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GARY SNYDER'S BIOPoETICS: A STUDY OF THE POET AS ECOLOGIST

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GARY SNYDER'S BIOPOETICS:
A STUDY OF THE POET AS ECOLOGIST

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
IN AMERICAN STUDIES

MAY, 1986

By

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ABSTRACT

Growing up in the Pacific Northwest, poet and ecologist Gary Snyder at an early age began developing sensibilities about the natural world which would later come to define his literary style. Because of the manner in which Snyder's approach to poetry parallels more speculative approaches to ecological theory, his work is best characterized as "biopoetic." With the publication in 1974 of his Pulitzer Prize-winning Turtle Island, Snyder emerged as a major spokesman for an alternative vision of the world, an ecological vision which defines both his poetic process and an amazingly consistent personal philosophy. This study examines the process through which Snyder's poetry simultaneously offers both a vision of an ecological world order and a vehicle—the poem—through which appropriate changes can be encouraged. An ecological vision and an openness to change are, in Snyder's terms, necessary preludes to our and our earth's survival.
To Susan and Carolyn
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

These abbreviations have been used for identifying Gary Snyder's books:

PREFACE

I was originally interested in investigating Gary Snyder's use of landscape, specifically comparing the manner in which he describes Japanese landscape in his poetry to the way in which he describes the landscape of the Pacific Northwest. But I soon realized that without a substantial travel budget and a working knowledge of the Japanese language this project would be unworkable. At the same time, I realized that a deep and pervasive theme was moving through all of Snyder's work. This theme, which seemed to encompass my original interests, revolves around the manner in which Snyder's poetry establishes relationship to a particular locale. The specific places Snyder writes of range a great deal, and it was the search to articulate a general pattern for the manner in which he establishes relationship which formed the basis for the dissertation research. Although, as Chapter One will show, my interest in this area of study in many ways preceded my work in American Studies, the ideas discussed here began taking shape during my work in Donald Worster's seminar on the American environment; Worster also supervised the initial planning of the research.

To date, two full-length books have been published about Snyder's poetry. The first, Bob Steuding's Gary Snyder
(1976) is a valuable guide to the development of Snyder's career through the publication of Turtle Island (1974). The second, Charles Molesworth's Gary Snyder's Vision (1983), lays important groundwork for understanding the integrity of Snyder's social and political thought. My study differs from both of these because it focuses on a specific approach to Snyder's poetic style. Although, like Molesworth, I am concerned with Snyder's political thought, I feel that his political and religious stance together, along with his background in the Pacific Northwest, form the basis for understanding the ecological significance of his writing.

Like the two books just mentioned, none of the now-over-a-dozen dissertations which have been written about Snyder deal comprehensively with the ecological aspect of his work, although almost everyone who writes about his work manages to touch on it. Among the dissertations, I found The Imagination of Gary Snyder (University of New Mexico, 1972) by Bert Almon most useful.

Two of the twenty or so journal articles dedicated to Snyder's work address the idea of ecology directly. Charles Altieri's article, "Gary Snyder's Lyric Poetry: Dialectic as Ecology," emphasizes that a reduction of tension results from Snyder's ecological poetic because the poet consistently focuses on the way opposites in nature seem inherently to fulfill a need for one another. Building on, and considerably modifying Altieri's idea, I hope to show
that although Snyder emphasizes interdependence in his rendering of nature, the result is a poetry of substantial tension which both emphasizes the fundamental oppositions of nature itself and the even deeper, and perhaps irreconcilable, oppositions which result when "civilization" is imposed on nature. Thomas J. Lyon's "The Ecological Vision of Gary Snyder," successfully explicates Snyder's concept of wilderness, or "the wild," as a dominant metaphor running throughout his work. My own study explores the tensions created by this and other metaphors which emerge from Snyder's own experience.

A fundamental part of my research was considerably strengthened by Snyder's own interest. I conducted two interviews with him, one at the outset of the project and the other toward the end. Transcripts of these interviews are included as appendices to this study. Snyder has given freely of his time to read drafts and talk about the movement of ideas in his own mind. I owe him many thanks for the encouragement and kindness he has extended to me.

From the beginning of my interest in the study of Snyder's work as a dissertation project, I felt that it was ideally suited for the kind of interdisciplinary scrutiny which characterizes American Studies research. More specifically, the intersection of literature, ecology, Asian religion and Amerindian folklore in Snyder's work virtually require this kind of synthesis of academic disciplines.
The first chapter is essentially an overview of the major themes of the dissertation, as well as a short explanation of my own interest in Snyder's work. The following two chapters are basically biographical, covering the period through Snyder's early association with Jack Kerouac, and are organized chronologically. Through these biographical chapters I will point to some plausible sources for Snyder's style of thought in the facts of his life prior to the regular publication of his poetry. At this point the focus of the study shifts somewhat--away from biography and toward the development of ecological ideas in Snyder's writing.

The fourth chapter discusses the food chain metaphor in some detail, looking at samples of Snyder's poetry as well as at sections of his journals which were published in *Earth House Hold* (1968). Chapter Five discusses the specific relationship between ecology and poetry which emerges in Snyder's work. The concluding chapter aims at explaining the political consequences of the particular ecological poetry which Snyder continues to write. Except for the two biographical chapters, I have avoided a chronological, or developmental, approach to the poet's work. Rather, I have attempted to discuss it whole in order to better depict the cyclical nature of change upon which Snyder's poetics seem to be based.
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

I am continuously impressed with the depth of the ecological concerns which inhabit both Gary Snyder's poetry and his prose. These concerns rise from his childhood in the Pacific Northwest, his anthropological interest in the American Indian and his training in Zen Buddhist meditation; this fusion of interests results in an essentially activist stance as a writer who sees the world as a web of interdependent organisms. This holistic view of the world defines both his poetic process and an amazingly consistent personal philosophy. I hope to show the parallel quality of Snyder's thought with respect to his experience of the living, breathing world around himself, on one hand, and his translation of that experience into poetry on the other hand.

By discussing Snyder's early life in the Pacific Northwest, his early literary influences, his travels in the Orient and his academic training in anthropology, I intend to present a view of his poetry that will place him in the mainstream of contemporary ecological thinking.

Gary Snyder was a child of the Great Depression, born out of poverty and a kinship to the forest world of rural Washington and Oregon. As a teenager, his experience exploring the Cascades foreshadows the ecological outlook which marks his work in later years. Throughout his career,
the nature of his physical work has been an essential element in his overall orientation. He worked as a summer camp counselor and as a copy boy for a Portland newspaper, then he shipped out in the Merchant Marine periodically before deciding to go to Japan and study in a Zen Buddhist monastery. Despite his distance from developments in America, when he returned he became a leader of the counter cultural movement of the late 1960's, a culture hero whose writing presented a vision of the future that resonated profoundly in the minds of the many people who attended his readings and bought his books. Snyder currently lives with his wife and two sons in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of California.

Because Snyder's writing includes poetry, essays, lectures and journal material, his work as a whole can be seen as a complete body of thought. In many ways, as Sherman Paul suggests in his essay on Snyder's work, "From Lookout to Ashram: The Way of Gary Snyder," the essays and journal material in Snyder's Earth House Hold go a long way toward establishing the texture of Snyder's ecological thought as in the mainstream of what Paul calls "the green American tradition." Alluding to Snyder's intense literary work with Oriental experience, Paul says Snyder's work has "shown how much of America might yet be discovered in a passage to India" (234). The very title, Earth House Hold, suggests a definition of ecology which is locked into the notion that
the earth is made up of a vast community of living things.

And the subtitle, "Technical Notes and Queries to Fellow Dharma Revolutionaries," suggests a decidedly political slant to Snyder's sense of his relationship to that community.

No doubt this is in part the result of the political mood of the 1960's, but the fusion of journal material with essays which address the biggest questions as simultaneously religious and political speaks strongly for the influence of Snyder's own training in the Rinzai sect of Zen Buddhism and his grounding in philosophical anarchism. After all, Earth Household is dedicated to Oda Sesso Roshi, Snyder's Zen teacher in Japan. It is the manner in which Snyder synthesizes his commitment to the universal and moral themes of Zen Buddhism with his drive to take action on those themes that marks his work. It is a synthesis of moral thought and moral action.

As a whole, Turtle Island, Snyder's 1974 Pulitzer Prize winning collection of poetry and prose, is a fusion of the poet's concerns with American Indian mythology, Buddhism and ecology. In his introductory note, Snyder writes of Turtle Island--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 poems speak of place, and the energy-pathways that sustain life. Each living being is a swirl in the flow, a formal turbulence, a 'song.'
In *The Real Work: Interviews & Talks, 1964-1979*, as editor Scott McLean points out in his introduction, we can track the development of Snyder's ecological and social thought in a way that complements *Earth House Hold*. In the first interview of the collection, conducted in 1964 and titled "The Landscape of Consciousness," Snyder lays the groundwork for a reading of his poetry:

> My poems on one level call the society's attention to its ecological relationships in nature, and to its relationships in the individual consciousness. ... It's a problem of love; not the humanistic love of the West--but a love that extends to animals, rocks, dirt, all of it. (4)

Many of the other interviews in *The Real Work* bear on his understanding of the function of poetry in society, which is to say that in his eyes poetry has a most profound function. For Snyder the function is to act as an agent for transformation, something that is in the very nature of metaphor:

> Poetry effects change by fiddling with the archetypes and getting at people's dreams about a century before it actually effects historical change. A poet would be, in terms of the ecology of symbols, noting the main structural connections and seeing which parts of the symbol system are no longer useful or applicable, though everyone is giving them credence. And out of his own vision and hearing of voices he seeks for new paths for the mind-energy to flow, which would be literally more creative directions, but directions which change politics. Poets are more like mushrooms, or fungus--they can digest the symbol-detritus. (71)
According to Snyder, the poet must speak for that part of the world which cannot speak for itself—animals, forests, rivers, mountains. Snyder's *Axe Handles* (1983) contains the most refined presentation of his ecological poetry. It develops and extends many of the key themes of *Turtle Island*, ending with the poem "For All," which takes off from the Pledge of 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.

(113)

This poem, as well as the entire book, demonstrates the high degree of purpose which Snyder implants on the work of writing poetry. My own work seeks to define that purpose by examining the poet's social and ecological vision and providing the reader with a sympathetic pathway to an understanding of Snyder's work on both lyric and mythic levels, while at the same time clearly separating it from both the "confessional" and the "deep-image" approaches of many of his contemporaries.

As an extension of this picture of Snyder's poetry, it is useful to consider his ecological vision as a correlative to the tension between self and other. On one level this tension is informed by a neoplatonist-like sensibility that
the inner and outer worlds correspond. On another level, the tension is political. In Snyder's case, self and other find reconciliation in the notion that the pattern of interdependence which results from careful observation of nature can be applied to poetry as well as politics. The major level of tension is that which combines all of these levels in a statement of ecological wholeness.

There is no doubt that Snyder's work is related to the American Romantic tradition; after all, *Myths and Texts* both opens and closes with allusions to Thoreau. The link to this tradition seems to be rooted in the urge to observe nature closely and furthermore to develop metaphors of correspondence between the inner world of the observer and the outer world of observed nature. The acknowledgement of the tension which emerges from these correspondences—for Snyder and for writers like Thoreau, Emerson and Whitman—is the first step toward reconciliation.

Let us be honest. No writer who deals with the work of a living person is ever totally free either of his own background or his sense of how his experience parallels or differs from his subject's. So let me very briefly talk about myself.

I have to start at my own beginning, wondering about the interlacing of my own childhood (boy scouts, swimming, surfing) with a deep curiosity about the relationship of the
individual to a particular place. Before my family moved to Hawaii in the early 1960's, I had lived in many particular places. Weekends camping in the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge in Southwestern Oklahoma as a Boy Scout gave me a taste of wilderness—a reinforcement of earlier family camping in the mountains of southeastern New Mexico. Family roots themselves were in Florida, New York and Tennessee, and although I've never lived in New York or Tennessee, and I've lived in Florida only briefly, I hear the southern accent in my mother's and grandmother's voices and their echoing and reechoing stories of children close to mountains and sea. From my father, there were also stories—but these were of Brooklyn streets and Brooklyn candy stores.

When we moved to Hawaii in my earliest high school years, I began to experience the reality of the phrase Aloha Aina, or love of land. And surfing gave me again a taste of wilderness, although wet.

My relationship to place has always seemed somehow political, but in retrospect, and in light of my feeling of "truth" in the work of Thoreau, Whitman, and Aldo Leopold, this particular relationship seems as self-evident as those truths the Founding Fathers enunciated.

It was about the time that Snyder's first books—*Riprap* (1959) and *Myths and Texts* (1960)—were published that I was sneaking into the only coffee house in St. Augustine, Florida, to listen to music and play chess and overhear the
first rumblings that a year later would embroil the town in the South's first major civil rights protest. But I was in Hawaii by then, and my civics teacher was Charles Campbell, a black man, later to be in the Hawaii State Legislature. He taught me well. I am, I suppose, still in part shaped by his teachings.

My first awareness of Gary Snyder was from a ten-cent recycled copy of The Back Country (1967) bought at the Whole Earth Bookstore in Haleiwa, Hawaii. But this was in 1972—and between my high school days and my first look at Snyder, I had entered the University of Hawaii as an engineering major, talked myself into enlisting in the Navy and three years later—after a summer off the coast of Viet Nam, during which time I was reading Bertrand Russell and Ramparts magazine—decided to take a stand as a conscientious objector. After another eight months of applications, appeals, cross-questioning and grim determination, I won an honorable discharge and a return to college—this time as an anti-war activist and American Studies undergraduate. I soon read Snyder's Regarding Wave (1970) and saw in both of these books a fusion of art and politics which fascinated me.

Artists, according to Shelley, are the "unacknowledged legislators of the world" and many people say (Ezra Pound or Carl Jung are sometimes quoted here) that they are the antennae of the race. If this is even slightly true, then the way the poet, as an artist, formulates the world he lives
in (and lives toward) in terms of aesthetics, religion, and politics--in sum, his poetics--is connected to the ongoing, expanding knowledge of the processes which carry us along in time.

In Snyder's work we find art which aims to connect words to the center of human experience. A caution is in order here, and in this caution lies the central concern of this study: Snyder is convinced (another "self-evident" truth) that human experience must always be discussed as directly linked, unified in a common web of being, to the biological processes upon which humanity's existence depends. It is in this assumption that Snyder's poetics find their roots, thus the coinage of the term biopoetics.

As a concept, biopoetics may very well be Snyder's own creation, a way to give consistency to a poetry whose mythic sources and whose metaphors range wider than most. Snyder's awareness of the essential biological nature of human experience is something he grew up with and is something which has not altered very much over the span of his career. Snyder has used the word biopoetic to describe the fusion of "the classic tradition" with ecological awareness:

When we bring together our awareness of the worldwide network of folktale and myth imagery that has been the "classic tradition"--the lore bearer--of everyone for ten thousand and more years, and the new (but always there) knowledge of the worldwide interdependence of natural systems, we have the biopoetic beginning of a new level of poetry and myth. That's the beginning for this
Biopoetics is a fusion of responsibility. First, the poet is responsible to language, and second, he is responsible to the planet on which he lives. In ecological terms, biological systems move toward a condition called climax, where all of the diverse elements of the system—animals, trees, water, bacteria—find stability in the recycling of biomass. That is, all the decaying energies of the system eventually find their ways back to fueling the ongoing life of the system. Snyder explains it this way:

In a climax situation a high percentage of the energy is derived not from grazing off the annual production of biomass, but from recycling dead biomass, the duff on the forest floor, the trees that have fallen, the bodies of dead animals. Recycled. Detritus cycle energy is liberated by fungi and lots of insects. I would then suggest: as climax forest is to biome, and fungus is to the recycling of energy, so "enlightened mind" is to daily ego mind, and art to the recycling of neglected inner potential. When we deepen or enrich ourselves, looking within, understanding ourselves, we come closer to being like a climax system. Turning away from grazing on the "immediate biomass" of perception, blocks of inner energies, dreams, the leaf-fall of day-to-day consciousness, liberates the energy of our own sense-detritus. Art is an assimilator of unfelt experience, perception, sensation, and memory for the whole society. When all that compost of feeling and thinking comes back to us then, it comes not as a flower, but—to complete the metaphor—as a mushroom: the fruiting body of the buried threads of mycelia that run widely through
the soil, and are intricately married to the root hairs of all the trees. "Fruiting"--at that point--is the completion of the work of the poet, and the point where the artist or mystic reenters the cycle: gives what she or he has done as nourishment, and as spore or seed spreads the "thought of enlightenment," reaching into personal depths for nutrients hidden there, back to the community. The community and its poetry are not two. (RW 174)

This kind of close attention to the details of nature and the building of metaphors out of those details allows a poet like Snyder to pattern his writing on the phenomena which define community in the biological realm. There is something both elegaic and yet life-affirming in the rhythmic alternation of any community, the recycling of the past through the present, and its metamorphosis into the future (see Steuding 114 and Rexroth 178). In music we might talk about the point-counterpoint-variation of a fugue as patterned in an essentially ecological and elegaic/affirmative way, the past informing the future through cycles which were set in motion by an even more distant past. Yet something equally informing, perhaps self-informing, causes the present-tima moment of the poem to be outside time yet still within time. Snyder's poetry accomplishes this through a kind of synchronizing of the poem to the rhythm of the world around him, sometimes through the recasting of myth, as in Myths and Texts, or through the recycling of a pattern, as in Axe Handles.

Elegaic/affirmative. Something rings lonely in any good
elegy; from the psychological depths of isolation and the
timeless quality of that experience arises the need for
reconciliation—with the world of other people, with nature
and with time itself. So the themes of biopoetry—reverence
for the past, loneliness in the present, hope for the
future—are in no way new. Snyder seems to take the elegaic
sense of the passing of the moment into past and future and
make it one of the elemental affirmative facts of existence.
I once asked him how he thought the emptiness at the center
of the world could be seen as an active force, perhaps even a
political force. Although I was concerned primarily with
trying to link Snyder's thinking with a Gandhian sense of
satyagraha, his answer went deeper than my question:

It is the creative emptiness of the world,
consuming and regenerating; the emptiness is a
creative emptiness, or pregnant emptiness; that's
the real Buddhist sense.

And then you know, there's another metaphor
running through this, that's kind of below the
surface. And it's the application of the idea of
the food chain, of ecology, to ideas, to
information—the ecology of mind. I was aware of
that metaphor of ecology long ago, where
archetypes succeed to other archetypes.

All the metaphors of ecology are useful in
psychological terms. The imagination can be burnt
over and then regenerate; the imagination can
become an underbrush full of unseen creatures.
There is a food chain of psychology where your big
pregnant correct idea is the predator at the top
of the food chain who has swallowed a whole lot of
other images to get to where it's at, starting
with small perceptions and impulses and sensations
which become subsumed in a larger image, or a set
of larger images which become subsumed in another
image which comes out as an idea. The intellect,
without knowing it itself is like a shark cruising
on the lower levels of the imagination, gobbling
up things, and then taking the credit for it
without realizing how much it owes to what came
from below.
(Snyder Interview 1 18-19)

So Snyder is from one point of view an elegaic poet; from
another he can be seen to write with the authority of his
awareness that at the center of existence is a creative
emptiness embued with a hopefulness that the past lends to
those who see it whole. This idea emerges in a poem like
"What Happened Here Before," from Turtle Island. For Snyder,
the span of history of a particular place begins 300,000,000
years ago:

First a sea: soft sands, muds, and marls
loading, compressing, heating, crumpling,
 crushing, recrystallizing, infiltrating,
several times lifted and submerged.
intruding molten granite magma
deep-cooled and speckling,
gold quartz fills the cracks--
(78)

The poem finds a kind of climax in the relative present, the
poet finding out who owned the land he lives on before he
bought it:

We asked, who the land belonged to.
 and where one pays tax.
(two gents who never used it twenty years,
and before them the widow
of the son of the man
who got him a patented deed
on a worked-out mining claim,)
laid hasty on land that was deer and acorn
grounds of the Nisenan?
branch of the Maidu?

(they never had a chance to speak, even,
their name.)
(and who remembers the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.)

the land belongs to itself.
"no self in self; no self in things"

Turtle Island swims
in the ocean-sky swirl-void
biting its tail while the worlds go
on-and-off
winking

The next poem in Turtle Island, "Toward Climax," moves in
much the same pattern, a recycling of the past, only this
time focused more on evolutionary origins than on geological
origins:

salt seas, mountains, deserts--
cell mandala holding water
nerve network linking toes and eyes
fins legs wings--
teeth, all-purpose little early mammal molars.
primate flat-foot
front fore-mounted eyes

watching at the forest-grassland (interface
richness) edge.
scaevnge, gather, rise up on rear legs.
running--grasping--hand and eye;
hunting.
calling others to the stalk, the drive.

It is my hope that this study will provide an addition
to our understanding of how poetry can offer a vision of an
ecological world order. Such a vision is a necessary prelude
to our and our earth's survival.
CHAPTER II
BEGINNINGS

Something in Gary Snyder's manner says this is a person who works with his hands, who works outdoors; maybe it's his eyes, the slight squint, or maybe it's the way he dresses that assures you of his authenticity and of his originality. Snyder began writing poetry before he was 15, but from the beginning his intellectual life was complemented by the outward pull of the natural world around him. Snyder's early interests--interests that were clearly ecological before the word ecology was familiar--foreshadow the key elements of his life as a thinker and a poet. As a child, Snyder played out age-old fantasies of life in the woods, life rich with elemental wilderness sensibilities. As a college student he prepared an interdisciplinary thesis in anthropology and literature and had his first poems published. In presenting a picture of the development of Snyder's ecological and literary ideas, I shall attempt to include a sense of the times; for most Americans that meant the poverty of the Great Depression, World War Two and the beginning of the Atomic Age, which is also the Age of Ecology.

In a chapter entitled "Re-inhabitation" from The Old Ways, a 1977 collection of his essays, Snyder develops an idea of self-identity that is tied firmly to a sense of belonging to a specific place--the Pacific Northwest. He
argues that to be an "actual inhabitant" of a place, or for that matter the planet, one must be in touch with the spirit of the place, which for Snyder, reflecting on his own ancestry, means the importance of the frontier to his parents and grandparents. John Muir once said that one only need take a boy to nature and nature will do the rest. Snyder was always aware that the boys—and girls—of his family had roots in the Pacific Northwest:

I came here by a path, a line, of people that somehow worked their way from the Atlantic seaboard westward over a hundred and fifty years. One Grandfather ended up in the Territory of Washington, and homesteaded in Kitsap County. My Mother's side was railroad people down in Texas, and before that they'd worked the silver mines in Leadville, Colorado. My Grandfather, being a homesteader, and my father a native of the state of Washington, put our family relatively early in the Northwest. (OW 57)

Snyder qualifies his rootedness, however, by pointing out that his ancestors were itinerants. At an early age he realized that the Indians, who were indigenous to the region, knew more about the spirit of the place than any white Johnny-come-lately, no matter how early that white man had arrived.

An elemental tension springs from this ambivalence. On the one hand, he acknowledges some of his ancestors' traits in himself; yet on the other hand, he recognizes a responsibility for the white man's destruction of the
environment. In Turtle Island, Snyder reflects on his family past in a poem called "Dusty Braces":

O you ancestors
lumber schooners
  big moustache
long-handled underwear
sticks out under the cuffs
tan stripes on each shoulder,
dusty braces--
  nine bows
  nine bows
you bastards
my fathers
and grandfathers, stiff-necked
punchers, miners, dirt farmers, railroad-men
killd off the cougar and grizzly
nine bows. Your itch
in my boots too,
--your sea roving
tree hearted son.
(75)

As Bert Almon, author of a Western Writers Series booklet on Snyder, observed in his discussion of the poem, this family past is important to a reading of Snyder's work: "His family has a symbolic value for him: he is descended from the pioneers who 'killd off the cougar and grizzly' . . . Snyder concedes in the poem that he is as restless as the 'punchers, miners, dirt farmers, railroad-men' he is descended from, and he willingly gives the 'nine bows' of homage customary in the Orient, for he is their 'sea-roving / tree hearted son.'" (Almon 1979 5-6) The key to the significance of Snyder's recollection of his ancestral past in "Dusty Braces,"
however, is in the word "braces," which has a multifaceted meaning. To the extent that the infrastructure of the poem is a description, a visualization, of a generalized ancestor, braces mean suspenders. But the word also suggests "two of a kind," in this case Snyder's identification with his ancestors; and it reminds us of their jobs, for a brace is also a tool, as well as a support used in building something, both senses reinforcing Snyder's working-class roots. The upshot of the poet's recollection of those "dusty braces" is the sense of reverence for the lineage whose "itch" for westward movement animates Snyder's own life. As the poet says, "Your itch / in my boots too."

Gary Snyder, the son of Harold and Lois Snyder, was born in San Francisco, California, on May 8, 1930; by the time he was two, he and his family had moved to a small dairy farm just north of Seattle, Washington. As a youth Snyder spent much of his time trekking in the woods around the farm, learning about himself and the world of nature. One early lesson, though, ironically turned his fascination with nature into an interest in reading. When he was about five or six, after walking into a burned-over field and stepping on some hot coals, he was forced to stay off his feet for six months. He spent much of the time reading or being read to.

He credits his mother with being a major influence in his early life by reading poetry to him every night before he
went to bed. Browning and Poe were favorites. The house also contained a fair amount of socialist literature. One of his grandfathers had been an organizer for the Industrial Workers of the World and many of his books were available (Almon 1969 6).

He was also reading the books of Ernest Thompson Seton (1860-1946), which led him toward making his own moccasins and toward other skills necessary for exploring the wilderness. By the age of ten, Snyder was spending time alone at a secret camp: "As soon as my father figured I knew how to put out a campfire, he let me go off and cook for myself and stay a day or two," Snyder has said (RW 93). Seton was a Canadian nature writer with a special interest in Indian traditions; he was also an organizer of the American scouting movement. His *The Book of Woodcraft and Indian Lore*, which was published in 1912, depicts Indian culture as superior to white culture. Snyder has said that Seton altered "the myth of the white man," and that Seton was "on the side of nature, on the side of the Indians, on the side of the unconscious, on the side of the primitive" (Husson 225-232, as cited in Almon 1979 8).

One of the interests which would later characterize Snyder's poetry and his intellectual life in college is his fascination with the American Indian. One elderly Indian came around the farm selling smoked salmon, and there were others he came into contact with at the Farmers' Market in
Seattle. However, he realized by the age of five or six that they were the "prior people." He knew that his parents hadn't been in the region long because they did not know the answers to questions he was asking about nature. He didn't develop associations with other children and recalls spending much of his time alone in the woods. He also realized at an early age that the State of Washington was entirely wilderness before about 1860. His awareness of Indian culture resulted in "a sense of outrage" at "what the White man had done to the land and to the Indians" (Tarn 105).

The influence of his parents and the enforced poverty of the great depression helped focus Snyder's outrage. His mother had taken a number of college writing classes and was especially interested in journalism. She was originally from Texas and had come to the far west with her mother. His father had been a seaman before meeting his mother, just as Snyder himself would later spend a good deal of time at sea. He has said that the radical outlook and the non-conformism were "sharpened" in his early years by the poverty brought on by the Great Depression (Tarn 105). For the young Snyder, the woods and his sense of the natural world may have eased the burden of poverty his family lived under because Snyder has said that he never felt deprived or annoyed by poverty (Kherdian 47). Perhaps in this aspect of his childhood one can discern the seed of the ascetic and practical mind which would later pull him to study Buddhism in Japan and advocate
a naturalistic philosophy of ecological vision and social responsibility. At the same time there was from an early age a conscious rejection of Christian thought:

I was never able to accept Christianity as a child because the two or three times I went to Sunday school I raised the question about the future of animals and was told that animals didn't have souls. I wasn't able to accept that—on a common sense practical basis. I felt that living creatures constituted some kind of community or unity, which was my own natural mystical experience. So I lost interest in religion and spent a lot of time in the woods.  
(Graham 59)

Although it wasn't until he neared the end of his college career that he became interested in Buddhism, at the age of eleven or twelve he was already becoming aware of alternative visions of the natural world, especially those depicted in Chinese landscape paintings:

I went into the Chinese room of the Seattle art museum and saw Chinese landscape paintings; they blew my mind. My shock of recognition was very simple: 'It looks just like the Cascades.' The waterfalls, the pines, the clouds, the mist looked a lot like the northwest United States. The Chinese had an eye for the world that I saw as real. In the next room were the English and European landscapes, and they meant nothing. It was no great lesson except for an instantaneous, deep respect for something in Chinese culture that always stuck in my mind and that I would come back to again years later.  
(RW 93-93)

But his daily world was one of borderline poverty. His father's dairy farm had only a few cows, some poultry and
some rabbits, and the family sold milk to neighbors (Kherdian 47). This was at the end of the Great Depression, and his family, like many other American ones, had learned about hard times first hand and about how the idea of a frontier with endless resources was a fragile, nationalistic dream. The prairies had turned into dust storms, and the belief that anyone could get rich in the stock market had skidded into chaos and despair. The soup kitchens might have been disappearing, but their memory was still vivid. The young Snyder was reading Carl Sandburg and imagining a populist world where food and clothing flowed smoothly from the rural part of the country to the city (RW 56). Like Snyder's family, Sandburg had strong ties to the I.W.W.

One can easily picture a young boy at the end of the depression confronting a "streetful of people buying clothes and groceries, cheering a hero or throwing confetti and blowing tin horns" as in Sandburg's "Cool Tombs" and in a boy's dreamy world, perhaps deep in the forest near the family's farm, seeing Sandburg's "Loam":

In the loam we sleep,
In the cool moist loam,
To the lull of years that pass
And the break of stars,

From the loam, then,
The soft warm loam,
    We rise:
To shape of rose leaf,
Of face and shoulder.

    We stand, then,
To a whiff of life,  
Lifted to the silver of the sun  
Over and out of the loam  
A day.  
(Sandburg 98)

Outwardly Snyder was confronting the natural world and the wilderness by hiking and exploring, while inwardly he was carrying the rich images of Sandburg's poetry in his mind. Perhaps Sandburg's poem "Wilderness" describes a plausible way for a youth in Snyder's environment to understand the reconciliation of the outer and the inner world, the world of one's origins and the world of the future:

There is an eagle in me and a mockingbird . . .  
and the eagle flies among the Rocky Mountains of my dreams and fights among the Sierra crags of what I want. . . .  
O, I got a zoo, I got a menagerie, inside my ribs, under my red-valve heart--and I got something else: it is a man-child heart, a woman-child heart: it is a father and mother and lovers: it came from God-Knows-Where: it is going to God-Knows-Where--For I am the keeper of the zoo: I say yes and no: I sing and kill and work: I am a pal of the world: I came from the wilderness.  
(100-101)

At the time of Snyder's tenth birthday, among the things influencing the popular mind were John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* and Sandburg's *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years*, both of which had just won Pulitzer Prizes. Other new books included *Footloose in America*, a look at San Francisco's so-called literary bohemia, by a reporter who emptied his notebooks of material about novelist Jack London and poets Ambrose Bierce
and George Sterling, and As Long as the Grass Shall Grow, a book of photos and essays about American Indians.

Steinbeck's novel had dramatized the human tragedy of an outdated national myth; the entire country was waking to the realization that the ever-westering frontier was only a mirage—shimmering idealism leading to nothingness. At about the same time, Senator LaFollette's Civil Liberties Committee conducted hearings on farm labor and revealed to the American public the depth of the plight of the nation's farm families from California to Oklahoma to the Deep South. One solution for some of the hordes of displaced farmers, farm workers and unemployed tradesmen was the ubiquitous quasi-socialism embodied in President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. But social ideologies ranged much farther to the left. As the public was daily learning more and more about the desperate reality of life in rural America from the LaFollette hearings, the communist New Masses reported:

And what happens, in a great big capitalist country, to little farm children, who cannot be plowed under or warehoused? They grow up into migrants and farm tenants. They take their place among the 1,700,000 farm families with net incomes of about $25 a week.

(21)

During the same period President Roosevelt established the Civilian Conservation Corps. By the beginning of World War II 2,500,000 young men were working in 2,600 camps building fire trails, lookout towers (such as the one Snyder ...
would eventually be assigned to), roads and fire breaks in national forests. They thinned 4,000,000 acres of trees and put out fires when they occurred, but mostly they planted trees in badly eroded or burned-out areas. President Roosevelt appointed aggressive conservation-minded people to run the Federal agencies, like the Bureau of Biological Survey, which were responsible for restoring and managing the country's natural resources. This same period saw Aldo Leopold working in the Forest Service trying to establish a wilderness policy and explaining the answers to many of the questions which were arising about game management.

It was in this period, too, that Kings Canyon National Park came into existence. Bubbs Creek and Piute Creek are among the places in the region that would later become parts of Snyder's poetry. The background of the Hetch Hetchy dam controversy and the much talked about dams in the Kings Canyon region, although not likely to have been prominent events in a ten-year-old's mind, would later work into "California Water Plan," in which Snyder sings praises to the region while calling on the darker powers of the place to stop the building of dams so that

those goddesses called Yuba, Bear, and Feather, fiery fist and their gentle downhill gliding be one gift to all.

If some of the "ecological" projects of the time were clearly
destructive (those dam-building projects, for example), others were spectacular successes. One of the outstanding ecological feats of the time was the planting of 18,000 miles of Shelter-belt Program forests by 33,000 farmers (Petulla 327). It is clear that the New Deal programs which permeated the world young Snyder grew up in—good, bad, or indifferent—were all presented in terms of a major conservationist thrust, a thrust that in an unfortunately diminishing way would continue to affect the condition of American forests and wildlife for Snyder's entire adult life.

But other, darker clouds were on the horizon. In May of 1940, Southern Norway was lost to Nazi Germany. Roosevelt's third-term presidential campaign was successfully churning its way through primary challenges, and—convinced that it might still be a peaceful supporter of England—America edged ambiguously closer to involvement in the war. But the most ominous note foreshadowing the dark future was the continuing success of American physicists in isolating uranium isotopes and bombarding them with neutrons. One isotope, U-235, they discovered, would release incredible amounts of energy, as well as more neutrons, thus causing a chain reaction. Controlling this reaction and transferring the heat energy to steam turbines, it was felt, would result in an infinitely cheaper source of energy. The New Republic commented:

_Broadly speaking, nearly all our troubles would be solved. Neither Hitler nor anyone else would need_
to fight for raw materials when two of the most valuable, coal and oil were obsolete. A new day would dawn for the human race—provided, of course, that we had enough collective sense not to use the discovery merely to hasten our self-destruction in war. ("Energy from the Atom" 640)

Like many of his generation, Gary Snyder grew up knowing the pace of hard rural life, the coldness of winter and the feeling of just barely making it. Snyder's father was finally forced to take a job with the Federal Bureau of Employment, though he still did his best to keep the dairy farm going by working it mornings, evenings and weekends. The natural rhythms of work—and the attendant values of self-discipline and attachment to nature—seem to be the major remnant themes of this period of Snyder's life.

But in 1942 the Snyder family gave up and moved to Portland, Oregon, where Gary attended public school; he was still spending as much time as possible out in the woods south of Portland or near the Columbia River, and getting to know some older Wishram Indians. It was at about this time he took up archery and began making his own arrows. In the summers of 1943-1945, while working at Spirit Lake, he learned more about backpacking and camping. He became more and more fascinated with the Cascade Mountains and has described this period of his life as a time when he made a transition from an interest in lowland wilderness to alpine wilderness. By the age of 15 he was accepted for membership
in the Mazamas Mountain Climbers, a mostly adult club whose major prerequisite for membership was to have climbed a snow peak. He climbed Mount St. Helens at the age of 15; Mt. Hood and Mt. Adams at age 16; and Mt. Ranier, Mt. Baker and Mt. Stuart at age 17 ("Gary Snyder: Choosing . . ." 17).

When he was in his early teens, his parents broke up, and he learned to make it on his own in the city. He was left alone at an age when most children are still being supervised carefully by parents. Snyder remembers, "I made a bunch of city-urchin adaptations to a wild life. I kept my freedom by looking after myself, paying my own rent and so on." He was befriended by some newspapermen from the Portland Oregonian and worked as a copy boy. He was soon writing poems. Toward the end of his high school career, a teacher showed some of them to a friend, which in turn helped Snyder land a scholarship to Reed College (Tarn 106).

As a teenager, Snyder had bought a subscription to The Living Wilderness, the official publication of the Wilderness Society, a conservation group founded in 1935 "to meet the emergency of a sudden excessively dangerous decline in America's unequalled wilderness." The objectives of the Wilderness Society, according to a 1946 issue of its publication, were:

(1) To enlist the American people in the preservation of our American wilderness.
(2) To spread the conception that the wilderness is a valuable natural resource of
Aldo Leopold was vice-president of the Society, and Snyder undoubtedly read some of his work in the pages of its magazine, well before Leopold's famous collection of natural history sketches and essays, *Sand County Almanac*, was published in 1949, the year after Leopold died fighting a brush fire near Madison, Wisconsin. Leopold wrote from the point-of-view of a man who had spent much time studying wildlife management, and his writings represent a major step forward in what he called an ecological conscience.*

Leopold argued that what is needed is "the extension of the social conscience from people to land" (Leopold 1968:209). This is an important theme in Snyder's more visionary writing and will be dealt with more thoroughly in a later chapter; the important point here is that *The Living Wilderness* provided a vehicle through which some of Leopold's ideas could influence Snyder while Snyder was still in high school. An earlier article by Leopold—written when Snyder was still only eleven—was undoubtedly read by the young boy.---

(3) To promote nation-wide cooperation in resisting the invasion of such wilderness by the sights, sounds, and other influences of civilization, including routes which can be used for mechanized transportation, all commercial developments, and those non-commercial improvements and influences which clash seriously with the primeval environment.
sensibilities of the entire ecology movement:

The most important characteristic of organism is that capacity for internal self-renewal known as health.

There are two organisms in which the unconscious automatic processes of self-renewal have been supplemented by conscious interference and control. One of these is man himself (medicine and public health). The other is land (agriculture and conservation). (Leopold 1941 3)

Although this sounds similar to Alfred North Whitehead's philosophy of organism, Leopold's biographer Susan L. Flader suggests that whatever small philosophical influence there might have been on Leopold's thought probably came from elsewhere:

Casting about for philosophical underpinnings for his interpretation of the hair-trigger equilibrium in the Southwest, he discovered the organicism of the Russian philosopher P.D. Ouspensky, who regarded the whole earth and the smallest particle thereof as a living being, possessed of soul or consciousness. "Possibly, in our intuitive perceptions, which may be truer than our science and less impeded by words than our philosophies," Leopold wrote, "we realize the indivisibility of earth--its soil, mountains, rivers, forests, climate, plants, and animals, and respect it collectively not only as a useful servant but as a living being." (Flader 18)

But whether Leopold's notions derive from Ouspensky or Whitehead, there is no doubt that a philosophy of organism, with strong panpsychic elements, was emerging as the foundation for both the ecology movement and Gary Snyder.
Another important early article by Leopold in The Living Wilderness had clearly drawn lines marking the central issues in the case for wilderness values. These lines differentiated the ecologist/scientist from the sportsman/hunter in whom Leopold saw the "genetical raw material" for an ecological perception. The problem was that the ecological perception had "not yet spread beyond the self-erected walls of science. . . ." Leopold felt that the lack "of ecological drama in art or literature" proved that ecology had not yet escaped "into the common life of common people"; however, the presence of a few stories (he mentions writers Fraser Darling and Conrad Richter) showed that something was beginning to change (Leopold 1942 24). For young Snyder, such material set the stage for long-term sentiment about the aesthetic value of wilderness and for short-term interest in a career in the Forest Service.

The year 1945 is one of major events: American forces sweep through Germany, Hitler and Mussolini die, Germany surrenders, Roosevelt dies and Japan surrenders. Yet in the background of these events lie other events which have even greater significance in terms of the environment. As historian Donald Worster points out, "The Age of Ecology began on the desert outside Alamogordo, New Mexico, on July 16, 1945, with a dazzling fireball of light and a swelling mushroom cloud of radioactive gases" (339).

On May 8, Gary Snyder turned 15. He was still in
Portland, Oregon, attending Lincoln High School and watching the war grind toward its awesome conclusion. The Oregonian focused increasingly on conditions in Japan as the aerial bombardment of Japanese cities accelerated through the summer. The tone of most of the writing was vengeful, as this editorial shows:

Unfortunately there seems to be no way of disillusioning the Japanese short of destroying them. . . . Let them either abandon their delusions or be massacred. Humanity will suffer from the incident, but otherwise, if the Japanese state religion survives, humanity cannot even hope for progress. ("Divine Wind")

A front-page story on the same day declared, "Ten of the 19 Japanese cities forewarned by the 20th Air Force that they had been marked for annihilation now have been struck" ("10 of 19 Jap Cities . . .").

Then on August 7 came the news: "Single Bomb Shatters Enemy City: Secret Weapon Made in Northwest." The atomic bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima. Some parts for the bombs were being manufactured near Portland in Richmond. Also on the front page was a story by Dr. Arthur F. Scott, acting president of Reed College, which Snyder would later attend, hailing the bomb as a great technological feat ("Fantastic Weapon's Wallop Like Volcano"). A release from the War Department stated, "Mankind's successful transition to a new age, the atomic age, was ushered in July 16, 1945," ("Test
Tower Vaporized by Blast of First Atom Bomb") thus acknowledging the test explosion which had taken place in New Mexico.

Snyder told me in conversation that he learned of the bombing of Hiroshima from a newspaper story posted on a bulletin board at Spirit Lake on the side of Mt. Saint Helens, where he had a summer job as camp counselor. He added that at the time he felt an immense disgust and that he had essentially resigned his allegiance to a civilization that could do such a thing.

Mixed in with the news coverage of the bombings in Japan was a report of labor strife in the lumber industry. Soon after the war ended, partly to prevent communist countries from gaining a foothold in the Japanese market, the U.S. exported huge amounts of lumber to Japan for reconstruction. In 1954 Snyder would work in the lumber industry; much of his early poetry, especially the first section of Myths and Texts reflects this work:

"Pines grasp the clouds with iron claws like dragons rising from sleep"
250,000 board-feet a day
If both Cats keep working & nobody gets hurt
(4)

One final image from the week of August 6, 1945, is the picture of Japanese Emperor Hirohito as a religious hermit who lived a "life of rigid formality patterned after that of
his ancestors." The Oregonian further described him as a man who "never drinks or smokes, and devotes much of his time to prayer. . . . Everyday, as soon as he arises, he bows reverently to the shrine in his palace bedroom and prays for the welfare of his ancestors" ("Japs Revere Hirohito . . ."). But perhaps even more significant were Hirohito's words to the Japanese people when he announced surrender:

The enemy has begun to employ a new and most cruel bomb, the power of which to do damage is, indeed, incalculable, taking the toll of many innocent lives. Should we continue to fight, it would not only result in an ultimate collapse or obliteration of the Japanese nation, but also it would lead to the total extinction of human civilization. ("Text of Hirohito's Radio Rescript")

In the fall of 1947 Snyder entered Reed College on a scholarship. The following summer he shipped out of New York in the Merchant Marine as a seaman. Going to sea is something that Snyder would repeat again and again in subsequent years. While at Reed Snyder met Philip Whalen, and the two roomed together. This was the first association in Snyder's life that would carry over into his involvement in the San Francisco poetry renaissance of the mid-1950's. Other people he met at Reed who would become a part of the San Francisco literary scene were Lew Welch and William Dickey.

Snyder submitted poetry to Janus, the school's literary magazine from 1950-1954, and steadily became more committed
to his work as a poet. The nine poems in Janus, the first Snyder published, were collected by Robert Ian Scott in 1977 in the North American Review. In his correspondence with Scott prior to their 1977 publication, Snyder pointed out that the poems indicate an awareness of Eliot and Pound, as well as the "Mother Consciousness" of Robert Graves. The White Goddess, by Graves, had been published in 1948, and argued essentially that Western, patriarchal society is responsible for the destruction of what Scott calls the "emotional and material sources of life." Scott also calls the first of the poems a parody (Scott 80). This is plausible, but as Scott also points out, the poem is essentially a riddle. Titled blandly "a poem," it begins by describing a return to a meadow:

walking lonely on a fall day  
in a long meadow, slanting open to the woods  
where the frost chilled  
the dead grass, a year ago  
(Scott 81)

In the next stanza, the poet describes looking closer at the place and discovering, or perhaps recovering, something left behind, the value of which is tied into the passing of time and its merging with the place itself:

peer sharply through the brown grass:  
the slim thin white thing rotted  
long ago  
(81)
This process of moving back and forth in time within a poem, as well as within a book of poems, and the linking of this alternation with natural cycles, is an essential ingredient in Snyder's poetic process throughout his career. In the last stanza the poet, as Scott points out, seems to be parodying Eliot's idea of the objective correlative by repeating a particular concrete detail:

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build now a squat stone tablet
for ants to sun on
and hide it in the dead grass:
"Here lie My Children."
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Scott feels the solution to the riddle is that the "thing" is, in fact, a used condom; however, what is more significant is that the third stanza of the poem responds to the obscure quality of the second stanza with concrete imagery and ultimately with an epitaph. The process here, with variations, seems to be a model for much of Snyder's later poetry.

An example from Snyder's first published book, *Riprap* and *Cold Mountain Poems*, illustrates how this process functions in a poem written later in his career. While at sea he expanded his awareness of the world and of the working people who would inhabit much of his poetry, and in the poem "Cartagena," which was written in 1958 and appeared in *Riprap*, Snyder describes a drunken night at a Colombian brothel in the summer following his first year in college:
Rain and thunder beat down and flooded the streets
We danced with Indian girls in a bar,
water half-way to our knees,
The youngest one slipped down her dress and danced
bare to the waist,
The big negro deckhand made out with his girl on
his lap
in a chair her dress over her eyes
Coca-cola and rum, and rainwater all over the floor.
In the glittering light I got drunk and reeled through
the rooms,
And cried, "Cartagena! swamp of unholy loves!"
And wept for the Indian whores who were younger
than me,
and I was eighteen,
And splashed after the crew down the streets wearing
sandals bought at a stall
And got back to the ship, dawn came,
we were far out at sea.

Colombia 1948--Arabia 1958

(Privates 9)

He consistently goes back and forth between the present
and the past; in this case the past is ten years prior (in
the case of the Janus poem discussed earlier, one year
prior), and the change which has taken place, the change
which the poem is actually centered on, is inevitably related
to the cyclical quality of biological time: the grass growing
up around the "squat stone tablet" in the earlier poem and
the returning to the same place, at least in memory, in the
later poem, ultimately shape the way the poet's perception of
the prior event emerges in the poem itself.

Snyder majored in literature/anthropology and prepared a
thesis discussing a myth from the Haida tribe of the Pacific
Northwest and its relationship to world mythology. Snyder
has said that he managed to map out all of his major interests in the thesis:

Most of the things concerning my poetry are handled there in one way or another as well as my particular approach to history, psychological problems, nature of the mind, nature of mythology, function and forms of literature, and so forth. All of these were foreshadowed there. (Kherdian 48)

The entire thesis, titled *He Who Hunted Birds in His Father's Village: The Dimensions of a Haida Myth*, was published by Grey Fox Press of Bolinas, California, with an introduction by Snyder and a preface by Nathaniel Tarn, in 1979. In his introduction, written in 1978, Snyder says that with all of its flaws he decided to publish the thesis with the hope that others would follow through with what he called a "multidimensional approach" to folklore studies. He acknowledges the possible contradictory nature of the various dimensions he explores, as well as the possibility that they might be in some way false. Nevertheless, he stresses in both the original 1951 version and in the 1978 introduction that it is the immediacy of the story which is of paramount importance. Snyder explains:

In the dark room, around the fire, children and old people, hearing and joying together in the words, the acting and the images. It's there that the shiver of awe and delight occurs, not in any dry analysis of archetypes or motifs—or the abstractions of the structuralist. (HWH xi)
Despite this disclaimer, Snyder applies his own "analysis of archetypes and motifs" to the myth as well as to his notion of poetry and language in order to explain the "dimensions" he was concerned with at the time. He would soon discover that in his own poetry the "shiver of awe and delight" could be retained.

As an anthropology student Snyder worked under the supervision of David French, who introduced him to the Wasco and and Wishram Indians on the Warm Springs reservation east of Mt. Hood. French was editor of the American Journal of Ethnobotany. In the summer immediately after graduation, Snyder worked on the Warm Springs reservation assembling a collection of folktales and developing an interest in oral literature. This led to a deeper interest in "oral literature as style, as raconteur technique" (Tarn 107). In the fall of 1951 he was invited to the University of Indiana on a fellowship. Dell Hymes, the noted anthropologist, who had been one year ahead of Snyder at Reed, was already at Indiana, and the two of them roomed together for the one semester Snyder was there. It was while he was at Indiana that Snyder decided not to pursue an academic career as an anthropologist. Instead, he turned toward the muse, toward a career as a poet. The problem with scholarly pursuit, it seemed to him, was a lack of concrete experience; Snyder's carefully considered choice was a rejection of the objectivity of concrete fact in favor of an orientation
toward a subjective and interdependent relationship with the world around himself. As Snyder explained it:

In the world of folklore and mythology there’s a . . . wisdom tradition if you like, half buried but that poets can dig it out and anthropologists can't, or aren't allowed to. (Tarn 105)

As a professional anthropologist Snyder felt he would be tied into one side of an emerging schism in his vision of the world. This schism had religion on one side and science on the other; Snyder's childhood had left him with a strong sense of the religious dimension of the world, yet his academic work was not satisfying his need for exploring that dimension. Certain fundamental questions needed to be answered; perhaps the old Sunday School question, "Do trees have souls?" was lingering still. Ultimately, Snyder felt he would be limited by the particular mode of perception an anthropologist must adhere to, yet in pushing toward a more poetic form of perception, Snyder always shows respect for objective fact. Snyder's direction upon leaving Indiana was in some ways an acting out of a spiritual quest similar to the one analyzed in his thesis.

This synthesis of objective fact, the scientist's concern, and the concern with actually being the experiencing subject itself, the poet's concern, is central to Snyder's developing ecological thought. In his poetry he manages to strike a kind of balance by alternating between the two types
of expression. For a poet like Eliot this synthesis works itself out through the use of the objective correlative, and "if Scott is correct, Snyder's college poems indicate an early rejection of this. On the other hand, if Scott is incorrect, then Snyder could very well have been exploring what is a fundamental aesthetic problem for both ecologists and poets. This is the problem of understanding the process of synthesizing the two realms. That is to say, Snyder's heavy-handed use of Eliot's technique is one stage in the development of a poetry that is solidly grounded in an ecological awareness of the interdependent relation of objective fact to its emotional correlative. More specific characteristics of this relationship will be discussed in subsequent chapters.
CHAPTER III

ASPECTS OF A DEVELOPING ECOLOGICAL CONSCIENCE

When asked by an interviewer why he tends to reject Christianity, Snyder replied, "I was never a Christian, so I never negated it." He explains that his concern with religion generally has to do with mythic origins; what he objects to is the Old Testament "anti-goddess oriented monotheism, patriarchal monotheism." Where Christianity is concerned, he says:

I appreciate Christianity on several levels. One is its archetypal level and the idea of the sacrificed and dying God. I appreciate that as a major mythological idea. And also Christianity as an attempt to humanize the state, and to assert spiritual values against the monolithic repression of the Roman Empire. And you know, whatever contemporary Roman Empire there is. Those are fine.

(Pickett I-1)

He has, at the same time, been critical of a generalized Judeo-Christian world view as it has evolved in mainstream Western civilization. His early interest in American Indian mythology was in part a religious interest, but he quickly realized that as a white man there were limitations to his participation:

American Indian spiritual practice is very remote and extremely difficult to enter, even though in one sense right next door, because it is a practice one has to be born into. Its intent is
universal, but you must be a Hopi to follow the Hopi way. (RW 94)

Although Snyder's earlier life had provided him with a clearly defined set of interests—a set of interests which called for a careful embodiment of American Indian sensibilities in his poetry—his spiritual path ultimately led to a religion that in some ways is personal and eclectic and in other ways is a part of an impersonal acknowledgement that all experience, religion included, is meaningful only as it is in a close relationship to the natural world. Essentially Snyder seems to feel that "native" religions come closer to establishing that relationship than anything in either the Judeo-Christian or the Hindu-Buddhist traditions:

So here in the twentieth century we find occidentals and orientals studying each other's Wisdom, and a few people on both sides studying what came before both—before they forked off. A book like Black Elk Speaks, which would probably have had zero readership in 1900, is perceived now as speaking of certain things that nothing in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and almost nothing in the Hindu-Buddhist tradition, deals with. All the great civilized world religions remain primarily human centered. (OW 61 - 62)

Perhaps Snyder had rejected conventional religion as a child because he half-consciously recognized a unity in the natural world that Christianity, at least as he was observing it, was not able to accept. The sensibilities which developed organically by simply spending a great deal of time in the
woods reinforced an individualistic religiosity aimed at exploring and celebrating the unity, the interrelatedness, which connects humanity to the rest of the world, a unity which mainstream Christianity—which saw man as intended by God to control the rest of animal and plant life—had rejected. Giving voice to this religiosity is for Snyder a matter of connecting his own consciousness to the biological processes of the natural world in as direct a way as possible and concurrently acknowledging the equal selfhood of the objects and animals found there:

That next step is excluded, or forgotten—"well, what do you say to Magpie? What do you say to Rattlesnake when you meet him?" What do we learn from Wren, and Hummingbird, and Pine Pollen, and how. Learn what? Specifics: how to spend a life facing the current; or what it is to perpetually die young; or how to be huge and calm and eat anything (Bear). But also, that we are many selves looking at each other, through the same eye.

(OW 61 - 62)

If this was a position he was ultimately to achieve, for the most part, however, Snyder moved toward it by turning to the Orient for spiritual guidance. He had read many of the classics of Oriental literature while in college at Reed: the Upanishads, the Vedas, the Bhagavad-Gita, as well as Ezra Pound's and Arthur Waley's translations of Chinese literature. He found the "Mahayana Buddhist wisdom-oriented line as it developed in China and assimilated the older Taoist tradition" the most fascinating. Consequently, as
early as 1949, Snyder had begun to practice zazen, or Zen meditation, on his own (RW 94).

During zazen, the meditator sits, usually cross-legged, in silent and deep contemplation. This form of meditation is called dhyana in Sanskrit, which literally means to keep one's mind concentrated on a single area of thought. In zazen, one's thought is often directed toward a koan, a statement or paradoxical question, that a teacher gives to a student. Through koans, zen meditation encourages an inquiring style of thought which keeps the student pointed toward the truth. And since koans form the core of Zen literature, it is generally acknowledged that the koan is best understood when approached as one might approach a poem (Suzuki 99-117).

The discipline of zazen, which Snyder practiced about half an hour a day while in graduate school in Indiana and more when he was working as a fire lookout in the mountains during the summers, seemed intellectually consistent with the sensibilities he was already committed to:

It wasn't alien to my respect for primitive people and animals, all of whom/which are capable of simply just being for long hours of time. I saw it in that light as a completely natural act. To the contrary, it's odd that we don't do it more, that we don't, simply like a cat, be there for a while, experiencing ourselves as whatever we are, without any extra thing added to that. I
approached meditation on that level; I wasn't expecting anything to happen. (RW 96)

But things did happen, sometimes comic ones. He recalls how strange he felt in Indiana when somebody walked into the apartment he was sharing with anthropologist Dell Hymes and discovered him sitting cross-legged on the floor doing zazen meditation. There was soon a rumor buzzing around the campus about the weird guy from Oregon (RW 97).

When Snyder left graduate school and hitchhiked back to the West Coast in the Spring of 1952, he made what on the surface seemed a major turn in life, but in the context of the ideas in his writing it was an inevitable movement. Ultimately, the journey west from Indiana was the first leg of a much longer journey which would help spark the San Francisco poetry renaissance and lead to a lengthy study of Zen Buddhism in Japan, as well as a trip to India and the publication of five volumes of poetry.

Upon arriving in San Francisco, Snyder worked at a variety of jobs, including one installing burglar alarms. The following summer he hitchhiked north to work as a fire lookout. The first section of Earth Household, called "Lookout's Journal," is made up of material he wrote that summer and the following summer when he worked in the Cascade Mountains. He and Philip Whalen, who later became a zen priest, shared an apartment in San Francisco during one
interval in this period, and in the fall of 1953 Snyder met Kenneth Rexroth for the first time. Rexroth was a generation older than Snyder and had been publishing poetry since the early 1940's; he is considered to have been the mentor of the Beat Generation, although he condemned their excesses. Snyder has recalled Rexroth holding open house at his apartment:

Four or five or sometimes ten people might drop by; some out of an old Italian anarchist group, some from the film makers' and artists' circles of the Bay Area. In 1954 I knew virtually every poet, film maker, and artist in the region. (RW 162)

Snyder and Rexroth also shared a coincidence of background in the Pacific Northwest. In his "autobiographical novel" Rexroth, whose strong anarchist/I.W.W. politics parallel the politics of Snyder's parents, describes hitchhiking to the Seattle area in 1924. After dabbling in the Seattle I.W.W. movement and deciding it was too provincial and sectarian, he headed north looking for work. At Marblemount, Rexroth found a job working out of the ranger station clearing trails in the wilderness of the Cascade Mountains. Not only had Rexroth worked in the same national forest as Snyder, but he claimed to have worked for the same man. In addition, Rexroth took up mountain climbing and undoubtedly climbed some of the same peaks that Snyder would climb twenty years later (Rexroth 1966 279).
Encouraged by Rexroth and other friends and recognizing that the Zen tradition was still most active in Japan, Snyder decided to undertake a study of Oriental languages at the University of California at Berkeley. In the autumn of 1953, he took a cottage in Berkeley and registered as an Oriental languages student at the University. Snyder recalls this period as a relatively solitary one, most of his time spent studying the languages that would ready him to go to the Orient (Kherdian 1967 49). While studying Chinese, and beginning to translate Chinese poetry, Snyder seems to have realized and to a certain degree emulated the Chinese poet's relationship to the natural world. At the 1977 Academy of American Poets' Symposium on "Chinese Poetry and the American Imagination" Snyder commented:

Chinese poetry seems to have found, at its finest, a center within the poles of man, spirit, and nature. With strategies of apparent simplicity and understatement it moves us from awe before history, to a deep breath before nature, to a laugh before spirit. ("Symposium on Chinese Poetry . . ." 20)

Snyder also explained that he felt different American poets had seen vastly different things in Chinese poetry. While Ezra Pound, whose poetic technique Snyder had studied carefully, was most fascinated with the idea of poets having great political power in a state bureaucracy, Snyder himself was attracted to the "hermit poet/nature poet." But in fact, as Snyder points out, these two extremes were frequently seen
in the same person. In the Occident we have neither a hermit/poet nor a civil servant/poet tradition. Rexroth, who had been actively translating Chinese and Japanese poetry well before he met Snyder, did not participate in the symposium, but in his contribution to the symposium's proceedings, he explained some of the history of the translation of Chinese poetry into English:

Chinese poetry began to influence writers in English with the translations into French of Hervey St. Denis and others in the mid-19th century who translated the Three Hundred Poems of T'ang into French free verse.
("Symposium on Chinese Literature . . . " 11)

As Earl Miner points out in The Japanese Tradition in British and American Literature, American poetic eyes were at the same time turned suddenly toward Japan (19 - 20). Walt Whitman watched a parade for Japanese statesmen on Broadway in 1860, following Perry's treaty negotiations, and swiftly incorporated Japan and the rest of the Orient into his work:

Superb-faced Manhattan!
Comrade Americanos! to us, then at last the Orient comes.

To us, my city,
Where our tall-topt marble and iron beauties range on opposite sides, to walk in the space between,
To-day our Antipodes comes.

The Originatress comes,
The nest of languages, the bequeather of poems, the race of eld,
Florid with blood, pensive, rapt with musings, hot with passion
Sultry with perfume, with ample and flowing garments,
With sunburnt visage, with intense soul and glittering eyes,
The race of Brahma comes.

For not the envoys nor the tanned Japanee from his island only,
Lithe and silent the Hindoo appears, the Asiatic continent itself appears, the past, the dead,
The murky night-morning of wonder and fable inscrutable,
The envelop'd mysteries, the old and unknown hive-bees,
The north, the sweltering south, eastern Assyria, the Hebrews, the ancient of ancients,
Vast desolated cities, the gliding present, all of these and more are in the pageant-procession.

The imaginative substance of Whitman's vision of Asia, however imperialistic it might have been, is even clearer in "Passage to India." That Whitman's vision transfers itself forward to become a part of Snyder's literary heredity is made clear in the following:

What I read Whitman for is for inspiration. He's inspiring. I love to read "The Song of the Open Road," or "By Blue Ontario's Shores," or "Passage to India"—I love to read 'em aloud, to a small audience. He's a good communal poet in that way.

A section of Earth House Hold closes with a quotation from the last part of "Passage to India":

Passage to more than India!
Are thy wings plumed indeed for such far flights?
O soul, voyaguest thou indeed on voyages like those?
(Whitman 112)

Perhaps Snyder is also concerned with the way Whitman sings
of the extension of himself beyond his own country, indeed beyond the mysteries of the ages and ultimately beyond time, space and death. For Whitman is inextricably interweaving the "passage" with the journey of his own ideal self:

Sail forth—steer for the deep waters only,
Reckless O soul, exploring, I with thee,
and thou with me,
For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go,
And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all.
(336)

Whitman follows "Passage to India" with "Prayer of Columbus," in which he describes his feeling for the evolution of Columbus' belief in an idea to which Whitman gives the elevation of both prayer and dream:

I know not even my own work past or present,
Dim ever-shifting guesses of it spread before me,
O newer better worlds, their mighty parturition,
Mocking, perplexing me.

And these things I see suddenly, what mean they?
As if some miracle, some hand divine unseal'd my eyes,
Shadowy vast shapes smile through the air and sky,
And on the distant waves sail countless ships,
And anthems in new tongues I hear saluting me.
(338)

Snyder's move toward the Orient seems to parallel the idea of America as an imaginative process in the minds of early explorers who believed they were searching for and had found Asia. This has been called "the invention of America." The "dim ever-shifting guesses" Whitman describes in "Passage to India" suggest a concept that Edmundo O'Gorman has
relationship between his work and Jeffers' work in "tone" (Steuding 154). In explaining how Jeffers is "a twentieth-century reverse image of Walt Whitman," Snyder says:

Whitman was optimistic and Jeffers is pessimistic and they're both talking about the same thing. . . . About the prophecy of America. They are the prophets of America, each in their own century. (RW 56)

In "Lookout's Journal" a kind of ambivalence seems to emerge that centers on the problem of man's relation to the natural world. For Jeffers the problem was human civilization and the way in which human emotions, primarily suffering and pity, emerge to destroy the landscape. Jeffers' solution was a loosely formed philosophy called "In-humanism," which sought to elevate nature, i.e. need and instinct, over man's desires to project and extend himself at the cost of nature.

It is essential to point out that Rexroth, on the other hand, energetically rejected Jeffers' work, saying:

His philosophy I find a mass of contradictions—high flown statements indulged in for their melodrama alone, and often essentially meaningless. The constantly repeated gospel that it is better to be a rock than a man is simply an unscrupulous use of language. (Rexroth 1961 216)

Snyder, from the perspective of a fire lookout in the Cascades, obviously saw things differently. Jeffers' "In-humanism" might well be an aspect of a plausible vision of man's place in an ecological order. However, the
during the summer of 1952, as "Cratershan." Throughout the journal one finds the terse, sharply focused imagery marking the emergence of Oriental aesthetics in his writing:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{two butterflies} \\
\text{a chilly clump of mountain flowers}
\end{align*}
\]

(EHH 7)

Occasionally Snyder comments on a specific quality which begins to fill in an aesthetic program that will guide the poet's work throughout his career: "form--leaving things out at the right spot / ellipse, is emptiness." In Snyder's world, the zen approach to meditation is a fundamental part of the poetic process which at times seems to lead toward questions, sometimes questions which remain unanswered, and at other times seems to resolve by dissociation, by offering a series of images leading toward other questions:

A dead sharp-shinned hawk, blown by the wind against the lookout. fierce compact little bird with square head.

--If one wished to write poetry of nature, where an audience? Must come from the very conflict of an attempt to articulate the vision poetry & nature in our time.

(reject the human; but the tension of human events, brutal and tragic, against a non-human background? like Jeffers?)

(EHH 4)

Snyder had been reading Robinson Jeffers throughout the period of the early fifties and has said that there was a
relationship between his work and Jeffers' work in "tone" (Steuding 154). In explaining how Jeffers is "a twentieth-century reverse image of Walt Whitman," Snyder says:

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significance here of both Jeffers' and Rexroth's work is that they both made important poetic explorations into the psychological aspects of man's relationship to the natural world and that Snyder saw merit in each. If Jeffers' pessimism runs counter to Whitman's celebration of American civilization's westward progress, Snyder's general orientation to civilization, both Western and Eastern, seems for a time to parallel Jeffers' while at the same time valuing Whitman's focus on man's proper place in the natural world.

Many of these concerns--Jeffers' as well as Snyder's--had been earlier examined by Freud, who suggests man's instincts, and therefore civilization's, are directed toward aggressive and egotistic efforts to control nature for exploitation and protection. For in the most primitive roots of man's relation to nature lie elemental fears of the violence of the natural world. Freud defines civilization as

the whole sum of the achievements and the regulations which distinguish our lives from those of our animal ancestors and which serve two purposes--namely to protect men against nature and to adjust their mutual relations.

(36)

Ironically, Snyder's summer job as a fire lookout gave him a unique perspective from which to engage this matrix of ideas, for Freud points to man's gaining control over fire as a primary achievement in his developing control over nature.
Of course, this could symbolically be understood as man gaining control over his emotions. By inventing tools, man was able to increasingly control nature and thereby extend his own ego in the direction of becoming godlike; however, Freud describes man as

a kind of prosthetic God. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent; but those organs have not grown on to him and they still give him much trouble at times.

(38 - 39)

That 20th century man lives in troubled times acknowledges the central movement of civilization as Freud describes it. Man has consistently separated himself from nature by increasing the number of and the complexity of his auxiliary organs. Freud also appends the creation of beauty to his short catalogue of the qualities of civilization, pointing out that cleanliness and order are on the same plane of importance as the invention of tools and the conquest of fire. Even writing can be seen as a kind of prosthesis, an effort to replace solitude with another person (38 - 39).

Jeffers, when he isn't rejecting man completely, seems intent on closing the gap between man and nature, yet he can hold nature up only as an emblem, an ideal that man incompetently emulates, rather than a process man participates in:

A horseman high alone as an eagle on the spur of the mountain over Mirmas Canyon draws
rein, looks down
At the bridge-builders, men, trucks, the power-shovels, the teeming end of the new coast-road at the mountain's base.
He sees the loops of the road go northward, headland beyond headland, into gray mist over Fraser's Point,
He shakes his fist and makes the gesture of wringing a chicken's neck, scowls and rides higher.

I too
Believe that the life of men who ride horses, herders of cattle on the mountain pasture, plowers of remote Rock-narrowed farms in poverty and freedom, is a good life. At the far end of those loops of road Is what will come and destroy it, a rich and vulgar and bewildered civilization dying at the core,
A world that is feverishly preparing new wars, peculiarly vicious ones, and heavier tyrannies, a strangely Missionary world, road-builder, wind-rider, educator, printer and picture-maker and broad-caster,
So eager, like an old drunken whore, pathetically eager to impose the seduction of her fled charms
On all that through ignorance or isolation might have escaped them. I hope the weathered horseman up yonder Will die before he knows what this eager world will do to his children. More tough-minded men Can repulse an old whore, or cynically accept her drunken kindnesses for what they are worth, But the innocent and credulous are soon corrupted.
Where is our consolation? Beautiful beyond belief
The heights glimmer in the sliding cloud, the great bronze gorge-cut sides of the mountain tower up invincibly,
Not the least hurt by this ribbon of road carved on their sea-foot.

(Jeffers 86 - 87)
Although Jeffers is part of a long-term movement toward acknowledging the widening gap between man and nature, it is not until the mid-20th century that the origins of Western attitudes toward nature become a separate field of study and the term "ecology" a household word (if not a householder's concern).

In his seminal essay, "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis," Lynn White, Jr., points to the manner in which man has altered the environment from the very beginning. There is evidence, he points out, that man's fire-drive hunting methods in the Pleistocene resulted in the planet's great grasslands and the extinction of many species of large mammals. Another example, which Snyder also points to, is the cutting of forests to build the Roman fleets. However, man's ability to change the environment makes a quantum leap forward in the mid-19th century with what White identifies as

the emergence in widespread practice of the Baconian creed that scientific knowledge means technological power over nature.... Its acceptance as a normal pattern of action may mark the greatest event in human history since the invention of agriculture, and perhaps in nonhuman terrestrial history as well.

(1203 - 1207)

If the seventeenth and eighteenth century ascension of Baconian ideology, which emphasized man's dominion over nature, is to be seen as a momentous event in scientific
history, then the prior victory of Christianity over paganism must have been "the greatest psychic revolution in the history of our culture." As White points out, in ancient times man recognized a spiritual quality in every aspect of nature, and the Christian movement against these attitudes paved the way for the imperial tradition, which promised a scientific utopia where man would manage nature:

In antiquity every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own genius loci, its guardian spirit. These spirits were accessible to men, but were very unlike men; centaurs, fauns, and mermaids show their ambivalence. Before one cut a tree, mined a mountain, or dammed a brook, it was important to placate the spirit in charge of that particular situation, and to keep it placated. By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects.

(1203 - 1207)

Working as a fire lookout, as an employee of the Forest Service, Snyder was himself an extension of a Baconian strain of nature management, except that at the same time he was writing poetry, keeping journals and exploring an attitude toward nature which involved a religious sense of participation with the cycles of nature. This is the kind of thing that makes Snyder's work seem eclectic to many, when in reality it is accurately mapping a poetic parallel to the development of ecological thinking; he adapts elements of technological and scientific thought to fill out his perception, his understanding, of the natural world. When he
describes the rock formations around his lookout, the question of the consciousness of the rocks themselves looms up:

When a storm blows in, covering the south wall with rain and blotting out the mountains. Ridges look new in every light. Still discovering new conformations----every cony has an ancestry but the rocks were just here.

Structure in the lithosphere / cycles of change in rock / only the smallest percentage sanded and powdered and mixed with life-derived elements. Is chemical reaction a type of perception??-- Running through all things motion and reacting, object against object / there is more than enough time for all things to happen: swallowing its own tail.

To justify his own animistic sensibilities, the young fire lookout had to reconcile his sense of biological heredity, his understanding of human evolution, with his sense of how the rock formations seemed to be continually changing. Earlier in the journal he explains a rock as alive, suggesting that this is so because of the plants and animals which it nourishes. However, the poet's vision of his own interrelatedness to the rocks suggests that "the cycles of change in rock," both biochemical changes and changes in his own perceptions, are related to climatic changes and therefore the long and repetitive movement of time.

As I noted earlier, during his second summer as a fire lookout, Snyder's friend Philip Whalen was stationed at another lookout nearby. Many of the journal entries reflect
a prevailing good humor about the life of isolation and loneliness. The opening entry in his journal confronts the problem with the premise of the Forest Service:

The Philosophy of the Forest Service:
Optimistic view of nature—democratic, utilitarian. "Nature is rational." Equals, treat it right and it will make a billion board feet a year. Paradox suppresses. What wd an Aristocratic F.S. be like? Man traps?

Forest equals crop / Scenery equals recreation / Public equals money. :: The shopkeeper's view of nature.
(EHH 12)

Having asserted the consciousness of all nature, the paradox which Snyder plays with is that nature is disenfranchised from the political process. Later, this becomes an important theme in his ecological thinking; it emerges in preliminary form here. Obviously, if the trees controlled the Forest Service, they might reverse the situation and protect themselves from exploitation by setting traps for men.

In August, one of the lookouts nearby spotted smoke; Snyder describes the speed with which the lookouts radioed in their azimuths and the firefighters were dispatched. The journal entry then shifts: "Don't be a mountaineer, be a mountain. / And shrug off a few with avalanches" (EHH 21).

Beneath the surface of Snyder's journals is the metaphysical notion that nature is entirely made up of conscious entities. Yet there is another element in his emerging view of nature, a more abstract and self-conscious element, but one which
sets Snyder's vision apart. He might agree with Jeffers that man—at least momentarily—has the upper hand and that man's role is a brutal one, but unlike Jeffers, Snyder stresses the capricious freedom of nature. He explains that nature is a vast set of conventions, totally arbitrary, patterns and stresses that come into being each instant; could disappear totally anytime; and continues only as a form of play: the cosmic / comic delight. (EHH 21)

Throughout much of the 1953 "Sourdough" section of "Lookout's Journal" Snyder looks at the natural world from this essentially comic point of view, a type of view that Joseph W. Meeker, in The Comedy of Survival says has to include man, who "is durable even though he may be weak, stupid, and undignified." Meeker goes on to elaborate on how the comic mode in literature is "a celebration, a ritual renewal of biological welfare as it persists in spite of any reasons there may be for feeling metaphysical despair" (24).

Throughout his career, Snyder seems to fit Meeker's very general mold, a mold intended to define the relationship of literature and ecology. What some critics have called Snyder's boyishness should be reconsidered in this light. But the problem with theoretical molds is that real lives seem all too anxious to break out of them. Snyder's first book of poetry, Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems demonstrates a contemplative tone growing out of the metaphors of Snyder's
Buddhist studies. "Riprap," Snyder points out on the title page of the book, is defined as "a cobble of stone laid on steep slick rock to make a trail for horses in the mountains." Snyder's use of this contemplative tone emerges in the poem "Mid-August on Sourdough Mountain Lookout," which lacks any of the comic elements present in "Lookout's Journal":

Down valley a smoke haze  
Three days heat, after five days rain  
Pitch glows on the fir-cones  
Across rocks and meadows  
Swarms of new flies.

I cannot remember things I once read  
A few friends, but they are in cities.  
Drinking cold snow-water from a tin cup  
Looking down for miles  
Through high still air.  
(RR 1)

This poem stresses a quiet serenity and an insight characteristic of the Chinese and Zen poetry Snyder had been studying. The compression of the imagery of the first stanza gives way to a realization of the smallness of the poet's own humanity against a backdrop of "high still air." To the extent that this should be read as a poem reflecting ecological values, it is neither comic nor tragic; it simply recognizes and accepts man's diminutive place in the vastness of nature.

During the years following World War II the political mood in the United States shifted dramatically toward the
right. In 1953, as the Korean War was drawing to a close, Senator Joseph McCarthy, a former judge from Wisconsin, began a series of investigations into communism in various parts of the government. McCarthy was chairman of the Permanent Investigations Subcommittee of the Senate's Committee on Government Operations. Eventually the Senate censured him, but much of the machinery of the nation still supported his doctrines (Zinn 150 - 157). It was in this atmosphere that a revolution was brewing in American poetry, and it was in this atmosphere that Snyder, in the summer of 1954, on orders from Washington, was fired from the U.S. Forest Service.

That same summer a strike shut down the lumber industry in the Pacific Northwest and kept Snyder from finding work, but it inspired him to write a poem titled "The Late Snow and Lumber Strike of the Summer of Fifty-four," which later appeared as the second poem in Riprap. The poem describes the landscape as seen by the unemployed drifting, hitching, thinking and searching man:

```
Whole towns shut down
hitching the Coast road, only gypos
Running their beat trucks, no logs on
Gave me rides. Loggers all gone fishing.
(2)
```

The wanderlust motif, which occurs through much of Snyder's work in the fifties and sixties--sometimes presenting the poet as a hitchhiker, sometimes as seaman and sometimes as backwoods hermit--emerges here with great clarity. What for
Snyder is functioning motif, providing him with a convenient device for connecting seemingly disparate imagery, for some other writers of the Beat movement--such as Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and Michael McClure--becomes elevated to major theme.

No doubt Snyder was expressing much of the mood of that period of time in America, but by "climbing the steep ridge below Shuksan" the poet realizes a measure of identity between himself and the "clumps of pine" which, like himself, "float out the fog." Measure by measure Snyder plays these types of identities out in his poetry, ultimately completing a vision of environment and self, a vision which acknowledges a place for man in the natural order. So, unlike much of working class America, Snyder finds meaning, and takes another step in defining himself, by the realization of his wanderlust as an operating motif, rather than an end in itself. Although the poem ends with anticipation--

I must turn and go back
caught on a snowpeak
between heaven and earth

And stand in lines in Seattle.
Looking for work.
(3)

--it marks an early poetic step toward an aesthetic which aims at establishing relationship with the natural world by careful observation and contemplation and with the world of humanity by working. In both cases Snyder's poetic
perceptions are ecological because they seek out and verify the interrelatedness of self and other.

With the next poem in *Riprap*, "Praise for Sick Women," Snyder lays another important stone in place in the development of his ecological ideas. The idea for the poem was probably influenced by Robert Graves' *The White Goddess*, which he had read in college. As the first step in the development of a metaphor for the female principle, the poem encompasses the much older idea of earth mother and introduces what becomes Snyder's mythological method by presenting images of woman merged with place and at the same time emphasizing the fertility of the idea by imbedding images of sexual union:

The female is fertile, and discipline
(contra naturam) only
confuses her
Who has, head held sideways
Arms out softly, touching,
A difficult dance to do, but not in mind.

Hand on sleeve: she holds leaf turning
in sunlight on spiderweb;
Makes him flick like trout through shallows
Builds into ducks and cold marshes
Sucks out the quiet: bone rushes in.
(4)

The idea of woman has merged with nature, merged with landscape. The poem describes birth of humankind merged with birth of land, and out of this union comes language itself, leading to perception:
Behind the cool pupil a knot grows
Sudden roots sod him and solid him
Rain falls from skull-roof mouth is awash
with small creeks
Hair grows, tongue tenses out--and she
Quick turn of the head: back glancing, one hand
Fingers smoothing the thigh, and he sees.

The second part of the poem describes the contrary aspect of the feminine principle, embodied in the destructive image of "kali/shakti," which Snyder refers to near the end of the poem. This is an essential part of Snyder's biopoetic vision, his ecological vision, because it is through this description of archetypal woman, his praises for her, that he brings forth the most fundamental notion of interrelatedness in the world--creation and destruction. In his "Praise for Sick Women" Snyder recognizes the beauty which transcends the sickness, "a beauty like season or tide, / sea cries" (RR 4).

James Wright, discussing the significance of Snyder's work in the American poetic tradition, said in 1962 that *Riprap* was "one of the two or three finest books of poetry of the last ten years." The poem "Cartagena," Wright points out, seems on its surface like much of the Beat poetry being written in the fifties, but the similarity was only in its subject matter--a raucous time in an exotic place. Wright elaborated on an essential point in establishing Snyder's relationship to the Beats and to a much larger picture of American literature:
Mr. Snyder's difference from the Beats... is apparent in a superior sensitivity. Like Whitman before him, he brings a sense of delicacy to bear upon his treatment of other people's lives. He even has a sense of privacy, even in the most raucous life, which appears in the several meditative poems in *Riprap*. (28)

Nevertheless, in most people's minds, Snyder is associated with the Beats by virtue of his friendships with Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac and by virtue of his presence in the San Francisco Bay area during the mid-fifties. While Snyder was living in Berkeley he met both Ginsberg and Kerouac. Ginsberg describes Snyder:

A bearded interesting Berkeley cat name of Snyder, I met him yesterday (via Rexroth suggestion) who is studying oriental and leaving in a few months on some privately put up funds to go be a Zen monk (a real one). He's a head, peyotlist, laconist, but warmhearted, nice looking with a little beard, thin, blond, rides a bicycle in Berkeley in red corduroy & levis & hungup on indians (ex-anthropologist student from some indian hometown) and writes well, his sideline besides zen which is apparently calm scholarly & serious with him. Interesting person. (Chaters 234)

Written in a letter to a friend in New York soon after Ginsberg's first meeting with Snyder, this complements Kerouac's description of Japhy Ryder, the hero of Kerouac's *Dharma Bums*:

Japhy Ryder was a kid from eastern Oregon brought up in a log cabin deep in the woods with his father and mother and sister, from the beginning a woods boy, an axman, farmer, interested in animals...
and Indian lore so that when he finally got to college by hook or crook he was already well equipped for his early studies in anthropology and later in Indian myth and in the actual texts of Indian mythology. Finally he learned Chinese and Japanese and became an Oriental scholar and discovered the greatest Dharma Bums of them all, the Zen Lunatics of China and Japan. At the same time, being a Northwest boy with idealistic tendencies, he got interested in oldfashioned I.W.W. anarchism and learned to play the guitar and sing old worker songs to go with his Indian songs and general folksong interests. . . . He wore a little goatee, strangely Oriental-looking with his somewhat slanted green eyes, but he didn't look like a Bohemian at all, and was far from being a Bohemian (a hanger-onner around the arts). He was wiry, suntanned, vigorous, open, all howdies and glad talk.

In discussing the Beat Generation with a Brandeis University seminar Kerouac once described its origins by presenting an oral jazzed-up history of popular culture in the 20's and 30's:

It goes back to the inky ditties of old cartoons (Krazy Kat with the irrational brick)—to Laurel and Hardy in the Foreign Legion—to Count Dracula and his smile to Count Dracula and hissing back before the Cross—to the giggling old Tao Chinaman trotting down the sidewalk of old Clark Gable Shanghai. . . . Like my grandfather this America was invested with wild selfbelieving individuality and this had begun to disappear around the end of World War II with so many great guys dead. (Kerouac 1961 71-72)

The origins of the Beat Generation cross over into the jazz of Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie and, as Kerouac explains it:
The hipsters, whose music was bop, they looked like criminals but they kept talking about the same things I liked, long outlines of personal experience and vision, nightlong confessions full of hope that had become illicit and repressed by War, stirrings, rumblings of a new soul. (Kerouac 1961 72)

Years later Kenneth Rexroth discussed the rebellious aesthetic origins of the Beats as connected to Parker and not-especially-Beat poet Dylan Thomas, who shared in their abilities to "communicate one central theme: Against the ruin of the world, there is only one defense--the creative act." These artists and others, Rexroth felt, regarded art as an end in itself, and this attitude contributed to their technical innovations:

I want to make clear what I consider the one technical development in the first wave of significant post-war arts. Ornament is confabulation in the interstices of structure. A poem by Dylan Thomas, a saxophone solo by Charles Parker, a painting by Jackson Pollock--these are pure confabulations as ends in themselves. Confabulation has come to determine structure. Uninhibited lyricism should be distinguished from its exact opposite--the sterile, extraneous invention of the corn-belt metaphysicals, our present blight of poetic professors. (Rexroth 1970 5)

As the patriarch of the San Francisco poetry renaissance Rexroth carries much credibility in defining aesthetic origins, but on the level of character, of the unique personalities who created that renaissance, Kerouac's description of the two varieties of hipsters sheds more light
on Snyder's place in Kerouac's novel *Dharma Bums* and on the relationship of both Kerouac and Snyder to the "confabulation in the interstices of structure" Rexroth describes.

Kerouac explains that many Beats were mixtures of two types: the "cool" and the "hot." The cool, full of experience, is "your bearded laconic sage, or schlerm, before a hardly touched beer in a beatnik dive, whose speech is low and unfriendly, whose girls say nothing and wear black," while the hot, more innocent than the cool, is "the crazy talkative shining eyed . . . nut who runs from bar to bar, pad to pad looking for everybody, shouting, restless, lushy, trying to 'make it' with subterranean beatniks who ignore him" (Kerouac 1961 73).

Snyder seems more the cool type, keeping his experience in focus through meditation and keeping a considerable distance from the idea of the Beat movement altogether. Yet, however coincidental one chooses to see it, Snyder's prosody and lifestyle contain qualities which are characteristically Beat. Thomas Parkinson, later to become one of Snyder's early major critics, describes Bay Area writing in this period:

But what especially distinguished writing in the Bay area was a group of people--mainly poets--who were interested in forming a culture rather than in shaping unimpeachable structures out of the detritus of a museum civilization. The poetry they wrote and liked was deeply religious in tone, personalist in dramaturgy, imagist in iconographic habit, and experimentalist in prosody. With this
poetics was associated a loose cluster of concerns and attitudes—anarcho-pacifism in politics, relatively conservative (especially Roman Catholic) religious preoccupations, a generally receptive attitude toward Eastern art and thought that grew naturally out of the Pacific Basin orientation of the great port of San Francisco, intensive interest in the traditions of European experimentalism, and perhaps above all a very deep elegiac sense of the destruction of both the natural world and the possibilities of the American dream (its waste in the great wars and the frozen polity of the postwar period) dramatized in the brutal exploitation of California as its population swelled.
(Kerouac 1961 281)
Although Snyder's poem "A Berry Feast" appears as the lead poem in *The Back Country*, his 1968 collection, it is essentially the same poem which he presented at the Six Gallery reading in San Francisco in 1955. It was at this poetry reading that Allen Ginsberg read "Howl" for the first time publicly, and there seems no doubt that the reading was an important jumping off place for much of the poetry of the latter fifties and the sixties. The six readers were Snyder, Ginsberg, Michael McClure, Philip Lamantia, William Everson, also known as Brother Antoninus, and Philip Whalen. Kenneth Rexroth was the master of ceremonies.

McClure's book *Scratchin the Beat Surface* and Ann Chater's biographical study *Jack Kerouac* describe the reading as being organized by Ginsberg, who had recently come from New York. Ginsberg had met Snyder, as well as other Bay Area writers, at Rexroth's home. Kerouac was also in the Bay Area at the time, and although he had recently written "Mexico City Blues," he was regarded by the others as a novelist, not as a poet. So he didn't read that night even though he was in attendance. Kerouac's novel *Dharma Bums* describes a somewhat fictionalized version of the reading.

It was a time when literary reputations were being forged, and as McClure's book makes clear, the reading helped
set the tone for the emerging beat generation. Snyder's reading of "A Berry Feast" established his concern with mankind's relationship to the non-human world and demonstrated the way this concern was shaping his poetry. When *Evergreen Review* published the poem, Snyder added this gloss:

> The berry feast is a first-fruits celebration that consumes a week of mid-August on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation in Oregon. Coyote is the name of the Trickster-Hero of the mythology of that region. (114)

Snyder's reading of "A Berry Feast" at the Six Gallery may have been in response to his stark recognition of an archetypal trickster quality in the prevailing aesthetic temperment, an aesthetic stance characterized by organic spontaneity, hyperbole, and the uses of disguises or shape-changing. His poem develops around a trickster figure—Coyote—who finds roots in the poet's backwoods experience and his knowledge of Amerindian myth. The whole poem is presented as a kind of off-beat litany, the first stanza serving as a kind of invocation:

> Fur the color of mud, the smooth loper
  Crapulous old man, a drifter,
  Praises! of Coyote the Nasty, the fat
  Puppy that abused himself, the ugly gambler,
  Bringer of goodies.
  (BC 13)

"Coyote the Nasty" evokes the imagery of the early American
West: dirty, or muddy, drifters and gamblers, as well as the wealth of Amerindian folklore revolving around the mischievous Coyote. Trickster images frequently involve transformations, and throughout "A Berry Feast" transformations back and forth between animal and human occur regularly. Coyote is credited, in some Indian myths, with showing humankind which plants are edible. So the poem begins by praising Coyote as the "bringer of goodies."

A notion of transformation is as essential to the poet working with a trickster archetype as it is to an ecologist studying the movement of energy through the food chain. The correlation has to do with process; that is, the poet recognizes that the important function of trickster is in its ability to change form via simple associative processes the listener must make; in the same way, the ecologist recognizes the way biological processes give form to the food chain. As discussed earlier, Snyder's "Lookout's Journal" indicates that the poet was consciously exploring this correlation in the years leading up to the Six Gallery reading.

As Snyder has pointed out, trickster is synonymous with certain psychological traits--"something in ourselves which is creative, unpredictable, contradictory: trickster human nature" (OW 75). Snyder's Six Gallery listeners were no doubt concerned with the ways in which their own lives played out these traits. For Snyder himself, Coyote was appealing in part because "he clearly belonged to the place and became
almost like a guardian, a protector spirit" (OW 84).

Nonetheless, the appeal was substantially psychological:

For me I think the most interesting psychological thing about the trickster, and what drew me to it for my own personal reasons was that there wasn't a clear dualism of good and evil established there, that he clearly manifested benevolence, compassion, help, to human beings, sometimes, and had a certain dignity; and on the other occasions he was the silliest utmost fool; the overriding picture is old Coyote Man, he's just always traveling along, doing the best he can. Growing up in the [forties] in Portland, Oregon; going to Reed College, associated with still struggling ex-Communist Party professors, who had found the last haven, you know, somewhere to teach. Drawing on IWW lore, of my grandfather, native white grass-roots political radicalism of the Northwest. The trickster presents himself to us as an anti-hero. The West was heroics, but as you know, in the fifties and sixties we didn't feel like heroics, we felt more like anti-heroics, and the trickster is immediately an attractive figure for the same reasons that you find anti-heroics in the writings of post World War II French and Italian or English writers. (OW 84)

Snyder's fascination with trickster's anti-heroics points toward the social protest movements of the fifties and sixties, for the seeming futility of Freedom Rides, Viet Nam War protests and Earth Day celebrations made the actions all the more significant. As I will show later, the highly charged environmental statements for which Snyder became known in the late sixties and early seventies find psychological roots in trickster. Call it irony, or paradox, or contradiction, but it smells like Coyote.

Because trickster is able to move freely between the
human and the non-human, he serves as intermediary between the two realms. Yet at the same time trickster is an outsider to both realms. He stands for the process of transformation itself, a process which brings mankind closer to nature, and at the same time acknowledges a seemingly capricious pattern of things in nature. In this way trickster suggests an organic spontaneity which inevitably encompasses a broad, yet finite, range of possibility. This notion of the trickster/transformer is related to what Claude Levi-Strauss (Snyder's writings are sprinkled with references to Levi-Strauss' ideas) calls the "bricoleur," a kind of repairman who makes do by spontaneously manufacturing whatever is necessary out of available material (Levi-Strauss 17). This idea also correlates nicely to the "riprap" of Snyder's world—"a cobble of stone laid on steep slick rock to make a trail for horses in the mountains" (RR title page)—and to the Coyote of "A Berry Feast," whose apocalyptic presence haunts the celebration.

In the forefront of the poem is the narrator, whose job is to pass on the lore of how the berries came to be connected to the life of mankind. The keynotes of the poem are human irresponsibility and non-human ascendence. In the second stanza, the interrelatedness of the human and the animal becomes explicit, as Bear, the one who is feasting on the berries, is said to be married to a woman:
In bearshit find it in August,  
Neat pile on the fragrant trail, in late  
August, perhaps by a Larch tree  
Bear has been eating the berries.  
high meadow, late summer, snow gone  
Blackbear  
eating berries, married  
To a woman whose breasts bleed  
From nursing the half-human cubs.  
(BC 13)

The poet develops the poem by exploring the intricate network through which energy travels up the food chain, as though finding berries in bearshit inspires him to embark on a search, back up the food chain, looking for a source, a place from which the energy comes. Of special significance here is the degree to which the poet keeps mankind from becoming his central concern. The half-human cubs suggest an appropriate relationship between humanity and the non-human.

In "this poem is for bear," from Myths and Texts, the rest of the Indian story about the bear can be found:

The others had all gone down  
From the blackberry brambles, but one girl  
Spilled her basket, and was picking up her  
Berries in the dark.  
A tall man stood in the shadow, took her arm,  
Led her to his home. He was a bear.  
In a house under the mountain  
She gave birth to slick dark children  
With sharp teeth, and lived in the hollow  
Mountain many years.  
*   *   *  
Til her brothers found the place  
Chased her husband up the gorge  
Cornered him in the rocks.  
(24-25)
The larger sequence of poems which "this poem is for bear" is a part of--"Hunting"--points toward an archetypal transformation Lee Bartlett has identified as fulfilling the middle, initiation, portion of the "monomyth" (Bartlett 138). In the monomyth the protagonist typically moves from adolescent departure through initiation to return as adult hunter/hero (Campbell 30).

In "A Berry Feast" Snyder points toward the wilderness, both a place where coyotes and bears actually live as part of an intricate network of energy transformations and a mythic place in which the mythmaker / poet / bricoleur / trickster pieces together a celebration of the food chain, while acknowledging the difficulty of evading the traps which modern man falls into:

The Chainsaw falls for boards of pine,  
Suburban bedrooms, block on block  
Will waver with this grain and knot,  
The maddening shapes will start and fade  
Each morning when commuters wake--  
Joined boards hung on frames,  
a box to catch the biped in.  
(BC 13)

The shift to a regular four-beat line serves to intensify the incantation-like movement of this and the following stanza. One wonders to what degree the essentially urban audience at the Six Gallery reading understood the depth of Snyder's attack on modern urban life. Did they realize that Snyder's vision makes people, at least those people who dwell in
suburban bedrooms, the hunted? "A box to catch the biped in" is characteristic of Snyder's sense of nature's dominance over man. Urban life isn't as much "wrong" as doomed.

In the last stanza of the first section Snyder shifts his attention back toward the berrybush to observe not sunlight, the supposed energy source he is seeking, but shadow, suggesting death, nature's timekeeper:

and shadow swings around the tree
Shifting on the berrybush
from leaf to leaf across each day
The shadow swings around the tree.
(BC 13)

The shadow here seems to parallel an image in an earlier stanza where a coiled rattlesnake sings a little death song: "Where I shoot my arrows / There is the sunflower's shade." (BC 13) In this way Snyder more than acknowledges, he praises, that element of the wilderness which man fears most: death. If "A Berry Feast" is a song to carry the listener's imagination back up the food chain, it does so by singing praises to the inevitability of the shadow moving around the tree, to the cyclical movement of nature's time as a correlative to the cycles of life and death.

The aesthetic which Rexroth articulated as "confabulation in the interstices of structure" seems apparent here. Snyder's particular confabulation in "A Berry Feast" represents an important evolutionary jump from the poetics of abstract juxtaposition of images which justified
much of the poetry of the generation of Pound and Eliot. Confabulation suggests a filling in of memory with spontaneous association, and when those associations are discovered and used, a poem becomes the synthesis of structure and confabulation. This results in an entirely cyclical process characteristic of the bricoleur. This is the context for Snyder's poetic imagination: Structure, or form, results from the riprap of associative movements characterized by memory, dream and immanent reality.

In "A Berry Feast" Snyder seems to be demonstrating the manner in which a montage of imagery looping back on itself recycles ideas, impressions, memories and fears. Perhaps "shadow" ("and shadow swings around the tree") is not merely death in the absolute sense, but sleep as well. Of course the most enticing reading is one which encompasses both possibilities, as well as several others. For as the poem continues to unfold, the imagery compounds as it continues to loop back on itself and the poet's unique bank of memory. Thus the second section of the poem opens with what seems pure memory:

Three, down, through windows  
Dawn leaping cats, all barred brown, grey  
Whiskers aflame  
bits of mouse on the tongue  
(BC 14)

But it is memory which, like dream, further reminds: of the food chain, of the bear myth, of Shang Dynasty China, of
logging, and at the end of the section, "When / Snow melts
back / from the trees," of

Bare branches       knobbled pine twigs
hot sun on wet flowers
Green shoots of huckleberry
Breaking through snow.

This is a poetry dominated by the poet's ability to wholly
embody the shape-shifting quality of trickster. At one place
in the poem, the point-of-view shifts to that of the half-
human bear cubs suckling their human mother:

We chew the black plug
sleep on needles through long afternoons
"you shall be owl
"you shall be sparrow
"you will grow thick and green, people
"will eat you, you berries!

The third section begins with the image of a pregnant woman:
"Belly stretched taut in a bulge / Breasts swelling."
But the image shifts in mid-line: "as you guzzle beer, who
wants / Nirvana?" One imagines the poet confronting
trickster in the twentieth century while sitting around a
campfire. This is revelation riddled with irony. His beer-
drinking, complacent listener gets mixed up with birth.
Perhaps the listener is a bounty hunter who has killed a
pregnant coyote--a coarse violation of the food chain. But
identical to his own folklore, Coyote comes back to life:

--and when Magpie
Revived him, limp rag of fur in the river
Drowned and drifting fish-food in the shallows, "Fuck you!" sang Coyote and ran.

From here the poem takes a precise look at the berries as food, as taste, as symbol of the interpenetrating latticework of the food chain:

Delicate blue-black, sweeter from meadows Small and tart in the valleys, with light blue dust Huckleberries scatter through pine woods Crowd along gullies, climb dusty cliffs, Spread through the air by birds; Find them in droppings of bear.

By the end of the section the listeners realize that Snyder is waking from and unravelling a dream, yet perhaps still in a dream:

Woke at the beach. Grey dawn, Drenched with rain. One naked man Frying his horsemeat on a stone.

These lines suggest transition and hint at transformation--waking, dawn, beach and perhaps initiation, as the naked man seems to be isolated, perhaps a survivor of the holocaust. At the same time, the naked man foreshadows the extended degeneration of civilization depicted in the last section, for the people are gone and the city is dead, replaced by berries. Perhaps the naked man is an ascetic who at the beginning of the final section transforms into Coyote.

In the first line of the final section--"Coyote yaps, a knife!"--one again senses the fusion of the animal and the
human. Then the poem's point-of-view moves even deeper into the animal world. In his travels along the food chain, the poet identifies with a reptile:

Clear sun in the scrubbed sky
empty and bright
Lizards scurry from darkness
We lizards sun on yellow rocks.

As the poem pushes toward its conclusion, one senses that perhaps Snyder is describing a vision of a plausible post-atomic world, perhaps one following nuclear war or perhaps one following mankind's return, via changing global consciousness, to a harmonious co-existence with the non-human world. Either way, the poem demands the listener's participation in Snyder's point-of-view. To participate in the berry feast is to go along with the poet, become the shape-shifting Coyote and see the city as it appears from the foothills. This places the reader substantially in the back country of the imagination, on a path to a mythopoeic place where the interpenetration of the various elements of life can be fully experienced, a place where humankind is incidental, if not negligible.

One of Snyder's primary aesthetic principles is found in his explanation of the relationship between his physical work and his writing. In a comment about the rhythms of Myths and Texts, which are very similar to those in "A Berry Feast," Snyder says:
Its several rhythms are based on long days of quiet in lookout cabins; setting chokers for the Warm Springs Lumber Co. (looping cables on logs & hooking them to D8 Caterpillars--dragging and rumbling through the brush); and the songs and dances of Great Basin Indian tribes I used to hang around. The title comes from the happy collections Sapir, Boas, Swanton, and others made of American Indian folktales early in this century; it also means the two sources of human knowledge--symbols and sense-impressions.
(Snyder 1960 421)

It is important to keep in mind that "work" for Snyder is something with metaphysical dimensions. The rhythms of Snyder's poems are built on his own rhythmic relationship to the food chain via the land itself and physical work.

In his writing, Snyder sets up a kind of correspondence between the physical characteristics of the landscape and his internal experience. The danger for any artist operating in this way is that poetry can become occasional, superficial or trite. In a superficial reading, the weakest of Snyder's work seems to deserve these objections. Yet in an important way, Snyder's work addresses an urge to implant selfness on otherness by lifting a very real chain of association--the food chain--out of the commonplace. "A Berry Feast" celebrates otherness by taking precise, almost measured, bites of experience and elevating them to the sacred.

McClure says that poetry like Snyder's answers a major concern by suggesting that we can "step outside of the disaster we have wreaked upon the environment and upon our phylogenetic selves." He points to Snyder's ability to
change "time itself into space through an alchemic act." This "alchemic act" is for the most part literary, yet it is filled with metaphysical intensity. However, McClure's comment points to something else. If Snyder transforms a notion of linear time into space, he effectively eliminates time altogether; his poetry objectifies and celebrates the movement of natural entities in space. McClure suggests this is transcendence as an end in itself (McClure 21). And this is an important element in the development of Snyder's ecological thinking. "A Berry Feast," however, calls up the celebration of the cycles of life and death which enrich the Earth, which bind all of Earth's inhabitants together. This is not merely transcendence, but celebration aimed at cultivating and renewing the consciousness of the trickster-hero who carries the food chain forward.

One has to wonder about the Six Gallery reading itself as a kind of berry feast, or first-fruit celebration. It represents a new generation of poetry coming into its own. And the poets, all of them tricksters of one sort or another, were striving for the heroic, yet stranded in a world with no vehicle for heroism. So their efforts moved toward the anti-heroic. Because of this, the generation of the Six Gallery might seem at the height of desperation--a generation striving to revise what it means to be heroic, yet continually falling back on its own despair. Snyder,
however, stands apart from this, and as Kerouac's
descriptions of Japhy Ryder in *The Dharma Bums* make clear,
the hope for the generation was embodied in Snyder and in the
clarity of his vision.

Japhy Ryder in the early parts of *The Dharma Bums* is the
mirror in which Kerouac--fictionalized as Ray Smith--refines
his own sense of Buddhism. The narrative begins with a
description of the events at the "Gallery Six." It was an
historic night:

Anyway I followed the whole gang of howling poets
to the reading at Gallery Six that night, which
was, among other important things, the night of the
birth of the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance.
Everyone was there. It was a mad night. And I was
the one who got things jumping by going around
collecting dimes and quarters from the rather stiff
audience standing around in the gallery and coming
back with three huge gallon jugs of California
Burgundy and getting them all piffed so that by
eleven o'clock when Alvah Goldbook was reading his,
wailing his poem "Wail" drunk with arms outspread
everybody was yelling "Go! Go! Go!" (like a jam
session) and old Rheinhold Cacoethes the father of
the Frisco poetry scene was wiping his tears in
gladness.
(13)

Alvah Goldbook and Rheinhold Cacoethes are, of course,
Kerouac's fictionalizations of Allen Ginsberg and Kenneth
Rexroth (Chaters 410 - 411). Kerouac next describes Japhy
Ryder's reading: "His voice was deep and resonant and somehow
brave, like the voice of oldtime American heroes and
orators" (14).

As the novel unfolds Japhy slowly convinces Smith of the
vitality of Zen. Early in the narrative Smith says, "I'm not a Zen Buddhist, I'm a serious Buddhist," yet soon Smith sees the way Japhy's poetry displays its strength in its lack of cynicism and in its hopefulness. In short order, Goldbook also declares Japhy "a great new hero of American culture." (27) As a hero, he is a catalyst for religious transformation, and at every step, the transformation is linked to immediate experience; for example, the mountain climbs that Japhy Ryder and Ray Smith take become religious quests: They want to "go prowling in the wilderness to hear the voice crying in the wilderness, to find the ecstasy of the stars" (33). It is a struggle for enlightenment that first of all means recognizing "crapulous civilization" for what it is. Echoing the first part of "A Berry Feast" Japhy explains:

All these people . . . they all got white-tiled toilets and take big dirty craps like bears in the mountains, but it's all washed away to convenient supervised sewers and nobody thinks of crap any more or realizes that their origin is shit and civet and scum of the sea. They spend all day washing their hands with creamy soaps they secretly wanta eat in the bathroom. (33)

The point is that the mountain climb is also a search for the origins of civilization. In Japhy's mind there is little separation between what for many are extreme polarities. After all, Japhy explains, using a line from Cervantes, "Comparisons are odious." Civilization and wilderness are
not so separate. Japhy says, "it's all the same old void," giving Cervantes' acknowledgement of paradox a Buddhist turn.

When Smith thanks Japhy for teaching him about the mountains, Japhy responds with his own expression of gratitude: "Well Smith I'm grateful I met you too, learning how to write spontaneously and all that." In short order the two begin composing haiku while they hike. This, in turn, makes them remember the aesthetics of oriental poets— their simplicity and their lack of pretense, "just going along as fresh as children writing down what they saw without literary devices or fanciness of expression" (48). Haiku represents the basis for a most immediate kind of literary expression, and in the minds of the two wandering writers, haiku becomes closely tied to spontaneity. Japhy recites a haiku by Shiki: "The sparrow hops along the veranda, with wet feet." And then in a most revealing way elaborates the significance of the poem:

You see the wet footprints like a vision in your mind and yet in those few words you also see all the rain that's been falling that day and almost smell the wet pine needles. (48)

When Smith prompts him for another poem Japhy tries to make one up, but finds fault with it. Smith then says, "How about making them up real fast as you go along, spontaneously?" Japhy's response is not the self-conscious expression called haiku, but a sudden bursting forth of excitement, pointing
out colorful flowers and trees. In this way the hike takes on an epiphanic quality, and in this way the mountain comes to stand for far more than a challenge to the physical stamina of the two hikers. Japhy explains:

You know to me a mountain is a Buddha. Think of the patience, hundreds of thousands of years just sittin there bein perfectly silent and like praying for all living creatures in that silence and just waitin for us to stop all our frettin and foolin. (54)

A similar attitude emerges in Aldo Leopold's essay "Thinking like a Mountain," where the mountain stands for the pure objectivity of experience, untainted by hopes and fears. When the wolf howls, "it is an outburst of wild defiant sorrow, and of contempt for all the adversities of the world." To every living thing this howling has meaning. Some consider it a warning of death to come; others think about the food the wolf will leave behind, and still others will think about the bounty a dead wolf might bring. As Leopold makes clear, "Only the mountain has lived long enough to listen objectively to the howl of the wolf." For the mountain, there is a secret meaning in the wolf's howl (Leopold 129).

By hiking up the mountain, Japhy Ryder and Ray Smith come close to understanding it. Leopold dramatizes this kind of experience by pointing to Thoreau's "In wilderness is the salvation of the world." And here is the common thread
in Snyder's, Kerouac's and Leopold's writing: a belief that the mainstream of all creation strives for a kind of security that leads to long life. Although a measure of peace is necessary to objective thinking (he also calls this ecological thinking), for Leopold it is merely a prerequisite to an acknowledgement of the sorrow in the wolf's howl. Kerouac parallels this recognition in describing an incident which occurred while he was meditating: Upon hearing a noise, he looked up to see

a deer, coming to re-visit the ancient deer park and munch awhile in the dry foliage. Across the evening valley the old mule went with his heartbroken "Hee haw" broken like a yodel in the wind: like a horn blown by some terribly sad angel: like a reminder to people digesting dinners at home that all was not as well as they thought.

(Snyder 148)

Snyder's poem "Migration of Birds," a version of which appears in Dharma Bums, points to the way in which objective thinking is confounded by the periodic intrusions of experience:

It started just now with a hummingbird Hovering over the porch two yards away then gone.

(RR 17)

The poet then juxtaposes the daily passing of time, synchronized to "the shadow network of sunshine" and the distant crowing of a rooster, with presence--"Jack Kerouac outside, behind my back / Reads the Diamond Sutra in the
sun"--and then with reflection--"Yesterday I read Migration of Birds." As the poem moves toward its closing, it seems to bear more and more on the paradoxical nature of time as flux, or change, objectified in the travelling of birds:

Today that big abstraction's at our door
For juncoes and the robins all have left,
Broody scrabblers pick up bits of string
And in this hazy day
Of April summer heat
Across the hill the seabirds
Chase Spring north along the coast:
Nesting in Alaska
In six weeks.
(RR 17)

Perhaps the "big abstraction" is the paradox: time is represented in the changing habitat of birds during a single moment of insight in which the poet synthesizes awareness of past, present and future.

Leopold and Kerouac both seem to recognize the essential sorrow which accompanies Leopold's objective thinking; Japhy Ryder, on the other hand, more often seems to remain the happy Buddhist, superficially free from suffering, yet none the less aware of it. In the The Dharma Bums, Kerouac consistently holds Japhy up as a symbol of hope: "What hope, what human energy, what truly American optimism was packed in that neat little frame of his!" (164). Similarly, much of Snyder's own writing projects a vision of the future where all of the world's adversity eventually finds reconciliation. Even in depicting the development of Japhy's writing, Kerouac
suggests a reconciliation of aesthetic need with real world actuality. Japhy says:

I'll do a new long poem called 'Rivers and Mountains Without End' and just write it on and on on a scroll and unfold on and on with new surprises and always what went before forgotten, see, like a river, or like one of them real long Chinese silk paintings that show two little men hiking in an endless landscape of gnarled old trees and mountains so high they merge with the fog in the upper silk void. I'll spend three thousand years writing it, it'll be packed full of information of soil conservation, the Tennessee Valley Authority, astronomy, geology, Hsuan Tsung's travels, Chinese painting theory, reforestation, Oceanic ecology and food chains.

(157)

Near the end of the novel, Japhy leaves San Francisco for a one-year stay in Japan. He had received a fellowship to study Zen Buddhism at Daitoku-ji in Kyoto. Smith retreats to the back country of the Cascades in Washington, and the cycle through Marblemount Ranger Station for work as a summer lookout begins again—first Rexroth, then Snyder, then Ray Smith.

Snyder leaves San Francisco for Japan in May of 1956 on a Japanese freighter, Arita Maru. The first few journal entries in "Japan First Time Around" (Earth House Hold) were written at sea, and perhaps because of the solitude, some concerns emerge which explore the analogical relationship between the idea of ocean waves and the food chain:

"Length of fetch" the distance a batch of waves has run without obstruction.
salts--diatoms--copepods--herring--fishermen--us, eating.
(31)

In the next section he writes: "any single thing or complex of things literally as great as the whole" (31). The idea which emerges is one which connects the eating person, through the food chain, to the entirety of nature. After Snyder identifies the definition of fetch as analogous to the food chain, he carries the comparison further:

POETRY is to give access to persons--cutting away the fear and reserve and camping of social life: thus for Chinese poetry. Nature poetry too: "this is what I've seen." Playing tools--language, myth, symbolism, intellect--fair enough but childish to abuse. just where am I in this food-chain?
(32)

By the end of the fifties, Snyder's poetry had established him as related to the Beat Generation. But Snyder had left for Japan, so his relationship to the evolution of the social movements of the sixties is tenuous. When he returned from Japan Snyder's position relative to the emerging counterculture became clearer. Social critic Theodore Roszak reviewing Earth House Hold for The Nation, stated:

The audience for Snyder's rhapsodic appeal is small, largely the young and the dropped out who cling on and make do, chanting mantras at the social margins; "the tribe" as Snyder calls them, referring to those like the sod brethren of the Berkeley People's Park whose delicate experiment in Arcadian communitarianism the Governor and University of California have determined to trounce
out of existence. Unhappily, visionaries like Snyder are regarded as the heretics-in-residence of our pluralistic technocracy, and their words make light weight in the scales of power.

(182)

However ambivalent Roszak's attitude toward Snyder's poetry was, it seemed axiomatic to him that mass culture automatically rejects, or overlooks, visionary statements unless they have to do with what Roszak calls "visionary technology--of the World's Fair, science-fiction variety" (182). Although some have read Roszak's review as negative, it is accurate in placing Earth House Hold, the first collection of Snyder's social and ecological commentary, in the context of a dominant culture of technicians--a culture on the order of that described in Thorstein Veblen's Theor~ of the Leisure Class--one characterized by "pecuniary emulation" and "conspicuous waste." Roszak is also accurate about the scope of Snyder's audience. Snyder himself has commented on this:

Well, I used to have a sense of an audience as being a rather small number of fairly intimately known people. But I can't help but have a much larger sense now, since I have literally read, face-to-face, to thousands and thousands of people. I could even calculate how many; it would amount to thirty or forty thousand at least, that I've read to face-to-face, probably more. And so I have a pretty good sense of who those people are, and I know what my relationship to them is. I can handle that, so what is interesting is expanding my constituency, and taking a look at the difficult area, what are the audiences that are not already conversant, and that is like working guys, like some of the Hawaiian people I'm hanging around
with, some of my American Indian friends, some of the loggers and sawmill workers that I know at home. That's one extension of the audience that's interesting to try for. Another that's interesting to try for is the skeptical and bored academic and the arrogant intellectual of the establishment; they think they're not going to be impressed by anything. That's another area to try to experiment in. So I'm trying to do both ends of that at the same time.
(Snyder Interview 1 11-12)

Yet on the scale of mass culture, 30 or 40 thousand is relatively small. What needs to be stressed, though, is that the way poetry like Snyder's occurs is vastly different from the way engineering feats occur, and it seems reasonable to speculate that the manner in which poetry affects mass culture is different from the way technology affects that culture. Essentially Snyder's poetry occurs organically; everything comes from the immediate field of his experience, from whatever is available, sometimes perhaps even haphazardly. Later the poetry further emerges in the context of an audience of listeners or readers. On the other hand, the technological entity--the engineering feat--emerges through the accumulation of deliberately fabricated objects and through a whole community of hired and hierarchical bosses and laborers who organize those objects into a linear sequence. In terms of general styles of thought the distinction might be described as analogical thinking versus technological thinking. This is a subject which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.
A year after *Riprap* appeared, *Myths and Texts* came out. The organization of *Myths and Texts*, which had emerged through the fifties, shows a major step forward in the development of the poet's personal myth. The book explores the possible parallels between the past and the present by adapting the panorama of mythic lore to the poet's perception of the aesthetic necessity of his own life. The past presents the poet with a full range of anthropological information against which, or in which, is juxtaposed personal and family history as well as natural history.

Snyder's particular mythopoetic stance must be seen as an active response to what might be considered a pastoral, domestic attitude toward nature. The tension in this is played out in *Myths and Texts*’ first section, "Logging," where the poet explores the anti-nature attitudes which at times pervade civilization. After all, the epigraph to the book is from the *Bible*, Acts 19:27:  

So that not only this our craft  
is in danger to be set at nought;  
but also the temple of the great  
Goddess Diana should be despised,  
and her magnificence should be destroyed,  
whom all Asia and the world worshippeth.

And then early in "Logging" he again quotes from the *Bible*, attempting to strengthen a case that in the west anti-nature attitudes go back to the ancient texts of Judaism: "But ye shall destroy their altars, break their images, and cut down
their groves" (Exodus 34:13). Snyder has pointed out that poetry has been "a long and not particularly successful defending action" against the central institutions of civilization, the state and the church" (OW 13). In the Orient, Snyder points out "The ancient forests of China logged and the hills slipped into the Yellow Sea" (MT 3). Reminiscent of Jeffers' "Inhumanism," Snyder's thought continuously points to the non-human as the realm where life is self-fulfilling. For Snyder, even agriculture denies man's free association with the non-human:

But it's hard to farm
Between the stumps:
The cows get thin, the milk tastes funny,
The kids grow up and go to college
They don't come back.
    the little fir-trees do

(MT 5)

By the end of "Logging," Snyder has established the actual tension of the book: In its effort to control nature, humanity has isolated itself from its very real connection to the rest of life; not only do humanity's goals point toward the inevitability of destruction, of death—they also deny the world of the senses:

Pine sleeps, cedar splits straight
Flowers crack the pavement.
    Pa-ta Shan-jen
(A painter who watched Ming fall)
lived in a tree:
"The brush
May paint the mountains and streams
Though the territory is lost."
(MT 16)

In the second section of the book, though, "Hunting," Snyder lays out a sensibility toward the animal world which is keyed to shamanism and to the ritual lore of pre-agricultural man. As does "A Berry Feast," "Hunting" recalls a distant past, a collective global past, from a perspective which is omniscient, yet distinctively non-human, perhaps even pre-human. It's as though the poet strives for a point-of-view which allows him to celebrate humankind's relationship to the food chain. In one section of the poem he begins by stating; "Now I'll also tell what food / we lived on then." The rest of the section is a list of 48 foods which would have been characteristic of hunter / gatherers in North America. The list ranges from "Mescal, yucca fruit, pinyon, cactus, acorns . . . angle pod, salt berries" to "wild cattle, mule deer, antelopes . . . buffaloes, mountain sheep, and turtles" (MT 31).

It seems clear that it is a savage, i.e. not domesticated, quality of mind which through his poetry Snyder aims to preserve. Yet it is not without a complex acknowledgement of the extreme domestication of the modern mind. He encompasses both minds, though, by assuming the posture of pure process, an active force synchronized to flux itself, perhaps in the body of bear:
On the rainy boulders
On the bloody sandbar
I ate the spawned-out salmon
I went crazy
Covered with ashes
Gnawing the girls breasts
Marrying women to whales
Or dogs, I'm a priest too
I raped your wife
I'll eat your corpse
(MT 28)

In another section of "Hunting," "first shaman song," the poet takes on the personna of the lonely human, after the apocalypse, scratching around "In village of the dead." He has nothing to eat, and while "trucks roll past," the speaker of the poem is apparently unseen, sitting "without thoughts by the log-roads," simply waiting, without intention or expectation. In light of Zen religious practice, it is easy to imagine the poet sitting in zazen, absolutely focused on his unity with the rest of the world. And what emerges is hunger, not the thought of hunger, but hunger itself: "Two days without food" (MT 19).

Snyder has said the shaman stands in a special relationship to the wild and, like the philosopher and poet, translates or communicates to humanity what the non-human is like. The shaman listens to the wind or to plants, or to the songs of the animals and speaks for them. In its origins shamanism is closely linked to hunting magic. Through images of ancient hunting lore and the persona of the shaman, Snyder creates an impression of man's interdependence with
wilderness, with savage mind—although, in Snyder's work, it is better characterized as wilderness mind. As Snyder has said, "In the shaman's world, wilderness and the unconscious become analogous: he who knows and is at ease in one, will be at home in the other" (OW 12). Snyder says that through poetry humanity can consult the non-human. By an extended pun he suggests this may be the "in-human," echoing Jeffers, and perhaps "inner-human." In the ceremonies of Pueblo Indians, he points out, ritual drama permits some individuals to step totally out of their human roles to put on the mask, costume, and mind of Bison, Bear, Squash, Corn, or Pleiades; to re-enter the human circle in that form, and by song, mime, and dance, convey a greeting from the other realm. (OW 13)

Thus, in "Hunting," the reader finds poetry that effectively serves as a communication medium with birds, bear, deer, and, by extension, the even more remote areas of unconscious, inner wilderness. In "this poem is for deer," the perspective shifts from the ancient shaman to the contemporary hunter:

Missed a last shot
At the Buck, in twilight
So we came back sliding
On dry needles through cold pines.
Scared out a cottontail
Whipped up the winchester
Shot off its head.
The white body rolls and twitches
In the dark ravine
As we run down the hill to the car.
(MT 26)
The poet rejects this attitude, preferring one of reverence and respect for the deer:

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.

(28)

A special kind of deep hunger seems to be the predominant state of being for most of humankind. The deer don't want to die, because humanity, for the most part, doesn't understand its own place in the food chain and doesn't understand the sacred aspect of the food chain. In Turtle Island, Snyder describes the way Pueblo Indians near the Rio Grande hunt deer. They begin preparing for their hunt by purifying themselves. They take emetics or sweat baths, or they might stay away from their wives for awhile. The predominant attitude is one of humility, and they only hunt when they have to, out of necessity. While they hunt, they make up songs to the deer, "asking the deer to be willing to die for them." They will wait beside a trail until the deer comes out of its own accord, so rather than hunting the deer in the conventional sense, they believe that the deer will present itself only if the hunter is humble and reverent. After shooting the deer, they cut the deer's head off. They turn the deer's head toward the east, and after
s猴子ng corn meal by the deer's mouth they pray to the
deer's spirit, asking it for forgiveness (TI 109 - 110).

Snyder's spiritual quest, in the pattern of the Pueblo
Indian's reverential hunt, requires a journey through the
food chain. In an essay titled "Grace," Snyder addresses the
necessity of eating at the same time that he addresses the
ethics of eating (Snyder 1984 1). First, he points out,
"the primary ethical teaching of all times and places is
'cause no unnecessary harm.'" In Sanscrit the word ahimsa is
used to describe this principle, and in some traditions
ahimsa is the ethical basis for vegetarianism. Throughout
his writing Snyder holds to the belief that all life is
sacred, and in this essay he points to a people who live
entirely by hunting, the Eskimo, who "know that taking life
is an act requiring a spirit of gratitude and care, and
rigorous mindfulness." Snyder extends this to an
acknowledgement of the necessity of taking life as the
essential fact of existence:

all of nature is a gift-exchange, a potluck
banquet, and there is no death that is not
somebody's food, no life that is not somebody's
death. . . .The shimmering food chain, food-web,
is the scary, beautiful, condition of the
biosphere.
(Snyder 1984 1)

To reconcile the necessity of taking life with the
ethic of ahimsa, Snyder says we need to realize that "Non-
harming must be understood as an approach to all of living
and being, not just a one-dimensional moral injunction. Eating is truly a sacrament." To help bring this kind of sacred attitude to the table, Snyder says, "We can start by saying Grace. Grace is the first and the last poem, the few words we say to clear our hearts and teach the children and welcome the guest." A good grace is one that accepts the food with gratitude and recognizes the abundance and the "great sexual exuberance" which allow our own place in the food chain:

Looking closer at this world of one-ness, we see all these beings as of our flesh, as our children, our lovers. We see ourselves too as an offering to the continuation of life. . . . But hang on: if we eat each other, is it not a giant act of love we live within? Christ's blood and body becomes clear: The bread blesses you, as you bless it. (Snyder 1984 1)

As Snyder points out, his poem "Song of the Taste" is written in this spirit, a "grace for graces," as he says:

Eating the living germs of grasses
Eating the ova of large birds

the fleshing sweetness packed
around the sperm of swaying trees

The muscles of the flanks and thighs of
soft-voiced cows
the bounce in the lamb's leap
the swish in the ox's tail

Eating roots grown swoll
inside the soil

Drawing on life of living
clustered points of light spun
out of space
hidden in the grape.
Eating each other's seed
  eating
  ah, each other.
Kissing the lover in the mouth of bread:
  lip to lip.
(RWA 17)

In light of this, it is reasonable to read the last section of *Myths and Texts*, "Burning," as a culmination of the poet's call to action on behalf of the non-human:

One moves continually with the consciousness
Of that other, totally alien, non-human:
Humming inside like a taut drum,
Carefully avoiding any thought of it,
Attentive to the real-world flesh and stone.
(38)

But before one can take action on behalf of the non-human, one must have the proper attitude. The poet calls for an acknowledgement of the presence of the non-human, yet asks that attention remain with "the real-world flesh and stone."
In second shaman song, the lead poem in "Burning," the poet suggests the common element in human birth and the birth of the primal swamp:

Squat in swamp shadows.
  mosquitoes sting;
  high light in cedar above.
Crouched in a dry vain frame
  --thirst for cold snow
  --green slime of bone marrow
Seawater fills each eye
Quivering in nerve and muscle
Hung in pelvic cradle
Bones propped against roots
A blind flicker of nerve.
(37)

Although to some readers, Snyder seems to be building a metaphor for human birth by personifying the swamp, the result is an objectification of an important element of Snyder's ecological vision. There is no separation of the two realms of experience. The interrelation of swamp and human is total. In the last line of the poem Snyder asserts himself in the culmination of the common action of shaman / poet / swamp: "The sun dries me as I dance."

In the second poem of "Burning," Snyder describes this dance in more detail:

Intricate layers of emptiness
This only world, juggling forms
   a hand, a breast, two clasped
Human tenderness scuttles
Down dry endless cycles
Forms within forms falling clinging
Loosely, what's gone away?
   --love
(38)

Out of this passage one comes to realize that the dance is that of a dualistic universe: form and emptiness falling through space, while tender living beings cling lovingly to one another. In the next poem a kind of "down" cosmology, Snyder's vision of hell, emerges, more or less centered on the swamp of dream: "Under the shuddering eyelid / Dreams gnawing the nerve-strings, / The mind grabs and the shut eye
sees" (39). In these "down dimensions" existence is "whipped" into a "froth of reality (wind & rain / Realms human and full of desire)." Then out of a region which contains both the known and the unknown rises the vulnerable "thin edge of nature" whose existence is centered on love. Yet it is a helpless love which is as concerned with "sentient stone" as it is with flesh. In Snyder's inferno the clouds he never loses sight of point to the conviction that "We learn to love, horror accepted." The earlier line "forms within forms falling" echoes at the end of the poem:

Beyond, within, all normal beauties
Of the science-conscious sex and love-receiving
Day-to-day got vision of this sick
Sparkling person at the inturned dreaming
Blooming human mind
Dropping it all, and opening the eyes.
(39)

What blooms into conscious form is the necessity of survival. In the end, this necessity shines forth as something of its own accord, yet something accompanied by the hope for love and for sexual fulfilment of that love in the context of the food chain.

In the paradoxical manner of Zen koan study, the question "What is the way of non-activity?" receives the answer, "It is activity." And the activity described in poem 11 of "Burning" is as concentrated as the question itself, a kind of hatha yoga exercise: "Ingather limbs, tighten the fingers / Press tongue to the roof / Roll the eyes." The
exercise continues internally as Snyder presents an image of "the dry, hard chrysalis." And so this almost-a-caterpillar becomes a paradigm of action, "form within a form," transforming:

Sudden flares: rush of water and bone
Netted, fitted
Flicker of action, nerves burnt in patterns
fields of cabbages
yet to consume
Imprint of flexible mouth-sounds,
Seared in the mind, on things.
(46)

To participate in the food chain is to celebrate it, to celebrate the essential sexuality of the process of burning, or falling, and growing again. Near the very end of Myths and Texts Snyder develops this idea by meditating on the steady deterioration of nature:

It's all falling or burning--
rattle of boulders
steady dribbling of rocks down cliffs
bark chips in creeks
Porcupine chawed here--
(51)

Like the caterpillar, even the slow erosion of rock or the seemingly random chewing of a porcupine fit the paradigm. And from a the perspective of a fire lookout, the cycle of burning and growing is something both remembered and observed:
Smoke

From Tillamook a thousand miles
Soot and hot ashes. Forest fires.
Upper Skagit burned I think 1919
Smoke covered all northern Washington.
lightning strikes, flares,
blossoms a fire on the hill.
Smoke like clouds. Blotting the sun
Stinging the eyes.
The hot seeds steam underground
still alive.

Coyote reenters the poem in section 16 to address Earth, to tell Earth that the beings living on its surface, none of whom seem to disappear, will all transform when Coyote speaks to them. This sets up the last section, which is divided into two parts: "the text" and "the myth." Echoing the Sourdough Mountain Lookout section of Earth House Hold as well as section 15 of "Burning," Snyder presents "the text" as an awkward and seemingly useless struggle to put out a forest fire which is eventually put out by an overnight rain. In "the myth" Snyder reveals the transformed text. Time presents no obstruction here, as it becomes Troy which is burning, and the metamorphosis of the mountain into "your mind" takes the poem into the realm of archetypal consciousness, a cosmic realm where "the cloud mutters" and "rain falls for centuries." The fire goes out and as the poet's eye follows "the last wisp of smoke... / Into the absolute cold / Into the spiral whorls of fire / The storms of the Milky Way," he realizes the emptiness of the world as an active force, consuming and regenerating, the
transformations which make up the food chain themselves transformed:

Black pit cold and light-year
Flame tongue of the dragon
Licks the sun

The sun is but a morning star.
(54)
CHAPTER V
THE POET AS ECOLOGIST

For perhaps five centuries, at least since the time of Copernicus, Western science has become increasingly aware of the ecological quality of the universe. The history of Western culture seems synchronized to a steady succession of monolithic insights: Copernicus describes Earth's movement around the sun; Newton explains gravity; Darwin establishes man's biological heredity. These discoveries, and the beliefs about man's place in the universe which they engendered, are among the major forces shaping Western civilization. Yet the same civilization seems ironically devoted to a set of cultural values which are deeply rooted in a pre-Copernican view of the universe. Despite the insights which science has provided, the keynote of technological civilization is humankind's belief in its capacity to dominate and control the Earth's natural environment.

This seems to be a critical ambiguity in modern thinking. On the one hand, by asserting the laws of gravity and biological heredity, science demonstrates the interdependent quality of man's existence, while on the other hand, the history of human culture simultaneously demonstrates the expansion of an essentially anthropocentric consumption of the environment. Gary Snyder's writing addresses this
conflict by extending scientific notions of ecology beyond their usual bounds and clarifying the manner in which our understanding of ecological systems defines the much broader values with which humankind shapes its future.

Ecologists, especially the speculative ones, are perhaps unique among scientists. They make heavy use of analogy and in this way are similar to poets who have as their central device metaphor. Both analogy and metaphor aim at extending understanding of a given subject through the illumination of similarities. The ecologist performing an experiment demonstrating the principle of exploitation in an aquatic system describes one part of the procedure as analogous to "plowing a field and then fertilizing it," when he has added some nutrients to an aquarium and stirred the water (Margalef 46). It seems clear that the theoretical ecologist concerns himself with the careful observation of similarities in natural systems in much the same way that a poet like Snyder concerns himself with the observation of similarities in his experience which have the potential for development as metaphor.

Essentially, literary theory divides metaphor into two elements: the tenor, or the subject, and the vehicle, or the figurative element. Metaphor which allows the vehicle to take on its own meaning is known as organic metaphor. Much of Snyder's concern is with such organic metaphor. Like the speculative ecologist, he is interested in the discovery of
the similarities of form which pervade the world he lives in. No doubt in the more empirical areas of science, analogy can be reduced to a flaw in logic; however, in speculative or theoretical discussions, the succession of ideas relies heavily on the careful observation of the parallel or analogous qualities which give form to natural phenomena.

On one hand we have a science, ecology, which leans toward poetry, and on the other hand, we have poetry, in the writing of Gary Snyder, which leans toward science. Perhaps because he is thinking "ecologically," Snyder rejects most of Western anthropocentric culture as a primary part of his intellectual heritage. Yet language itself, language which brings a word like ecology into being, carries with it an excess of cultural baggage and becomes part of the burden of values Snyder's work is dedicated to altering.

The origin of the definition of the word ecology is frequently traced to a prominent German Darwinist, Ernst Haeckel, who in 1866 defined oecologie "in the broadest sense . . . to be the study of all the environmental conditions of existence" (Worster 192). However, the 1976 supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary cites use of the word ecology in an 1858 letter written by Thoreau, suggesting the word's occasional use before Haeckel's explication. Snyder's adaptation of the etymological associations travelling with the word led to the title of Earth House Hold, in which he discusses his notion of the the meaning of ecology:
Thus nature leads into nature—the wilderness—and the reciprocities and balances by which man lives on earth. Ecology: "eco" (oikos) meaning "house" (cf. "ecumenical"): Housekeeping on Earth. Economics, which is merely the housekeeping of various social orders—taking out more than it puts back—must learn the rules of the greater realm. Ancient and primitive cultures had this knowledge more surely and with almost as much empirical precision (see H.C. Conklin's work on Hanunoo plant-knowledge, for example) as the most concerned biologist today. (127-128)

Although Snyder's reference to "ancient and primitive" cultures points to anthropological connotations for the word, the roots of his own idea of ecology also need to be explored in the terms of more scientifically oriented ecologists, namely Ramon Margalef and Howard T. Odum, who are among the modern ecologists Snyder has read (RW 115).

Margalef discusses ecosystems as cybernetic systems which are self-organizing and which store an immense amount of information; information, Margalef says, "has to do with any a posteriori restrictions of a priori probabilities" (4). In this way, he says, history, or the past, defines the manner in which cybernetic systems move into the future. He points out that the meanders of a river, or even the increasing complexity of the Earth's geography, are information storing devices in the same manner that genetic systems are information storing devices. Ecology, according to Margalef, is "the study of systems at a level in which individuals or whole organisms may be considered elements of
interaction, either among themselves, or with a loosely organized environmental matrix" (4).

Odum bases ecological insight on thermodynamic principles. Odum's own extension of this idea to practically all aspects of human activity seems to have provided Snyder with a model for using an empirically based ecological insight to parallel his already fine-tuned religious / intuitive sense of mankind's relation to the natural world.

Snyder suggests his own sense of these interrelationships in response to a general question about the increasing availability of information resulting from high technology:

We have more information than anyone knows what to do with. But it's a question of quantity or quality, when you talk about the quality of information, in ecological terms; sheer quantity of information can be a stifling or paralyzing thing when it comes to making a decision. High quality information is information that operates switches. A tiny amount of information will divert water this way or that way in the pipeline causing results that are far out of proportion from the amount of energy that was required to do the switching.

This comes from H.T. Odum -- Environment, Power and Society -- when he draws out an overall thermodynamic model of the universe. He uses energy flow charts that are designed to show how energy moves in natural systems. Then he comments on things like the switching function. It takes a milliamp to operate a switch and look how much it does. And then he says that in concert such low-energy-demand, high-effect, small systems are like poems, or he says, like religions, which control values.

Values control enormous amounts of behavior and work, and so a couple of mythographic poems control a religion; religion controls the values of a culture; and the values of a culture end up seeing whether they make supertankers or grow taro. So you are tracing some things back to some very
interesting sources. Language itself is an example of a complex low-energy system that causes a great amount of work to be done. (Snyder Interview 11-12)

As with both Odum and Margalef, Snyder's primary concern is the relationship between nature and man; all three writers see nature as made up of microorganisms, plants, animals, and human societies. As ecologists, they are concerned with the "invisible pathways over which pass chemical materials that cycle round and round being used and reused ... and over which flow potential energies that cannot be reused" (Odum 1). The interrelation of these pathways form ecosystems, the energy networks which define their organization. Such systems rely on feedback loops which function as specialized communication circuits governing the development of the system. In animal societies, these communication pathways are behavioral cues and in human culture much the same type of information exchange takes place with economic units such as money and with language. Poetry in Snyder's eyes is one such feedback loop. Here is what Snyder does with the idea of energy pathways. This is a section of a longer poem called "Toward Climax":

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science walks in beauty
nets are many knots
skin is a border guard, a pelt is borrowed warmth;
a bow is the flex of a limb in the wind
a giant downtown building
        is a creekbed stood on end.
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detritus pathways. "delayed and complex ways to pass the food through webs."

maturity. stop and think. draw on the mind's stored richness. memory, dream, half-digested image of your life. "detritus pathways"--feed the many tiny things that feed an owl. send heart boldly travelling, on the heat of the dead & down. (TI 84)

One can easily read the "nets are many knots" stanza of this passage as a set of analogs, images, linking similarities, creating, as it were, a "net" of metaphor. The "knots" can be seen as points of energy in a matrix of images. Of course, nets are literally made of knots--tiny pieces of string tied together--yet later in the passage they become the synapses tying together dream and memory in the brain's detritus pathways. Keep in mind that detritus is essentially the residue of an ecosystem: among thousands of other scraps, the fragments of rock at the bottom of a cliff which eventually break down so that their mineral content becomes available to the organic world. "Maturity," then, links to the residue, the fragments of images which make up the detritus of a person's life: dreams, memories, "the mind's stored richness." In "detritus pathways" Snyder is presenting to us a metaphor through which he explains how a person's experience accumulates, like pieces of rock at the bottom of a cliff, and eventually defines the travels of one's heart, one's emotions, as interconnected transformations of matter (the "borrowed warmth" of the third
line's pelt, for example, tied to the last line's "heat of the dead"), the accumulated biomass of the world.

According to Snyder, much of contemporary Western civilization strives to domesticate art and constantly rips away at its primitive status. Art—particularly poetry—is a preserve for savage thought, and for Snyder it is analogous to wilderness. Poetry becomes Snyder's notion of an "ecological survival technique" by virtue of its relationship to the primitive mind, which Snyder understands as connected to "those societies which have remained non-literate and non-political while necessarily developing in directions that civilized societies have tended to ignore" (EHH 117). As Snyder sees it, primitive minds are much more in the present than civilized minds and are therefore much more attuned to their own physical properties, in other words the day-to-day interrelatedness of their own biological needs, than the minds of people "living (as they themselves describe it) impotently and inadequately in 'history' " (EHH 118). The primitive mind lives in the "mythological present," intimately connected to its environment and far more open to imaginative possibility than the civilized mind. Snyder says, "A hand pushing a button may wield great power, but that hand will never learn what a hand can do. Unused capacities go sour" (EHH 118).

What poetry allows, perhaps forces, civilized man to
do is to address the authenticity of his own experience by requiring an identification with the primitive mind. Other arts, such as music and dance, as well as disciplines such as religion and philosophy, share poetry's functional origins in the archaic, but all of them seem to Snyder to have lost their primitive vitality because of the weight of history. Poetry, however, can be seen as "steering a course between crystal clouds of utterly incommunicable non-verbal states—and the gleaming daggers and glittering nets of language" (EHH 118).

This image of the glittering nets of language reappears a number of places in Snyder's work. Near the end of the essay "Poetry and the Primitive" he writes of our empirically based observations of interrelatedness as being "but a corner of the vast 'jeweled net' which moves from without to within" (EHH 118). One finds the same image—"Nets"—titling the last section of Axe Handles. In that section, the poem "24:IV:40075, 3:30 PM, n. of Coaldale, Nevada, A Glimpse through a Break in the Storm of the Summit of the White Mountains" demonstrates a parallel pattern of association which moves in four lines from the metaphysical and mythic form of the first line, "O Mother Gaia," to the noun-oriented visual form of the second line, "sky cloud gate milk snow," to the sound-oriented form of the third line, "wind-void-word," to the reverential form of the poet's expression of gratitude in the last line, "I bow in roadside
gravel" (71). Here is another poem which develops in a similar way. It's called "Pine Tree Tops":

in the blue night
frost haze, the sky glows
with the moon
pine tree tops
bend snow-blue, fade
into sky, frost, starlight.
the creak of boots.
rabbit tracks, deer tracks,
what do we know.
(TI 33)

It is important to see the manner in which this poem moves visually, from top to bottom, similar to an Oriental scroll painting. The sky imagery is at the top, and the ground imagery is at the bottom. Then in the closing lines, the poet, "reading" the tracks in the snow, concedes humanity's lack of knowledge of the natural order—or at least ranks it no higher than the rabbit's or the deer's. "Knowledge," he seems to suggest, is far less important than "being." The poem provides an answer to Snyder's question, "What do we say to Magpie?" It is simply silence, reverence. Both poems move from without to within by presenting nets of interconnected imagery suggesting in their economy the depth of the poet's experience.

Snyder contends that a sense of reverence for the processes scientists like Margalef and Odum are explaining to us is at the heart of the ethics or morality, the values, on which he bases his writing:
The ethics or morality of this is far more subtle than merely being nice to squirrels. The biological-ecological sciences have been laying out (implicitly) a spiritual dimension. We must find our way to seeing the mineral cycles, the water cycles, air cycles, nutrient cycles, as sacramental -- and we must incorporate that insight into our own personal spiritual quest and integrate it with all the wisdom teachings we have received from the nearer past. The expression of it is simple: gratitude to it all, taking responsibility for your own acts; keeping contact with the sources of the energy that flow into your own life (i.e. dirt, water, flesh).

Although much of Twentieth Century ecology has evolved as resource-management thinking which continues the exploitation of natural resources, many other ecologists strive to "think like a mountain," in Aldo Leopold's terms, in order to overcome out-moded man-over-nature attitudes (Leopold 129). As has been pointed out, Leopold explains that it is objective thinking which characterizes the second kind of ecological conscience. In an ecological poetry the writer and reader (or listener) merge at a common level of perception of the poem. Their reading of it is, or should be, as objective as possible so that the feelings generated in each should be parallel. Both in ecological thinking and in poetic thinking, insight emerges from the experience of a diminishing ego. The egotism of a human civilization which sees itself as standing above and manipulating the earth is parallel to the egotism of a writer attempting to stand above experience for the purpose of manipulating the sentiments of
the reader. The ecologist advocates the immanence of humanity's participation in a biological community. The poet celebrates the immanence of his experience in that same community. However, as an ecologist, the poet must give way to the recognition that there is nothing new, that a tradition of celebrating immanence had existed in ancient cultures and has survived into the present. Snyder serves as an intermediary between the past and present in much the same way that he mediates between nature and humanity.

The proximity of the two terms--ecology and poetry--brings to light an important facet of Snyder's thinking, a facet which has been articulated most incisively by Robert Aitken, a friend of Snyder's and a Zen roshi who lives in Honolulu. While writing about Gandhi's recognition that his actions in leading the Indian people to independence were acts of self-realization, rather than "humanitarian" in the conventional Western sense, Aitken explains:

Gandhi's view is traditionally Eastern, and is found with differing emphases in Hinduism, Taoism, and Therevada Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism. For Dogen Zenji and for Zen Buddhists generally, the way is openness to all beings, all things. Each being confirms my self-nature, but if I seek to control the other, I fall in delusion.

(169)

For Aitken, and Snyder as well, ecological ruin is the consequence of the separation of self and other.

To be sure, in literary tradition the recognition of the
relationship between inner life and outer life is anything but new. Whitman's "Song of Myself" stands as perhaps the most prominent example in American literature. But until recently those writers who have acknowledged the depth of interdependence between the two realms have had little if any impact on, say commercial television or evangelical Christianity. And it is these "popular" forces which define contemporary American civilization. So the issue here is not so much whether there has been a tradition of poetry which celebrates the interdependence of man and nature, the extension of the self into the natural world--clearly there has been such a tradition--but how that notion of interdependence has been refined in the thinking of Gary Snyder.

According to Snyder, the tradition of communion with nature is something which poetry has been responsible for carrying on:

Of all the streams of civilized tradition with roots in the paleolithic, poetry is one of the few that can realistically claim an unchanged function and a relevance which will outlast most of the activities that surround us today. Poets, as few others, must live close to the world that primitive men are in: the world, in its nakedness, which is fundamental for all of us--birth, love, death; the sheer fact of being alive.

(EHH 118)

But they are not merely "alive," they are alive in particular places and situations, and the place helps us understand the
unique individual. Here is how he explains it:

How does knowledge of place help us know the Self? The answer, simply put, is that we are all composite beings, not only physically but intellectually, whose sole individual identifying feature is a particular form or structure changing constantly in time. There is no "self" to be found in that, and yet oddly enough, there is. Part of you is out there waiting to come into you, and another part of you is behind you, and the "just this" of the ever-present moment holds all the transitory little selves in its mirror. The Avatamaska ("Flower Wreath") jeweled-net-interpenetration-ecological-systems-emptiness-consciousness tells us, no self-realization without the Whole Self, and the whole self is the whole thing.
(CW 63-64)

Extending this kind of holistic and ecological vision to the realm of poetics, to the manner in which the poet organizes words, brings us to a consideration of what interpenetration means on the level of the poetic image. T. S. Eliot set forth the principle of the objective correlative:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. . . . The artistic "inevitability" lies in this complete adequacy of the external to the emotion.
(124-125)

Although the objective correlative might be seen as in part informing Snyder's poetic process, he also builds on and extends the familiar William Carlos Williams dictum, "No
ideas but in things." The "things" of Snyder's imagination are extremely hard at the center, yet they endlessly connect—by etymological association, by clear-cut metaphor or by biological fact—to other things, including people and events. The overwhelming home-thrust of Snyder's writing is that everything in the world, which is constantly undergoing some form of change, interrelates to everything else. If we see the world as a biosphere, then we must also see Gary Snyder's poetry as the apparent ecosystem of his imagination.

It is tempting to see Williams' object-oriented poetics as the absolute negation of ideas in favor of the objects of the actual world (and therefore, in Snyder's work, the fulfillment of the "non-intellectual" aspect of the Western American tradition). After all, Williams might be seen as a reaction to Eliot's objective correlative, in that he found the roots of poetry in a world of objects, of "things," rather than in a landscape of personal emotion. But perhaps there is another view of the same landscape, a view informed by Snyder's own acceptance of both Eliot's objective correlative (perhaps co-relation, therefore interrelation or even interpenetration) and Williams' objectivism.

Snyder's objectivism, however, seems conditional; in recognizing the interaction of everyday things with their circumstances, Snyder finds a way to alternately adhere to objectivist poetics and reject them. Snyder's exploration of
consciousness, by alternating between the apparent world of the imagination and the actual world of biological interdependence, extends and modifies both the notion of the objective correlative presented by Eliot and the notion of objectivist poetics presented by Williams.

In 1965 Snyder assembled a group of poems called Six Sections from Mountains and Rivers without End in which he brought up—from both dream and memory—places and things, images and objects, to fill out the territory of the book. That territory is both dream and real; the book explores the relationship of the retained world of the poet to the real world outside, the world which, like the tide, moves alternately out of the past and toward it.

The book follows many of Snyder's journeys, much in the manner of a Japanese Noh drama, where the protagonist journeys through a landscape, a landscape dominated—as William Butler Yeats commented—by significant recurring imagery. In the first poem of the set, "Bubbs Creek Haircut," the reader finds Snyder situated in a barber's chair—the first of a series of chair images—from which he makes a smooth associative jump not only to Bubbs Creek, but to the idea of the past. Then, after telling the barber he is about to embark on a trip into the Sierra, to Bubbs Creek, he finds that the barber built a cabin there in 1905:
Just clip it close as it will go.
"now why you want your hair cut back like that."
-- well I'm going to the Sierras for a while
Bubbs Creek and on across to upper Kern.
   he wriggled clippers,
"Well I been up there, I built the cabin
   up at Cedar Grove. In nineteen five."
   old haircut smell.

(1)

As in "The Elwha River," the next poem in the book, the poet
considers the problem of his own objectivity and of the
seeming emblematic quality of things before proceeding to
take the reader into the Sierra. He considers the things in a
Goodwill store next to the barber shop:

   All emblems of the past -- too close --
   heaped up in chilly dust and bare bulb glare
   of tables, wheelchairs, battered trunks & wheels
   & pots that boiled up coffee nineteen ten, things
   Swimming on their own & finally freed
   from human need. Or?
   waiting a final flicker of desire
   To tote them out once more.
   (SS 1)

Once in the mountains, the objects of Snyder's attention
become the rocks and boulders, and by association other
things as well, like trout in a lake. Although he offers no
elaboration, Snyder comments: "the crazy web of wavelets
makes sense / seen from high above" (SS 3). The sense of
this observation is the way it sets the reader up for a
series of associative leaps beginning with: "The boulder in
my mind's eye is a chair." He then links further
associations--including hair (this time uncut) and chair--
with Hindu mythology and the dance of creation/destruction:

    Soft is the dance that melts the
    mat-haired mountain sitter
    to leap in fire
    & make of sand a tree
    of tree a board, of board (ideas!)
    somebody's rocking chair.
    (SS 4)

Snyder's procedure here is to sidestep chronology and to alternate back and forth between varieties of experience, weaving a dense-pack of images interlaced with the seminal question of existence: How do things become what they appear to be? For Snyder, at the writing of this 1960 poem, things seemed in soft focus, moving toward some sense of the more real, as the poem ends:

    out of memory of smoking pine
    The lotion and the spittoon glitter rises
    Chair turns and in the double mirror waver
    The old man cranks me down and cracks a chuckle

    "your Bubbs Creek haircut, boy."
    (SS 6)

"The Elwha River" was begun in 1958; however, the second section of the poem seems to have been written some time later, and the third section is dated "21.VIII.1964." This chronology suggests the construction of a poem whose imagistic substance flows continuously away from that place and time on which it is founded. That is to say, the arrangement of imagery both validates and denies the real Elwha River. After all, Snyder as poet is arranging images
for aesthetic purpose; he is not trying to recreate the river at some place other than on the Olympic Peninsula. This is an essential distinction in all of Snyder's poetry because of the exquisitely dense objectivity of his vision, the quality of a vivid and this-worldly imagination.

"The Elwha River" begins by presuming the reader's participation in a dream; then the persona of the dream—a pregnant girl waiting for her boyfriend by the Elwha River—recreates the scene as a piece of writing for school; however, like a writer's internal editor, the teacher rejects the essay. The girl then explains that the dream river is different from the real river, even though they have the same names. At one point, Snyder's own voice intrudes to elaborate on the idea:

As I write this I must remind myself that there is another Elwha, the actual Olympic Peninsula river, which is not the river I took pains to recollect as real in the dream. (SS 7)

This poem reveals a fascinating and important aspect of Snyder's work—the manner in which he alters or distorts his apparent subject, in this case the Elwha River. Snyder himself acknowledges that this material is out of an actual dream which he had; therefore, the versions which appear in the poem are already two steps removed from the actual river.

In the first stanza of the poem, the girl sees a sleeping man, a symbolic stand-in for the missing boyfriend.
In the second version of the dream, the girl takes the basic images and builds on them:

I was waiting for my boyfriend by the Elwha bridge. The bridge was redwood, a fresh bridge with inner bark still clinging on some logs—it smelled good. There was a man there sleeping under the redwood trees. He had a box of flies by his head; he was on the ground. I crossed the Elwha River by a meadow; it had a flat stony prong between two river forks.

(7)

Although in much of Snyder's poetry, this same sort of image building goes on, nowhere in his work is the process so transparent. In fact, in "The Elwha River" he expounds on the process itself:

The Elwha River, I explained, is a real river, but not the river I described. Where I had just walked was real but for the dream river—actually the Elwha doesn't fork at that point.

This is perhaps a door through which the reader, or for that matter, Snyder himself might enter the dream. It is where the poem, or the dream, forks off from the actuality, that a point of energy is created. Whenever a writer sets up expectation, and by naming an actual place he is doing just that, and subsequently presents his reader with something else, something associated with actuality but in fact "unreal," he is creating meaning. This might be seen as one of those "knots" Snyder had spoken of, one of the knots in
the interconnected web of meaning which constitutes the net that makes up the poem.

So, in the case of the Elwha River, we now know that there are two points, two knots, where Snyder deviates from actuality—in own his dream, and in the girl's essay derived from his own dream. In the elaboration of the dream in the essay the girl dramatically extends the dream: first, the bridge becomes the Elwha bridge; second, the bridge is made of fresh redwood and smells good; third, the man is sleeping under redwood trees; fourth, there is a box of flies; and then of course, the river forks near the bridge. In terms of the density of imagery, Snyder's presentation of the dream as the girl's essay is much more powerful material—apparently filled with more meaning, or with possible meaning—than the dream itself or possibly than the real bridge on the real river. The key deletion in the movement from first to second stanza is that in her essay the girl makes no mention of being pregnant, although in the description of the redwood bridge interior, there is some suggestion of pregnancy. The man sleeping may be both the possibility of the boyfriend's arrival and the possibility of a child. The pregnancy seems to be unwanted, therefore easily put aside, but not easily forgotten by the girl. Certainly the most interesting image of the stanza is the box of flies. The box suggests the random nature of dream images themselves, but if they relate in that way it would follow that they are there to define the
man as a fisherman; nevertheless, in the box they have no possibility of interacting with other images; thus, the flies have no significance at all as long as they are isolated from everything else. This seems to be part of the girl's attempt to repress the dream, and no doubt the hidden pregnancy. So the Elwha River and the redwood bridge, with its pleasant smell, are possibly mere decoration on the dream, put there to disguise the real meaning.

What the girl obviously wants to hide from her teacher is that she is pregnant. The teacher is an easy authority symbol, but more importantly, the teacher suggests the conscious drive to reject the content of the dream. Herein lies the paradoxical quality of the poem, an insight into the way consciousness both represses imagination and pulls it along. After all, it was the teacher who assigned the essay. Without the teacher, there would have been no second stanza at all. The girl thinks her essay will please the teacher, but in fact she suffers severe rejection. The teacher's rationale for the rejection is simply, "Because I used to be a whore." The teacher has seen through the girl's charade and mercilessly responds not to the girl as child/student, but as another woman lying about being pregnant.

In Snyder's own words, the poem is "pregnant with possibility" (Snyder Interview 18). Every time he creates another associative knot, a new network of possibility presents itself to the reader. As the range of possible
meanings increases, the poem becomes more connected to the form of actual experience. As poet, Snyder manages a soothing alternation between raw images and actual experience. And as is common in his poetry, actual experience is most plausible as biological fact. Thus, he ends the opening section of the poem with bare fact: "There are no redwoods north of southern / Curry County, Oregon." The stark reality of biological fact both denies the dream and gives the dream a more distinct reality of its own.

Section Two demonstrates the way in which everything, in this case everything not part of the natural world, is still inevitably connected to it. And the central place of the poem, the Elwha River, is still the point from which the images emerge:

Marble hollow-ground hunting knife;
  pikeleather tobacco pouch
  left on the ground at Whiskey Bend along the Elwha, 1950--

Sewing kit. Blown off the cot beside me
on the boatdeck by a sudden wind
  South China Sea;

The objects of memory, "lost things" of this section, find their ways out of the wilderness of the mind by following the same paths as dreams. Image connects to image, and ultimately leads the reader to a sense of how completely the world of the imagination complements the biological world. Snyder's lost things—a knife, a tobacco pouch, a sewing kit,
a black beret, another knife and a bottle of wine--each
connect to a place. And the first two of the objects connect
to place and time, thus reaffirming the primary geography of
the poem. Snyder's handling of these lost images is
reminiscent of both Williams and Eliot: these lost objects
correlate Snyder's half-buried feelings to one another and to
similar ones in a reader. They demonstrate the
interdependent quality of poetic images in the way they
remain in memory connected to specific places.

In the beginning of the last section, the poet sings to
the beauty of the Elwha River, imbedding in his description
allusions to mouth and breath which reinforce the reader's
acceptance of the actual place as a catalyst for memory; the
poem becomes a kind of mnemonic device:

Elwha, from its source. Threadwhite falls
out of snow-tunnel mouths with
cold mist-breath
saddles of deep snow on the ridges.

The following stanza, a dramatic shift of tone, is an
incantation to the river, a song to its power as shaper of
the landscape, as muse, and if the ecological theory of
Margalef is recalled, as an information storing device:

o wise stream--o living flow
o milky confluence, bank cutter
  alder toppler
  make meander,
swampy acres   elk churned mud.
As an information source, the river's meanders—both its present wanderings and its ecological, "meander belt"—display the process of history-making and history-telling (Margalef 2). In "The Elwha River," this means experience itself and, simultaneously, the memory of experience and the knowledge of long-past experience.

Then follows a stanza describing the trees of the region, but the description is one of flux, for the trees too are part of the flow, the ever-changing network of interrelated biological and physical phenomena:

The big Douglas fir in this valley.
Nobly grooved bark, it adapts: where Sitka spruce cannot.
Redwood and sequoia resisting and enduring, as against adaptation; one mind.

This is the point one comes to frequently in Snyder's writing, a point which characterizes its ecological consistency. The lost things of the world are milestones in a process of confluence, a process that is largely outside conventionally understood time. Yet the poem ends steadfastly within time: "About 12:30 come to Whiskey Bend / That Lowland smell. / 21.VII.1964." In the broad sweep of experience the lost things are energy points in a net of imagery which connects Snyder's remembering self to a specific place, the Elwha River, to a specific poem, "The Elwha River," to the preceding poem ("old haircut smell" of
"Bubb's Creek Haircut" tied in our minds to Elwha's "Lowland smell"), to the poem's reader/listener, and further outward from there.

His commitment to the relationship of imagination, including the memories and dreams which reside there, and to the ecosystem of which he is a part, overrides the superficial tags critics occasionally apply to his work. Overall, Snyder's formal poetics move toward organic form, away from what Snyder himself has called

the game of inventing an abstract structure and then finding things in experience which can be forced into it. A kind of intensity can indeed be produced this way—but it is the intensity of straining and sweating against self-imposed bonds. (Snyder 1969 357)

As a counterpoint to this Snyder says, "Better the perfect, easy discipline of the swallow's dip and swoop, 'without east or west.'" He holds that each poem must grow from the wilderness of the poet's unconscious. The work of the poet is "to let it grow, to let it speak for itself." In order to breathe "in'spir'ation" out "into the thing-world as a poem," the poet must sensitize himself "to the inner potentials of his own language—pulse, breath, glottals, nasals & dentals. An ear, an eye and a belly." From this kind of sensibility, Thomas Lyon says, Snyder has developed

a form that grows so rightly out of wild things, and which leads the reader uncannily ahead to a wild point of view. This is the technique of the
ecological sense which goes past both the primitive and primitivism, into something else, in certain poems the ecstatic ecology of wholeness. (121)

To be sure, Snyder makes the most of the contrast between this kind of thinking about the world and the kind of thinking that he feels characterizes the modern world. The political implications of Snyder's thinking seem self-evident, but the process by which Snyder's politics emerge in his writing are worth careful examination.
CHAPTER VI
THE POLITICS OF INTERDEPENDENCE

As shown earlier, Snyder's response to Amerindian and Buddhist teachings is a direct consequence of the most basic alienation of technological society—humanity's separation from the natural world. By attempting to actualize poetry, to pull the poem as close as possible to experience, Snyder presents us with a poetic organism striving to be at one with the rest of nature. The poem is part of a process of cultural transformation that can be seen as substantially political, the ecologically oriented poem moving us toward a stable and expansive democracy that includes the non-human as well as the human.

I hope to show in this chapter that Snyder's politics and his poetics are inseparable. What is political in this context is the role of the poem as a catalyst for change. To a certain extent, Snyder's vision of the ideal political world is related to bioregional movements. These movements hold that the nature of political boundaries needs to be changed in order to encourage more diversity of life and more cooperation. However, the focus of this chapter has less to do with the nature of Snyder's utopian vision than with the manner in which the poem functions to activate change. Because Snyder clearly intends much of his work, both literary and physical, to function in this way, it seems
appropriate to refer to him as an activist.

Snyder offers a definition of poetry at the beginning of a section of *Earth Household* called "Poetry and the Primitive: Notes on Poetry as an Ecological Survival Technique":

> The skilled and inspired use of the voice and language to embody rare and powerful states of mind that are in immediate origin personal to the singer, but at deeper levels common to all who listen.

(117)

From this, as well as from the title of the essay, we see how Snyder applies an ecological paradigm to the work of creating poetry. That is to say, poet, poem, and reader/listener form a net of interrelation which functions both as an agent for change and as an agent for stability. A poem might act as an agent for cultural change, yet in a larger frame of reference this change is inevitably aimed at stability. To Snyder, poetry and language are among the most important tools in the work of redirecting contemporary man's values relative to both the natural world and himself. "Poetry," he says,

> must sing or speak from authentic experience. Of all the streams of civilized tradition with roots in the paleolithic, poetry is one of the few that can realistically claim an unchanged function and a relevance which will outlast most of the activities that surround us today. Poets, as few others, must live close to the world that primitive men are in:
the world, in its nakedness, which is fundamental for all of us--birth, love, death; the sheer fact of being alive.
(EHH 118)

Snyder's advocacy of the primitive focus on our most elemental human experience pervades all of his work. Its earliest literary occurrence is in He Who Hunted Birds in His Father's Village. This early work shows how Snyder's notion of the "authentic experience" of primitive man stems from his study of the functions of mythology; furthermore, it points to a mode of transformation for modern man:

Much of the modern interest in mythology stems from the recognition of its social function, as does the even more recent attitude of some scholars and poets that the function mythology serves in primitive culture is desperately needed by contemporary society.
(HH 98)

To explain the manner in which the pattern of primitive mythology might influence human behavior, Snyder quotes from Bronislow Malinowski's 1926 essay:

Myth as it exists in a savage community, that is, in its living primitive form, is not merely a story told but a reality lived. It is not of the nature of fiction, such as we read today in a novel, but it is a living reality, believed to have once happened in primeval times, and continuing ever since to influence the world and human destinies.
(Malinowski 79, as cited in HH 99)

Despite the important distinction that poetry, in general, does not necessitate belief, Snyder's fusion of
poetry and myth moves his work toward the realm of religion. The emphasis on belief in both poetry and myth is clearly distinct from the concern with plausibility in much popular art, especially drama and fiction. But to the extent that myth is "continuing . . . to influence the world and human destinies" it serves as an agent—and in my view a political one—for cultural change in the modern world.

Snyder has said that there are basically two types of poets: lyric poets and mythographers (Snyder Interview 16). Yet Snyder is both lyric poet and mythographer. There are transformative, and therefore political, qualities and intentions behind both types of poetic impulses.

Charles Molesworth, in his insightful book on Snyder's work, Gary Snyder's Vision, has discussed the two functions of poetry by pointing to an interview that was done with Snyder in 1977. In the interview, Snyder speaks of poetry as "in-time" and "out-of-time":

The value and function of poetry can be said in very few words. One side of it is in-time, the other is out-of-time. The in-time side of it is to tune us in to mother nature and human nature so that we live in time, in our societies in a way and on a path in which all things can come to fruition equally, and together in harmony. A path of beauty. And the out-of-time function of poetry is to return us to our own true original nature at this instant forever. And these two things happen, sometimes together, sometimes not, here and there and all over the world, and always have.

(RW 73)

Molesworth's concern in pointing to this passage is in
establishing how, in Snyder's poetry, a "form of mediation occurs, between the social and the individual, the historical and the transcendent" (Molesworth 11). Molesworth's concern centers on the complex political vision which emerges in Snyder's writing within the chronological development of his career. However, it seems to me that this notion links to a bio-political one: that is, the manner in which his poetry moves within a pattern of ecological wholeness extends the idea of mediation to one of alternation and transformation. In this way, Snyder's poetic process sets up a pattern for change which is political at the same time it is metaphorical. For it is an alternation between types of poetry which results in change, or transformation, generally moving toward a stability of the whole organism.

Snyder is very conscious of the two types of poetry he works with. "Riprap," he told me, "represents a style of poetry that I've continued to do all through the years and Myths and Texts is another style which I've continued to do all through the years. There are two kinds of poetry I've been doing side by side, keeping the two types quite clear in my mind" (Interview 2 14). To be sure the Riprap type of poem is essentially objective and lyrical, and the Myths and Texts type is essentially mythographic. But there are all varieties of symbiotic relations between the two types within Snyder's books. Subcategories of the lyric type might be designated as object-lyric and sacrament-lyric. The object
lyric is closely related to and perhaps derived from the poetics of Pound, on the one hand, the haiku masters on the other. The sacrament lyric is derived from and intended to be a part of the earth/spirit biorhythms of religious practice. Within the mythographic type one finds the anthropologist's impressionistic journal forming one subcategory (much of Myths and Texts fits into this pattern) and the directly polemical and factual forming another. His poem "Facts" from Turtle Island serves as an example:

1. 92% of Japan's three million ton import of soybeans comes from the U.S.
2. The U.S. has 6% of the world's population; consumes 1/3 the energy annually consumed in the world.
3. The U.S. consumes 1/3 of the world's annual meat.
4. The top 1/5 of American population gets 45% of salary income, and owns about 77% of the total wealth. The top 1% owns 20 to 30% of personal wealth.
5. A modern nation needs 13 basic industrial raw materials. By AD 2000 the U.S. will be import-dependent on all but phosphorus.
6. General Motors is bigger than Holland.
7. Nuclear energy is mainly subsidized with fossil fuels and barely yields net energy.
8. The "Seven Sisters"—Exxon, Mobil, Texaco, Gulf, Standard of California, British Petroleum, Royal Dutch Shell.
9. "The reason solar energy has not and will not be a major contributor or substitute for fossil fuels is that it will not compete without energy subsidy from fossil fuel economy. The plants have
already maximized the use of sunlight."--H.T. Odum

10. Our primary source of food is the sun.
   (31)

Within the mythographic type one also finds a third subcategory which is essentially sacramental. This type of poem, like the lyric-sacrament, is intended to be presented in a ritual context rather than, say, a public poetry reading.

The rhythm of Snyder's alternations between the types varies widely, but the general alternation between mythographic poetry and lyric poetry pervades all of Snyder's work. Snyder's poetry as a whole presents parallel movements of a wide variety, and his poetry strives for a condition of climax where the variety of diverse poetic rhythms achieves an overall stability.

From this it is possible to see Snyder's work as mythographer merging with his work as political advocate. For, as has already been pointed out, it is his desire to redirect the future by shifting the framework of mythic belief which sustains humankind's relationship to the natural world. One might think that a vision of the future with this basis would lead to a vision of earthquakes or other cataclysmic events. But for Snyder the future, as well as the past, is a place of myth, the location of hope for the reemergence of Turtle Island, as we see in the poem "Tomorrow's Song":
The USA slowly lost its mandate
in the middle and later twentieth century
it never gave the mountains and rivers,
trees and animals,
a vote.
all the people turned away from it
myths die; even continents are impermanent

Turtle Island returned,
my friend broke open a dried coyote-skat
removed a ground squirrel tooth
pierced it, hung it
from the gold ring
in his ear.

We look to the future with pleasure
we need no fossil fuel
get power within
grow strong on less.
Grasp the tools and move in rhythm side by side
flash gleams of wit and silent knowledge
eye to eye
sit still like cats or snakes or stones
as whole and holding as
the blue black sky.
gentle and innocent as wolves
as tricky as a prince.
At work and in our place:

in the service
of the wilderness
of life
of death
of the Mother's breasts!

In describing America's ecofuture Snyder projects his vision
of an ecologically consistent mythology onto a mainstream
contemporary belief system. "Tomorrow's Song" is
simultaneously mythographic, political, and essentially
affirmative.
In a later prose section of Turtle Island, called "The
Wilderness," Snyder elaborates on what he means by giving "the mountains and rivers / trees and animals / a vote."

Originally presented at a seminar at The Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara, California, "The Wilderness" begins by describing the poet as a kind of senator whose constituency is made up of the wilderness; the poet advocates "a new definition of democracy that would include the non-human, that would have representation from those spheres." He criticizes civilized humankind generally for its lack of an "ecological conscience" and says:

A culture that alienates itself from the very ground of its own being--the wilderness outside (that is to say, wild nature, the wild, self-contained, self-informing ecosystems) and from that other wilderness, the wilderness within--is doomed to a very destructive behavior, ultimately perhaps self-destructive behavior. (TI 106)

Snyder argues that civilization views the natural world as "less than authentic" and that one of the basic transformations modern man must accept is that the "self-informing ecosystems" of which man is merely a part contain a vast measure "of authenticity and intelligence" which needs to be built into the democratic process. In discussing the need for expanding the democratic process Snyder is engaging in a form of serious wit which the casual reader might be unprepared for. For the democracy Snyder has in mind is not merely human--say his own active participation in special
interest groups like Sierra Club, Friends of the Earth, and Earth First!, a democracy in which he can, and very often does, speak for the wilderness in the realms of conventional mainstream politics—but it is instead a democratic process in which grass and geese and even gneiss have equal rights with Republicans, Democrats, Communists and philosophical anarchists.

Asserting that the world is approaching "postcivilization," Snyder says that modern man must recognize that the stored information of life-biomass can lead toward a higher level of "biological diversity and sophistication opening to more and more possibilities."

Consequently, even those plants that are lowest on the food chain and are therefore responsible for the most basic energy transformation (photosynthesis) in nature—algae, say—have implicit political standing which humankind needs to, and in Snyder's view which humankind will eventually have to, recognize. Our failure to recognize the political standing of everything on and in the earth is our greatest danger (greater, perhaps, even than nuclear destruction); our potential for recognizing the political interdependence of all human and non-human existence is our greatest hope for a shining future.

The hope really is there, but the danger that it will not be realized is also everpresent. A theme which consistently recurs in Snyder's writing is that civilized
humankind of the 20th century simply does not measure up to the beauty and intelligence of the natural world. In part, this theme arises from Snyder's recognition of the vast quantity of information, genetic or biological information, contained in the non-human realm of the biosphere, the point I have just been discussing. Yet whether humanity measures up or not, it is nevertheless absolutely connected to the natural world. It is the quality of this interconnectedness which Snyder's ecological poetics seek to illuminate. One metaphor Snyder uses to elaborate on this theme is "interbirth"; he describes it as

ongoing recurrence--comradeship with the landscape and continual exchanges of being and form and position; every person, animals, forces all are related via a web of reincarnation--or rather, they are "interborn."

(EHH 129)

The idea of interbirth is from Australian aborigines, and Snyder has speculated that this kind of rebirth might be "the objective fact of existence which we have not yet brought into conscious knowledge and practice" (EHH 129).

"Uluru Wild Fig Song," from Axe Handles, makes substantial use of this metaphor. Written about a walk through the Australian outback, the poem speaks of "singing the land," as though singing the poem is an actualization of interbirth. The poem ends with the poet literally in touch with the earth:
Sit down in the sand
skin to the ground.
a thousand miles of open gritty land
white cockatoo on a salt pan
hard wild fig on the tongue.
this wild fig song.

_Fall of 40081, Uluru, Amata, Pregon,
Papunya, Ilpili, Austral._

(97-98)

Thus the poem becomes identified with the place and the
eating of the fig: "hard wild fig on the tongue. / this wild
fig song." In bringing his poem toward an end with these two
lines, Snyder actualizes the metaphor, for the poem presents
not just the detached observation of interconnectedness, but
the actual embodiment of the place by eating the fig which
grew there. In one sense the metaphor of interbirth can be
seen as an extension of the food chain metaphor, yet in the
context of the book, the act of "singing the land" becomes a
political act aimed at alterng humanity's relationship to
the land.

Much of Snyder's writing celebrates interconnectedness
by describing how certain human qualities have disrupted
natural relationships. On the other hand, Snyder's life and
poetry culminate in a political stance which is democratic in
the most inclusive sense. This seems to result in a polarity
in his thought which permits a tension, and perhaps a
contradiction. On one side of the polarity is the
communitarian notion that an ideal political system may serve to solidify the relationship of the individual to the well-being of the community. On the other side of the polarity is the notion that all political systems are exploitative and are therefore bad.

However, rather than play the two positions against one another, Snyder finds his political center in a reconciliation of them while still harking back to his early grounding in philosophical anarchism. This background orientation leads him decidedly more toward an allegiance to the individual spirit than to that of the community. Yet in a consistent way Snyder defines the poet's role as one of advocacy of the natural world, the communities of the non-human, among the communities of people. This is reinforced over and over in his writing. In an important way, the poetry that is most intentionally political, like the following poem from Regarding Wave, "Revolution in the Revolution in the Revolution," explores the symbiotic relationship between the two poles:

The country surrounds the city
The back country surrounds the country

"From the masses to the masses" the most Revolutionary consciousness is to be found Among the most ruthlessly exploited classes: Animals, trees, water, air, grasses

We must pass through the stage of the "Dictatorship of the Unconscious" before we can Hope for the withering-away of the states And finally arrive at true Communionism.
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.
(39)

Essentially power lies within the individual, perhaps in the individual's ability to practice the virtue of ahimsa, or non-harming. It is important, therefore, to point out that Zen meditation is literally the perfection of ahimsa, and in Snyder's experience this source of strength is attainable through meditation, the repeating of primal sounds, or mantras.

Snyder has said that his contribution to political thought is in the idea of extending Marxist dialectic to the non-human:

Until recently, most people, including Marxists, have been unable to bring themselves to think of the natural world as part of the dialectic of exploitation; they have been human-centered—drawing the line at exploitation of the working class. My small contribution to radical dialectic is to extend it to animals, plants: indeed, to the whole of life.

(RW 162)
Within an ecological framework Snyder's contribution is clear, but the concern here is to establish a complement to this idea in Snyder's poetry. In much of his work, as in "Revolution in the Revolution in the Revolution," Snyder uses the procedure of separating things into polarities in order to then reconcile the oppositions. The process of reconciliation is the poem itself, alternating rhythmically between the poles. In theory, such poems reflect oppositions which have a natural relationship to one another. In practice, the poems play out the idea of what Charles Altieri calls an "affirmative dialectic," a phrase which, as I will show later, seems not always precisely used, but which is a most useful concept. Altieri says that Snyder "has developed a lyric style which itself embodies a mode of consciousness leading to a state of balance and symbiotic interrelation between man and his environment" (55-56).

In the poem "A Walk," a poem from The Back Country that Altieri draws on, Snyder achieves a dialectic unity when the walk and the swim at the end of the walk seem to reinforce the appreciation of one another. This poem, characteristic of Snyder's writing, blossoms whenever details illustrate what Altieri calls "paradox of relationship."

Craggy west end of Benson Lake -- after edging
Past dark creek pools on a long white slope --
Lookt down in the ice-black lake
lined with cliff
From far above: deep shimmering trout.
A lone duck in a gunsightpass
steep side hill
Through slide-aspen and talus, to the east end,
Down to grass, wading a wide smooth stream
Into camp. At last.
   By the rusty three-year-
Ago left-behind cookstove
Of the old trail crew,
Stoppt and swam and ate my lunch.
(BC 19)

Altieri also points to other aspects of the poem which he feels characterize Snyder's "ecological intention":

First of all there is the tone which by its quiet casualness denies the traditional assumption (taken to extremes in confessional poetry) that lyric poetry is the expression of unique moments charged with extraordinary intensity. (58)

Furthermore, the poem's syntax allows Snyder to avoid making himself the subject. Instead, Snyder presents series of verbs and participles which "blend actor and action, man and world." After all, Altieri points out, "Ecology deals not with ideas but with modes of action and with the unity of interrelationships in nature."

Snyder's use of participles (Altieri uses "Six-Month Song in the Foothills," from The Back Country, as an illustration) also suggests a "free interchange of awakening mind and nature" because as verbal nouns they reflect both dynamism and stasis. Their "repeated use evokes the metaphysical state described by Whitehead where what we tend to see as entities are in fact states of action" (Altieri 61). Strings of these participles support the ecological and
Whiteheadian notion that entities in nature interact on their own accord, free of subjective control.

Although Whitehead's thought should not be seen as cornerstone of Snyder's poetics, I do feel that the philosophy of organism presented a foundation of thought which helped modern ecology gain acceptance. Worster, in *Nature's Economy*, describes Whitehead as a "major prophet" of the ecology movement of the 1960's (318). Furthermore, it is clear that the manner in which Whitehead's cosmology synthesizes the past in a dynamic process of descriptive generalization accommodates the most contemporary aesthetic concerns with the presentation of the immanent experience. Additionally, Whitehead's concern with what he considered to be one of the chief errors of philosophy, the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness," which Altieri seems to refer to, could as well be held up to poetry as a mode of valuation. In this way, authentic experience, presented as images in a poem, could be seen as separate from the abstractions of experience which often masquerade as poetry.

Altieri says that the reduction of tension in Snyder's lyrics separates him from much in the modern tradition which relies on the writer's ability to impose emotional or philosophical dimensions on the poem. The reconciliation of oppositions, in this tradition, often involves the exertion of the writer's will, whereas in Snyder's poetry one finds an "affirmative dialectic" at work, a poetic process by which
the writer asserts that no reconciliation need be imposed because natural processes have already taken care of it.

Although Altieri's insight is an important aid to the reading of Snyder's work, the assertion that "affirmative dialectic" is related to a reduction of tension in Snyder's work seems incorrect. After all, the energy transformations which make up an ecosystem are full of a dynamic tension and it is on precisely this kind of tension that Snyder's poetics are founded. In any event, a careful look at a specific poem which seems to point to ecological interrelationships and which at the same time presents the reader with considerable tension should prove helpful.

Much of Snyder's poem "The Market" seems derived from his 1962 trip to India. Part of the poem is a reflection on his childhood; it operates much like "The Elwha River," with its quick bends back and forth in time. The opening lines demonstrate the technique of alternation, in this case a kind of juxtaposition which overlays experience from different places and times, as well as from different people:

heart of the city
down town.
the country side.

John Muir. up before dawn
packing pears in the best boxes
beat out the others--to Market
the Crystal Palace
on the morning milk-run train.

me, milk bottles by bike
guernsey milk, six percent butterfat
raw and left to rise natural
ten cents a quart
slipped on the ice turning
in to a driveway
and broke all nine bottles.

By alternating back and forth between the generalities of
city and country, Snyder makes us aware that the market is a
point where the country—in the form of goods to be sold—
becomes the living "heart of the city." He then moves
deductively to the parallel particulars of John Muir and
himself, though young Muir comes off as a considerably more
successful capitalist! The parallels are both neat and
witty: milk-run train parallel to Snyder's bicycle milk run,
the crystal palace of the farmers' market Muir takes his
pears to parallel both to the crystal milk bottles Snyder
smashes and the crystal ice his bike skids on. In this way
the poet sets up an alternating rhythm aimed at demonstrating
how parallel actions, like the separate but similar actions
of two people travelling to market, are part and parcel of
the same process: change, or transformation. In an
exploitation of wit similar to that he had employed in the
milk run episode, Snyder makes good use of the pun on the
word change—the locale now Asia rather than West Coast
America—at the end of the first section:

valley thatch houses
palmgroves for hedges
ricefield and thrasher
to white rice
In its second section, the poem catalogues a wide variety of changes, all of which take place, at least metaphorically, in the market. The subject, seen more abstractly, in this section of the poem might be called exchange, suggesting the more economical, and therefore the more political, dimension of the poem.

Taken separately, the elements of Snyder's exchanges seem random, yet cumulatively they point to a quality of transformation defining an ecological perspective which asserts interdependence in the context of the most concrete facts of existence:

seventy-five feet hoed rows equals
one hour explaining power steering
equals two big crayfish =
all the buttermilk you can drink
= twelve pound cauliflower
= five cartons greek olives = hitch-hiking
from Ogden Utah to Burns Oregon
= aspirin, iodine, and bandages
= a lay in Naples = beef
= lamb ribs = Patna
long grain rice, eight pounds
equals two kilograms soybeans = a boxwood
geisha comb.
equals the whole family at the movies
equals whipping dirty clothes on rocks
three days, some Indian river

The transformations taking place in the poet's imagination, in his memory, as seen in the rapid fire exchanges presented
in the poem, seem to flow inevitably to the disparity between his own economic and cultural values (perhaps the seventy-five feet of rows hoed in his own garden or the "value" of time spent hitchhiking from Utah to Oregon), the economic and cultural values of middle-class America (the hour explaining power steering, say, or the whole family at the movies), and the economic and cultural values of Ceylon, India and Nepal (eight pounds of long grain rice or three days whipping dirty clothes on rocks by an Indian river). The relationship between the vastly different sets of values becomes personalized in the closing lines of the second section, though without value judgement:

```
a billygoat pushing through people
stinking and grabbing a cabbage
arrogant, tough.
he took it--they let him--
Katmandu--the market

I gave a man seventy paise
in return for a clay pot
of curds
was it worth it?
how can I tell
```

Interestingly, the curds turn up in Snyder's prose description of the market in Katmandu, and even in this separate recollection of the market, the memory is in part bitter:

```
The market, early morning, in the open on the stone-flagged square: young men bring in enormous loads of firewood on their backs to sell; they are barelegged and barefoot, though the hills around town and right down to our level almost are covered with snow (one morning). I bought curds,
and an orange that was so bright and juicy looking, but turned out to be bitter and all seed. (PTI 44)

The question the poem forces lies beyond the simple contrast between cultural values. There is a depth of suffering, both human and animal, which attends the market, and it is toward this that the poem inevitably moves:

they eat feces
    in the dark
    on stone floors.
on legged animals, hopping cows
    limping dogs    blind cats

crunching garbage in the market
    broken fingers
    cabbage
    head on the ground. (SS 32-33)

Amidst the waste of the market the seemingly random exchanges generate a range of suffering which is related to the rhetorical question which appeared earlier in the poem: "was it worth it?" An ecologist might say that the poem demonstrates the principle of entropy, that each energy transformation, in this case each exchange in the market, increases the level of disorder, or chaos, and in a sense chaos is analogous to suffering, as the closing of the poem demonstrates:

who has young face.
    open pit eyes
between the bullock carts and people
    head pivot with the footsteps
    passing by
dark scrotum spilld on the street
penis laid by his thigh
torso
turns with the sun

I came to buy
a few bananas by the ganges
while waiting for my wife.

Although the last three lines of the poem seem ambiguous, they represent the intersection of innocence and experience: the intrusion on the casual innocent shopper of a chain of unpleasant, yet dream-like, perceptions which unswervingly place the reader and the now-experienced, once-innocent banana buyer at the heart of the pain of the marketplace. In a way, the last three lines frame the slow passing of the sun over the desperation of a starving man lying in the gutter. One senses the timelessness of the poet's observation, as well as the lonely awakening which attends his experience. The human desperation in this poverty-dominated market is immediate and inescapable.

By way of contrast, Snyder's poem "The Trade" depicts the inside of a department store; whereas in "The Market" the poet portrays a deep sensitivity to the human suffering of a starving population, in "The Trade" Snyder portrays naive affluence and the inhumanity it leads to in a market on the opposite side of the globe:

I found myself inside a massive concrete shell
lit by glass tubes, with air pumped in, with levels joined by moving stairs.
It was full of the things that were bought and made in the twentieth century. Layed out in trays or shelves

The throngs of people of that century, in their style, clinging garb made on machines,

Were trading all their precious time for things.

(RW 47)

A set of "consumer" values emerge in the shoppers' warped sense of time, for it is their belief that the artificial world, the world which can be measured and traded within the sterile confines of the department store is literally worth their lives, the only time that they have trivially spent making, buying and selling artificial "things." The resonating irony of "precious time" stands in stark contrast to the image of time--"torso / turns with the sun" in "The Market."

For Snyder, natural events are, however, the primary source of the words for the poem. These words lead to an energy transfer between the natural world and the mind of the poet/reader. This kind of energy movement accompanies a shift in consciousness and accompanies change in the political sphere. The political consequences of the poem spin out of the poetic process and the quality of metaphor from which poems are made. In closing the gap between tenor and vehicle, in making the poem more closely connected to reality, more immanent, Snyder sets in motion cultural changes which are born out of his parallel ecological and
poetic sensibilities. The political pervades Snyder's poetry.

At the beginning of "Money Flows Upstream," one of several poems in Axe Handles which deal explicitly with the political, Snyder describes the situation of listening to people talk at a public gathering. Yet the poet is more personally concerned with the sharply focused and almost portentous picture of nature outside:

I am hearing people talk about reason
Higher consciousness, the unconscious,
looking across the audience
through the side door
where hot sunshine blocks out
a patch of tan grass and thorny buckbrush
(AH 101)

The word "people" appears again in the first line of the second stanza, but this time Snyder is intent on recording a bland, contemporary "truism" against which he launches an attack:

There are people who do business within the law.
And others, who love speed, danger,
Tricks, who know how to
Twist arms, get fantastic wealth,
Hurt with heavy shoulders of power.
And then drink to it!
they don't get caught.
they own the law.
Is this reason? Or is it a dream.

The key line in this section of the stanza is "Hurt with heavy shoulders of power." As key exploiters of the political system, these "others" are, for Snyder, the
personification of the exploitative values of the business world. The ambiguous turn which hinges on the word "hurt" shows the power brokers as both doing the hurting and being hurt by the hypocrisies of their own laws. But there is one more line to the stanza. And in reading the last line of that second stanza one can imagine that after hearing speakers at the gathering idly discussing the most abstract dimensions of their mutual political concerns, the poet turns to his own inner political territory, his sense of power as something personal and something concrete--his awareness of his own senses and the manner in which they connect him to a particular place:

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.

In the final stanza, Snyder elaborates on this notion of power and as a result reinforces the last line of the second stanza--which ironically locates the power of that stanza in dream. It is the dream of power, which is attached to an accompanying drive to accumulate wealth, that Snyder defines as corrupt:

And some odd force is in the world
Not a power
That seeks to own the source.
It dazzles and it slips us by,
It swims upstream.

What might be seen as a trivializing of the evil and corrupt
acts which bring hurt into the world is for Snyder a description of the slipperiness of materialistic values which try to "own" the source. (He puns, needless to say, on the literal meaning of source as "wellspring.") The slippery force that dazzles and escapes us as it works its way upstream toward that source is dangerous, tricky and brutal. But ultimately it is merely an "odd force" swimming against the current, totally unsynchronized to nature and therefore in the very long run doomed. Nature can be betrayed for a while but never "owned" by anything but itself.

In an earlier poem in Axe Handles, "Glamor," a related message comes through in the form of a parable, beginning, "A man who failed to master his Ally correctly . . . was out seeking power." The poem then presents a kind of paradigm for the spread of materialistic values through primitive cultures: "so heard there were 'white people' and left / his own to go there." The focus of the poem is the corruption of values, the breakdown of the integrity of the individual along with the breaking of the individual's interdependent relationship with his "Ally." In the poem, the man "became infected with greed, went home / with trade goods." His people see his greed but fail to do anything about it, so: "crazy and greedy, he lives on. To the damage / of his people." At this point, the particularity of the narrative gives way to the moral lesson:
Civilization spreads; among people who are generous, who know nothing of "ownership," like a disease. Like taking poison.

A glamorous disease
a dazzling poison

"overkill."

(AH 94)

For the most part Snyder's definition of civilization and his response to it seem related to an important dialogue which occurred in London in the 1890's. Snyder once mentioned to me that one of the first ecologists he was exposed to was Peter Kropotkin, whose book *Mutual Aid* he read while still in his teens. *Mutual Aid* was first published in London as an attack on the views of Thomas Huxley. It was Huxley's notion that civilization must fight a continuous war against nature. Acknowledging evolution as an unfortunate fact, Huxley saw civilization as redemptive.

In response to this, Kropotkin asserted that it was mutual cooperation which moved evolution along. Kropotkin's commentaries about animal life were the result of journeys he made to Eastern Siberia and Northern Manchuria, where he observed cooperation and "mutual aid" in the struggle for the means to existence among animals belonging to the same species. Many of Snyder's ecological ideas may be rooted here.

By distinguishing between certain kinds of force and separate, but related, notions of power, Snyder is able to
present a basis for action in the political realm. Other distinctions—such as the distinction between allegiance to community and allegiance to self—are related to this one. There is something essentially Gandhian in Snyder's notion of power; it has to do with a belief that the root of political—and spiritual—power lies in the recovery of a personal source of power which is the rough equivalent of what Gandhi called "satyagraha." Gandhi coined the term satyagraha in order to describe the philosophical underpinnings of non-violent resistance. Gandhi said, "The sword of satyagrahi is love, and the unshakable firmness that comes from it" (Merton 29). Gandhi's philosophy has sometimes been called love-force, which looks like a contradiction in terms; however, this term points to the paradox at the center of Gandhi's philosophy: that something non-material, like love, can cause change in the realm of political institutions, which seem to be governed by laws arbitrary as those of 19th century physics. Snyder's political stance seems to approximate Gandhi's, especially when they both point to the need for consistent recognition and cultivation of the individual's connectedness to both other people and the planet on which he resides. In a major way, this is an absolutely democratic political stance.

Another poem in Axe Handles, "Breasts," goes even farther in examining how the interconnectedness the poet celebrates has brought about the disruption of natural
processes as basic to life as the taking of mother's milk. After all, the concentration of "heavy metals in traces / deadly molecules hooked up in strings" in the breasts of women is a frightening twist in the metaphor of the "vast jeweled nets," which Snyder uses to describe the food chain. "Breasts" encompasses the horrible reality with a simile:

--they're like philosophers!
Who hold back the bitter in mind
To let the more tasty
Wisdom slip through
for the little ones.
who can't take the poison so young.

(104)

This passage contains the seeds of the poem's finale, which establishes that following the raising of children, one should "burn the poison away" so that the "real self" can come into being. In this way "Breasts," and perhaps the entire "Nets" section of Axe Handles, shows how the nets come to stand for the process by which nature itself, in a kind of affirmative dialectic, may finally be able to reconcile things as opposite as mother's milk and poison.

In conclusion, it is useful to point to the opening of Axe Handles--the epigraph and the title poem. In the poem one recognizes the elemental oppositions of time--the old and the new, as the poet demonstrates how in the most basic passing on of knowledge, in this case the poet teaching his son how to make an axe handle, the moment itself provides the
means and the model. The poem first credits Ezra Pound with the basic idea. Pound published a complete set of translations of the the Confucian Odes, the Shih Ching, in 1954. It was there that Snyder first read a translation of the poem which he himself later translated for the epigraph of Axe Handles. This is Pound's version:

How to cut haft for an axe?
Who hacks
holds a haft.
To take a wife
properly
one gets a notary.
To hack an axe-haft
an axe
hacks;
the pattern's near.
Let who weds never pass
too far
from his own class.
(78-79)

By comparison, Snyder's version is much more palpable than Pound's, whose ear for alliteration dominates over any inclination he might have had to make the poem sound natural. After all, natural to Pound, from the inside of nine years in a madhouse, might have seemed something much more akin to the music of Chinese itself (visitors would read to him in Chinese) than to modern American speech. Here is Snyder's version:
How do you shape an axe handle?
Without an axe it can't be done.
How do you take a wife?
Without a go-between you can't get one.
Shape a handle, shape a handle,
the pattern is not far off.
And there's a girl I know,
The wine and food in rows.

(AH ix)

Early in the poem "Axe Handles," Snyder exclaims how Pound's words ring in his ears. And ring they do! A few lines further along, however, one reads an even older version of the idea, as the poet quotes from

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

Snyder then explains that his own teacher, Shih-hsiang Chen, translated and taught him the essay. According to Snyder, the actual chronology of the idea begins with the Shih Ching, around 500 B.C. Later it appears in the Confucian text Chung Yung, "Doctrine of the Mean," Chapter XIII-2, and then it appears in Lu Chi's Wen Fu, "Essay on Literature." Pound read it first in the Confucian text and later in Shih Ching. Snyder saw it first in Pound, and then--while a student in Oriental Languages at the University of California at Berkeley--read it roughly simultaneously in Shih Ching and Lu Chi (Snyder "Letter to Jim Kraus").
To be sure, "Axe Handles" is not only a poem where Gary Snyder, the poet and anthropologist, explains the tools of culture; it is also a poem in which Gary Snyder, the ecologist, provides an example of how the information of life-biomass, which includes human knowledge, passes, rather re-cycles, through time.

Another way to understand how Snyder works with this kind of relationship is to note the degree to which he uses the past as a way of modeling the present. Snyder says that Axe Handles is itself patterned after the Shih Ching:

I think in a way Axe Handles goes back to being very close to the functional origins of poetry in terms of folksong and folklore. It's not for nothing that the whole poem, the whole book, the title and the lead poem is out of the Book of Song, the Odes. I'm looking back to the Book of Odes as a model for that book of verse, to its simple 'poems about planting fields and getting together for feasts--real early agricultural community poetry.

(Snyder Interview 2 2)

At the end of "Axe Handles," the genealogy of Snyder's poem becomes transparent when he makes the axe handle metaphor explicit:

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.

(6)
Snyder's ecological vision is a correlative to his poetic process, and both are linked to his concept of political change. Perhaps in the end, writing poetry and working for political change is like making compost. Nature does it all the time, while time itself does the turning. And it's political, too, when we imagine composting as a metaphor for changing human consciousness. Maybe it's subversive. Here is Snyder's recipe for change:

All this new stuff goes on top
turn it over turn it over
wait and water down.
From the dark bottom
turn it inside out
let it spread through, sift down,
even.
Watch it sprout.

A mind like compost.
(AH 11)
APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW 1: JUNE 15, 1983

Jim Kraus: One of the things that I'm interested in is the way you handle the Japanese landscape in your poetry . . . and the way in which it seems to me any poetic landscape is altered or perhaps distorted for some aesthetic purpose.

Gary Snyder: That would be something a Japanese scholar might miss. It's hard to see the landscape that way.

JK: Why is that?

GS: Well, because they are so close to their own landscape. They wouldn't notice the ways of seeing it so easily.

JK: My broader concern has to do with the idea of landscape and environment and to a certain extent the environmental movement of the past few decades and the relationship of these things to your poetry. So it is a question of the way poetry functions. What is the purpose of the poet in what to a certain extent is a political movement?

GS: That's a good approach. You could do that and limit yourself primarily to Earth Household, Turtle Island and The Real Work. Those three books.

JK: What about Axe Handles?
GS: Axe Handles takes off in another direction I think. It isn't a piece exactly with those. It carries through with a lot of their themes, but it has a broader range. It is more concerned with the metaphor of communication and transmission. It is more concerned with cultural values in the larger sense of the carrying on of cultural sanity.

JK: But the idea of communication ties in with poetry, with what it is and how it functions.

GS: I think in a way Axe Handles goes back to being very close to the functional origins of poetry in terms of folksong and folklore. It's not for nothing that the whole poem, the whole book, the title and the lead poem is out of the Book of Song, the Odes. I'm looking back to the Book of Odes as a model for that book of verse, to its simple poems about planting fields and getting together for feasts--real early agricultural community poetry.

JK: Who else is doing that kind of thing in the United States or in Japan?

GS: Minoru Sakatu in Japan is my closest comrade and mentor. He's quite a poet. He has a book in English that is just remarkable. He has a small but enthusiastic readership. He was published by a small press in New Mexico and was reviewed in many of the big magazines.
JK: What about poetry as part of a political movement? Is it just organic that it comes about?

GS: The first question is, I think, what is the relationship of poetry to a society? If that's clear, then its relationship to politics becomes more evident. And without falling into simple-minded functionalism and looking at whole cultural models rather than fragmented cultural models you see right away that the larger spread of what we call poetry is involved in every detail of life. It is a major culture bearer; it has a major educational function; it brings pleasure and lore to people at every stage of their lives. In fact when a culture begins to be fragmented or frazzled around the edges, like Hawaiian culture, the cultural nub, the heart of the culture retreats into the poetry. It may retreat to the point where the poetry is the only thing left that keeps it going. Witness the importance of traditional or ancient hula and hula mele in the revival of Hawaiian culture. For young men and women who have had very little contact with their Hawaiian culture to get into a halau is to begin to learn lore, terminology, geneologies, history, tradition, and moves, and costumes, that is so intense and so rapid that there is no other way you could get so much so fast. And that's a function of poetry. The mele and oli are poems. Where Hawaiian culture resides is in the cultivation of taro and in the mele and in the oli and in the hula halau.
Those are the two centers where people are touching base with what it was ... and that would be true in a lot of other things.

It's in the poetry, in the poetics. If there are the things that might and should surround the poetry, like a teaching tradition, like a dance and music tradition, then you've got a huge amazing chunk of cultural knowledge. So much is subsumed in that, names of plants and animals, cooking techniques.

JK: When you mention the naming of plants and animals, we come back to the subject of language and the centrality of language in culture. The study of Hawaiian language is an important part of the Hawaiian Renaissance. This is much the same kind of thing we see in outrigger canoe paddling. People who go into canoe clubs learn the tradition of making canoes; there is a tremendous amount of ritual that goes into making a canoe in the traditional way. Eric Enos and Peter Apo were talking about the difference in design between the racing and the fishing canoe. In any event, the canoe is an important link back to agricultural and subsistence values. It's encouraging.

GS: Very true. I don't know about canoes, and what comes through is that a lot of language, a lot of terminology, comes into play which is only in Hawaiian. It's the same way with *taro* cultivation—all of the vocabulary of the parts
of the plant and the species of taro. But the more archaic and poetic, and more complex, vocabulary is carried on in the tradition of the songs. So obviously that's where language is carried. What do anthropologists study when they do a Ph.D. on Takiyama or some dialect that we don't understand? They get a hold of some texts, and those texts are usually myths that have been changed into a poetic form. And what we end up with is one or another form of oral literature as our model for the whole language. It's true of all of linguistic work done on most of the American Indian languages in the last 50 or 80 years.

JK: One of the things that I'm interested in is the role of onomotopoeia in American Indian languages and its use in your own work. Do you see the same quality in other languages, in English say, or is it something unique to them? Is there a level of language which is universal?

GS: Onomotopoeia is universal. It's everywhere. Some languages have more of it than others. And when you talk of American Indian languages, you are talking about 400 different languages, you know--five different major families; so you can generalize too much. But to come back to the function of poetry. Poetry is deeply imbedded in society. It's one of the concepts society defends itself with and defines itself by. So that in a fragmented, pluralistic, class-structured, etc., society poetry to some extent has
fragmented and begins working with different classes and
different levels too, but it always has the instant capacity
to sum up and to summon up a situation to galvanize people
around a situation. "Blowing in the Wind," Bob Dylan's song,
became the summation of one phase of the sixties. And I
include song as a variety of poetry. You can look at any
number of poems that deliberately or unconsciously started
playing roles of that sort on one scale or another.

JK: What about Pound? Do you see him in that way?

GS: It seems to me that Pound was grasping for one of the
larger undertakings, of the same order as what Dante and
Goethe undertook. Which was to restate almost all the key
elements of a civilization and reorient them and bring them
into view again. Dante was anything but successful; Goethe to
a degree, on faith, in that particular undertaking. Another
example was Blake, who was not really deliberately trying to
do that, but in a quirky way did and will remain valuable for
an indefinite length of time, working so much with
imagination, but working with larger types of imagination.
Those are really big undertakings. To try to do that . . .
to try to be another Homer. That's what it is. It's not for
nothing that Joyce calls his work Ulysses. Homer sets the
literary tone for Western culture.

JK: Do you think that desire to restate key cultural elements
is necessarily part of some basic poetic urge, or urge to express oneself?

GS: Oh, yes. There are two kinds of poets. There are more than two, but there are these two kinds: lyric poets and mythographers. Pound was trying to be a mythographer; he also was a lyric poet, too.

JK: There seems to be a point where a poet's work jumps out of personal myth and personal experience and into experience available to him from the past. For example, in your book *Myths and Texts*, something like that takes place, but maybe it's not just a jump, rather an alternation between writing about the two kinds of experience.

GS: Yes, that's a really interesting way to work; that's the best way to work, but it's not easy.

JK: With Pound, the poetry seems to be tipped very heavily toward one kind of experience.

GS: And so eventually, the poems become just bulk and overloaded with irrelevant information.

JK: How does Pound fit into your interest in poetry?

GS: My interest in Pound from very early was in the quality of his ear and in the quality of certain lines, certain lines that he wrote are just magical. There may not be more than a
hundred of them. But they are just extraordinary. Most of them are in the *Cantos*, and most of them in the early *Cantos*. There are some in the early work Pound did, too. I was very excited by those lines and to a certain extent interested in what Pound was trying to do. I also thought for a while that Pound knew something about history and politics which I later decided was probably not that much the case. He had made some real strange errors in his understanding of Chinese history; but the great poetic ear, the great poetic mind—some kind of a genius, no doubt.

And his ear changes American poetry. Although not too many people have picked up on Pound's ear. Charles Olson tries to, but I don't think has the ear.

JK: I think I know what you mean by ear, but could you elaborate on it a little?

GS: It's the way the music of the line works. If we had some Pound here I could show you.

JK: I'm fascinated by your "Elwha River" poem. When it comes to the question of the way an artist alters a landscape, that poem seems to be right on the mark. And I'm wondering about your perception of that poem at this point in time . . . and your idea of the way you alter a landscape in your writing. Do you have a rationale, or any sense of how that occurs?

GS: That poem was actually written in response to a dream in
which I was seeing what I told myself in the dream was the Elwha River; when I literally woke up, and I said in the dream that was supposed to be the Elwha River, but I know that it doesn't look like that (laughs). And so I was fascinated by that and started working with several levels of memories and also the relationship between the real place and the dream place. It's as simple as that, but it is pregnant with possibilities. Because it has to do with memory and what the mind does to landscapes and what the metaphors of landscape are. I'm still working on all of that. On the Mountains and Rivers Without End series. That's my project now. Now that I've got Axe Handles collected. I'm not into anything else until I finish Mountains and Rivers Without End.

JK: Is that a project you can see finishing soon?

GS: Oh, yes. Definitely.

JK: What about that same idea? Do you see Mountains and Rivers as a pursuit of the idea of the transformation of landscape, or is there something more going on?

GS: There are several other things behind Mountains and Rivers, and one of those things is the structure of the Noh drama and the journey of a traveler through a landscape, resulting in certain kinds of karmic knots and of course the actual Mountains and Rivers Without End scrolls which are a
type of Chinese landscape. I'm trying to draw out the aesthetic of that, trying to use my most intimate way of bringing out the almost unarticulate level of feelings about plants and animals. There's a whole level of feeling that's still almost insatiable.

On the ecological level, Mountains and Rivers sets up a real biosphere poem. One of my insights in my recent years of ecological thought is that the precise knowledge of what we call "local" and the precise set of customs that go with that knowledge results in the understanding of limits that goes with localness, the limits of a watershed or the limits of an island that tell you when to quit fishing or how long your slash and burn cycle can go on before you are overdoing it. That kind of knowledge has to be transformed into a planetary scale; we are one little watershed or one little island or one little oasis in the desert.

So it becomes possible to make a local folksong out of the whole planet. That's why understanding the lore small cultures carry with them is attractive to us now. It would have seemed crazy fifty years ago to be interested in something like the folklore of the Ainu in a serious way. And we get interested in them seriously now because we intuit, and the people who don't even know about it intellectually intuit, that their sense of continuous working with the system is a lesson to us that points to a sense of creativity that we have to know the system we are in, that
the image of endless space to be exploited—which was the Roman Empire, Babylon, the Chinese Empire—is dissolving. And so we are back in the same place that Samoans are; we've only got so much to work with, and our culture works within this sphere. So *Mountains and Rivers* points in that direction, it tries to leap from the local to the planetary and back again. And that's why I say it's a biosphere-like poem, which literally talks of travels I've had in the many far corners of the globe and senses of landscape in many parts of the globe, senses of place.

JK: Looking back into an American literary tradition, we see Thoreau & Emerson reflecting on a similar sense of place. How do they play into your writing, especially *Myths and Texts*?

GS: I didn't read Thoreau until I was 22, and I have not yet read Emerson. So I picked up a lot of that just out of the culture by absorption. I must say, when I first read *Walden*, I was really delighted. Thoreau plays into the beginning and the end of *Myths and Texts*; otherwise, I'd say *Myths and Texts* was already there.

JK: What about audience? Who do you think of as your audience?

GS: Well, I used to have a sense of an audience as being a rather small number of fairly intimately known people. But I
can't help but have a much larger sense now, since I have literally read, face-to-face, to thousands and thousands of people. I could even calculate how many; it would amount to thirty or forty thousand at least, that I've read to face-to-face, probably more. And so I have a pretty good sense of who those people are, and I know what my relationship to them is. I can handle that, so what is interesting is expanding my constituency, and taking a look at the difficult area, what are the audiences that are not already conversant, and that is like working guys, like some of the Hawaiian people I'm hanging around with, some of my American Indian friends, some of the loggers and sawmill workers that I know at home. That's one extension of the audience that's interesting to try for. Another that's interesting to try for is the skeptical and bored academic and the arrogant intellectual of the establishment; they think they're not going to be impressed by anything. That's another area to try to experiment in. So I'm trying to do both ends of that at the same time.

JK: What about the scientists, the technocrats?

GS: Actually in some cases they are easier to reach than English department people; it's true. Like H.T. Odum, who's a hard-line, thermodynamics energy man; he always comes to poetry readings of mine if I'm anywhere nearby.

   I know any number of people in biology, anthropology,
biochemistry, architecture and engineering who come to poetry readings of mine when the English department people don't. In that sense, I speak to a broad range of people, people who are interested in hearing things, learning new things.

JK: What do you think about the way technology is making information more available to the average person?

GS: We have more information than anyone knows what to do with. But it's a question of quantity or quality, when you talk about the quality of information, in ecological terms; sheer quantity of information can be a stifling or paralyzing thing when it comes to making a decision. High quality information is information that operates switches. A tiny amount of information will divert water this way or that way in the pipeline causing results that are far out of proportion from the amount of energy that was required to do the switching.

This comes from H.T. Odum--Environment, Power and Society-- when he draws out an overall thermodynamic model of the universe. He uses energy flow charts that are designed to show how energy moves in natural systems. Then he comments on things like the switching function. It takes a milliamp to operate a switch and look how much it does. And then he says that in concert such low-energy-demand, high-effect, small systems are like poems, or he says, like religion, which control values.
Values control enormous amounts of behavior and work, and so a couple of mythographic poems control a religion; religion controls the values of a culture; and the values of a culture end up seeing whether they make supertankers or grow taro. So you are tracing some things back to some very interesting sources. Language itself is an example of a complex low-energy system that causes a great amount of work to be done.

So to answer your question, obviously we are going to have all kinds of technology around for a long time. One of the ways we measure appropriate energy, appropriate technologies, is to weigh how much energy went into it, and to weigh how much work came out of it.

Automobiles are not as efficient as bicycles when you start weighing everything out to do an overall cost accounting. We spend 20% of our time running our automobiles. You have to count the time you put in paying the car off, paying off all its operating expenses plus the time you spend driving it, and all of that comes to something like 20% of your income-producing time. Whereas, if you did the same travel by bicycle and were not paying the cost of the car or the overhead of the gasoline, you would get there faster (laughs). So bicycles are thermodynamically the most efficient form of transportation in the world, considering the amount of distance traveled per energy input. Walking is second. Bicycles are first.
So, yes, there are ways of looking at which technologies you can keep. Some technologies will phase themselves out. The big changes that are coming in food production will take care of a lot of that, and high energy costs will take care of a lot of that, too. The oil glut is temporary; the low oil prices are temporary. When all that stuff starts going up again, people will freak out. We'll see what happens.

JK: There seem to be some interesting things going on in bioengineering where they are trying to make plants resistant to nematodes or insects.

GS: All that is so unpredictable. I have a friend who is in bioengineering whose company has developed corn plants that will fix nitrogen ... legume corn. That's bound to change the world fertilizer outlook for the better.
APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW 2: OCTOBER 27, 1985

This interview was conducted after Snyder had read an early version of Chapters 2, 3 and 4. Because many of his comments were made in the context of reviewing those chapters, I have inserted parenthetical material in the transcript of the interview to help with transitions.

Jim Kraus: The title poem of Axe Handles is based on a poem from the Shih Ching. Which translation of the Shih Ching do you prefer? The epigraph to Axe Handles—is that your own translation?

Gary Snyder: That's my own translation, based on Karlgren in part, but working from the Chinese.

(Regarding the 1977 Academy of American Poets' Symposium "Chinese Poetry and the American Imagination.")

Kenneth Rexroth was not at the Chinese Symposium in New York at that time; he was invited to it. And then later he was published in the proceedings of it. So he did have some contribution later, but in actual fact he wasn't present. He probably didn't come because I was going to be there and because Bly was going to be there.

(Regarding his earliest meeting with Allen Ginsberg.)

Unless I'm mistaken Allen Ginsberg came to San Francisco
from Mexico. He had been down to Mexico and that's reflected in the little booklet he did later called *Siesta in Xivalva*. It was done when he went to work on a ship that took him up to the Bering Sea. So he came up from Mexico, Yucatan, and then he went to work in San Francisco doing marketing research and for a while was living with a girl. I guess that was only for a few months when he was living in San Francisco.

Then the idea came to him to go back to graduate school and major in English, working in poetics and prosody and somehow by that time he had come to know Kenneth, had probably gone out to one of Kenneth's Friday evening events; so Kenneth had mentioned me, and Allen looked me up in Berkeley one day when I was just at home in my cottage. So he just turned up one day in Berkeley. And that was just when fall semester was starting. I had just re-enrolled in Oriental languages, and he had just enrolled in English. So there we were the same semester, the fall of 1955. But he didn't finish the semester even. He dropped out.

(Regarding trickster as Coyote.)

Trickster is an archetypal motif that occurs throughout all folklore; whatever animal form he takes has the appearance over and over again of reflecting certain human psychological traits. The term archetypal motif [is related to] the idea of a character in mythology. We're talking about a character in mythology.
Read Paul Radin on the trickster, or Jung's essay on the trickster. Paul Radin wrote a whole book called The Trickster. And Jung wrote not a whole book, but an essay on the trickster, and I think touches on Coyote. Jung doesn't like the trickster. I don't know if he ever understood the trickster too well. He sees no further richness or complexity in the trickster image than a manifestation of immaturity. Still the Jungians are the only people who really look at this kind of thing.


GS: My writings are sprinkled with references. I find him very stimulating, very interesting. Sure. I think that's very appropriate, although I had not read Levi-Strauss when I was writing this stuff. Levi-Strauss wasn't even in print then. I wrote "The Berry Feast" in 1955.

JK: In many ways "The Berry Feast" feels like Myths and Texts.

GS: Yes, it really is laying the groundwork for Myths and Texts. It's an experiment in the direction of my writing. I couldn't have written Myths and Texts if I hadn't done "The Berry Feast." And then Myths and Texts is laying the groundwork for the work I'm doing in Mountains and Rivers Without End.
(Regarding the specific use of the "language of the food chain.")

In the hierarchical language of the food chain, the source is photosynthesis, and photosynthesis is at the bottom. That's in the language of ecologists. Things move up this food chain as they move toward the larger, more rare, more specialized animals and down the food chain as it spreads out to the broadest diffusion of energy, which is sunlight falling on the surface of the earth. I think you will see this in Margalef, who uses that same idea.

JK: I guess what I'm wondering about and what leads to this kind of concern is the possibility of some irony in the world of ecological terminology. I guess what I mean is that if we were to transpose the hierarchical terminology of ecologists into a metaphysical terminology we might be talking more about light as metaphor for ultimate reality, or something like that, which would suggest the top. Do you see that as ironic or just a mixing up of terminology?

GS: Well, we have both terminologies anyway. It's not ironic; it just happens that in this kind of discussion we use both images of up and down. That's very deep; that's very high; you should get deeper; you should get higher ... God is the ground of being, God is the fundamental ontology underlying everything; that's down below. And then there is
other language which puts it at the top. It's all metaphorical though.

Photosynthesis is down; the sun is up there to be sure, but photosynthesis starts on the surface of the earth, it's the point of contact that begins the process as far as I'm concerned. It's at the point of contact, which is diffuse, that it begins to concentrate itself into diverse forms.

JK: I guess the danger is in mixing metaphors, in working in two seemingly disparate realms and trying to use the terminology in a transpositional way.

GS: (Regarding his use of the bear myth in early poems and then later in *Turtle Island.*

That's also echoed in the poem in *Turtle Island* called "Prayer to the Great Family"--just in that one little line:

"who share with us their milk":

Gratitude to Wild Beings, our brothers,
teaching secrets,
freedoms, and ways; who share with us their milk;
self-complete, brave and aware
in our minds so be it.
(TI 24)

JK: I sense that there might be some conscious effort to link the older work or pull the older work into focus with the newer work.

GS: Not much conscious effort. Once in a while I'll find something that does do that.
(Regarding "this poem is for bear" from Myths and Texts which is similar to "The Berry Feast")

I probably wrote this very close to the same time that I wrote the other piece.

JK: I still keep seeing sharks and bears as somehow related because here in Hawaii we have a shark goddess, actually a demigod, Mamala. The bay that Waikiki is facing is named after this goddess Mamala. She was a surfer, with a very jealous shark husband.

How do you read Jeffers with regard to his attacks on urban life?

GS: Well, Jeffers is an all-out attack on civilization, not just urban life; it's humanity. So that doesn't quite apply either. But I don't think he was that familiar to people at that time (1955 - 56). Jeffers had his readers, but he had a lot of people who didn't read him, and a lot of people who wouldn't read him for that reason.

Jeffers' literary reputation started slipping after Ivor Winters attacked him in a review, I think in the late '20s. Jeffers had a period of considerable popularity in the middle and late '20s, and then Winters really trashed him in a review that set the whole East Coast against him and developed a kind of language and an attitude that the East Coast has held toward Western writers ever since. I think
the language was something like, "the customary excess of Western writers," faulting Jeffers for excess.

JK: Well, Rexroth seems to have gone after him too.

GS: Rexroth does too, but Rexroth never wrote anything particularly effective in the way of a public critique of Jeffers; he just talked about it in private or at his soiree. He was also extremely critical of Pound, and even worse about Olson. There weren't many people that he did like.

Anyway it's an interesting historical point that Yvor Winters played a very strong role in the shrinking of Jeffers' reputation. But then the Depression and the rise of Marxist literature, proletarian literature, continued to add to the view that Jeffers was a Neitzschean elitist. Which I guess he could be charged with. But that certainly did shrink his readership, and of course the criticisms that can be aimed at Jeffers are the same criticisms that are aimed at Whitman--infelicitious language that's being carried along too much by his narrative, not being careful enough with his craft. And in Jeffers' case in taking his own ideas too seriously, almost. Yet in hindsight he wasn't that far off either.

JK: Were you reading Jeffers at Sourdough Mountain? In "Lookout's Journal" there is a place where you mention
Jeffers explicitly, and there are other things besides his name just coming up that kind of fill out Jeffers' presence.

GS: I was reading Jeffers all the way through college, or even before college and going back to it with considerable pleasure from time to time. It cheered me up to read Jeffers.

But I didn't have it there with me. On Crater Mountain I had two books. I had the complete Blake and the complete works of Chaucer in Middle English. I read them all the way through. In Blake all of the prophetic books. And I read the complete corpus of Chaucer in Middle English. After the first three weeks I could read it without looking at the glossary. That was Crater Mountain; on Sourdough I'd have to go back and look at my notes. But anyway I didn't have any big blocks of poetry like that.

(Regarding use of Dharma Bums as a source.)

I wonder about your using the Dharma Bums as a source for discussing my work.

JK: What I tried to do was present that material so that the fictional character of The Dharma Bums was acknowledged. But it does present a problem, the problem of the writer on the one hand--and the writer's relationship to work, literary work, and to environment--and on the other hand, how other people see the writer and the development of the public perception of the writer and his work. At a certain point in
your career, it seems to me, you begin interacting with a public, with a larger readership, and maybe *The Dharma Bums* is one of the things which helped establish you in the public eye.

GS: But you know, not to that great a degree, I don't think; that is to say, the reading public of *The Dharma Bums* does not exactly overlap by any means with my poetry public. The reading public of *The Dharma Bums* often doesn't know my work, or if they do know my work, they don't know that I'm supposedly Japhy Ryder.

   It is a novel, and he makes the Japhy Ryder character into a more happy, optimistic character. And that's part of what he does with it as a fictionalized character. More bouncey or resilient.

   (Regarding the section of *Dharma Bums* in which Japhy describes his projection of *Mountains and Rivers Without End.*)

   Now it happens that I really did say this to Jack, and it really is a good description of my projection of *Mountains and Rivers* as it comes out in his book. It's kind of funny to see that in a novel. To see your own words.

GS: (Regarding the following passage from *Earth House Hold*, p. 31.)
"Length of Fetch" the distance a batch of waves has run without obstruction.

salts - diatoms - copepods - herring - fishermen - us, eating.

Length of fetch means the distance a batch of waves has run. So the length of fetch is from Hawaii to California.

I don't know if I'm saying that length of fetch is analogous to the food chain. As a matter of fact, as I recall, these are two unconnected utterances. Although who knows what I was thinking when I did that.

In a sense there it is; yeah, ok, it's hard for me to remember. That is a kind of a run isn't it. In that sense the length of fetch could be the run that one particular food chain takes to work itself out. So what you have to say is specific food chains, or any given food chain.

You can't confuse the generalization food chain with the fact. There is no such thing as a general food chain. There are food chains. And the specific food chains all have a point of beginning and a point of ending. Sometimes they are short. Sometimes they go for a small number of members, and sometimes they go for a large number of members.

So this is one particular set here in which I left out the predators on herring because I went straight to us, as one of the predators on herring, but at this point where it says fishermen on the list, I'm not sure exactly what that would be, a number of other species, including probably dolphins, that would all be in that position as being at the top of the
food chain in relationship to diatoms and copepods. A length of fetch in that metaphor is the number of members involved in working out any given specific food chain.

(Regarding his relationship to the beat generation.)

First of all it depends on how you define the beat generation. In the Donald Allen anthology I'm not listed as a beat poet; there are only three people listed as beat poets: there's Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Corso. And that was the result of a lot of discussion with Don, between all of us and Don, in which I think all the poets involved made it clear that being a member of the San Francisco renaissance, and then the larger renaissance of poetry that was taking place across the country shortly after that, was not exactly identical with the sociological phenomena called the beat generation—and that the work that Allen and Gregory, Peter Orlofsky, and Jack, as a poet, had done genuinely could be taken to be the writing that set the tone for the beat generation, particularly Jack's work, of course, really Jack's work, and then "Howl," those two directions.

But also you have to look at who it was that works out the poetry that is implicit in that. The spontaneous bop prose and prosody, the idea that first thought is best thought, the idea of poetry as jazz improvisation-like, all of that goes back to those four guys and not to any of the work of the rest of us.

So first of all I was never a spokesman for the literary
beat generation. Now, if you take the beat generation as a sociological phenomenon, I was also not a spokesperson for that because I literally was not there. And I actually didn't surface on the scene as a spokesman until the hippie days, and then some interviews we did turned up in the second or third issues of the hippie newspaper The Oracle.

I instantly became thought of as one of the people speaking for the middle sixties, out of those Oracle interviews. That's how I see it. It also has to be said, though, that via the Japhy Ryder image in the Dharma Bums I became an influence on the self-image of the beat generation. But that's not the same as being a spokesman.

Then it is true that as the social movements of the sixties evolved, my relation to the counterculture became clearer; that's exactly true.

(Regarding Theodore Roszak.)

It's OK to invoke Roszak, but I must say I don't think Roszak really understood what was going on either at that time, and possibly not later. He was kind of an outsider; he was too late to the West Coast to know a lot of the gossip, and a little bit too much in an ivory tower; he really is a very private man, who stands very much to the side and does not really involve himself in the nitty gritty of stuff, and so he doesn't really know a whole lot about what goes on inside of it. However that's a real review, and the review is accurate enough.
Now the Nation has been characteristically hostile toward my work.

JK: I saw the recent terrible review of Axe Handles.

GS: Where they reviewed me and Creeley at the same time. You know how I account for that? It is the persistence of the Old Left. Where do you get hostility from? The right doesn't read me enough to be hostile. But there is a certain amount of hostility that comes out of the left. And what it is, is hostility toward anarchism. They know exactly where I stand. They knew exactly where Rexroth stood. And they know exactly where Duncan stands; they don't like it at all. But they won't come out in the open and say this is what they don't like.

JK: In our earlier interview you talked really precisely about the scope of your audience. I think you pinned it in that interview at about 40,000. It wasn't until a couple of months ago, in the publicity materials from New Directions, that I realized the number was higher. They said that Turtle Island had sold 70,000 copies, and you have said maybe 100,000, so 40,000 seems very conservative. But then you were talking about a face-to-face audience.

GS: I'm talking also about the audience of people who would come in any given area, that would be drawn to come to a poetry reading if they heard about it. And so it's that
really broad spread now—older people, younger people, people with big beards sitting next to people with ties on and so forth.

(Regarding the two types of poetry he writes.)

It has to be said that Riprap represents a style of poetry that I've continued to do all through the years and Myths and Texts is another style which I've continued to do all through the years. There are two kinds of poetry that I've been doing side by side, keeping the two types quite clear in my mind. So that Mountains and Rivers Without End material, of which the New York stuff is part, the new New York and Los Angeles poems also, although I'm not announcing it as such, are that kind of mythopoeic thing.

They are part of Mountains and Rivers Without End, which I'm still working on, which is what I'm going to finish up in the next few years.

JK: "The Songs for Gaia"—which category would you put them in? Is that another category?

GS: I would just sort of put them in with the small poems, like all the small lyric poems. I've always had a few small lyric poems in all of the books. Like in The Back Country, Regarding Wave, some short poems as well. And that could be a category if you really wanted to boil it down, but I've never really written enough of them at any given time to bunch them together as one kind of collection. Those others I had.
If I were to put together a collected works, I would reorganize the collected works along slightly different lines to reflect different sub-themes that run through different categories of poetry. I might do it that way.

(Regarding the term "savage.")

The term that I really prefer is "wild." Levi-Strauss uses it his own way; it's a French way of using it, but our association with the word savage is wild.

In our general American association the word savage is associated with savages, and it is associated with cruelty and extreme primitivism and so forth. And the way I'm using the word wild, I'm trying to remove gradually and eliminate all that area of subjective meaning in the terminology and give it a really precise meaning. This is the way I keep using it. Like in the essay "Good Wild Sacred," I make a definition of wild is basically value free.

JK: In saying that it is value free, is that the same as anarchistic?

GS: Well, anarchistic is another difficult term. But I'm trying to make it value free because what I'm trying to communicate, and I realize now I'm trying to communicate, is in part that these things are so fundamental, so pervasive, so universal, so much inside of us, so much a part of what we are as organisms ourselves, that our exercise is not in being
in favor of them, but in acknowledging them, which is a different thing entirely.

Where a Christian would not say that I am in favor of God; nevertheless, I'm trying to get people to recognize that God is here. It's the same kind of thing, in a sense. And so in that sense value free, to simply describe what it is. So that when people realize what it is, they realize that's what I am, that's what everything is.

(Regarding shamanistic poetry.)

Poets do one thing; the shaman is on another level; a poet speaks for, but in an actual shamanistic event the shaman is the voice through, and we should keep that distinction.

I have poems which do that or come very close to doing that, which I almost never read anymore. A truly shamanistic poem is not for a public event; it's in the realm of the sacred, rather than in the realm of the secular. The poetry reading is a secular event, and so I do secular poems at secular events. And what I might call roughly sacred poems are very rarely performed and only in a ceremonial or ritual context.

JK: Can you point to specific poems in that direction?

GS: Some of the poems in Myths and Texts. In fact the one you quoted there ("first shaman song"). I don't read that aloud normally. The poem "By Frazier Creek Falls" in Turtle
Island I never read aloud anymore. It belongs too much in the other realm.

JK: What about the Coaldale poem?

GS: Yeah, I never read that one aloud either. That's a prayer. I never have read that aloud. I tried it once or twice, and I realized it wasn't going anywhere.

(Regarding the impermanence of nature.)

The fact is that all the entities of nature themselves are undergoing constant change, including mountains, steady dribbling of rocks down cliffs. The mountains are not that solid.

(Regarding the nature of emptiness.)

In Buddhism emptiness means non-substantial, it means without self, without any fixed entity in it.

JK: What I'm trying to get at, trying to move toward is this idea: that the emptiness at the center of the world is an active, perhaps even political, force. Maybe it's the awareness of emptiness, I don't know; I can't get quite an accurate bead on what it is, but in my mind it's related to Gandhi's satyagraha.

GS: It is the creative emptiness of the world, consuming and regenerating; the emptiness is a creative emptiness, or pregnant emptiness; that's the real Buddhist sense.

And then you know, there's another metaphor running
through this, that's kind of below the surface. And it's the application of the idea of the food chain, of ecology, to ideas, to information—the ecology of mind. I was aware of that metaphor of ecology long ago, where archetypes succeed to other archetypes.

All the metaphors of ecology are useful in psychological terms. The imagination can be burnt over and then regenerate; the imagination can become an underbrush full of unseen creatures. There is a food chain of psychology where your big pregnant correct idea is the predator at the top of the food chain who has swallowed a whole lot of other images to get to where it's at, starting with small perceptions and impulses and sensations which become subsumed in a larger image, or a set of larger images which become subsumed in another image which comes out as an idea. The intellect, without knowing it itself is like a shark cruising on the lower levels of the imagination gobbling up things, and then taking the credit for it without realizing how much it owes to what came from below.

And then there is also an ecology of information in the exterior world.

JK: That's what Margalef and Odum are all about.

GS: Right, right, but they're not a hundred per cent clear about it themselves; they just barely realize it. But it's interesting in computer language. We talk about this as the
age of information, the information commune, but I don't see anybody who is quite coping to the point of ecology. How low level researchers are busily crunching numbers and building up data which then a higher level researcher bunches together. And then those guys put it together, and it goes to a higher level and then somebody like a writer, like a poet, cruises along way at the top the information food chain and creams off the top of everything and comes out with a novel.

I'm very aware as a poet, I can almost feel it when I go into a library, and start cruising through learned journals. I'll pick up something from geology, from volcanology and then from oceanic ecology, and I'm just like a shark cruising by picking up the cream of everybody's work to put into my own metaphors. And those guys never knew, when they were working on their level, that anybody would have a use like that for it, so that's kind of fun to think about.
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