

The Development of the Ecological Concern in Gary Snyder's TURTLE ISLAND

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Gary Snyder , a contemporary American poet, has been noted for his poetry about nature. Though he is sometimes classified among the confessional poets of the Beats' Movement, "Snyder's emphasis on metaphysics and his celebration of the natural order removes his work from the general tenor of Beat writing."¹ He has produced several collections in order to arouse people's , especially the Americans', concern for nature. To him the sense of equilibrium between man and nature is indespensible if we hope to survive in this world. In saving the earth , man saves himself from the threat of pollution,drought and famine.

The relatedness of all things is a cliché in western civilization...known as the Chain of Being, but it is reinvigorated with an Eastern admixture in Snyder's poetry.... ²

However,in 1974 came out an outstanding piece of work in American literary world.The collection of poems titled **Turtle Island** was published. The title refers to the Indian name of the continent, North America. The book was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1977. In this book, Snyder celebrates the beautiful scenery of the Pacific Coast. Nevertheless, the natural beauty is threatened by human civilization. Industrialism turns to destroy the world of primitivism. Thus, Snyder is calling for man's cooperation to protect nature and wildlife by referring to the Indian myth and Indian folkways to suggest the nostalgic tone.

Aiming at awakening people's ecological concern, **Turtle Island** succeeds in its job because it effectively develops the main theme into four minor ones. The poet begins with the idea of nature herself in disregard of any connexion with human beings. Then he

depicts the condition in which man resorts to nature as a means to achieve spiritual fulfilment. Here, man and nature live in perfect harmony. But man then turns to encroach upon and exploit nature. Therefore, the poet winds up with the persona's voice urging mankind to protect nature.

In **Turtle Island**, each theme is represented by several poems. The selection thus has to be made. One poem is chosen to support one theme. The first theme, the idea of pure nature, seems vivid in the poem titled "Charms." The state of balance between man and nature best portrays itself in "Source" whereas "Ethnobotany" reflects the destructive power of human technology. Finally, "For the Children" expresses the hope of mankind in preserving natural beauty.

From the beginning of the collection, Snyder points to the intrinsic mystery in nature. Even though it is composed of various trivial things and beings, they live and perform their functions in a union. In "Charms," the poet makes use of the Indian creation myth. He believes in the existence of 'THERE' or 'the Deva Realm', where Goddess Nature is dancing. The goddess in motion is symbolized by the image of 'half-naked woman'. Due to the charming motion of the dance, 'mammal species' are created. She hands down her ultimate beauty to the animals 'on some dreamlike perfection of name-and-form'. As she takes control of the creation, everything goes on under her will like in a dream. And since the goddess possesses the female qualities, her production is female as well. 'A lovely mare or lioness, or lady mouse' are then referred to. All of them reflect 'the beauty from THERE'. We can regard these animals as the representation of Mother Nature. Nevertheless, the representation does not exist as static figures. While the goddess is dancing, they are set in motion. The lioness and the lady mouse show 'some toss of the whiskers' and the mare waves her tail in a graceful manner. Throughout this poem, the reader notices that the existence of the female animals is something ordinary. However, nature has taken a great effort to create them and the sense of mystery results.

Now the creation is seen as an enchanting and charming process. Everything is obscure. The naked or half-naked woman is lying but not in exposure. Because of the charm and the obscurity, the speaker longs to see the process, in which Mother Nature creates beings and things out of the state of vacuum. As a whole, the poem represents the attitude primitive men hold towards nature. They pay her respect and consider her a type of religion. Nature is transferred into the form of a powerful goddess who acts as the center of the creation myth.

Even though there resides a speaker in "Charms," the persona does not get involved in the mystic process. He is only the witness, who becomes awe-struck by the enchantment of Mother Nature. Nevertheless, in the second poem, "Source," the speaker completely belongs to the scene. He exemplifies how man can live in and unify himself with his

CHARMS³

for Michael McClure

The beauty of naked or half-naked women,
lying in nothing clear or obvious-not
in exposure;but a curve of the back or arm,
as a dance or-evoking “another world”

“The Deva Realm”or better,the Delight
at the heart of creation.

Brought out for each mammal species
specifically-in some dreamlike perfection
of name-and-form

Thus I could be devastated and athirst with longing
for a lovely mare or lioness, or lady mouse,
in seeing the beauty from THERE
shining through her,some toss of the whiskers
or grace-full wave of the tail

that enchant.s.

enchant.s, and thus

CHARMS.

environment. As his sense of perception becomes keener, he is enabled to take delight in the secretive motion and activities of natural beings. Nature is not considered something static. Its hidden power is portrayed as the poet makes use of personifications to achieve a lively picture. The ‘croppt-out rock’ is compared to a person who cannot see ‘the swiftly passing trees’ clearly. While ‘manzanita clans’ assume the image of dancers who ‘fan out on their soils/in streaks and sweeps’, the birds and woodrats enjoy themselves beneath the trees. Besides, an even more vivid picture of nature lies in the scene in which ‘cloud finger dragons’ fall down the snowy ridge and come to a halt upon ‘the sawtooth spine’ of a pine tree. The act of falling is gracefully magnified with verbs ‘dance’, ‘tremble’, ‘spit’, ‘spiral’ and ‘quiver’.

The whole scene then renders the sense of calmness though everything is moving. The persona attains the pleasure of isolation since he ‘hear(s) no news’ and the bunch-grass has never been trodden upon as if ‘no Spaniard ever came’. Moreover, the darkness also emphasizes the sense of tranquility. The sky is only brightened up by ‘all the stars’. Here, the blackness of the sky does not threaten the speaker; it arouses no fear but serenity in his heart. The fertile land gives him a refreshing quality. The clay keeps itself wet and ‘free of trees’ whereas ‘the tree leaves’ suck the moisture in the air to nourish themselves.

Staying in nature, the speaker comes to realize that all the beings, whether they are big or small, contribute to the natural balance and abundance. Animals, trees and snow altogether form a perfect whole. But apart from functioning as the source of fertility, these beings also serve as the source of the speaker’s spiritual fulfilment. He ‘drink(s) deep’ in ‘that black light’. Among the world’s turmoils, he could achieve the truth of the universe as there is the light from the stars in the black night. He becomes aware of the significance of every element which acts as a part of the whole. In a way,

“Turtle Island” is our “Walden”- a sustained poetic testimony that we can, perhaps must, learn to live in psychic health with less organized human context, and more wild context, than civilization offers.⁴

Reading “Source,” we are introduced to the spiritual benevolence of nature. Nonetheless, Snyder provides us a picture of nature bruised by human beings in “Ethnobotany.” The poem shows us how the human race destroys nature when studying botany. The poet vividly depicts the process of destruction by referring to the number of plants which were felled and to the period of time during which that process last. They felled two oak tree in June and then in September they cut down one tree within three days. The botanists came into the forest and cut down trees because they wanted to study them. The act of splitting

SOURCE ⁵

To be in
to the land
where croppt-out rock
can hardly see
the swiftly passing trees

Manzanita clans
cluster up and fan out on their soils
in streaks and sweeps
with birds and woodrats underneath

And clay swale keeps wet,
free of trees, the bunch-grass
like no Spaniard ever came

I hear no news

Cloud finger dragons dance and
tremble down the ridge
and spit and spiral snow then pull in
quivering, on the sawtooth
spine

Clears up, and all the stars.
the tree leaves catch
some extra tiny source
all the wide night

Up here
out back
drink deep
that black light.

a tree trunk for examination is the way they study plants and it looks ‘like opening a book’. Besides, the examination reveals hard facts about oak trees : the sour fresh smell and ‘the slightly humping oak leaves’. This sort of facts is noted down as scientific records like in the studies of *Boletus*, a category of fungus. The first type of *Boletus*, called *Alice Eastwood*, is described as pink and poisonous, and the second type is yellow, ‘edible and choice’.

Although the studies are aimed at gaining knowledge, the way to obtain it seems destructive. It is ironic that the botanist came with a man-made machine, the chainsaw, in order that they would study natural objects. They did not do it for the sake of the plants. The examination and studies were undertaken with the hope that they could exploit nature “properly” and radically. Therefore, the persona felt ‘slightly sick’ in his heart when the studied tree lay wasted, rotten in the roots. In addition, he equates the botanists with Adam and Eve. While the former felled oak tree, the latter plucked the fruit of the forbidden tree. In doing so all of them gain the truth ; however, the truth is something painful. Adam and Eve were eventually banished out of the Garden of Eden. The botanists have learnt to disrupt the ecological system, which would affect mankind later on. But no matter how shameful the truth is and how ashamed the learners felt, they had to ‘hand the knowledge down’ to later generations. In handing down the truth, Adam and Eve caused their children to respect God but the knowledge handed down by these scientists quickens the exploitation of nature.

In “Ethnobotany,” Snyder obviously presents us a disastrous way man abuses nature. The reader is given an image of impending catastrophe for the ecological system. However, the sense of hope is suggested in “For the Children.” The poet proposes an alternative to the ecological disruption. And to convince people of the significance of nature, he refers to the children, the younger generation or the generation of hope. At first, the poet juxtaposes a physical or geographical picture with a spiritual image of man. The steep climb, the rising hills and the slopes represent the uprising movement. They are compared with a statistic line that is going up while the human spirit is descending the moral ladder. The moral decline to Snyder lies in the fact that man tends to destroy nature and his own environment; as a result, barrenness and drought occur.

Nevertheless, we can hope for a better condition. The persona poses “if” as a condition. If we are aware of how important the ecological system is and if we join hands, ‘in the next century... are valleys, pastures’. Prospective images of beautiful scenery are given to arouse the sense of hope. But the goodwill is facing obstacles, symbolized by the ‘coming crests’. Hence, people of the future are referred to. The poet urges us to take action by putting the last condition. If we do not think of doing anything to save the environment at all, the children are going to suffer from natural imbalance very extensively. The hope for a better condition for the younger generation thus awakens our awareness. We turn to

ETHNOBOTANY⁶

In June two oak fell,
rot in the roots

Chainsaw in September
in three days one tree
bucked and quartered in the shed

sour fresh inner oak-wood smell
the main trunk splits
“like opening a book” (J. Tecklin)

And slightly humping oak leaves
deer muzzle and kick it,
Boletus.
one sort, *Alice Eastwood*
pink, and poison;

Two yellow. *edulis*
“edible and choice.”
only I got just so slightly sick-

Taste all, and hand the knowledge down.

FOR THE CHILDREN ⁷

The rising hills, the slopes,
of statistics
lie before us.
the steep climb
of everything, going up,
up, as we all
go down.

In the next century
or the one beyond that,
they say,
are valleys, pastures,
we can meet there in peace
if we make it.

To climb these coming crests
one word to you, to
you and your children :

stay together
learn the flowers
go light

take the problem very seriously.

Finally, after having succeeded in arguing for the preservation of nature, the effective way of solution is proposed. We have to learn from the way flowers live: ‘go light’. Flowers and other kinds of plants need very little to live on. Just some water and sunlight are enough. Man should imitate flowers, living off only necessary things. The key word is “moderation.” If we have the sense of moderateness, our greed will be subdued. And nature is less likely to be exploited for the sake of luxury or excess. But we have to bear in mind that though Snyder writes about nature, he is not a Nature Poet. His aim is “not to achieve harmony with nature but to create an inner human harmony that equals to the natural external harmony....”⁷

From the four poems, the reader understands how Snyder develops the ecological concern in **Turtle Island**. In order to give a convincing argument, Snyder:

is calling upon the total resources of man’s moral and religious being...A larger and more humble vision of man and cosmos is our only hope, and the major work of any serious person.⁸

He first presents nature hidden with some mystic power. “Charms” provides the reader with the image of nature as a kind of religion. There is a sense of wonder in the process of creation. The beings are charged with some mysterious energy. Thus, the persona shows his reverence to nature. In connection with “Charms,” Snyder proposes an alternative to get in touch with nature in “Source.” In the latter poem, the sense of respect is turned into an attempt to achieve spiritual fulfilment. Among natural objects and beings, man comes to realize the universal truth. The simple way of living contributes to the spiritual uplift of mankind. Here, philosophy derives from plainness. However, since ordinary men lack the sense of moderateness, they turn to destroy nature to serve their materialistic desire. The situation exemplifies itself in “Ethnobotany.” This poem portrays human unscrupulousness in a destructive action. They use the term “botany” as a way to explore natural sources. Nature then becomes more bruised, more contaminated and polluted. Eventually, there comes a call for cooperation in protecting our nature. At present it is the time for nature to benefit from man after man has “taken” tremendously from nature.

It is noticeable that Snyder’s ecological concern is not a fashion. He has dealt with this subject matter for an extensive period and he has done it successfully. As a result, it would be worthwhile studying the poet’s technique of writing. In most of poems in **Turtle Island**, the poet expresses himself in a straightforward and concise manner. There is hardly any sort of introduction at the very beginning of a poem. His speech is very short but every word is meaningful and contributes to the central theme.

The structure of Snyder's poetry is influenced by the intellectual dilemma of using language—the medium of rational discourse—to disclose deeper, extra-rational states of being ... The poet overcomes this problem by producing verse "based on the Oriental haiku—sharp, uncomplicated images that, like many Oriental paintings, form sketches that the reader's imagination must fill in."¹⁰

For instance, "Ethnobotany" begins a stanza of two lines which directly shows how nature is being destroyed :

In June two oak fell,
rot in the roots

Furthermore, the poet does not only wind up his argument at the end of the poem; he also presents concrete examples that can suggest his idea more explicitly. "Charms," for example, does not plainly mention the movement of the mammals since "there are few still-lifes in Snyder's poetry. His writing is full of things caught in motion...."¹¹ It gives a vivid picture of the animals set in motion by the goddess's mystic power :

for a lovely mare or lioness, or lady mouse,
.....
....., some toss of the whiskers
or grace-full wave of the tail

Due to his plain style, Snyder succeeds in awakening an awareness of the importance of the environment. He opens the reader's eyes so that the reader could know the truth, what is happening to our community. This is exemplified in "For the Children," in which the persona utters the truth in an outward way :

of everything, going up,
up, as we all
go down.

After having aroused the human mind, he resorts to the didactic tone to a certain extent. In the same poem, the speaker proposes one way to solve the ecological problem. But he puts it in the form of imperative sentences :

stay together

*learn the flowers
go light*

Apart from the plain and didactic style, the way Snyder makes use of only one speaker in the poems accounts for his success in the persuasive task. The reader has to concentrate on only one voice. The attention is fully paid to what is being said. The idea to be presented can thus be absorbed very rapidly. But :

Snyder is not, indeed, interested in the unique experience but in the shared or sharable experience, and this is why his poetry is so different from that of the "confessional" poets even though like them he writes largely in the first person.¹²

Throughout the collection of poems, Gary Snyder has made it clear that the world is facing a very serious problem. The problem concerns our way of living in a subtle manner. So it needs the attentive mind to solve it. But no matter how complex the subject matter is, Snyder utilizes the plain style to present the issue. This may have been because he realizes that the problem is difficult enough. As a result, no complicatedness is needed in the presentation any longer. It is unnecessary to waste time cracking the shell of a nut. Therefore, it can be said that Snyder succeeds in his job as a poet as well as an environmentalist. His artistic style serves him in his attempt to urge his fellow countrymen to take better care of nature while we cannot deny that :

Gary Snyder has become a sort of prophet of the essential in human life, and in his own way a great liberator, too. His concern with ecology and the physical environment of America - to cite an important example - is not just fashionably recent. It is and has been as fundamental to his own thought and expression as it was to Thoreau's a hundred years before....¹³

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- ³ Gary Snyder , **Turtle Island** (New York:New Directions Books, 1974), p.28.
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- ⁶ Ibid., p.51.
- ⁷ Ibid., p.86.
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- ¹¹ Vinson , **Contemporary Poets**, p.1445.
- ¹² Ibid., p.1444.
- ¹³ Carolyn Riley,ed., **Contemporary Literary Criticism**, Vol. 1 (Detroit : Gale, 1973), p.318.

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