

Under the Volcano: Gary Snyder's Ecopoetics of reinhabitation

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From ecopsychology to reinhabitation

The purpose of this paper is to examine, through the work of the ecological Zen poet Gary Snyder, what the relatively recent field of ecocriticism can contribute to a discussion on processes of rebuilding, reconstruction or restoration. Ecology in general may first be described as a science concerned with studying ecosystems, their interactions and regulations, in a neutral, objective manner. Yet, the “science” of ecology—as is actually often the case with other sciences, but probably to an extent larger than in other sciences—has also been driven by an agenda reaching beyond scientific concerns. It has consistently exhibited a powerful urge to identify and denounce human activities said to be endangering our ecosystem, then suggesting cures appropriate to “healing the planet.” Ecological discourse is thus typically driven by a mix of apocalyptic and messianic thinking, with the larger share going to apocalyptic warnings about the end of the world—or, rather, the end of *our* world. A good case in point would be the 2005 best-seller by Jared Diamond, *Collapse*. In this respect, while ecological discourse may imply a scientific perspective, it is definitely driven by an ideological and even moral agenda in that it implies a definition of what is good and how to get there, as is made clear for instance by Hans Jonas's *Imperative of Responsibility* (Jonas, 1984). Ecology is therefore also consistently enlisted in a restoration project involving the whole planet.

Yet, even though ecological thinking may seem to be working *For the Health of the Land*, (Aldo Leopold, 1999), its actual concern is for *our health on this land*, i.e. our ability to survive in this world without paying too high a price. No matter how far ecological thinking may go towards questioning an anthropocentric worldview, it rarely questions the priority given to human interest over ecological interests. Environmentalism, as the very word ‘environment’ implies, puts human beings at the centre of the world. Environmentalist thinking never acknowledges the scientific possibility that the “health of the land” or the quality of “life” on the planet might not be affected negatively, quite the opposite, by the destruction of a human race, the only one which has proved capable of ecocide. From a strictly planetary perspective, self-destruction of the *homo sapiens* species might be good news, far less regrettable than extermination of the Asian tiger. Such considerations, when they are voiced, are loudly attacked, and rightly so, as anti-humanist. Yet, even without relinquishing our claim to define what is good for the planet, we can also observe that, from an ecological perspective, there are occasions when destruction is good for the health of

ecosystems, as it creates conditions for regeneration.

This is what the American west coast poet Gary Snyder could observe when visiting the site of Mount St Helen's "blast zone"—the area around the volcano which bore the brunt of the great May 2000 eruption—a few months after the eruption. Various areas there were dedicated to testing various forms of responses. The Soil Conservation Service, the Forest Service, and the Army Corps of Engineers, for instance, got on the Restoration effort, while environmental activists gathered in a group called the Forest Ecology Mind succeeded in securing a zone in which "zero restoration became the rule" (Snyder 2004: 14). There, nature was left alone to have its way with "natural succession." Looking at the unmanaged "ecological zone" and comparing it with the scientifically and technologically managed zone, in which replanting and fertilizing took place, Snyder refrains from taking sides. Ecological efficiency, indeed, is not the main lesson to be drawn from the blast. For Snyder, whose perspective on natural processes is much influenced by the many years he spent studying in a Zen Buddhist monastery in Japan, the blast is, primarily, a lesson in energy and impermanence a lesson in *letting go*, as the title of the poem written in response to the eruption suggests: "1980: Letting Go" (Snyder 2004: 11-12). From Snyder's perspective, combining lessons drawn both from the study of ecological processes *and* from Eastern philosophy, which I will go back to, the human will to mastery (of the non-human environment) is the problem rather than the solution. So what then would be the point of reconstruction? Why not just let natural regeneration, free from human engineering, have its way?

Snyder's work interestingly ties up with some of the basic arguments which are at the heart of ecopsychology, first expounded at length by Theodore Roszak in his 1992 landmark essay *The Voice of the Earth*. Roszak makes clear that ecopsychology as a field is founded on the observation that human beings live in a nonhuman world to which they have always been and still are connected—even if, lately, connection has often taken the shape of a sense of alienation and disconnection. This (dis)connection must be taken into account when addressing human predicaments, including ailments falling into the scope of psychotherapy. This basic statement then fuels two interconnected arguments. The first one holds that human destruction of the non-human world calls for psychological attention. The destructive and self-destructive violence to the environment can and must be addressed from a variety of perspectives: economic, technical, cultural, political, but it should also be viewed as a collective psychopathology, calling for some form of therapeutic work. This is the perspective often adopted as an implicit or explicit frame in ecocritical research, since the latter dedicates itself to exploring connections between environmental violence and various forms of cultural discourse entailing symbolic action (including literary production). A second argument holds that psychological ailments, either individual, or collective, or both, cannot be treated

properly if not apprehended as part of a global and not just social environment. Freudian psychological theory has limited itself to looking at mental disorders in the context of the patients' relations to other human beings, primarily members of the nuclear family. In doing so, modern psychology has overlooked the significant relations of humans to the non-human world. As Roszak argues in his chapter "Stone Age Psychiatry," the historical wealth of pre-modern and/or non western shamanistic practices shows that this is not the only viable approach. It even suggests that the exclusive anthropocentric scope of western psychology is a product and a symptom of an ailing modern culture rather than a viable cure for its woes.

A third, mediating line of argument would suggest that (post)modern western man cannot save himself or the planet without addressing the psycho-cultural causes of the violence he inflicts on the non-human world while, conversely, the psychological work cannot be effective if it does not envision humans as part of a system of significant relations including the ecosystem. Obviously, this is the perspective from which Gary Snyder practices what we may call his ecopoetry. The ecopoem is a means of restoring a bond between man and the non-human environment, as part of a "reinhabitation" project whose agenda Snyder has expounded in various essays, echoing the thinking of the famous bioregionalist poet and thinker: Wendell Berry, best known for his landmark *The Unsettling of America* (1977). What must be stated very clearly, though, from the very start, is that, as the lesson from the volcano suggests, reinhabitation does not in any way mean reconstruction. It does not mean recreating what was destroyed, moving back to a secure place tucked away in the past, and restoring a previous state of things: if this were the case, indeed, history would just repeat itself as the path to destruction would be taken again, in the same reckless way. The same conditions would only produce the same effects. Reinhabitation, in contrast with this, involves learning to inhabit the world again, but differently, and accepting impermanence, even if this means destruction.

Reinhabitation in motion

Reinhabitation, as Snyder defined it, is a choice made by "People who come out of the industrial societies (having collected or squandered the fruits of eight thousand years of civilization) and then start to turn back to the land, back to place. This comes for some with the rational and scientific realization of interconnectedness and planetary limits." (Snyder 1995: 190-191) To Snyder, as to many other ecologists, one primary cause of the ecological crisis, indeed, lies in man's increasing disconnection from the land. Snyder's remark that "inhabitants," in the course of western history, have always been on the losing side—"peasants, paisanos, paysan, peoples of the land, have been dismissed, laughed at and overtaxed for centuries by the urban-based elites" (Snyder 1995: 184) echoes Wendell Berry's

look at the European so-called “settling” of the continent. Berry rather sees a continuous process of “unsettling,” driven by a culture suffering from anxious restlessness, displaying a fundamental inability to settle down: “Once the unknown of geography was mapped, the industrial marketplace became the new frontier and we continued, with largely the same motives and with increasing haste and anxiety, to displace ourselves—no longer with a sense of direction, like a migrant flock, but like the refugees from a broken anthill.” (Berry 3)

Berry’s point is mostly made as part as a social and economic history of agriculture as a successive process of victories of those who “did *not* look upon the land as a homeland,” over those who intended to stay put, “to remain and prosper where they were” (4):

Generation after generation, those who intended to remain and prosper where they were have been dispossessed and driven out, or subverted and exploited where they were, by those who were carrying out some version of the quest for El Dorado. Time after time, in place after place, these conquerors have fragmented and demolished traditional communities, the beginnings of domestic cultures. They have always said that what they destroyed was outdated, provincial and contemptible. (Berry 4)

The point echoes Snyder’s remark that “we haven’t discovered North America yet. People live on it without knowing what it is or where they are. They live on it literally like invaders.” (Snyder 1976: 69) Snyder also finds it appropriate to draw the line between choosing “to live in a place as a sort of visitor, or try(ing) to become an inhabitant.” (Snyder 1995: 195) The latter means moving back to the land and claiming a *place* among those living on that land in a way that fits the land, adapting to its local characteristics and population (in the widest sense of the term, i.e. including all elements of the local ecosystem).

Yet, contrary to what one might assume, emplacement does not mean re-rooting, insofar as it does not exclude displacement, quite the opposite—although of course the sort of displacement it involves is not driven by Manifest Destiny. From an ecological perspective which puts *interrelatedness* and *circulation* as its chief principles, no single place or being can ever be considered as a stable or isolated entity. From a Buddhist perspective also, starting from the same two chief principles (interrelatedness and circulation), the world of clearly delineated material phenomena is an “illusion.” What we wrongly perceive as solid, stable and finite is “really” a constant rush of energy flowing in and out of forms, ruled by impermanence. Stability, focus, full attention to the here-and-now, in meditation, eventually lead to a paradoxical awareness of energy flowing into emptiness. One often finds this motion from a focus on a solid form to a dynamic dissolution of awareness in Snyder’s poems. A good case in point, among many others, might be the opening poem in the collection *No Nature* (1992), “Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout” (*No Nature* 4):

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.

In terms of focus, the first stanza narrows the perspective from a vast, blurred image (“smoke haze”) to a precise, sharp one (“fir cones”) only to open up again and dissolve into a display of buzzing formless energy (“swarms of new flies”). The second stanza moves from vague memories to a precise, focussed awareness (“tin cup”), only to dissolve and enlarge it to a perception of immaterial infinity (“high still air”). One may also notice the recurrent compound nouns (“smoke haze”, “fir cones”, “snow water”, “tin cup”), making language mimic the intricate interrelatedness of all elements, and the final vertical balancing (“looking down” / “high still air”). The significant pattern bringing together an epiphany of presence and an experience of dissolution is a typical one in Snyder’s poems:

Words and books
Like a small creek off a high ledge
Gone in the dry air. (6)

This makes clear that the poet’s claim to the place he chooses to reinhabit is only a passing, fleeting gesture which leaves behind only the trace of its song. As is the case in the poetic meditation under the volcano, and in the practice of meditation generally, involvement in the poem puts the reader through a paradoxical, psychological experience of intense gripping *and* letting go.

This paradox is key to understanding why reinhabitation, although claiming a specific place and retrieving a given heritage is *not* driven by a conservative agenda. This clearly appears when we look at the first move in the reinhabitation process: the designing then building of a

house. The importance of choices involved was underlined by the critic Katsunory Yamazato in his article on the building, in 1970, of Gary Snyder's "Kitkitdizze" house (the name connects the house with local Native American lore). As much as it is centered, to begin with, around a firepit which marks the center of the *zendo*, Snyder's Kitkitdizze house is also widely open: "we came to live a permeable, porous life in our house set among the stands of oak and pine. Our buildings are entirely opened up for the long Sierra summer." (Snyder 1995: 195-196) Moving into a place is understood as inserting oneself in a busy web of transformative and interactive processes, so that the choice of emplacement also involves a continuous experience of flowing: one becomes grounded, as it were, in flux. The house, Buddhist philosophy, ecological and social ethics thus meet as manifestations of the same fundamental reality.

Snyder's ecopoetics

They are also tied up to poetic practice: the poem, like the house, is a stable, anchored, yet open, flowing, impermanent structure and the place for constant traffic between many dwellers. This may call for clarifying the term ecopoetry, which critics have increasingly used in the more general context of ecocriticism. Looking at two recent examples, Sharla Hutchison "The Eco-poetics of Marianne Moore's 'The Sycamore'", or Josh A. Weinstein's "Marianne Moore's Ecopoetic Architectonics", we find two basic principles. Hutchison argues that Marianne Moore's ecopoetics bring readers to challenge their anthropocentric views of nature: "The ecopoetics of Moore's 'The Sycamore' reveals that her environmental position is consistent with a core belief manifest in deep ecology, specifically the belief that all life—both human and nonhuman—has significant and equal value." (Hutchison 764) The point is that Moore's poetic practice, notably in the images she chooses to represent animals, agrees with an ecological view of the world. The criterion, here, is that of intellectual consistency. A second one, which John Weinstein elaborates on, is that Moore's poetic language imitates the complex networks of connections at work in the ecosystem: "the complex interweaving of various poetic devices creates an interconnected and interrelated system of individual units and groups that can be understood analogically as an ecosystem." (Weinstein 373) The criterion is that of structural analogy. As my colleague Tom Pughe has argued (Pughe 2011), the ecological "work" of the poem does not stop at the message, content, ideas. It also enlists the way in which the poem ponders what is at stake in choosing not just *what* it represents but *how* it represents it. This entails a metafictional inquiry on what is at stake in the work of representation and on the ethical and political implications of representational strategies. In addition to this, my own take on the ecopoem, in keeping with Snyder's poetic practice, involves paying attention to *the poem as a momentary display of material and psychic*

energy (Snyder uses the image of “fruiting”) taking “place” in the ecosystem at large. Taken to its extreme, it considers the poem as a tiny but meaningful intervention, a statement in the broad cultural conversations through which the planet constantly reorganizes itself, as well as a material move in the broad field of forces that keep the ecosystem going. In Snyder’s perspective, indeed, the poem is a contribution to what he, after the critic and writer Ronald Grimes, calls “the Deep World’s Gift Economy”: “An incantatory Riff for a Global Medicine Show.” (Snyder 2004: 11-12)¹ The poem occurs as a performance: “*Performance* is art in motion; in the moment; enactment and embodiment: which is exactly what nature herself is.” (Snyder 2004: 12)

Snyder’s exercise in poetic reinhabitation can be seen as part of a broader poetic movement toward “reinhabiting the world”, which the French critic and poet Jean-Claude Pinson celebrated in his essay *Habiter en poète* (1995). Pinson borrows from Heidegger’s work the notion of “poetic inhabitation”² and contends that contemporary poetry has in various ways sought to respond to Yves Bonnefoy’s brooding reflection on “la terre qui s’en va.” (Pinson 66) Looking at the work of Yves Bonnefoy, Philippe Jaccottet, Jacques Réda, among others, Pinson points to connections between world and words, not just in terms of representation or commentary but in terms of articulation, junction, “linking up” (“raccordement”) or “stitching” (“suture”), and this from a double perspective, which we can also relate to Snyder’s work. The first one involves pointing out *the materiality of language*, as Pinson does with respect to Bonnefoy: “le langage n’est pas composé de concepts, il l’est de mots. Et les mots, ne l’oublions pas, sont quelque chose de matériel.”³ (Pinson 160) The second one is related to *the energy of language* (matter is energy) activated and released by the poem. For this reason, Pinson is more interested in lyrical poetry than in “reflexive,” “ontological” poetry, poems that sing rather than poems that think, or, rather, poems whose thinking is done by singing. This chimes in with Snyder’s keen attention to the sensory impact of words and “a kind of sense of the melodic phrase as dominating the poetic structure.” (Snyder 1980: 46) It also harmonizes with Snyder’s insistence on rhythm, including the bioregional tempo: “the rhythm I’m drawing on most now is the whole of the landscape of the Sierra Nevada, to feel it all moving underneath. There is the periodicity of ridge, gorge, ridge, gorge, ridge,

¹ Snyder refers here to the title of a paper by Ronald Grimes precisely entitled “Performance as Currency in the Deep World’s Gift Economy: An Incantatory Riff for a Global Medicine Show.” (Grimes, 2002)

² For a thorough, enlightening discussion of Heidegger’s influence on ecophilosophy, see Greg Garrard’s “Heidegger Nazism Ecocriticism.” (Garrard, 2010)

³ “[L]anguage is not made up of concepts, it is made up of words. And we should keep in mind that words have a material dimension.” My translation of Pinson quoting from Yves Bonnefoy’s *Entretiens sur la poésie* (Bonnefoy 262).

gorge at the spur ridge...” (48)

Poetic intervention is situated, embodied, grounded, as a momentary concretion and manifestation in the ongoing flow of the organic network through which life keeps shaping and reshaping itself. Various images are activated here by Snyder. One involves *rippling*: “Ripples on the surface of the water— / were silver salmon passing under—different / from the ripples caused by breezes.” (Snyder 1992: 381) Words, lines, poems come as ripples, too, phenomena emerging out of the constant flow of energy, then moving along with it. Another image summoned up is “the Japanese term for song, *bushi* or *fushi*, which means a whorl in the grain,” an image which makes it possible to inscribe an act of specific figuring into a process of continuous flow: “Like the grain flows along and then there’s a turbulence that whorls, and that’s what they call a song. It’s an intensification of the flow at a certain point that creates a turbulence of its own which then as now sends out an energy of its own, but then the flow continues again.” (Snyder 1980: 44)

Snyder’s poetic work thus becomes part of the reinhabitation process as it enacts the joint principles of Buddhism and ecology. Each poem is a punctual, local yet global ecological act, a contribution to the immediate terrain and to the ecosystem at large, a way of inhabiting it, however briefly, by establishing a form of relation to it, involving both body and mind—gestures, sounds, images, thoughts, rhythms. Each poem is a simple yet complex, stable yet open dwelling. In this way, Snyder’s poems carry out “the real work” of breaking through conceptual frames and making reinhabitation not just an idea but a fully engaged, however fragile, practice, just like the poem itself. The poem thus contributes to a process of healing the poet and the world in enacting, rather than just encouraging, a reconnecting, a fragile bonding based on the sharing of an ability to be here, do a little dance and then vanish.

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