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Countless Cross-Fertilizations:  
*Gary Snyder as a Post-Romantic Poet*

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PhD in English Studies  
Durham University  
2011

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### Declaration

No material in this thesis has been previously submitted for a degree at this or any other University. The work is solely that of the author, Paige Tovey, under the supervision of Professor Michael O'Neill.

### Statement of Copyright

The copyright of this thesis rests with the Author. No quotation from it should be published in any format, including electronic and the Internet, without the author's prior written consent. All information derived from this thesis must be acknowledged appropriately.

### Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my supervisor, Professor Michael O'Neill, for his guidance and support. I also wish to thank my parents, David and Madge Tovey, and my family members for their support, kindness, understanding and love throughout my thesis and my life. Finally, I would like to thank the Durham University English Studies Department for a funding award.

## Abstract

This thesis examines Romantic (including American Transcendentalist) legacies in the poetry of Gary Snyder. It traces connections and conversations between Snyder and his Romantic predecessors, especially Wordsworth, Blake, Shelley, Emerson and Thoreau, and it seeks to demonstrate the workings of what Snyder himself calls “cross-fertilizations.” Snyder’s understanding of cultural influence is based on the Buddhist concept of interconnection. My thesis applies Snyder’s recurrent theme of interconnection and interdependence to his own relationship with Romantic visions, ideas and forms. Through examining Snyder’s poetic achievements in the light of the Romantic tradition, the thesis attempts to deepen current understanding of his work by suggesting that he should be considered not only as an ecological, post-modern or Beat poet, but also and centrally as a post-Romantic writer.

My thesis is structured upon four main, interlocking concerns: eco-Romanticism, the Romantic poet as visionary and prophet, Romantic poetic form, and mountains and rivers as holistic Romantic emblems. It covers a wide range of Snyder’s poetry and prose from across his career in relation to these concerns. The first two chapters, centred on eco-Romanticism, address Snyder’s ecological inheritance from the Romantics; they examine the British Romantic pastoral tradition alongside Snyder’s contemporary eco-Romantic verse. Chapters Three and Four build on the poet’s sense of necessary individuality by focusing on the Romantic role of the poet as prophet in Snyder’s work. They trace the notion inherited from Romanticism of the poet who is conflicted by divergent roles: isolated visionary seer, on the one hand, and the prophetic poet whose role is to speak to and for society, on the other. In my chapters (Five and Six) on the forms through which the post-Romantic poet expresses his vision, I take as my point of departure Shelley’s assertion, from *A Defence of Poetry*, that “every great poet must inevitably innovate upon the example of his predecessors in the exact structure of his peculiar versification,” and I examine how Snyder’s “peculiar versification” follows and yet innovates upon the tradition of experimental and unconventional form set forth by his Romantic predecessors in such seminal works as *Lyrical Ballads*. In my final two chapters, I bring the thesis to a close by focusing on Snyder’s use of two Romantic emblems, mountains and rivers, as dialectical, interdependent elements of nature. Responding to their interaction, Snyder renews Romantic modes of representing the universe and the mind. The thesis draws on other American poets (including Williams, Pound and Stevens) in studying how a major American poet has shaped his art, meanings and identity out of a Romantic and post-Romantic poetic and cultural tradition.

### Note on Texts

The following texts have been used for major Romantic poets. Unless indicated otherwise, quotations from these authors are taken from the following texts. Line numbers are given for poetry, page numbers are given for prose.

*The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. Rev. ed. Ed. David V. Erdman. Garden City, NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 1982.

*Lord Byron: The Major Works*. 1986. Ed. Jerome McGann. Oxford: OUP, 2000. Oxford World's Classics.

*The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. 16 vols. London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1972-2001. Bollingen Series 75.

*John Keats: The Major Works*. 1990. Ed. Elizabeth Cook. Oxford; OUP, 2001. Oxford World's Classics.

*Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*. Ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill. Oxford: OUP, 2003. Oxford World's Classics.

*The Cornell Wordsworth*. 19 vols. Ed. Stephen Parrish, et al. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1975-2007.

References to Shakespeare are to *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*. Compact ed. Ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994.

The Bible is cited from the King James (Authorized) version.

Parenthetical references to Gary Snyder's works are by abbreviated titles as outlined in the List of Abbreviations that follows. Because Snyder's poetry is not published in editions which provide line numbers, and because it does not follow traditional conventions and forms, I have given line numbers when referring to shorter poems (or no numbers when in my view they are not needed), and page numbers when referring to longer poems. Occasionally I refer to a "stanza" number in an effort to clarify to which section I allude; however, such references are given with the understanding that these are also estimations intended to assist the reader in locating the passages in question.

I have punctuated quotations according to the guidelines of the Modern Language Association Handbook, which states that "By convention, commas and periods that directly follow quotations go inside the closing quotation marks" (section 3.7.7).

## List of Abbreviations

## Snyder's Poetry

- RR            *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems*. 1959. Washington, DC: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004.
- BC            *The Back Country*. 1968. Reset ed. New York: New Directions, 1971.
- RW            *Regarding Wave*. New York: New Directions, 1970.
- TI            *Turtle Island*. New York: New Directions, 1974.
- AH            *Axe Handles*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983.
- NN            *No Nature: New and Selected Poems*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1992.
- MRWE        *Mountains and Rivers Without End*. 1996. New York: Counterpoint, 1997.
- DOP          *Danger on Peaks*. 2004. Washington, DC: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2005.

## Snyder's Prose

- EHH          *Earth House Hold: Technical Notes and Queries for Fellow Dharma Revolutionaries*. New York: New Directions, 1969.
- TRW          *The Real Work: Interviews & Talks 1964-1979*. 1980. Ed. Wm. Scott McLean. New York: New Directions, 1980.
- POW          *The Practice of the Wild*. 1990. Washington, DC: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2003.
- PIS          *A Place in Space: Ethics, Aesthetics and Watersheds*. 1995. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2008.
- BOF          *Back on the Fire*. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2007.

## Snyder's Poetry and Prose Selections

- GSR          *The Gary Snyder Reader: Prose, Poetry, and Translations*. 1999. New York: Counterpoint, 2000.

## Introduction

### I.

Pulitzer Prize winner Gary Snyder is a student of influence, and this is reflected in his poetry and poetics, which reflect a lifetime spent learning and practising an attitude to experience, at once contemplative and active, shaped from the interaction of international cultures, mythologies, religions and ideas. His study of cultural and ideological influence reaches from East Asian religion and culture to Native American history, folklore and tradition, always exploring what he terms *interconnectedness*, *interdependence*, and *interpenetration*—or in Buddhist terms: *sunyata*<sup>1</sup>—a concept wherein “phenomena are *śūnya* or unreal because no phenomenon when taken by itself is thinkable: they are all interdependent and have no separate existence of their own.”<sup>2</sup> In a discussion of Snyder’s poetry, Wendell Berry summarises his work as an articulation of the idea that “We are living in a world that is still and always being made; human history is not being made ‘on’ or ‘in’ the world, but is involved by intricate patterns of influence and causation in the continuous making of the world.”<sup>3</sup> Snyder’s poetic works are indeed expressions of the “intricate patterns of influence and causation” that he sees in the world; they are also an attempt to involve literature in “the continuous making of the world.” Snyder’s poetry deals with influence and interconnection, and this thesis centres itself upon a study of the “intricate patterns” of Romantic “influence and causation” in his work.

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<sup>1</sup> Also spelled *shūnyatā*.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Eliot. *Japanese Buddhism*. 1935. Ed. G. B. Sansom. Richmond: Curzon Press, 1993. 81.

<sup>3</sup> Wendell Berry. “Interim Thoughts about Gary Snyder’s ‘Mountains and Rivers Without End’.” *The Sewanee Review* 106.1 (1998): 148-153. *JSTOR*. 9 Aug. 2010. 150.



Generally, then, the thesis argues that Snyder's poetic oeuvre can and should be seen as interfused and interpenetrated with Romantic ideals, vision and form. Before discussing the ways in which Snyder's poetry is imbued with Romantic traits and can therefore be considered post-Romantic, the term "Romantic" must first be defined and established in the sense that it is applied in this thesis. The word "Romantic" is a various and difficult appellation associated with many different, and often conflicting, meanings—as both a literary movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries identified with certain distinguishing traits, and also as an ethos that spans centuries. The distinguishing traits of Romanticism have been listed, categorised and energetically debated by many critics through the years. In an overview of Romantic poetry, Seamus Perry traces the etymology of the word, "Romantic," and the changing and contradictory history of the debate concerning Romanticism from the time period to which the word now refers (approximately 1785 to 1830, dates which have also been debated and questioned over the years). At the time, its use was primarily a "pejorative associate of 'wild, extravagant, and visionary,'" which then changed to a positioning by T. S. Eliot as a reaction against Classicism and reason, and later to its qualification as anti-natural by Harold Bloom.<sup>4</sup> But Perry also points out in his overview of Romantic poetry the different views of "nature" obtained in it. Blake was, in one sense, anti-natural in his claim that "Natural Objects always did & now do Weaken deaden & obliterate Imagination in Me" (*Annotations to Wordsworth's Poems*

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<sup>4</sup> Seamus Perry. "Romantic Poetry: An Overview." *The Cambridge History of English Poetry*. Ed. Michael O'Neill. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 418-39.

665).<sup>5</sup> Wordsworth, by contrast, can be seen as a nature poet whose poetic emphasis lay in a valuing of nature as that which should interact with and inspire the imagination; thus Wordsworth and Blake together embody opposing poles of a dialectic approach to imagination and nature, which points to a more contradictory and complex understanding of the fundamental character of Romanticism. One might add that Wordsworth himself can be seen as a poet of two voices with regard to his treatment of nature. On the one hand, there is Matthew Arnold's view of Wordsworth as essentially a healer, who brings us into contact with "The freshness of the early world"; this is a poet who "laid us as we lay at birth / On the cool flowery lap of earth" ("Memorial Verses" (1850) 57, 48-9).<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, there is the view of A. C. Bradley that "the road into Wordsworth's mind must be through his strangeness and his paradoxes, and not round them" and that this "strangeness" and these "paradoxes" are often evident in his writings about the natural world, especially at those moments when a "visionary feeling" enters, and we are aware of "the intimation of something illimitable, over-arching or breaking into the customary 'reality.'"<sup>7</sup>

Snyder is, thus, the heir of a literary movement which is itself full of "strangeness" and "paradoxes." Perry concludes his overview of Romantic poetry with discussion of a quotation from Paul De Man:

"For what are we to believe? Is romanticism a subjective idealism, open to all the attacks of solipsism . . . Or is it instead a return to a certain form of naturalism after the forced abstraction of the Enlightenment . . .

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<sup>5</sup> William Blake. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. 1965. Ed. David V. Erdman. Garden City, NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 1982. 665.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew Arnold. *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*. Ed. Miriam Allott. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Longman, 1979.

<sup>7</sup> A. C. Bradley. "Wordsworth." *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*. 1909. Intro. M. R. Ridley. London: Macmillan, 1965. 101, 134.

?”<sup>8</sup> There is no right answer to the question: it depends on the version of “Romantic” you have in mind . . . <sup>9</sup>

Michael O’Neill suggests that Romanticism can be seen “less as an identifiable literary essence than as a complex, fraught, and fascinating bundle of differing practices and achievements.”<sup>10</sup> Wordsworth’s discussion of the poet in his 1802 preface to *Lyrical Ballads* illustrates a sense of what Romanticism is and what its legacy of influence embodies. Wordsworth asks “What is a Poet?” and then answers his own question with the following assertion:

To whom does he address himself? And what language is to be expected from him? He is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe . . . (751)

Although the passage characterises the role of the poet, Wordsworth’s discussion of the Romantic poet is applicable to Romanticism and Romantic poetry as a whole. For Romanticism seeks to express a “more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness” as well as “a greater knowledge of human nature.” Romanticism also seeks to “[rejoice] . . . in the spirit of life” that is both “in him” as well as “manifested in the goings-on of the Universe.” Ultimately,

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<sup>8</sup> Perry quotes from Paul De Man’s *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Methuen, 1983. 198.

<sup>9</sup> Perry 433

<sup>10</sup> Michael O’Neill. Ed. *Literature of the Romantic Period: A Bibliographical Guide*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998. 20.

Romanticism seeks to embody and express a “comprehensive soul”—comprehensive in the sense of being all-encompassing, as well as in the sense of being able to comprehend, or understand, both “human nature” and the “Universe” in general, along with the soul of the individual and the interactions and connections that link humanity, nature and the individual to something more “illimitable,” in Bradley’s word. William Blake expresses this idea of a “comprehensive soul” in his *Auguries of Innocence* as a microcosm of the whole, or an expression of the individual, which in turn corresponds—both in similarity and in difference—to the universal. The first four lines of the poem are “comprehensive” and dynamic in their all-encompassing scope and yet minute specificity:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand,  
 And Heaven in a Wild Flower  
 Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
 And Eternity in an hour      (1-4)

Blake’s capacity for expressing and embracing contradiction in order to articulate comprehensive vision exemplifies the Romantic tradition, and illustrates what is at the heart of Romantic poetry: aspiration and its accompanying doubt; measured, bordered form as well as wild, formless chaos; a sense of individuality which contributes to an impassioned valuation of both a human community and an expansive natural community in which humans take part; the awareness of imperfection that lies at the heart of a striving for perfection; a celebration as well as mistrust of the human mind’s imaginative capacity which can both perceive and conceive its own potential and the potential in the external world, leading the poet to explore and seek after truths

concerning the connection and interaction between the two; and a self-awareness and subjectivity that both “celebrates” and “sings” the self, as in Whitman, whilst also recognising that what follows a heightened self-awareness must be a discovery and awareness of, as well as an appreciation for, “the other.”

The Romanticism I identify in Snyder’s work is a tradition that, like the path of a river, leads a long and winding trail. It is transmitted to contemporary American poetry through multiple sources, including the American Transcendental tradition and the Modernist movement. American Transcendentalism has always been seen to be an incorporation of British Romanticism as adjusted and applied to a budding American culture and society by such prominent figures as Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman. Their contribution to Snyder and to the general characteristics of American Romanticism is a further emphasis on self-reliance, non-conformity and a practical application of these Romantic principles to everyday life. The doubleness of Romanticism is heightened in American Transcendentalism, which brings something to British Romanticism that it did not already have. There is a boldness of claim and statement in Emerson’s *Oversoul* and Whitman’s capacity to be everybody. American Transcendentalism brings an ambitiously new quality of conviction to Romanticism. This boldness of conviction is surely related to the more overtly religious aspects of the movement, often associated with Unitarianism.<sup>11</sup> Rather than question religion altogether, as Shelley did, Emerson questioned religious dogma and sought a return to individual spirituality without the stifling confinement of organised

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<sup>11</sup> Although Transcendentalism is often associated with Unitarianism, Emerson, Thoreau and other primary Transcendentalists spoke against Unitarianism and any official, and therefore potentially dogmatic, creed.

religion. In the opening lines of *Nature* Emerson laments the retrospective nature of his age, and calls for a renewal of the relationship between man and God through nature:

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us, by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature, why should we grope among the dry bones of the past . . . ? The sun shines to-day also. . . . There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.<sup>12</sup>

This desire to abandon old and stagnant traditions of the past in favour of a future in which men create their own “new thoughts,” “works and laws and worship” is characteristically American. Individualist spirituality is embraced whilst tradition is seen as dogmatic and stifling. Emerson’s desire is for a direct communication with God without the mediation, and therefore interference of, historical “fathers” from the now-irrelevant past.

However, the problem of evil, which is so potent in Romantic poetry, is a strong problem for American Transcendentalists. In every Transcendental discussion about the potential for human good, one must address the capacity for evil within human nature. Hawthorne and Melville, as well as Poe, do not shy

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<sup>12</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson. *Nature and Selected Essays*. Ed. Larzer Ziff. New York: Penguin Books, 2003. 258-284. Penguin Classics. 258.

away from addressing the potential for evil which accompanies the human capacity for good. Their explorations of twisted and darkened characters stretch Transcendentalist ideas into a more “comprehensive” estimation of the human “soul.” Paired with and in contrast to the optimism and determination of Emersonian and Thoreauvian self-reliance, Hawthorne, Melville and Poe also pushed the boundaries of individualism. They articulate the dark side of individuality as it becomes abnormality through aspects of extreme isolation and haunting alienation. Snyder discusses this Romantic and Transcendental doubleness as a struggle between what he calls “sane” poetry and poetry that approaches “possible madness . . . possible utter transcendence” (EHH 39).<sup>13</sup>

As an American who espouses Buddhism, Snyder exemplifies the contradiction of religious tradition and individualism. His personal pilgrimage to Kyoto, Japan to study Buddhism in the Shokoku-ji temple in 1956, and in the Daitoku-ji monastery, also in Kyoto, in 1959, contrasts with and complements his individualist approach to religious practice.<sup>14</sup> In an interview published in *The Paris Review*, Snyder addresses the distinction between “following a rule” and being guided by a “precept”:

Interviewer: Many are surprised to discover that you're not a vegetarian and not a Luddite, but rather a carnivore with a Macintosh. This sets you apart from, on the one hand, many Buddhists, and, on the other, from a certain branch of the environmental movement. Any comments?

Snyder: Come, come, I'm not a carnivore, I'm an omnivore. . . . I am a very low-key omnivore at that, as are most of the Third World people who eat very little fish or meat, but who certainly wouldn't spurn it. . . .

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<sup>13</sup> I discuss this concept in depth in Chapter Three.

<sup>14</sup> GSR 612.

The key is still the first precept: “Cause least harm.” . . . Ethical behavior is not a matter of following a rule, but examining how a precept might guide one, case by case.<sup>15</sup>

Ever the individual, Snyder’s Buddhism follows an Emersonian fashion. He seeks an understanding of the “one” in relation to everything else, and thus attempts to maintain a balance and a “sanity” which keeps him from the dangers of a darker Transcendental isolation. His is “a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to [himself]” in which he has studied ancient “precept[s]” and now chooses how such precepts “might guide *one*” (my emphasis added). Snyder, like all Romantics, recognises and even embraces contradiction because he understands that “Ethical behavior is not a matter of following a rule,” but rather a matter of individual responsibility and understanding in which contradiction is not only necessary, but also unavoidable.

This is part of Romanticism’s many-hued legacy: it opens up religious problems for discussion and exploration. Shelley puts poetry as a rival to religion. Romanticism turns tenets of pious belief into questions. Wherever Romanticism is, religion is not far away, but it is a religion of a peculiar kind. At the heart of the frequent dislike among Romantic writers for religious doctrines is the fear of apprehensions codifying into dogmas. Romantic poetry often offers something close to a religious experience, but it is one that refuses to be

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<sup>15</sup> Weinberger, Eliot. “Gary Snyder: The art of poetry: LXXIV.” *Paris Review* 38.141 (Winter 1996): 89-118. *Literature Online*. 30 Mar 2009.



codified. Otherwise a systematised set of beliefs and doctrines would stifle intuition and individual versatility, concepts at the heart of Romanticism.<sup>16</sup>

As I trace Snyder's reworking of Romanticism, I make brief connections to American Transcendentalism in Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman. However, most of my poetic comparisons are drawn from the poetry of the British Romantics for two reasons: first, their poetry predates the American Transcendentalist movement and therefore serves as an original source of the Romantic characteristics I identify in Snyder, albeit a source that is more distant; and secondly, much, although certainly not all, of the American Transcendentalist literature tends to favour essayist prose over poetry.

There are many ways in which a movement can be influential, and apparent unlikeness often conceals a deep affinity. Influence is a conversation, and not a carbon-copy reflection or mirror-image correspondence. This is certainly the case with Snyder's direct poetic influences—the Modernist poets—who are responsible for disseminating Romantic ideals and characteristics through what has been considered a “counter-Romantic” poetics. Albert Gelpi, for example, pairs Romanticism and Modernism together as a “Janus-face” of opposing, and yet simultaneously congruent approaches to poetic experience. Therefore, if I am to assert the claim that Modernism is a disseminator of and

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<sup>16</sup> Gavin Hopps and Jane Stabler's collection, *Romanticism and Religion from William Cowper to Wallace Stevens*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006., is an indication of a recent quickening of interest in Romanticism and religion. William A. Ulmer, in *The Christian Wordsworth: 1798-1805*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001., views Wordsworth's Immortality Ode and *The Prelude* as “vehicles of a revisionary Christianity” and containing a “displaced Christianity” (x). Geoffrey Harman has also recently written on Romanticism and religion. In “God, Ghosts, and Shelley's ‘Atheos.’” *Literature and Theology* 24.1 (2010): 4-18., Harman discusses Shelley's attention to *genius loci* in *Mont Blanc* as quasi-religious.

counterpart to Romanticism, it follows that a working definition of Modernism, in the sense that it is applied to this thesis, must be established.

Albert Gelpi's discussion of the relationship between Modernism and Romanticism is integral to my application of the terms with respect to Snyder. Gelpi identifies a distinct aspect of Romanticism that transfers through Modernism to one of Snyder's main poetic and philosophical ideals: the interconnection between the human and the natural, between which Snyder asserts that there is actually no distinction. Gelpi says:

This radical ideological shift [to Romanticism from the Enlightenment] elevated to primacy the individual's intrinsic capacity to perceive and participate in the organic interrelatedness of all forms of natural life and the individual's consequent capacity to intuit the metaphysical reality from which that natural harmony proceeds, which it manifests, and on which it depends. Assimilating gnostic Neoplatonism, German Idealism, and Oriental mysticism, the Romantic supplanted the right reason of the Renaissance and the logical reason of the Enlightenment with transcendental Reason, appropriately capitalized. Its flashes of intuitive perception superseded mere lowercase reason . . .<sup>17</sup>

Gelpi goes on to assert that the Romantic emphasis on "the individual's intrinsic capacity to perceive" and thus "intuit . . . metaphysical reality" is a "personal and individual experience of potential correspondence" that is not only the source of Romantic "psychology," "politics" and "aesthetics," but is also "the source of Romantic instability and self-doubt, and so the genesis of Modernism." Thus, according to Gelpi, Modernism "proceeded from a sceptical,

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<sup>17</sup> Albert Gelpi. *A Coherent Splendor: The American Poetic Renaissance 1910-1950*. 1987. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. 3.

experimental, relativistic, even materialistic base to seek an absolute realization and expression which internal and external circumstances seemed to rule out.”<sup>18</sup>

This “sceptical, experimental” drive to “absolute realization and expression” is seen in the poetic theories of T. S. Eliot, whose publication of *The Waste Land* in 1922 with its fragmented form and sense of alienation is often considered the epitome of high Modernism, and whose approach to literary criticism posed as a reaction against more Romantic forms. But the early poetic roots of Modernism are found in a “counter-Romanticism,” as Michael O’Neill calls it (borrowing Eliot’s own term), that is highly aware of Romanticism and demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of its drives.<sup>19</sup> O’Neill asserts that Eliot’s “anti-Romanticism masks a powerful affinity with Romantic poetry” and that his “overt hostility to Romanticism connects with his complex feelings about self-expression in poetry.”<sup>20</sup> Eliot speaks of Baudelaire as the first “counter-Romantic” poet, writing a poetry that is not anti-Romantic, but rather builds upon a sophisticated understanding of Romanticism. O’Neill demonstrates this Romantic inheritance in a discussion of the poetry of both Baudelaire—whose poetic imagery draws greatly from the dark American Romanticism of Poe—and Eliot when he observes that “The imagery used by Baudelaire and Eliot demonstrates and conjoins what Wordsworth in his analysis of lines from ‘Resolution and Independence’ calls ‘the conferring, the abstracting, and the modifying powers of the Imagination.’”<sup>21</sup> Charles Altieri asserts that “modernist rejections of romanticism might better be seen as

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<sup>18</sup> Gelpi 3-4

<sup>19</sup> Michael O’Neill. *The All-Sustaining Air: Romantic Legacies and Renewals in British, American, and Irish Poetry since 1900*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. 60-82.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 60

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 74

repudiations of Victorian versions of the romantic subject . . .”<sup>22</sup> and in Snyder’s occasional valuations of Romanticism, as will be discussed throughout this thesis, his direct commentary on Romantic ideas is often mediated through this Victorian interpretation of the “romantic subject.” This is not to say that Snyder misinterprets Romanticism. On the contrary, the texture of his poetry shows a profound understanding of it.

With these arguments concerning the continuities between Modernism and Romanticism in mind, the Modernism I refer to is marked by a strong element of “counter-Romanticism,” in which the Romantic emphasis on visionary imagery, such as Wordsworth’s “spots of time” and Blake’s “pulsation of the artery” (*Milton, Book the First* 28:62-63, 29:1-3), develops into the more distilled *imagiste* and Vorticist factions of the early twentieth century. It is a Modernism in which the Romantic fragment develops into an amalgamation of sometimes sparse and seemingly disjunct pieces; and it is a Modernism that is deeply involved with explorations of the self that seek otherness and an interaction with the external in order more closely to examine the internal.

Born in 1930, Snyder’s development as a young poet in the 1950s followed the rich poetic tradition of the prominent poets that emerged from the Modernist era, such as Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and Wallace Stevens. As an inheritor of both the Romantic and Modernist traditions, Snyder is categorised as a postmodern poet by critics such as Tim Dean, whose *Gary Snyder and the American Unconscious: Inhabiting the Ground* (1991) examines Snyder’s poetics through a psychoanalytic, especially Lacanian, lens. That

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<sup>22</sup> Charles Altieri. “Strange Affinities: A Partial Return to Wordsworthian Poetics after Modernism.” *Romantic Circles Praxis Series*, 2003. 15 Aug 2010. <<http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/poetics/altieri/altieri.html>>.

Snyder is in many ways postmodern (another slippery and widely debated term)—particularly if by using the word “postmodern” a critic refers to the rejection of the “high” and “low” cultural hierarchy—is easily acceptable. But Snyder’s poetic ideal certainly does not embrace the assertion of the meaninglessness and confusion of contemporary human existence often associated with the term, and his poetry generally lacks the ironising tinge often found in postmodern literature. Additionally, Snyder has openly objected to postmodernist criticisms and deconstructions of nature and literature. In an essay entitled “Is Nature Real?”<sup>23</sup> Snyder made what Laurence Coupe calls “a heartfelt complaint”<sup>24</sup> against “the slippery arguments being put forth by the high-paid intellectuals trying to knock nature and knock the people who value nature and still come out smelling smart and progressive” (GSR 387). Laurence Coupe identifies Snyder’s “high-paid intellectuals” as “literary theorists and philosophers who, having discovered the joys of deconstruction, think they are being ever so clever in declaring nature to be nothing more than a cultural construct.”<sup>25</sup> My characterisation of Snyder as a post-Romantic poet, then, expresses a view of Snyder as a poet coming after Romanticism and creating a reignited, reformed and current Romanticism.

In tracing Snyder’s literary influences, I am indebted to Harold Bloom and his theory of poetic influence as outlined in his seminal *The Anxiety of Influence*, from which I draw on the prompts to thought supplied by the assertion that “Criticism is the art of knowing the hidden roads that go from poem to

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<sup>23</sup> First published in *Wild Earth* (Winter 1996-97), the essay is collected in GSR.

<sup>24</sup> Laurence Coupe. Rev. of *The Ecological Thought*, by Timothy Morton. *Times Higher Education* 1.962 (2010): 52-53.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 52

poem.”<sup>26</sup> Some of the roads between Snyder and the Romantics are less hidden. For example, Snyder’s connection to Blake is documented by Snyder himself, whose poem “IT,” from the collection *Regarding Wave*, is subtitled “[*Reading Blake in a cowshed during a typhoon on an island in the East China Sea*].” In the poem Snyder invokes the classic Blakean image of the whirling, spiralling vortex of perception as he dramatises the meeting of the two poets’ minds represented by the intersection of two storm fronts:

—on the edge of a spiral

Centered five hundred miles southwest.

Reading in English:

the way the words join

the weights, the warps,

I know        what it means.

my language is home.

mind-fronts meeting

bite back at each other,

whirl up a Mother Tongue.

one hundred knot gusts dump palms

over somebody’s morning cream—

Snyder uses the subtitle of the poem to give important background information, including the poet’s location: “an island in the East China Sea,” or in other words, Japan. Knowing that Snyder is in another country where he must

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<sup>26</sup> Harold Bloom. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. 96.

communicate and read in a foreign language, a reader can appreciate the genuine affinity Snyder expresses for Blake—a fellow English-speaker whose poetry communicates to Snyder through their “Mother Tongue.” But the connection is built upon far more than a common language in which Snyder finds relief from the difficulties and stresses of constantly communicating in a foreign tongue. Rather, Snyder finds connection to Blake as a fellow poet whose ability is evident to Snyder in “the way the words join.” As Snyder says himself in the poem, his language “bite[s] back” at Blake’s with an innovation upon traditional poetic diction. Blake is known for his alliteration, particularly in collections such as *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, and Snyder incorporates moments of Blakean alliteration whilst maintaining his own poetic form and device. He repeats the letter *w*, perhaps to echo the onomatopoeic sound of the wind, in “way,” “words,” “weights,” and “warps.” Then, in the following line, he plays with the letter *w* once more with “know        what.” By inserting an unusual distance, a space, between the two words and between the repeated letter, Snyder creates a great deal of possibility, of simultaneous separation and connection between the letters, the words and the phrases within the line.

Within the quoted passage, there is a sense of acknowledgement by Snyder that Blake and the Romanticism Blake represents is Snyder’s “Mother Tongue,” and is the root of the poetic tradition that Snyder emerges from. The image of a spiralling storm introduced by Snyder in the line, “—on the edge of a spiral,” recalls Blake’s discussion of the nature of infinity from *Milton, Book the First*, where the poet asserts that “The nature of Infinity is this: That every thing has its / Own Vortex” (15:21-22). Snyder’s “mind-fronts meeting” is the “Vortex,” or spiralled storm of his own mind as it meets, intersects,

interpenetrates as well as clashes with, responds to, and even differs from the spiralling “Vortex” of Blake’s mind, imagination and poetry. When the forces meet, they produce “one hundred knot gusts” of energy and creation.

Snyder’s connection to Blake is also traced through his friendship and interaction with Allen Ginsberg, whose interest in and study of Blake bordered upon obsession. More subtly, and yet, on occasion, still directly, one can find connection to some of Shelley’s works and ideas in Snyder’s poems. The final lines of “IT: [*Reading Blake in a cowshed . . .*]” equate his “Cowshed” shelter from the typhoon to a “skull” which encases his mind, but whose windows are open to the influence of the Shelleyan as well as Blakean poetic storm:

Cowshed skull

Its windows open

swallows and strains

gulfs of wild-slung

quivering ocean air.

breathe it;

taste it;     how it

Feeds the brain.

This final image creates an unmistakable vision of “fast influencings” rendered and received (*Mont Blanc* 37) by the “Cowshed skull” human mind. The link to Shelley within the passage is also evident in the notion of a connection between the physical sensation of the storm and the mental sensation of poetic idea. This characteristically Romantic notion is seen in the physical and mental correspondence of Snyder’s “Cowshed skull,” which “swallows and strains / gulfs of wild-slung / quivering ocean air” which provide sustenance for the



mind. The final lines of the poem—“breathe it; / taste it;    how it; / Feeds the brain.”—draw upon a Shelleyan metaphor in which the poet’s mind is fed by immortal substances such as ideas represented by the immaterial air. In *Prometheus Unbound* The Fourth Spirit refers to the sleeping poet as one who “. . . feeds on the aerial kisses / Of shapes that haunt thought’s wildernesses” (l.i.741-42). Ideas born out of Romanticism, the image suggests, provide sustenance for Snyder’s poem.

It is also worth noting that although the form of Snyder’s poem does not seem to follow a traditional pattern and metre, Snyder still incorporates moments of metrical pattern and poetic device. For example, Snyder disguises iambic pentameter by breaking it into two lines: “gulfs of wild-slung / quivering ocean air.” In the lines: “breathe it; / taste it;    how it,” he combines repetition with slight variation by using a parallel syntactical structure in the imperative statements “breathe it; / taste it.” But Snyder employs variation whilst still incorporating repetition by shifting from imperative to interjection with “how it / Feeds the brain.” The repetition of the word “it” and the concentration of poetic device at the close of the poem give a connection and insight to the poem’s title, “IT,” which must seem an obscure title for the poem up to this point. At its conclusion, the poem provides the reader with the connection between the pronoun “it” and the subject it modifies. Grammatically, that subject is “gulfs of wild-slung / quivering ocean air,” whose demarcation in iambic pentameter substantiates such a conclusion. Metaphorically, the “wild-slung / quivering ocean air” is representative of Blake’s poetry, which communicates and speaks to Snyder of his cultural and linguistic roots. Also, ultimately, the “quivering ocean air” that Snyder speaks of is the Romantic wind—that “wild West Wind”

(*Ode to the West Wind* 1), dense and wet with the moisture of the Earth's oceans, which brings with it life and death, change and poetic inspiration: food for Snyder's poetic and artistic thought.<sup>27</sup>

Snyder's connection to Shelley is certainly not limited to "IT." Anthony Hunt, for example, comments on the direct quotation of lines from Shelley's "The Cloud" in Snyder's "Arctic Midnight Twilight" from *Mountains and Rivers Without End*. Hunt asserts that the borrowed lines from Shelley—"by the midnight breezes strewn," and "The beat of her unseen feet"<sup>28</sup>—inform a greater understanding of the poem and lead the reader to identify Snyder's "her" as Shelley's "orbèd maiden with white fire laden, / Whom mortals call the moon" (45-46). Snyder puts the borrowed lines from Shelley's "The Cloud" in quotation marks within "Arctic Midnight," thus giving a clear indication of a conscious influence arising from Shelley. Hunt gives further discussion of the similarities between Snyder's poem and Shelley's, concluding that Snyder's poem is "a love song sung to the moon in all its 'splendor.'"<sup>29</sup> However, greater than the similarities of syntax and language between Snyder and Shelley is the shared—and for Snyder, at least partially inherited—Romantic vision of the holistic and interdependent nature of the earth and its individual parts which come together as a great whole. Shelley's poem personifies a cloud, and traces the movement of its processes and characteristics as it participates in the water cycle and in the natural processes of the earth. Snyder's poem, as Hunt describes it, "refers to the perceptible harmony of Alaskan Dall mountain sheep in their

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<sup>27</sup> This idea of the Romantic wind will be discussed further in Chapter Eight.

<sup>28</sup> Punctuated as "By the midnight breezes strewn" (48), and "the beat of her unseen feet" (49) in Shelley's poem.

<sup>29</sup> Anthony Hunt. *Genesis, Structure and Meaning in Gary Snyder's Mountains and Rivers Without End*. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2004. Western Literature Series. 176.

age-old habitat.”<sup>30</sup> The underlying thread that connects both poets and poems is their shared theme and expression of “harmony,” or interconnection, interpenetration and interdependence that connects the cloud to the flower or the mountain sheep to man.

Snyder’s connection to the inescapable influence of Wordsworth, a poet with whom Snyder is often compared<sup>31</sup> due to their shared responsiveness to nature, is actually more subtle and difficult due to the fact that Snyder claimed in a 1978 interview with Ekbert Faas to find Wordsworth “tiresome,” asserting that he “really can’t read” the great Lake Poet.<sup>32</sup> Snyder’s reaction to Wordsworth seems to echo his Modernist predecessors and exemplifies Altieri’s observation that the Modern poets’ rejection of Romanticism was due to a Victorian misrepresentation of the Romantic subject. The idea that one can escape a particular influence by not reading a certain influential poet is a common delusion; and Snyder’s productive inability to escape the long arm of Wordsworthian poetic influence is explored throughout this thesis.<sup>33</sup> For, as Harold Bloom puts it, “Wordsworth will legislate and go on legislating for your poem, no matter how you resist or evade or even unconsciously ignore him.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 172

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Charles Altieri’s article, which gives a discussion of Snyder visionary poetry in light of Wordsworth’s influence: “Gary Snyder's Turtle Island: The Problem of Reconciling the Roles of Seer and Prophet.” *Boundary 2* 4.3 (1976): 761-78. *JSTOR*. 7 Oct. 2007.

<sup>32</sup> Ekbert Faas. *Towards a New American Poetics: Essays and Interviews*. Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1978. 124.

<sup>33</sup> For Wordsworth’s influence upon Snyder’s American predecessors, such as Thoreau and Whitman, I have drawn upon the invaluable collection of essays: Joel Pace and Matthew Scott, ed. *Wordsworth in American Literary Culture*. Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

<sup>34</sup> Harold Bloom. *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976. 111.

Snyder himself asserts that “Every living culture and language is the result of countless cross-fertilizations—not a ‘rise and fall’ of civilizations, but more like a flowerlike periodic absorbing—blooming—bursting and scattering of seed” (EHH 126). This “bursting and scattering of seed” in which “living culture and language” and ideas are exchanged is reminiscent of Shelley’s remarkable image in *Ode to the West Wind* of the dissemination of ideas and inspiration as “wingèd seeds” (7) borne upon the wind and driven as “thoughts over the universe” to “quicken a new birth” (63-64). The Romantic wind is a force of influence whose traces can be seen throughout the Modern and Postmodern tradition. It is a wind which has transported “wingèd seeds” that have quickened the poetry of Snyder through a multitude of “cross-fertilizations,” traced throughout this thesis.

## II.

T. S. Eliot has said that: “The work of the critic is almost wholly comprehended in the ‘complementary activities’ of comparison and analysis. The one activity implies the other; and together they provide the only way of asserting standards and of isolating a writer’s peculiar merits.”<sup>35</sup> I have sought to discuss Snyder as a post-Romantic poet through Eliot’s “‘complementary activities’ of comparison and analysis,” which serve as my primary method of study in this thesis. Through close readings and thematic discussions of Snyder alongside readings and discussions of Romantic works, I seek to establish an affinity between ideas and structures that unite Snyder to the Romantics. My approach to the concept of literary influence, as previously mentioned, is

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<sup>35</sup> T. S. Eliot. “Studies in Contemporary Criticism.” *The Egoist* 5.9 (1918): 113-14.

indebted to Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*. I build a reading of Snyder that is based upon Bloom's definition of "influence" as "a metaphor, one that implicates a matrix of relationships—imagistic, temporal, spiritual." However, although I do not necessarily take issue with Bloom's concluding aspects of this definition—that influence is also "psychological," and that these "imagistic, temporal, spiritual, psychological" relationships are "all . . . ultimately defensive in their nature"<sup>36</sup>—I focus my comparison and analysis of Snyder upon the "matrix" of "imagistic, temporal" and "spiritual" relationships between Snyder and Romanticism. Where I have discussed Snyder in association with anxiety, it is with reference to an articulation within the poetry of a poet's self-conscious struggle to overcome self-doubt in favour of poetic aspiration—an internal poetic struggle which finds its roots in Romantic poetics and which I discuss in detail in Chapters Three and Four. My discussion of anxiety therefore does not include or necessarily build upon Bloom's sometimes Freudian idea of a poet's anxiety as a defensive desire to assert one's primacy and originality by deliberately misreading sources of influence in order to devalue and even disguise such influences. My use of the term *anxiety* is applied to a poet's own valuation of his/her poetic ability rather than his/her fears concerning originality. Throughout, I read Snyder as coming after the Romantics and therefore differing from them. Poetic influence is a far more complicated issue than mere imitation; thus it could be said that this study of influence is a study of causation and interaction. Additionally, influence can often be identified as the way in which a later poet chooses to construct his/her vision and conceptualisation of, as well as interaction with and response to, an earlier poet.

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<sup>36</sup> Bloom *Anxiety* xxiii

Because Snyder's poetics is also fed by an East Asian cultural, religious and poetic tradition, I have sought, where appropriate, to trace and identify connections between this tradition and Romanticism. An integral element to Snyder's poetics, philosophy and lifestyle, Buddhism is a system of belief and thought which assists in a greater understanding of Snyder's poetry. Unlike Snyder's Transcendental and Romantic predecessors, Snyder has more openly embraced and endorsed a particular religious creed. However, Snyder still expresses scepticism and a distrust of organised religion. As previously mentioned, Romanticism often turns religious belief into questions. Snyder revisits these questions, often through a Buddhist point of view. Nevertheless, the questions that both Snyder and the Romantics address are questions that do not spring from Christianity or Buddhism exclusively. This is not to say that Snyder's Buddhism is irrelevant to his poetry, for his poems and essays are replete with Buddhist and East Asian references, which could potentially leave a reader in the dark. My assumption has therefore been that most western readers are less familiar with many of Snyder's Zen Buddhist and East Asian references and allusions, and I have thus given supplementary discussions and definitions as is needed for an understanding of the dynamic between Snyder's Buddhist vision and Romantic ideals and dimensions. Above all, my emphasis in this area is on the poetic use to which Snyder puts Buddhist ideas.

In selecting editions for my discussion of Snyder's poetry, I have sought to incorporate the versions of his poems and collections by which he is best known. This means, for example, that although Snyder published some sections from *Mountains and Rivers Without End* beginning in 1965, I have referred to and discussed the poem as published in its entirety in 1996. Although Snyder has

made minor changes and corrections in his publications of poems over the years, those changes are few and bear no effect on my thesis and discussion of Snyder as a post-Romantic poet.

### III.

This thesis is structured around four main themes: eco-Romanticism, Romantic poetic form, the Romantic visionary poet/prophet, and mountains and rivers as holistic Romantic emblems. My first two chapters, focused on eco-Romanticism, address Snyder's ecological inheritance from the Romantics. I begin Chapter One with an examination of the British Romantic pastoral tradition in the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge, as well as the American pastoral ideas of Emerson and Thoreau. I explore the idea that the pastoral is a complex genre, which is often unjustly simplified as an extolment of the values of the countryside. Snyder reworks an American Transcendentalist pastoral into a Postmodern and post-Romantic ecological poetics that articulates the contradiction and tension at work in modernised contemporary life. I argue that an ecocentric criticism of both Romantic poetry and Snyder's work tends to oversimplify the poetry and often ignores the dual vision and tension between a longing for connection with nature and the possibility that human self-consciousness does not allow for such harmony. Chapter One, although predominantly focused on Snyder's Romantic predecessors, concludes with a discussion of Snyder as an heir of eco-Romantic tradition, which is elaborated upon in Chapter Two.

Building upon the Romantic pastoral tradition, I structure Chapter Two around a discussion of the Romantic pastoral alongside Snyder's contemporary

eco-Romantic verse. In Chapter Two I give more detailed close readings of Snyder's poetry as a contemporary beneficiary of the ecological awareness in the Romantic tradition. My readings build upon the dialectic between the desire for the mind to be "melded to the universe" and a self-consciousness which often opposes or interferes with a union between humanity and nature. This acknowledgement of discord is often what makes Snyder's work impressive, for the dramatic tension and dynamic expression of contradiction and discrepancy approaches the significance of Wordsworth's "comprehensive soul," which seeks to express all aspects of the interaction between humanity and the natural world. This discord is manifest in many ways throughout Snyder's poetic repertoire. I examine poems from the range of Snyder's career in order to explore his recurrent attempt to find a reconciliation between humanity and nature. I discuss Snyder's poetic examples of reconciliation, achieved by mediating between consciousness and the imagination as well as between the individual as part of the human community and as a separate entity.

This attempt at mediating between the individual and the community develops in the following two chapters. These two chapters centre on the concept (one embraced by Snyder) that a connection between human and the external world is a task that must be undertaken by the poet. Chapter Three gives a discussion of the Romantic conflict between a poet's aspiration and its accompanying doubt. I follow this idea with a subsequent discussion of Snyder and the Romantic poet/prophet, which traces the notion, inherited particularly from Wordsworth, Blake and Shelley, of the poet who is conflicted by the divergent roles of the poet as seer, whose visionary disseminations are rarely intelligible within the general community, and as prophet, whose role is to speak



to and for society. For Snyder, this contradictory nature of the poet is an ever-present theme. In this chapter, I examine a sample of poems from across the time span of Snyder's career. A central poem, "As for Poets" (from *Turtle Island*, 1974), articulates a hierarchy of kinds of poetry in which Snyder places the poetry of the "Space Poet" in direct competition with the poetry of the "Mind Poet," whilst the "Earth," "Air," "Fire" and "Water" poets are valued to a lesser degree. This competition between the visionary, boundless "Space" poetry and the more steady, mediating "Mind" poetry exemplifies Snyder's own struggle to find balance between the visionary poet who is often misunderstood, and the prophetic poet whose work is aimed at providing a means of mediation toward at least a partial understanding of the boundless, visionary utterings of the "Space Poet."

Chapter Four expands my discussion of the roles of the poet as potentially visionary, and as articulate mediator and ambassador by drawing connections between Snyder's ideas concerning the poetry of the "Mind Poet"—which seeks, through the imagination, to express a dynamic and reciprocal interaction between the mind and the natural world—and the Romantic dialectic or conversation in which the power of nature and the power of the mind interact. I explore Snyder's attempt to articulate this conversation between mind and nature as expressed in his epiphanic poetic moments. These moments of epiphany and simultaneously static and dynamic visionary imagery, although undoubtedly a product of Snyder's lifelong study of Zen Buddhism, also draw upon a Romantic and Modernist inheritance, a contention which I support through close readings in this chapter.

A principal means by which Snyder attempts to articulate and embody his poetic vision in a way that communicates powerfully to the reader is experimental poetic form. My chapters on post-Romantic poetic form in Snyder's work, Chapters Five and Six, see Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* as a crucial text for Romantic and post-Romantic poetics. Chapter Five explores the Romantic roots of "open form poetics" and/or "free verse" and Snyder's inheritance from that Romantic tradition. I apply Shelley's assertion, from *A Defence of Poetry*, that "every great poet must inevitably innovate upon the example of his predecessors in the exact structure of his peculiar versification" (679) to Snyder's own poetic aspirations toward formal innovation. This is done through close examination of Snyder's poetry in the light of previous experimentations on form as exemplified by Wordsworth's revolutionary preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* and its accompanying verse. I also trace how Coleridge's theories concerning organic form travel through Whitman's quasi-Biblical catalogues into Snyder's own biologically influenced notions and practice of open form. This biological idea of open form reflects Snyder's overarching theme of the interconnectedness and interpenetration of all things; it brings modern notions of the way organicisms function to the poetic structure itself, with its associations and seemingly random but purposeful interactions. Ultimately, poems are not self-enclosed things. Their tools are words that interact and correspond with each other, with multiple meanings and with varying interpretations. The result is what Snyder calls a "measured chaos" (PIS 168).

Snyder asserts that language is “fundamentally wild” and that poetic form, syntax and style should reflect more closely the way in which thought functions<sup>37</sup> rather than following traditional poetic conventions of form:

. . . consciousness, mind, imagination, *and* language are fundamentally wild. “Wild” as in wild ecosystems—richly interconnected, interdependent, and incredibly complex. Diverse, ancient, and full of information. At root the real question is how we understand the concepts of order, freedom, and chaos. Is art an imposition of order on chaotic nature, or is art (also read “language”) a matter of discovering the grain of things, of uncovering the measured chaos that structures the natural world? Observation, reflection, and practice show artistic process to be the latter. (PIS 168)

That Snyder sees language as “fundamentally wild” is evident throughout his poetic repertoire. Snyder follows and yet innovates upon the tradition of experimental and unconventional form set forth by his Romantic predecessors. In Chapter Six I also examine Snyder’s development from more traditional forms in his earlier publications to increasingly more experimental forms in his later poetry. This development over time also reflects Snyder’s desire to create poetry that represents and corresponds to the external world in both its shapes and its ideas. For example, “All in the Family” from *Axe Handles* (1983), is structured in a way that represents a correspondence and a relationship of similarities between the poet and nature. Divided into two stanzas, the poem discusses two families which correspond to each stanza. The first is Snyder’s own family: himself, his wife, Masa, and his sons, Gen and Kai (referred to as

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<sup>37</sup> The idea is similar to the way in which Modernist writers experimented with stream-of-consciousness prose.

“the boys” in the poem). Snyder utilises the first half of the opening stanza to set the scene for his readers:

For the first time in memory

heavy rain in August

turning up the chainsaw

begin to cut oak

Boletus by the dozen

fruiting in the woods

Full moon, warm nights

With the opening line, we learn that his setting is one with which he is familiar. It is a place of which he must have a memory that spans years, for he indicates that this August’s heavy rain is different from previous years. This information also lets the reader know that Snyder’s location is home. The stepped triadic lines, “heavy rain in August / turning up the chainsaw / begin to cut oak” (reminiscent of William Carlos Williams, whose influence I will discuss in detail throughout), give the poem an element of formal metre and structure. In fact, the two lines: “heavy rain in August / turning up the chainsaw,” share the same metrical scansion whilst the third line, “begin to cut oak,” reveals a slight variation; it is similar enough to the first two lines to complete the stepped triad, but dissimilar enough (with a missing syllable) to discontinue the metrical repetition before it becomes an obvious and predictable pattern. This opening half of the first stanza also illustrates that Snyder’s familiarity with his location extends to the natural plant life such as the oak trees and the Boletus mushrooms (also called Oak Bolete), which often grow out of oak trees.

Snyder continues his description of home in the first stanza with an inventory of his wife and children:

the boys learn to float  
 Masa gone off dancing  
 for another thirty days  
 Queen Anne's Lace in the meadow  
 A Flicker's single call

Included in the inventory of Masa and "the boys" is the "Queen Anne's Lace in the meadow" and the "Flicker" with its "single call." By grouping them together within one stanza, Snyder indicates that his family extends to include not only his wife and children, but also the plants and animals who share his local habitat, and with whom he is undoubtedly familiar.

The second and concluding stanza of the poem indicates a thought that follows the reflections and observations of the first stanza and builds, as well as plays, upon Snyder's classification of family.

Oregano, lavender, the *salvia* sage  
 wild pennyroyal  
 from the Yuba River bank  
 All in the family  
 of Mint.

The catalogue of plants in the mint family at first seems an exercise of memorisation and categorisation. Its differentiation from Snyder's family by a separate stanza, belies what Snyder is actually doing. For although Snyder uses the form of the poem to mislead the reader, in a sense, he also uses the form of the poem to indicate to the reader what his actual intention is. After listing the

members of the Mint family, Snyder tells us that they are all “from the Yuba River bank,” a river that runs through the Sierra Nevada mountain range wherein Snyder built his own family home (named Kitkitdizze after an evergreen shrub native to the area). The form as well as the content of the final two lines of the poem provides the reader with the last and most important clue as to Snyder’s ideas about family. Rather than combining the lines into one—“All in the family of Mint”—Snyder separates the observation into two lines, setting “All in the family” apart and indicating an underlying theme of the poem: that there is an interconnection between himself, his wife and children, and the other living plants and animals that inhabit his Sierra Nevada home. Rather than identify himself as separate from the varying species of Mint that grow near his home, he indicates through the form of the poem that the “Oregano, lavender, *salvia* sage” and the “wild pennyroyal” belong to two families: the Mint family and his own Sierra Nevada family.

This double structure in “All in the Family” is correspondent to many of Snyder’s recurrent themes and ideas. He readily acknowledges separations, differences and contrasting elements, but also seeks through his poetry to explore relationships of interconnection and interdependence which are often hidden at the heart of seeming discrepancies.

The final two chapters of the thesis, Chapter Seven and Chapter Eight, focus on Snyder’s use of two emblems—mountains and rivers—as dialectical and yet interdependent elements of nature whose interaction embodies a microcosmic representation of the whole. This interaction between mountains and rivers, for Snyder, is holistic, even all-encompassing. It is a conceptual representation of the interaction and interdependence between the universe and

the mind. I structure a discussion of these emblems as inherent in and derived from a Romantic tradition. Chapter Seven gives a detailed investigation of mountains as intrinsically visionary and inspirational natural locales in which the poet/prophet is faced with the dilemma of his/her dual role as seer and as legislator. This is seen throughout Romantic works such as Wordsworth's *The Prelude* and Shelley's *Mont Blanc*, which I examine closely, giving especial consideration to these poets' interactions with such mountains as symbols of both the metaphysical and temporal realms. I then give a detailed reading of Snyder's "Bubbs Creek Haircut," from *Mountains and Rivers Without End* (1996), as an example of Snyder's poetic representations of mountains as visionary locales upon which, and through an interaction with, the poet can obtain understanding. "Bubbs Creek Haircut" represents a post-Romantic reinvention of such a traditionally Romantic theme.

Chapter Eight, which focuses on rivers, takes as its starting point Shelley's assertion that "rivers are not like roads . . . they imitate mind."<sup>38</sup> It examines the way in which the Romantic tradition becomes a precursor to Snyder's mountain-river-mind poems that attempt to embody the holistic dynamic of creation and destruction. This Romantic influence often lies latent in intermediating poetry until a new poet lives up to and brings new life to Romantic ideas. This final chapter's discussion of Snyder's rivers and waters addresses the post-Romantic poet's inheritance and renewal of a contemplation of water in its varying forms and processes that becomes a meditation of the structure of the universe in its interconnections between the smallest sentient

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<sup>38</sup> See Shelley's letter written to Thomas Love Peacock dated 17 July 1816 in *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley. Vol. I*. Ed. Frederick L. Jones. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964. 489-90.

being and the cosmic system in its entirety. I begin with a discussion of Snyder's Romantic predecessors—namely Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley—and their poetic visions of landscapes as traced, shaped and defined by rivers and as interpreted and mediated by the imagination and the mind of man. I include a discussion of how Williams's *Paterson* carries this Romantic theme of equating the movement of rivers with the processes of the human mind to Snyder's treatment of cognisance and water. And I conclude the chapter with a discussion of Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind* in which Shelley's wet and fertile wind of influencings and destructive regeneration gives rise to Snyder's own creative and destructive rivers which culminate in a "burning sky-river wind" ("1980: Letting Go" from DOP) of volcanic lava, and thus a culmination of abject destruction which eventually leads to a healing and flowering restoration.

#### IV.

Gary Snyder is a largely under-studied poet whose work has attracted surprisingly few academic studies relative to the time span and breadth of his literary career and his acknowledged poetic achievements. Such achievements include a Guggenheim Fellowship (1968), the Pulitzer Prize for poetry (1975), the Bollingen Prize for poetry (1997) and the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize (2008), among others. Previous studies of Snyder's work tend to focus largely on three elements: first, his overtly ecological themes and subject matter; second, the East Asian and Buddhist element of his ideas and philosophies; and third, biographical sketches of his life with accompanying guidelines for reading and understanding his sometimes-difficult, unconventional brand of poetics.



Since the budding and flourishing of eco-criticism, Snyder's poems and essays have become a staple for ecological collections and anthologies. His interest in the natural world and the interrelation between humans and nature predates and acts in part as a catalyst for the modern-day ecological movement, which has been increasing in momentum since the early 1960s. Authors such as Laurence Coupe, Jonathan Bate, Terry Gifford, Robert Kern, and others, have examined Snyder's work through an ecocritical lens. There is no doubt that Snyder's poetry and philosophies lend themselves to an ecocritical reading, and have even contributed to and shaped the field of ecocriticism. Although this thesis expresses an interest in Snyder's ecological nature-writing (in Chapters One and Two), it does so with an eye to examine his Romantic ecological inheritance and seeks to compare and analyse Snyder's work in the light of previous Romantic ecological poetic endeavours. Rather than apply the moral and philosophical aims of an ecocritical reading, which I argue can often detract from the poetry itself, I seek to locate currents within Romantic poetry and poetics that have endured and developed through a series of poetic inheritances and influencings in such a way that they are reincarnated in Snyder's work.

Snyder's explicitly expressed interest in and practice of Buddhism has also been a subject of study for critics of poetry and ideas. Although the Buddhist element is integral to Snyder studies, this thesis incorporates a discussion of such philosophies and ideas in order to facilitate a further understanding of Snyder's works, and not to trace an already explicit and openly acknowledged Buddhist influence. When necessary, I have drawn upon

informational sources, such as the *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*<sup>39</sup>, to supplement readings of Snyder's poetry. By incorporating particulars from such informational sources, my intention is not to merely supply information, but to further facilitate an evaluation of Snyder's poetry that connects the East Asian philosophical and religious elements of Snyder's poetics to the Romantic tradition.

Critics such as Bob Steuding<sup>40</sup>, Anthony Hunt and Patrick D. Murphy<sup>41</sup> have published monographs which incorporate biographical and historical supplementary information in order to elucidate Snyder's poetry. These critics' works have served as sources for my research. For my discussions of Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, I have occasionally drawn, in particular, from Anthony Hunt's extensive groundwork (in *Genesis, Structure and Meaning in Gary Snyder's Mountains and Rivers Without End*, 2004) on biographical and Buddhist explanations that coincide with Snyder's long poem. Nevertheless, my research differs greatly from these critics in that I seek to trace and elucidate a Romantic connection that, although mentioned and acknowledged by Hunt, Murphy and others, is not examined in detail.

Snyder is often the subject of sociological and political-based criticism, as is the case in the works of Tim Dean<sup>42</sup> and Charles Molesworth.<sup>43</sup>

Molesworth's *Gary Snyder's Vision: Poetry and the Real Work* (1983) discusses

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<sup>39</sup> *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*. 2 Vols. Ed. Robert E. Buswell, Jr. New York: Thompson Gale, 2004. Macmillan Reference USA.

<sup>40</sup> Bob Steuding. *Gary Snyder*. Boston, MA: Twayne. 1976.

<sup>41</sup> Patrick D. Murphy. *Understanding Gary Snyder*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina P. 1992, and *A Place for Wayfaring: The Poetry and Prose of Gary Snyder*. Corvallis, OR: Oregon State UP. 2000.

<sup>42</sup> Tim Dean. *Gary Snyder and the American Unconscious: Inhabiting the Ground*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991.

<sup>43</sup> Charles Molesworth. *Gary Snyder's Vision: Poetry and the Real Work*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1983. Literary Frontiers.

Snyder's work as "involv[ing] the establishment of an alternative vision, especially a vision of the role of the poet," which Molesworth suggests is that of the "Western lyric poet" who must "[maintain] an eccentric relation to dominant social values" and mediate between the poet as hermit and the poet as social entity.<sup>44</sup> Molesworth makes occasional mention of Snyder's Romantic inheritance in his examination of Snyder's dialectical view of the poet; nevertheless, his intention in *Gary Snyder's Vision* is primarily to discuss the social and political implications of Snyder's vision of the role of the poet. Molesworth's discussion of the idea that the role of the poet is a dual and often-contradictory position stems in part from Charles Altieri's earlier writings on the subject. However, where Molesworth finds Altieri's observations supplementary, I find them integral. Thus, although I, like Molesworth, am interested in Snyder's view of the role of the poet, my study focuses on the implications for Romantic connections and the ways in which Snyder integrates Shelley's notion of the poet as "unacknowledged legislator."

Charles Altieri's discussions of Snyder's poetics often address the poet's attempt at mediation between the role of the poet as spokesperson for humanity and as visionary augur whose poetic utterances are often unintelligible or inaccessible to the uninitiated.<sup>45</sup> His connections between Snyder and the Romantics, particularly Wordsworth, have been instrumental in shaping my own notions of Snyder's own self-consciousness as a poet. My chapters on the

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 3

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Altieri's *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry during the 1960s*. London: Associated University Presses, 1979; as well as "Gary Snyder's Lyric Poetry: Dialectic as Ecology." *Critical Essays on Gary Snyder*. Ed. Patrick D Murphy. Critical Essays on American Literature. Boston: G K Hall & Co., 1991. 48-58.; and "Gary Snyder's *Turtle Island*: The Problem of Reconciling the Roles of Seer and Prophet." *Boundary 2* 4.3 (1976): 761-778.

poet/prophet are indebted to Altieri's earlier works on Snyder and, in part, spring from and respond to Altieri's suggestions concerning Snyder's successes as a poet of auguries and occasional failures as a poet of the community.

Nevertheless, my work differs from Altieri's writings on Snyder. Where Altieri finds that Snyder "rarely expresses doubt or fear"<sup>46</sup>, I find that Snyder's self-doubt, self-consciousness and even fear are embodied (albeit slightly hidden) in the poet's dynamic conflict, a shifting hierarchy, between a primacy of visionary poetics versus a primacy of prophetic poetics. Snyder's attempt at mediation between the two is representative of the poet's own internal dialectic. Such a striving for mediation between the competing roles of the visionary poet and the socially enriching poet echoes the Romantic tradition. It is exemplified by moments of Romantic epiphany combined with the language of the common man, examples of which are discussed at length throughout my chapters on Snyder and the Romantic poet/prophet.

In *Soul Says*, Helen Vendler explains that her collection of essays focuses on poets she admires, for "there is really nothing to say about an inept poem except to enumerate its absences."<sup>47</sup> Vendler's introduction to her chapter on Snyder acknowledges his well-deserved respect as a prophet and practitioner of an ecologically minded lifestyle and politics. However, Vendler asserts that "though Snyder has earned the seriousness of his views, which he presents not only in political debates . . . but also in the example of his own frugal way of living, his moral seriousness by itself would not earn him the title of poet."<sup>48</sup> It is this perspective—that Snyder's work as a poet must be considered in poetic

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<sup>46</sup> Altieri "Gary Snyder's *Turtle Island*" 774-75

<sup>47</sup> Helen Vendler. *Soul Says: On Recent Poetry*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995. 7.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* 117

terms, and not in environmental and moral terms—which I have attempted to incorporate within my study of Snyder and Romanticism. I agree with and build my discussion of Snyder from the stance of Vendler’s assertion that his poetics must be examined apart from his ecological agenda. Nevertheless, this study differs from Vendler’s in that my aim is specifically to trace Romantic connections and inheritances within Snyder’s poetic works, whereas hers is an examination of his success as a poet as independent from his success as an ecological figure.

## V.

Vendler describes Snyder’s “poetic function” as “to be a link in the transmission of what there is to be seen and known in the world.”<sup>49</sup> It is this sense of Snyder’s place within a poetic tradition—a tradition that Snyder himself would assert stems back in time beyond Romanticism to the beginning of poetry and literacy and human thought—which this thesis seeks to discuss. Just as Snyder serves as a “link in the transmission,” so too Romanticism serves as a paramount “link” through which, as Shelley observes, “the episodes of that cyclic poem written by Time upon the memories of men” are conveyed so that “The Past, like an inspired rhapsodist, fills the theatre of everlasting generations with . . . harmony” (*A Defence of Poetry* 688).

In particular, my contribution falls within the bounds of a discussion of Romanticism as another such “link in the transmission” of seeing and knowing. I seek not only to reassert, as many critics before, the primacy and value of the ideas and visions imparted to us from our Romantic predecessors, but also to

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 124

examine the extent to which such ideas and visions are inherent in a contemporary poet who has developed such ideas and made them his own. This thesis belongs to the study of Romantic legacies. Thus, rather than underscoring a disjunction and separation between the ideas and characteristics attributed to Romanticism, Modernism and subsequent literary and aesthetic movements, an examination of Romantic legacies seeks to uncover the inherent harmonies behind the superficial discord. Snyder himself calls it a “measured chaos that structures the natural world” in which the apparent dissonance between ideas and things belies a subtle, yet pervasive, synthesis. Amongst the “countless cross-fertilizations” between cultures and languages and ideas, there is a significant “blooming,” “bursting and scattering of seed” located in the relatively short time period designated to the Romantic movement. To acknowledge that the Romantic wind is a powerful force of influence provides a further understanding of “what there is to be seen and known in the world”<sup>50</sup>; and to trace such influence to a present “periodic absorbing” of Romantic ideas gives us an opportunity for a glimpse at the future. For “the future is contained within the present as the plant within the seed” (*A Defence of Poetry* 675).

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<sup>50</sup> See previous quotation from Helen Vendler.

## Chapter One: The Romantic Pastoral: Snyder's Ecological Literary Inheritance

### I.

Snyder's reputation and career are largely associated with and built upon his ecological philosophies and approach to living and thinking. As a poet whose work is based on an exploration and representation of the way that human beings interact with their environment, he has become a paradigm of the ecocritical movement in literature. His combination of a scientific outlook—he is knowledgeable and well-read in biology, ecology, anthropology, geology, and other natural sciences—with the visionary stance of a poet and the spirituality of a dedicated Buddhist, has created a philosophy and works that both pre-empted and contributed to the establishment of the environmental movement of the 1960s and 70s as well as the development in the late 80s and 90s of ecocriticism as an approach to literary and cultural theory and criticism. Recognition of this significance for ecocriticism is increasingly widespread. Writing for *The Ecocriticism Reader*, William Rueckert extols the virtues of Snyder's Pulitzer Prize-winning collection, *Turtle Island*, and concludes his discussion of Snyder's work by stating: "its relevance for this paper is probably so obvious that I should not pursue it any longer."<sup>1</sup>

The history of ecological poetry and literature has deep and ancient roots. Poets throughout history have incorporated nature in verse as a backdrop or setting in which to explore themes ranging from love to war and revolution as well as a

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<sup>1</sup> William Rueckert. "Literature and Ecology." *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Ed. Harold Fromm and Cheryll Glotfelty. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996. 105-23. 117.

symbol or metaphor through which a poet can explore such themes. And poetry throughout history has sought to explore and express many of the issues at the heart of humanity's interaction with its environment. The pastoral tradition encompasses literature that embodies these issues, and although it is often pejoratively simplified into a comparison of the idealised country life—its pleasures and basic, uncomplicated living—with the opposing complications and privations of city life, it can be an intricate and enduring mode of exploring the relationship between humanity and nature. William Empson's *Some Versions of Pastoral*<sup>2</sup>, in its very title, is an example of the fact that the pastoral is a changing and complicated set of convention through which a poet can approach various subjects. Stuart Curran's chapter on the pastoral, from his brilliant *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*, identifies it as a complex and contradictory mode, and suggests that “the literary kind that celebrates simplicity is far from simple in either practice or critical taxonomy.”<sup>3</sup> Curran also identifies the “enduring feature of pastoral” as “its double vision” and notes that it “guarantee[s] a tension of values.”<sup>4</sup> Milton's *Paradise Lost* illustrates this duality and tension as an “embodiment of mixed and competing genres”; even its epic ambitions are underpinned by the pastoral “in its most radical form.”<sup>5</sup> This reworking of the pastoral has become a tradition in itself.

Leo Marx identifies Romantic Pastoralism as being “located in a middle ground somewhere ‘between,’ yet in a transcendent relation to, the opposing forces

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<sup>2</sup> William Empson. *Some Versions of Pastoral*. 1935. London: Penguin, 1995.

<sup>3</sup> Stuart Curran. *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986. 85.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 88

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 90



of civilization and nature.”<sup>6</sup> Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads* set the precedent for the British Romantic pastoral<sup>7</sup>, which “dominated early Anglo-American literature” and upon which Emerson and Thoreau built an American pastoral that emphasised “a working rather than an aesthetic relationship with the land.”<sup>8</sup> Snyder reworks American Transcendentalist pastoral into a post-modern and post-Romantic ecological poetics. His preference for and attempt to embody the pastoral is in many ways at odds with contemporary culture and his recognition and incorporation of this tension within his poetry give it a fascinatingly complex and at times productively contradictory double vision.

## II.

The pastoral’s connection to modern ecological literature is easily seen. Pastoral is one of the oldest modes of literature, dating from the Classical Hellenistic period and widely utilised by authors through to the modern age. Pastoral authors often employed rural scenes as idyllic settings in which to explore themes of love, leisure and erotic fantasy. M. H. Abrams, in *Natural Supernaturalism*, asserts that the Romantic tradition follows a basic Christianised pastoral model that moves from innocence to a fall and ultimately to recovery. As Abrams puts it, the poets of the Romantic age were “philosopher-seer[s]” and “poet-

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<sup>6</sup> Leo Marx. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1964. 23.

<sup>7</sup> Specific details in the form of an in-depth discussion of Wordsworth’s reworking of the pastoral in his *Lyrical Ballads* can be found in “Chapter 5: The Pastoral” of Stuart Curran’s *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*.

<sup>8</sup> Greg Garrard. *Ecocriticism*. 2004. Series Ed. John Drakakis. London: Routledge, 2007. The New Critical Idiom. 48-49.

prophet[s]” who sought to “reconstitute the grounds of hope” and proclaim “a rebirth in which a renewed mankind will inhabit a renovated earth where he will find himself thoroughly at home.”<sup>9</sup> Other Romantic critics see Abrams’s model as an outdated and idealised view of Romanticism in which a poet can simply turn loss into recompense. Jerome McGann, for example asserts that Abrams’s idea of the Romantic movement from a fall to rebirth and recovery is a false move. McGann finds Abrams’s criticism to be borne out of “a moral evaluation of the ‘message’ of ‘the great Romantic poems,’” and not out of an objective criticism. McGann goes on to describe Abrams’s approach to hope and despair as a simplified moral dichotomy wherein hope is equated with good and despair with bad:

“Despair” is an emotional state to be shunned if not deplored, and it is associated explicitly with “the unbounded and hence impossible hopes” of political and social transformation. “Hope,” on the other hand, is a good thing, and it is associated with an “infinite *Sehnsucht*”: which is possible to achieve: that is, with a psychological victory, a religious and spiritual success which can replace the failed hope of social melioration.<sup>10</sup>

McGann’s complaint against Abrams’s idealised take on Romantic tradition and revolution is understandable and in many ways justified; however, there is still some validity in Abrams’s model which can be traced from Romantic literature through to post-Romantic poetry and ideas. Specifically, the process of moving from innocence to fall to renewal can be seen in the poetry of Gary Snyder, whose contemporary

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<sup>9</sup> Meyer Howard Abrams. *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*. New York: Norton, 1971. 12.

<sup>10</sup> Jerome McGann. *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983. 26.

pastoral poetry often maintains a moral and religious—albeit Buddhist rather than Judaeo-Christian<sup>11</sup>—point of view that articulates a positive outlook and valuation of hope.

Before discussing Snyder's ecological pastoral poetry, it is necessary to discuss Wordsworth—one of the central figures for contemporary ecological poetics and a poet whose influence upon Snyder is removed, or indirect, yet still deeply felt. Wordsworth's seminal musings on man and nature are of such dominance in Anglo-American literature that much critical attention has been paid to his impact on subsequent eco-Romantic authors. His unconventional use of the pastoral, and the fact that humanity's relationship with nature is frequently the subject of his poetry, marks an important and influential transformation, not only in a literary sphere, but also in the realm of politics and culture. It is a transformation which still resonates. *Michael. A Pastoral Poem*, from *Lyrical Ballads*, exemplifies this transformation to the Romantic pastoral. When the poet introduces a scene of idyllic country landscape in the form of Green-head Ghyll, he also introduces a finely adjusted change. The pastoral ideal is immediately given another dimension: struggle and effort now precede the conventional pastoral *otium* or leisure. For, in order to reach the place where "The Mountains have all open'd out themselves, / And made a hidden valley of their own" (7-8), one's "feet must struggle" (4) if one is to meet the mountains "face to face" (5) as though in confrontation. Then, as the story unfolds

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<sup>11</sup> Snyder often outwardly rejects the western, and therefore Judaeo-Christian, tradition, and would assert that the similarities between the Christianized pastoral pattern (innocence, fall, recovery) and his own pastoral poetic are rooted in an archetypal universal human subconscious that is manifest in many religions and social mythologies throughout history and throughout the world.

beside the sometimes “tumultuous” (2), sometimes “boisterous Brook”(6)—in which even the adjectival shift from “tumultuous” to “boisterous” indicates a turmoil of change—there is a tragic human drama told. The drama reminds us that for Wordsworth there is always a gap as well as a link between the human and the natural worlds. At the heart of *Michael* is a conflict between love of nature and love of man:

. . . these fields, these hills  
 Which were his living Being even more  
 Than his own Blood—what could they less? had lay'd  
 Strong hold on his Affections, were to him  
 A pleasurable feeling of blind love,  
 The pleasure which there is in life itself. (74-79)

Jonathan Wordsworth calls upon these lines to observe that “the first half of *Michael* is propagandist in intention, a garrulous eulogy of the shepherd’s way of life,” but that the second half of the poem illustrates Wordsworth’s “ability to imply feeling which could not convincingly have been described.” Jonathan Wordsworth points out that “One is aware as one reads that Michael’s love has a tragic intensity . . . and yet the poetry actually *says* nothing about it. Its surface implications in fact play down his suffering.”<sup>12</sup> For all the “blind love” that Michael has for his land, where “blind” is admonitory as well as admiring, his love for Luke, his son, is even greater:

but to Michael’s heart

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<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Wordsworth. *The Music of Humanity: A Critical Study of Wordsworth’s Ruined Cottage*. London: Thomas Nelson (Printers) Ltd, 1969. 79-81.

This Son of his old age was yet more dear—

.....

to the thoughts

Of the old Man his only Son was now

The dearest object that he knew on earth.

Exceeding was the Love he bare to him,

His Heart and his Heart's joy! . . . (149-162)

Jonathan Wordsworth's examination of the subtlety with which Wordsworth creates a conflict in the shepherd's divided love and "treatment of emotion"<sup>13</sup> in *Michael* illustrates Wordsworth's creation of a new pastoral with a double vision wherein contradiction—in this case, Michael's "blind" love for his son and yet his willingness to sacrifice Luke in order to save his land—is embraced and not explained away. In this way it could be said that *Michael* establishes a kind of form for the pastoral, and it bequeaths a pastoral structure from innocence to fall, but not necessarily to a complete recovery. It is a communication for how things used to be, a lament that they are not as they were, and a kind of half-recovery that is tainted, or short of complete, by the remembrance of a fall and the incorporation of tragic human flaws.

According to *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Romantic pastoral theory . . . showed more freedom to disregard the form and the content of the traditional pastoral; to look on nature with heightened

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 79

emotion; to endow primitive life with benevolence and dignity; and to place a greater value on sentiment and feeling.<sup>14</sup>

The same entry offers a view of Wordsworth's *Michael* as "reflecting the empirical element of English romanticism" and "mark[ing] the end of serious attempts in the genre." Perhaps this is because the pastoral—originally considered "a fictionalized imitation of rural life, usually the life of an imaginary Golden Age"<sup>15</sup>—having endured more than 2,000 years of experimentation and change, became a mirror image and opposing reflection of itself. Its values and emphases have reshaped themselves in a Romantic and post-Romantic climate. With the publication of *Michael* and subsequent post-Romantic pastoral poems, the pastoral has become more than an exploration of the real in opposition to the ideal. In fact, Curran observes that in *The Excursion* "Wordsworth both creates a self-reflexive pastoral mode and questions its value."<sup>16</sup> But Curran points out that this self-reflexive pastoral is not to be confused with the "antipastoral" of Crabbe. Rather, it is a celebration and acknowledgement that "systole and diastole is the 'eternal language' of God" and that "the opposition between pastoral bower and grave has been enlarged to a universal natural rhythm, reuniting man and nature"<sup>17</sup> in a dialectic that passes into Snyder's work through a transmission from the British Romantics. It is a mode which Snyder then develops into an ecological pastoral lyric for the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries.

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<sup>14</sup> "Pastoral." *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Preminger, Alex, et al, ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993. *Literature Online*. 26 June 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Curran *Poetic* 103

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 111

Ecocritics such as James McKusick<sup>18</sup> and Jonathan Bate<sup>19</sup> assert that examples of Wordsworth's ecological awareness abound in his writings. However, McKusick gives an oversimplified description of the Romantic period in which Wordsworth wrote as "the dawn of the industrial era" where "the green world of field and forest was a remote, mysterious, and magical place that existed in sharp disjunction from the smoke, crowded streets, and noisy machinery"<sup>20</sup> of the booming industrial cities in England and throughout the world. McKusick, among other critics, also credits Wordsworth as "one of the first inventors of 'human ecology,' if by that phrase we mean the study of complex relationships between human communities and their dwelling-places."<sup>21</sup> What McKusick forgets or does not see about Wordsworth is that the ecological concerns are subject to and part of the drama that is inseparable from the poet's expression and exploration of self-awareness. Bate and McKusick both recognise Wordsworth's *Guide to the Lakes* as developing a "sense of the unity of the country as formed by nature. Mountains, vales, and lakes all work together; even the humble tarn makes a necessary contribution to the whole."<sup>22</sup> Works such as "Home at Grasmere" and *Tintern Abbey* are commonly recognised by many ecocritics such as Bate, Karl Kroeber, McKusick, and Lance Newman as poems which "[celebrate] how all parts of human nature and physical nature interactively contribute to an inclusive vitality of being

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<sup>18</sup> See James McKusick. *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000.

<sup>19</sup> See Jonathan Bate. *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*. London: Routledge, 1991; and *The Song of the Earth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.

<sup>20</sup> McKusick 1

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 70

<sup>22</sup> Bate *Romantic* 46

multiform but not hierarchized.”<sup>23</sup> Yet these critics’ ecocentric praise of Wordsworth’s role as a predecessor to the environmental movement fail to recognise his dual vision and the tension that he communicates between a longing for a connection with nature and the fact that human self-consciousness does not easily allow for such connection.

“Lines Written in Early Spring” is one of Wordsworth’s many poems which ecocritics argue reveal his awareness and his concern over humanity’s increasing non-participation in its natural environment. His opening lines, “I heard a thousand blended notes, / While in a grove I sate reclined,” (1-2) imply a harmonious cooperation between natural elements—the brook that runs down from the combe above, the flowers and twigs, and the birds and other animals and insects. Wordsworth’s observations go beyond a basic acknowledgement that plants and animals and all elements of the natural world are dependent upon each other to a recognition, or at least supposition, that there is pleasure and enjoyment in their association, as illustrated in lines such as “And ’tis my faith that every flower/ Enjoys the air it breathes” (11-12). But to observe that “Lines Written in Early Spring” is a straightforward poem about the harmony that can exist between man and nature does an injustice to Wordsworth’s poetry and ideas. The issue of simplicity in *Lyrical Ballads* is taken up by Michael Mason:

Classical pastoralism evidently plays a rather complicated role in *Lyrical Ballads*. When most straightforwardly invoked, by Wordsworth’s term “pastoral” as part of a poem’s title, the context is a group of light-hearted

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<sup>23</sup> Karl Kroeber. *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994. 56.



and insubstantial poems. On the other hand, the “pastoral poems”—“the Brothers” and “Michael”—are the most solemn and poignant of all the long Wordsworthian items in the collection.<sup>24</sup>

Mason goes on to observe that in many of Wordsworth’s poems “an explicitly pastoral mode is being deployed in a rather unserious context.”<sup>25</sup> Mason’s recognition that *The Brothers* and *Michael* are “most solemn and poignant” in spite of their “complicated” categorisation as “pastoral poems,” is insightful.

Another way in which Wordsworth’s shrewdly complicated articulations of the complex relationship between man and nature are often oversimplified is through forcing an absolute relationship between modern ecology and Romanticism. Ralph Pite points out that “linking ecology and romanticism . . . may easily oversimplify both” and that using Romantic poetry “to support any number of different versions of ecology” may diminish it to an inferior status.<sup>26</sup> This can be a danger when studying Wordsworth’s poetry. For, amidst the pleasures of budding twigs in the breezy air in “Lines Written in Early Spring,” Wordsworth expresses a sense of sadness at the inadequacy of nature’s offered joys. In fact, the connection that Wordsworth feels with Nature further emphasises his alienation as a human being from those simple earthly delights:

To her fair works did nature link

The human soul that through me ran;

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<sup>24</sup> Michael Mason. Introduction. *Lyrical Ballads*. By William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Ed. Michael Mason. New York: Longman, 1992. 12.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 12

<sup>26</sup> Ralph Pite. “How Green Were the Romantics?” *Studies in Romanticism*. Green Romanticism. 35 (1996): 357-374. 357.

And much it griev'd my heart to think

What man has made of man. (5-8)

In a way the poem explores the possible insufficiency of ecological joy, and Wordsworth repeatedly acknowledges throughout the poem that the reason to rejoice is not quite strong enough to outweigh the reason to lament. Nevertheless, Wordsworth does not let go of such joy, even as he shows how it can prompt other, more anguished feelings:

If I these thoughts may not prevent,

If such be of my creed the plan,

Have I not reason to lament

What man has made of man? (21-24)

What gives this and other Wordsworthian poems its enduring value is its acknowledgement of discrepancy—the potential peace and happiness that nature affords is not quite realised and does not quite outweigh or assuage the sadness which must exist alongside joy in the human experience. In addition, although Wordsworth was concerned with the welfare of the natural environment, “Lines Written in Early Spring” illustrates that his fundamental concern was for the well-being of mankind. His specific and repeated lament is over “What man has made of man” and not what man has made of the earth.

*Tintern Abbey* illustrates Wordsworth’s developing view of the interchange between humanity and nature. McKusick refers to the opening lines of *Tintern Abbey*, where he views “these plots of cottage ground” with houses “Green to the very door” as an example of Wordsworth’s emphasis on the “peaceful coexistence

of human habitation and wildness in the same landscape.”<sup>27</sup> Although this is a valid observation, Wordsworth’s description of humans and nature beneficially co-existing should be considered as more than an argument for basic living or for “deep ecology.” In *Tintern Abbey*, the poet, at once haunted observer and imaginative participant, contemplates the way in which humanity and nature are simultaneously connected and divided. Toward the middle of the poem, Wordsworth discusses how the remembered contemplation of nature brings, rather than joy, a settled recognition of “The still, sad music of humanity” (92)—an observation that echoes Wordsworth’s rumination in “Lines Written in Early Spring” that the “pleasant thoughts” of nature “Bring sad thoughts to the mind,” (3-4). For Wordsworth, not only does nature inspire a contemplation of the state of mankind, but she also provides a respite from the “The dreary intercourse of daily life”:

‘tis her privilege,  
 Through all the years of this our life, to lead  
 From joy to joy: for she can so inform  
 The mind that is within us, so impress  
 With quietness and beauty, and so feed  
 With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,  
 Rash judgments, nor the sneers of selfish men,  
 Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all  
 The dreary intercourse of daily life,  
 Shall e’er prevail against us, or disturb

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<sup>27</sup> McKusick 67

Our chearful faith that all which we behold  
 Is full of blessings (123-134)

This role—as a foster-mother, “nurse,” “guide,” “guardian”—that Wordsworth ascribes to nature was a role that changed as the poet’s understanding of humanity’s place in a world composed of natural beauty but also human malevolence matured. In his “boyish days” (73), when he first visited the Wye Valley, nature “was all in all” (76) to Wordsworth. But, the poet says, “That time is past, / And all its aching joys are now no more” (84-85). As a result of possibly traumatic historical experience (Wordsworth may allude obliquely to his retreat from revolutionary extremist fervour), the poet has learned “To look on nature, not as in the hour / Of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes / The still, sad music of humanity” (90-92), which gives him the ability to feel:

A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
 Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
 Of something far more deeply interfused,  
 Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
 And the round ocean, and the living air,  
 And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,  
 A motion and a spirit, that impels  
 All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
 And rolls through all things. (95-103)

Many critics discuss this “presence” as “the mysterious ‘powers’ of nature”<sup>28</sup>, but Wordsworth indicates that this “presence” is something that is “far more deeply interfused,” which dwells in everything, even the mind of man. It is easy to presume that this “sense” of “something” is “far more deeply interfused” than nature; however, Wordsworth’s diction is ambiguous here, as William Empson explored in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. Empson observes that “It is reasonable, then, to try to extract from this passage definite opinions on the relations of God, man, and nature, and on the means by which such relations can be known.” However, there are “several points of difficulty in the grammar when one tries to do this.” And Empson concludes that one cannot be “certain what is ‘more deeply interfused’ than what.”<sup>29</sup>

Wordsworth remains obscure about this “motion” and “spirit”; even as he evokes its “presence” in a mimetically spacious blank verse, he implies that whatever it is about nature that makes it great is also found in the mind of man, and that the mind and nature are inextricably connected through this experience of a “sense sublime.” After describing this “sense” of “something far more deeply interfused,” Wordsworth goes on to say that although he will never be able to look on nature with the sensuous enjoyment and entertainment that he did as a youth, he is “still / A lover of the meadows and the woods, / And mountains” (103-105) and all aspects of nature because nature is what facilitates a connection between man and a “sense sublime.” The adverb “still” is a giveaway; if he is “still” a lover of nature, it shows that he has discovered that nature is not everything. He still loves it,

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<sup>28</sup> McKusick 68

<sup>29</sup> William Empson. *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. 1930. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961.

but his own imagination is as important, and he can bring himself closer to that “presence” that disturbs him with the “joy of elevated thoughts” by recollection of past experiences. Thus, nature becomes something other than beauty and joy or even entertainment; it becomes a sounding board for memory and a mirror for the reflection of more elevated thought.

Ultimately, *Tintern Abbey* is a poem about how a greater knowledge and understanding becomes “Abundant recompense” (89) for the loss of youthful pleasures and a restless turbulence of feeling that includes a “passion” (78) for the natural world. Wordsworth is a poet who values human ecology and humanity’s relationship with nature because he sees that understanding nature brings a perspective to humanity and suffering, and an understanding of “something far more deeply interfused” (97), a means of alleviating the “burthen of the mystery” (39) and making enduring the “heavy and the weary weight / Of all this unintelligible world” (40-41). For Wordsworth, there will always be a gap between the human and the natural.

Alongside Wordsworth’s contributions to the eco-Romantic field of literature, Coleridge’s involvement must also be examined. Nicknamed the “cosmic ecologist”<sup>30</sup>, Coleridge contributed greatly to the awareness of human ecology and man’s role in nature. Many ecocritics suggest that his contributions to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth and Coleridge’s joint collaboration, reflect his “engagement

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<sup>30</sup> McKusick calls Coleridge the “cosmic ecologist” (vi) based on M. H. Abrams’s examination of Coleridge’s cosmic ecological philosophies in *The Correspondent Breeze: Essays on English Romanticism*. New York: Norton, 1984. 216-222.

with the integrity of the natural world, and his concern for its preservation.”<sup>31</sup> Many of Coleridge’s early poems, such as “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” “The Nightingale,” “Frost at Midnight” and “The Eolian Harp,” represent an ecological attitude in Coleridge’s early philosophy. Some argue that Coleridge’s philosophy changed as he matured and eventually rejected Wordsworth’s ecological and pantheistic view of nature and humanity. According to Karl Kroeber, “at the height of his intimacy with Wordsworth, Coleridge composed poems as ecologically oriented as his friend’s.” However, Kroeber asserts that in later years “Coleridge went on to devote major energies of his long intellectual career to defending a transcendental vision of divinity hostile to romantic proto-ecological nature poetry.”<sup>32</sup> But an evaluation of Coleridge’s later works as hostile to proto-ecological nature poetry is an extreme view that is not necessarily well-grounded. Certainly Coleridge’s philosophical viewpoint changed and matured; but rather than reject Wordsworth (although the two did fall out and later reconcile) and an ecological philosophy of nature, Coleridge’s philosophies broadened and his intellectual investigation came to include issues that reach beyond, without excluding, nature, just as Wordsworth’s did. Abrams’s designation of Coleridge as the “cosmic ecologist” derives from his evaluation of the poet’s later work, *The Statesman’s Manual* (1816), in which Abrams observes that Appendix C of the *Manual* incorporates contemporary scientific and especially biological discoveries. Coleridge is concerned here with how he contemplates “a single tree or flower, or meditate[s] on vegetation throughout the world, as one of the great organs of the life

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<sup>31</sup> McKusick 44

<sup>32</sup> Kroeber *Ecological* 67

of nature” (72). In the passage Coleridge describes what Abrams identifies as the process of photosynthesis and how a plant contributes to the “spiral scheme of evolving and correspondent nature . . . the evolutionary process.”<sup>33</sup> Identifying Coleridge as the cosmic ecologist because the Romantic poet sees living and non-living things as contributing to a higher system of cosmic ecology, Abrams writes:

The passage makes it evident that Coleridge’s myth of concern envisions all existing things, from the inorganic through the human, as participants in a single system of cosmic ecology. Man, whatever more he may be, is consubstantial, interdependent, and in communication with the nature of which he is the product. By having achieved self-consciousness, Coleridge says, man ‘has the whole world in counterpoint to him, but he contains an entire world within himself. Now, for the first time at the apex of the living pyramid, it is Man and Nature, but Man himself is a syllepsis, a compendium of Nature—the Microcosm!’<sup>34</sup>

This idea of a cosmic ecological system does not imply that Coleridge abandoned nature or devalued romantic proto-ecological philosophies, but rather that he sought to develop them and incorporate the discrepancies between nature and man. Abrams says that Coleridge’s cosmic ecology is not an isolated philosophy: “With whatever differences, this sense of a cosmic ecology of nature, man and mind is shared by all Romantic visionaries, Christian or non-Christian, from Schelling and Coleridge to D. H. Lawrence and Dylan Thomas.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Abrams *Correspondent* 220

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 221-22

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* 222



If Kroeber's idea that Coleridge abandoned nature and ecology in his later career is disputable, he would seem to be on surer grounds when he finds "The Nightingale" to be one of the poet's most ecologically minded poems. Kroeber says that it "stands in contrast to Coleridge's usual un-Wordsworthian insistence that the One Life within us and abroad originates entirely within the divine human soul, not in an interactive dialogue between man and nature" and that "his discomfort with his overt Wordsworthianism of 'The Nightingale' probably helps to explain his derogation of the poem when he sent it to his friend."<sup>36</sup> But establishing the valuation of the poem on its ecological and natural awareness demonstrates a two-dimensional perspective that overlooks the most important qualities of Wordsworth's and Coleridge's poetry—their poetic observations of joy mingled with sadness, knowledge leading to uncertainty, and contradiction in all things. "The Nightingale," subtitled "A Conversation Poem" engages in dialogue with Wordsworth, even as it appears to espouse a Wordsworthian trust in Nature. It turns its scorn on those who sentimentally project their unhappiness on to nature, but it also concedes or celebrates, through the brilliant self-awareness of its figurative energies and imaginative fictions, the existence of what it calls "something more than Nature" (73). Statements such as: "In nature there is nothing melancholy" (15) and "Nature's sweet voices, always full of love / And joyance!" (42-43), reduce and even ignore the contradictory issues close to the heart of Romantic literature and ecocriticism, but the poet's consciousness of his own activity, evident in the final

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<sup>36</sup> Kroeber *Ecological* 75

allusion to *Twelfth Night*<sup>37</sup> brings out the potentially unstable role of the imagination in assigning value and meaning to the natural world.

Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight," more insightfully contemplates the physical and spiritual interchange between humanity and nature. Unlike nature in "The Nightingale," which nurtures freely and brings pure joy, nature in "Frost at Midnight" creates a silent, calm solitude that "vexes meditation" (9) and invokes dreams and "Abstruser musings" (6) inspired by imagination. A comparison of the two poems illustrates differing levels of interaction with nature. "The Nightingale" urges people and poets alike to abandon self-reflection and conceit in order to share in Nature's immortality and calming influence. But in contrast, "Frost at Midnight" exemplifies a different communication with nature in which the stillness and silence of Nature become a catalyst for the poet's own thoughts, memories and imagination which inspire and encourage musings of a higher, more complex and mysterious character. It must also be said that the poem's complexities go beyond exemplifying a communication with nature. In addition to being read ecologically, "Frost at Midnight" can be and has been read historically and politically as well as in context and mutual allusion with Wordsworth's poetry. Paul Magnuson, in *Reading Public Romanticism*, makes the point that the poem is "not exclusively the creation of private circumstances of private meditation," but also carries within its complex nature "the testimony of a public figure" concerning political issues of the time.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, Lucy Newlyn gives a sophisticated reading of "Frost at Midnight" as

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<sup>37</sup> Compare Coleridge's "That strain again!" (90) with Shakespeare's "That strain again, it had a dying fall." (*Twelfth Night* I.i.4).

<sup>38</sup> Paul Magnuson. *Reading Public Romanticism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998. 84-85.

correspondent and interactive with Wordsworth's "The Pedlar" through the two poets' allusions to each other as well as their incorporation and modifications of ideas and lines. Newlyn discusses "Frost at Midnight" as having complexities that include a sense of "insecurity" and "vulnerab[ility]" that draw the focus on the relationship between Coleridge and Hartley rather than the natural scene, which becomes a backdrop for the father-son relationship.<sup>39</sup>

### III.

Richard Gravil, in *Romantic Dialogues*, discusses the influence of the English Romantics on authors such as Cooper, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Melville, Hawthorne, and Poe and emphasises that the "English Romantics are without doubt the instrumental precursors for all the American writers" mentioned. Gravil goes on to compare the American version of Romanticism to the vision of the English Romantics:

I read American Romanticism as a sustained effort to restate Romanticism in American terms, redeemed from the tentativeness, the doubt, the indirections, the failures and the compromises, of their English precursors, or to fulfil in America what was only promised in England.<sup>40</sup>

Gravil gives three plausible reasons why American authors in the Age of Emerson took to English Romanticism: first, "it was one way of avoiding Augustan gentilities, without falling into Victorian ones"; second, "whatever one may think

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<sup>39</sup> Lucy Newlyn. *Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Literary Allusion*. 1986. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. 38.

<sup>40</sup> Richard Gravil. *Romantic Dialogues: Anglo-American Continuities 1776-1862*. Houndmills: Macmillan, 2000. xvii.

about Romantic ideologies, Romanticism represented adherence to a literary program contiguous with what might be termed England's abortive republican renaissance . . ." which "was itself inspired by America's example"; and last, "it affirmed what Robert Weisbuch calls American 'actualism' (the realization of what others merely dream) in another way."<sup>41</sup>

Emerson's comprehensive study of the English Romantic authors is well-documented by many historians and literary critics including James McKusick, Richard Gravil, Robert Weisbuch, F. O. Matthiessen, Lance Newman, and others. His response to Coleridge is especially significant, as McKusick brings out:

Emerson's *Nature* presents . . . [an] understanding of "Commodity," grounded in an ecological understanding of the relationship between humankind and the natural world. This ecological worldview was derived in large part from Emerson's acquaintance with, and critical response to, the writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge.<sup>42</sup>

McKusick notes that in Emerson's first chapter of *Nature*, he expands Coleridge's concepts of the Primary and Secondary Imagination, and puts forward his own definition of Imagination as a poet's ability to translate the objects of nature into meaning through Reason. Importantly, Emerson also emphasises the Coleridgean idea that one who truly understands nature is able to retain the spirit of infancy into adulthood—a concept that also directly relates to Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid. xvi-xvii

<sup>42</sup> McKusick 116

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 116-17

Emerson's articulation of what Wordsworth and Coleridge<sup>44</sup> surmised about the interconnectedness of all things—their Romantic version of a Great Chain of Being—is seminal in the repercussions it has had on American Romantic and eco-Romantic literature. It is often noted by McKusick and other eco-Romantic critics that Emerson's image in *Nature* (published in 1836) of the chain that binds all things together anticipated Darwin's theory of evolution as published in *Origin of Species* in 1859. Emerson's epigraph for the 1849 edition of *Nature* illustrates the concept of evolution: "And, striving to be man, the worm / Mounts through all the spires of form."<sup>45</sup> McKusick notes that Emerson had a "conception of the entire terrestrial globe as a complex dynamic ecosystem" and he quotes from "Commodity," the second chapter of *Nature*, as an example:

Nature, in its ministry to man, is not only the material, but is also the process and the result. All the parts incessantly work into each other's hands for the profit of man. The wind sows the seed; the sun evaporates the sea; the wind blows the vapor to the field; the ice, on the other side of the planet, condenses rain on this; the rain feeds the plant; the plant feeds the animal; and thus the endless circulations of the divine charity nourish man.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Keats and Shelley are also often credited as influencing American Romanticism, and even eco-Romanticism, although not as heavily as Wordsworth and Coleridge. In fact, to be more precise, Keats and Shelley reiterated and even revised Wordsworth's and Coleridge's concepts of nature and ecology. See, for example, Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," which is in part an answer to Coleridge's "The Nightingale." Undoubtedly Emerson and Thoreau were familiar with the works of the younger English Romantics.

<sup>45</sup> Emerson *Nature* 259-84

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* 40-41

The concepts expressed articulate not only a scientific understanding of the water cycle, but also the food chain, and foreshadow contemporary ecological poetry and literature. Emerson's Great Chain of Being, his articulation of the interconnectedness of all things, finds new life in the poetic musings of Snyder, whose contemplation of the food chain and its delineation of humanity's place within the natural cycle of energy exchange is expressed in poems such as "Song of the Taste," which will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

But in a way that recalls Wordsworth's observation that there is a "presence," "something far more deeply interfused" that goes beyond nature and exists both in nature and the mind of man and connects the two as part of something greater, Emerson recognised the simultaneous separation and connection of the human mind and nature and considers, in *Nature*, the potential of a harmony of the two:

The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. . . . Yet it is certain that the power to produce this delight, does not reside in nature, but in man, or in a harmony of both.<sup>47</sup>

Emerson's twisting syntax, with its use of 'Yet' and 'but' and qualifying phrases, shows him revolving various possibilities. Even as he recognised the glorious possibility of delight in the "relation between man and the vegetable," he also recognised the simultaneous separation from mankind that inevitably results from a deeper connection with the natural world:

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 39

To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society. I am not solitary whilst I read and write, though nobody is with me. But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars. The rays that come from those heavenly worlds will separate between him and what he touches.<sup>48</sup>

Emerson created a philosophical viewpoint that brought intellectual credit to a more practical interaction with nature and paved the way for Thoreau's lifelong experiments. Emerson's emphasis on ignoring past theories and histories about nature, and instead relying on personal experience and interaction with nature to inspire individual understanding undoubtedly had an impact on Thoreau's experiments, works and ideas. Whatever Emerson's influence has been on subsequent American nature writing, he has not received the attention from ecocritics that his successor has. This is because Emerson's role as philosopher, although important in ecocriticism, is secondary to the role of practitioner, a role which Thoreau revolutionised.

Much has been studied and written concerning the intellectual relationship, contrasts and similarities, and works of these two authors. Emerson and Thoreau had differing approaches to how humanity might best interact with and benefit from nature. Ultimately, both men saw that a holistic relationship with nature (which Emerson roughly identifies in his introduction to *Nature* as anything that is external to ourselves) was the means by which mankind could obtain a more harmonious existence. Thoreau, in Lawrence Buell's word, was a "local Renaissance man"—he

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 37

had skills as a carpenter, gardener, woodsman, land surveyor and even pencil-maker that awed Emerson “especially given his literary and intellectual gifts.”<sup>49</sup> Thoreau’s acquisition of comprehensive, rather than specialized, knowledge is an attribute that sets him apart from other intellectuals both in his time and throughout the history of literature and ecology. He sought to embody Emerson’s (and Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s) idea of the interconnectedness of all things and was yet able to articulate the contradiction and uncertainty of seeking such a connection. Thus his knowledge was based on theory and practice—an integration of philosophy, science and practical application, which is ultimately what contemporary ecological scientists, environmentalists, and eco-Romantics value highly and seek to achieve.

James McKusick says that Thoreau “possessed a clear and unrivaled understanding of the ecosystem concept”<sup>50</sup>, and Jonathan Bate describes Thoreau’s writing thus: “the whole project of his writing might be summed up as an attempt to develop a human economy that is responsive and responsible in its relationship with the economy of nature.”<sup>51</sup> “His decision to live alone in nature” is described by Lance Newman as being “part of a broad flowering of ideological experimentation” in which “he imagined a redemptive relationship between people and nature according to the figure of an individual alone in the woods.”<sup>52</sup>

Thoreau’s experiment on Walden Pond illustrates much of his ideas about economy and the debilitating consequences of extravagance:

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<sup>49</sup> Lawrence Buell. *Emerson*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003. 300.

<sup>50</sup> McKusick 139

<sup>51</sup> Bate *Romantic* 39

<sup>52</sup> Lance Newman, *Our Common Dwelling: Henry Thoreau, Transcendentalism, and the Class Politics of Nature*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005. 189.



Most of the luxuries, and many of the so called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind. With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meager life than the poor. . . . None can be an impartial or wise observer of human life but from the vantage ground of what *we* should call voluntary poverty.<sup>53</sup>

According to Thoreau, those who are the “most terribly impoverished class of all” are those “seemingly wealthy . . . who have accumulated dross, but know not how to use it, or get rid of it, and thus have forged their own golden or silver fetters.”<sup>54</sup> A withdrawal to the woods was Thoreau’s prescribed cure for the self-forged manacles of excess and extravagance.

Thoreau’s ideas and approaches to Nature are ultimately issues of economic, cultural, and political concern. Thoreau understood that social and political change is rooted in individual understanding and responsibility because the individual is a microcosm of the universal—ultimately an ecological concept. His experiment in the woods was a micro-community comprised of one human being and many trees, plants and animals living together, and was conducted in part to discover whether mankind could live in a truly integrated state of community and communion with nature. It is not surprising, then, that contemporary ecologists also emphasise that the “cornerstone of ecologism is community.”<sup>55</sup> Interestingly, Thoreau incorporates several instances of contradiction and disjunction within his “integrated” natural

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<sup>53</sup> Henry David Thoreau. *Walden and Other Writings*. Ed. Joseph Wood Krutch. New York: Bantam, 1981. Bantam Classics. 115.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* 117

<sup>55</sup> Buell *Environmental* 388

community. In *The Machine in the Garden*, Leo Marx identifies Thoreau's mention and even glad incorporation of the railway into the Walden scenery as one such incongruity and asserts that Thoreau is aware that his idea of a truly integrated community of humans in harmony with nature is a mythical dream:

The point becomes explicit in a thought that Thoreau repeats like a refrain: "If all were as it seems, and men made the elements their servants for noble ends!" . . . The contrast embodies both the hope and the fear aroused by the impending climax of America's encounter with wild nature.<sup>56</sup>

Garrard summarises Marx's evaluation of Thoreau's train as returning "pastoral hope to its classical origins, as a witty and learned literary game" for "the machine is reality and the future, and pastoral merely a myth about history."<sup>57</sup> We know that "Later ecocritics would find fault both with this [Marx's] reading of Thoreau and the confident simplicity of the analytical dichotomy applied to it"<sup>58</sup>; yet Marx's observation that Thoreau's contrast "embodies both . . . hope and . . . fear" is significant and valuable as a convincing relevant evaluation of the sometimes harsh reality of Thoreau's lament over the discrepancy between what is and what might have been, or, as Wordsworth puts it: "What man has made of man."

Thoreau built his ideas upon a concept of community based on human and natural interdependence and experimented with and applied his theories in his own life. This self-discipline and practical application in everyday living are

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<sup>56</sup> Marx 251

<sup>57</sup> Greg Garrard. *Ecocriticism*. 2004. Ed. John Drakakis. London: Routledge, 2007. *The New Critical Idiom*. 50.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* 51

characteristics that link Snyder with Thoreau as his modern-day heir of deliberate living.

Ironically, critics often suggest that Thoreau was anti-social by withdrawing himself out of the community upon his experiment at Walden Pond, and that his writing is too personal and egocentric to benefit the vast public.<sup>59</sup> This is a difficult and contradictory issue. Because his journals and publications contain much of his personality and private musings, Thoreau becomes more valuable and more accessible to his readers, who find a personal connection to his ideas. This accusation of becoming a poet/prophet of nature rather than a poet/prophet for the people is an echo of similar accusations against Wordsworth. Lance Newman's exploration of the "class politics of nature" addresses this contradiction with the incorporation of an anonymous review written "during the long years of [Wordsworth's] neglect":

Wordsworth modeled a new principle of civic peace [and] democratic sympathy. . . . It was precisely his lifelong association with nature that guaranteed Wordsworth's ability to feel 'the purer and nobler sentiments of the heart' together with the common people. Because of this ability he "is emphatically a poet of liberty, not by passionate invocations to popular enthusiasm, but by calm and beautiful appeals to those manly qualities, those chastening virtues and noble sentiments, which are perhaps more often found in the cottage than in the halls of opulence."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Kroeber "Ecology" 314

<sup>60</sup> Lance Newman. *Our Common Dwelling: Henry Thoreau, Transcendentalism, and the Class Politics of Nature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 79-80.

In the same way that Wordsworth withdrew from civilization in order that he might feel more profoundly the “purer and nobler sentiments of the heart,” so Thoreau retreated to the woods that he could live more “deliberately,” as his famous edict declared.

If Wordsworth is considered one of the first inventors of human ecology, and the principal instigator of eco-Romanticism with all its complexities, his dominant heir is Thoreau. Jonathan Bate describes him as occupying “the central place in a study of the Romantic ecology in the United States.”<sup>61</sup> Lance Newman identifies Wordsworth as “the starting point of the ecocritical narrative in which a countercultural tradition of nature-love crosses the Atlantic to sink its firmest roots in America”<sup>62</sup> and also names Thoreau as “one young New Englander who enthusiastically emulated Wordsworth’s persona and poetics.”<sup>63</sup> In his chapter from *Our Common Dwelling* on the interrelation between Wordsworth and Thoreau<sup>64</sup>, Newman traces Thoreau’s interest and study of Wordsworth and compares the two authors’ crowning achievements, *The Prelude*<sup>65</sup> and *Walden*. Newman concludes

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<sup>61</sup> Bate *Romantic* 39

<sup>62</sup> Newman 192

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 83

<sup>64</sup> See Newman’s *Our Common Dwelling*, Chapter Eight: “Wordsworth, Thoreau, and Poetry of Nature,” 83-95.

<sup>65</sup> In most quotations in this dissertation, I have chosen to refer to and quote from the 1805 version of *The Prelude* due to its tendency to preserve “the poem’s more radical statements of the divine sufficiency of the human mind in its interchange with Nature” which were so “conspicuously . . . toned down” in the 1850 version, as Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams and Stephen Gill assert in their introduction as editors to *The Prelude: The Four Texts (1798, 1799, 1805, 1850)*. New York: Norton, 1979. Norton Critical Editions. xii. If Snyder had read *The Prelude* in the early years of his life and poetic development (pre 1978), it likely would have been the 1850 version. He nevertheless tells Ekbert Faas in an interview published in 1978 that he “can’t even read Wordsworth,” adding “I really can’t read him. I find it

that Thoreau read *The Prelude* just before rewriting *Walden*, and that the “rewritten book recapitulates the structure of a Wordsworthian lyric poem, building from a recollected experience to a crescendo of wisdom.”<sup>66</sup>

#### IV.

Undoubtedly, Wordsworth and Thoreau, through an intricate, trans-Atlantic distillation and communication of ideas, stand at the foundation of a powerful eco-Romantic movement in which some of the best thinkers of the past two centuries have sought to integrate the existence of mankind with nature, not to the devaluation of mankind, but rather to the elevation of human thought and understanding. It is within their tradition that Snyder’s new eco-Romantic poetry lies and upon which Snyder builds and reworks a renewed pastoral that continues the dialogue of the relationship and connection—or lack of connection—between humanity and nature.

Terry Gifford, in an attempt to approach the pastoral aspect of twentieth-century ecopoetics, identified a “need for a term that characterises literature that transcends the closed circle of the pastoral and anti-pastoral modes.” Calling his term *post-pastoral*, Gifford explains that it works

. . . to characterize literature, like the best of Gary Snyder’s poetry, that avoids the traps both of idealization of the pastoral and of the simple

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tiresome. It’s just tiresome” (Faas 124). Such an observation would seem to undercut my premise that Wordsworth had such influence on Snyder; however, I maintain and intend to demonstrate throughout my thesis that Wordsworth’s and his Romantic contemporaries’ influence on Snyder is not only by direct reading, but also through a long lineage of literary influence that is sometimes winding and digressive.

<sup>66</sup> Newman 95

corrective of the anti-pastoral. Thus post-pastoral is not necessarily postmodern. The heart of Blake's work is post-pastoral . . ."<sup>67</sup>

Gifford details his definition of post-pastoral poetry through a set of questions that the poetry must raise for the reader. But ultimately, what Gifford attempts to tease out in his idea of the post-pastoral and its "difficult questions of our time"<sup>68</sup> is an ability to encompass the contradiction necessary for ecological poetry to be authentic rather than "corrective" or idealistic. Gifford finds in both Blake and Snyder this capacity for opposing elements of the pastoral, and draws parallels and similarities between the two poets. Of Blake, Gifford observes:

Blake's "Marriage of Heaven and Hell" attempted to provocatively ("by the infernal method of corrosives") cleanse "the doors of perception" in order to be able to celebrate the "infinite" in everything, even in the predators—the serpent and the tiger—so that the "fearful symmetry" of a creative-destructive universe could be accepted within the self. It is not only with breathtaking awe, but with "fearful" respect for the implications that Blake asks of the tiger, "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?"<sup>69</sup>

Gifford finds the same sentiment and appreciation for the "creative-destructive universe" in the poetry of Snyder:

In the 1955 poem "Milton by Firelight" Snyder is happy to accept a universe without Christian purpose and to put his faith in the material reality of

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<sup>67</sup> Terry Gifford. "Gary Snyder and the Post-Pastoral." *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction*. Ed. J. Scott Bryson. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2002. 78.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* 85

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* 81

creative-destructive “weathering” and the flux of nature represented by the sky: “No paradise, no fall, / Only the weathering land, / The wheeling sky.”<sup>70</sup>

What Gifford sees as the “difficult questions of our time,” are the same questions that the Romantics have been asking all along, and Gifford’s qualifying statement that the “post-pastoral is not necessarily postmodern” is at the heart of my own observations about Snyder’s eco-Romantic heritage and tradition. These six difficult questions that characterise a post-pastoral poem, according to Gifford, are:

- 1- Can a poet “gain the humility that comes from awe”?<sup>71</sup>
- 2- “What are the implications of recognizing the creative-destructive cycles of the universe of which we are a part?”
- 3- “If it is the case that our inner lives echo the ebbs and flows of growth and decay in the natural world around us, how can we learn to understand the inner by being closer to the outer?”
- 4- “If we all live in one ecosystem of diverse cultures, isn’t nature culture and culture nature?”
- 5- “If our evolved consciousness gives us conscience, how should we exercise our responsibilities toward our material home?”
- 6- “How can we best address the issue that . . . our exploitation of our environment has emerged from the same mind-set as our exploitation of each other?”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> I find this to be a reincarnation of the old Romantic differentiation between the beautiful and the sublime.

Ultimately, these questions are a reincarnation of the issues, ideas and questions that the Romantic poets explored two hundred years ago. Humility sprung from awe seems to be an updated version of the Romantic sublime. Gifford himself refers to Blake in illustrating the implications of recognising one's part in a creative-destructive universe, and in his concluding arguments states that "The advantage of placing Snyder's work within the broader frame of post-pastoral literature is to see its continuities back to Blake and across to the prose of John Muir."<sup>73</sup> As an association of the inner lives of human beings and the processes of the natural external world, ecological poets explore the relationship between men and their connection to land. Wordsworth, perhaps more than any other poet, explores this interrelation in poems such as *Michael*. This Wordsworthian awareness of the connection between people and their landscape, and even man's place as a participant within his natural environment, serves as Gifford's illustration of his fourth post-pastoral question which addresses the association of nature and culture—the "Mind" of man as "fitted" (1009) "to the external world" (1008) just as "The external world is fitted to the mind" (1011) in *Home at Grasmere*.

Gifford's fifth post-pastoral question addresses the implications of scientific advancement and increased knowledge over time. But the idea of poet and scientist working together with a common purpose of discovery and knowledge was a concept not uncommon in the Romantic era, as Tim Fulford describes:

They were not poles apart in the 1790s: in those years of political revolution a revolution in knowledge also seemed possible. Poets and natural

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<sup>72</sup> Gifford 80-84

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. 85



philosophers thought they were lifting the veil that covered the workings of nature. They made common cause: poets would give new insight into human nature; men of science would reveal the processes of physical nature. Their methods were different, their goal the same. . . . This was the project of Romantic science as conceived by poets including Shelley and Erasmus Darwin and by experimentalists including Joseph Priestly and Humphry Davy.<sup>74</sup>

Gifford's sixth characteristic question of post-pastoral poetry, concerning the exploitation of both men and man's environment, is a subject that the post-pastoral poet's Romantic predecessors also took seriously and focused a great deal of literary energy toward. Wordsworth decried the injustices that the poor and uneducated were compelled to endure. In a letter to Charles James Fox dated 14 January 1801 Wordsworth mentioned his poems "The Brothers" and "Michael" as two poems which exemplify this ideal: "You have felt that the most sacred of all property is the property of the Poor. The two poems I have mentioned were written with a view to shew that men who do not wear fine cloaths can feel deeply."<sup>75</sup>

Snyder's poetic career can be seen as an exploration of the relevance of post-pastoral poetry in modern America. Chapter Two, then, turns to this subject with a discussion of Snyder as an heir to, and innovator upon, the Romantic pastoral tradition.

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<sup>74</sup> Tim Fulford. "Science." *Romanticism: An Oxford Guide*. Ed. Nicholas Roe. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. 90-101. 90.

<sup>75</sup> William Wordsworth. *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*. 6 vols. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Ed. Ernest De Selincourt. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967.

## Chapter Two: Snyder's Twentieth-Century Eco-Romanticism

Snyder writes about nature to articulate the interconnectedness of all things and particularly, the integration and interpenetration of the imagination with the natural world; yet his work articulates, too, the double vision of the Romantic and modern pastoral, including the disjunction that competes with and accompanies any vision of interconnectedness. Greg Garrard's critical but positive assessment of Snyder's poetic accomplishment is relevant here:

Much of Snyder's poetry is marred by earnest ecopieties and hectoring propaganda ("For the Children", "Mother Earth: Her Whales", "Front Lines", "Control Burn"), but his adapted translations of Oriental poems are vivid, spare and brilliant, and his own poetry, at best, is rescued by playful eroticism, sharp humour, beautiful language and a degree of self-deprecation. Snyder's youthful experiences of working as a logger, and contact with socialists as well as Buddhists and Native Americans, give his writings a breadth of reference and sensitivity to people's social and material needs that is unusual amongst wilderness writers.<sup>1</sup>

It is Snyder's varied life experiences, with their "breadth of reference and sensitivity to people's social and material needs," that give his poetry a perspective that is more accessible to the general reader. Snyder's poetry best succeeds in distilling his ecological message when he is able to subdue overly "earnest ecopieties" in favour of "a degree of self-deprecation" and sensitivity to the needs of his readers.

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<sup>1</sup> Garrard 82

Snyder's poetic exploration of the mind bears out his assertion that "consciousness, mind, imagination, *and* language are fundamentally wild" (PIS 168). This concept of the human mind as a wild terrain, vast, often still to be explored and hardly understood, is illustrated by Snyder's use of the term "The Back Country," which for Snyder refers not only to its western American usage as a remote wilderness or terrain—untouched, wild and uninhabited by men—but also to his own idea of the unconscious mind as a back country that is equally remote, untouched and worthy of exploration. His collection of poems entitled *The Back Country* (1968)—the subject of this chapter's readings—is thus an exploration of the back country of the mind in conjunction with an exploration of nature's back countries, as well as an examination of the intersection of the wild—both in nature and the mind—and civilisation. Snyder's collection is divided into four sections<sup>2</sup>: "Far West," poems centred on the western mountainous United States where Snyder grew up; "Far East," poems centred on his experiences in Japan where he studied Zen Buddhism; "Kali," poems concerning his visit to India; and "Back," poems written about the West upon his return to the United States and composed in the light of a newly gained Eastern perspective. This arrangement and categorisation of poems based on location give emphasis to, and illustrate the value Snyder places on, setting in the dialogue he stages between the mind and nature.

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<sup>2</sup> The American publication of *The Back Country* includes a fifth section made up of Snyder's translations of the Japanese poet, Miyazawa Kenji. The British publication of *The Back Country* (London: Fulcrum Press, 1967) was published a year earlier than the American (New Directions, 1968) version, and does not contain the fifth section of translations, as they were previously published in the UK in *A Range of Poems* (Murphy *A Place* 87).

Although Snyder's poetry diverges from the traditions of his predecessors, particularly in its experimentations on form, its exploration of what Shelley calls "the human mind's imaginings" (*Mont Blanc* 143) owes much to Romantic precursors. As discussed in my introduction and throughout this dissertation, Snyder's connection to canonical Romantic poetics is often a subtle matter of influence in which the continuities are winding and varied in their links back to Romantic progenitors. The English Romantic tradition is mediated through other poets, such as Pound and Williams, who are often considered anti-, or counter-Romantic, but who, as Albert Gelpi argues, reveal that the relationship between Romanticism and Modernism is not necessarily a disconnection.<sup>3</sup> What is interesting about Snyder's poetry, in consideration of his Romantic tendencies, is not that he is an environmental or ecological poet, but how he approaches the shared theme of nature in ways that are innovative and unique, arguably, the essence of Romanticism.

Wallace Stevens's response to the Romantics is helpful as a guide to considering Snyder's poetic relationship with the Romantics. Like Snyder, Stevens is by no means a derivative imitator of his Romantic precursors and his trans-historical reaction to them is dialectical: a reaction formation that is Romantic itself. Consequently, although there is certainly no sense in which Stevens and Snyder ought to be considered as simply Romantic, there is in their poetry a reconfiguration of the Romantic. Stevens makes important observations about the regenerative nature of the "romantic," as in *Opus Posthumous*, where he explains:

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<sup>3</sup> See my discussion of Gelpi's *A Coherent Splendor* at the beginning of Chapter 3.

The romantic . . . has a way of renewing itself. It can be said of the romantic, just as it can be said of the imagination, that it can never effectively touch the same thing twice in the same way. It is partly because the romantic will not be what has been romantic in the past that it is preposterous to think of confining poetry hereafter to the revelation of reality. The whole effort of the imagination is toward the production of the romantic.<sup>4</sup>

In his “Adagia,” collected in *Opus Posthumous*, Stevens again addresses and contradicts the ideas of his contemporaries that Romanticism is dead and asserts once more that rather all poetry “is essentially romantic.” Stevens distinguishes between stale and new Romanticism and in doing so instigates a transformation of Romanticism:

It should be said about poetry that it is essentially romantic as if one were recognizing the truth about poetry for the first time. Although the romantic is referred to, most often, in a pejorative sense, this sense attaches, or should attach, not to the romantic in general but to some phase of the romantic that has become stale. Just as there is always a romantic that is potent, so there is always a romantic that is impotent.<sup>5</sup>

This transformation of Romanticism from “stale” to “potent” is explicated by George Bornstein, who relates the correspondence between Modernism and Romanticism and the aspects of modernist poetry which inhabit a “phase of the romantic” that is still relevant. Bornstein notes that Stevens “saw the necessity of

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<sup>4</sup> Wallace Stevens. *Opus Posthumous*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957. 215.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 180.

renewing romanticism and adapting it to modern times.”<sup>6</sup> In his early works Stevens creates an imitative Romanticism that “combines the old devices” of Romantic diction and imagery—such as “wind, star, moon, and domes of light”—“with a new spareness”<sup>7</sup> that distills into Snyder’s poetry as well. But Bornstein delineates a progression in Stevens’s poetry that becomes more potently Romantic as it rebels against the stale and dead elements of past Romanticisms. Stevens’s creation of poetry that explores the process of imagination and the mind’s interaction with itself and the external world is one aspect of his Romantic transformations that is highly relevant to a discussion of Snyder. As a self-proclaimed new and “potent” Romantic poet, Stevens, like Snyder, explored the role of the poet as “the priest of the invisible”<sup>8</sup> who is able to see things in the sense that he can see by means of contemplation, consideration and by hearing what only a poet could hear, see or understand through the imagination. Such use of the imagination, according to Stevens, indicates the presence of, and in a central sense, “is the romantic.”<sup>9</sup>

The social, economic and environmental impact of the industrial revolution served as a contributing catalyst to the Romantic revolution of ideas.<sup>10</sup> Although the cultural and environmental changes Snyder experienced and witnessed in the 1940s and 50s as his development into a poet began were not as drastic and unprecedented

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<sup>6</sup> George Bornstein. *Transformations of Romanticism in Yeats, Eliot and Stevens*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976. 163.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 167

<sup>8</sup> Stevens *Opus* 169

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 163

<sup>10</sup> For further discussion of the relationship between the industrial revolution and Romanticism, see James McKusick’s *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology*, or Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden*, which includes an exploration of the impact of the industrial revolution on American Transcendental Romantic poetics.

as the industrial revolution of the Romantic age, Snyder writes about how to bridge the disparity between humanity and nature in a cultural and physical environment that is the direct result—both as beneficiary and as casualty—of the industrial revolution. In his Preface to *No Nature* (1992), Snyder discusses this disparity as a difficulty for human beings to comprehend or even define what nature is:

Human societies each have their own nutty fads, mass delusions, and enabling mythologies. Daily life still gets done. Wild nature is probably equally goofy, with a stunning variety of creatures somehow getting by in all these landscapes. Nature also means the physical universe, including the urban, industrial, and toxic. But we do not easily *know* nature, or even know ourselves. Whatever it actually is, it will not fulfil our conceptions or assumptions. It will dodge our expectations and theoretical models. There is no single or set “nature” either as “the natural world” or “the nature of things.” The greatest respect we can pay to nature is not to trap it, but to acknowledge that it eludes us and that our own nature is also fluid, open, and conditional. (v)

Just as Wordsworth saw a discrepancy, or at least a contradiction, in calling for a complete communion between man and the natural world<sup>11</sup>, so Snyder sees the near impossibility of being able to understand nature or even ourselves; both are “fluid, open, and conditional.” Thus Snyder’s poetry must seek to acknowledge such contradictions and mediate between human perceptions of and approaches to the natural world without relying on superficial resolution. Charles Altieri’s essay on

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<sup>11</sup> See my discussion on “Lines Written in Early Spring” and “Michael” from Chapter One.

Snyder's lyric poetry, pertinently subtitled "Dialectic as Ecology," observes that discrepancy is what makes Snyder's poetry work:

In other words, the balanced elements each achieve their full significance, obtain their fullest life, only when seen as a dialectic unity. . . . Snyder's habit of loading his poem with detail is neither frivolous nor without artistic consideration, for the paradox of relationship is that it returns us to the particulars with a greater appreciation of them . . . <sup>12</sup>

Altieri suggests that this incorporation of dialectic is what gives Snyder's poetry value and significance, particularly in light of other ecological poetry:

One might even claim that Snyder is preeminent among the literary figures concerned with ecology because he has developed a state of balance and symbiotic interrelation between man and his environment. The characteristic poem in this style is thoroughly concrete and dramatic, but its drama does not involve the usual process of creating and intensifying conflicts that are eventually resolved. Rather the poem develops casually and depends not on tension between elements but on the mutual support they give one another on the way they draw out one another's full significance for the process of living. <sup>13</sup>

I agree with Altieri's judgements concerning Snyder's "preeminent" ability to develop a "state of balance . . . between man and his environment" through a dramatic interplay of "mutual support." But Snyder also plays with discord that does

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<sup>12</sup> Charles Altieri. "Gary Snyder's Lyric Poetry: Dialectic as Ecology." *Critical Essays on Gary Snyder*. Ed. Patrick D Murphy. Boston: G K Hall & Co., 1991. 50. *Critical Essays on American Literature*.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 48



create a slightly unbalanced tension in order to make his ecological point. In “Marin-An”<sup>14</sup>, from the “Far West” section of *The Back Country*, Snyder illustrates the discrepancy between humanity and nature in his distinct free verse approach. He begins with a description in the first stanza of an active image—a moment filled with action, rather than a still scene—in which his interaction with nature serves as exposition to the poem:

sun breaks over the eucalyptus  
grove below the wet pasture,  
water’s about hot,  
I sit in the open window  
& roll a smoke.

In the opening two lines Snyder illustrates the separation of man and nature by first describing the sun and the eucalyptus grove; elements of the poem that represent varying degrees of wildness since the sun is untouched by men and the grove, at the very least, is unploughed and at least partially wild. Then Snyder mentions the wet pasture—land that has been cleared and trained and groomed by some human hand—which presents a contrast to the untamed sun and apparently untended grove. In this opening, Snyder immediately creates a boundary between the wild and the cultivated land, and thus a boundary between man and nature. In the following three lines, this separation is furthered by drawing the focus from outdoors to indoors as the water, presumably heating on the stove, is “about hot” and most particularly as the poet sits smoking at the window which separates him from the outside world.

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<sup>14</sup> “Marin-An” is the name of the cabin that Snyder and Jack Kerouac shared in the spring of 1956. See Hunt 90.

The second stanza shifts to a perspective that reaches outward and increases in space and distance as the scene takes on auditory elements:

distant dogs bark, a pair of  
 cawing crows; the twang  
 of a pygmy nuthatch high in a pine—  
 from behind the cypress windrow  
 the mare moves up, grazing.

The lines draw the reader's perspective beyond the speaker's close physical presence to a larger view of a landscape that combines both wild and domestic elements. These elements are exemplified variously by the domesticity of the barking dogs and the wildness of the pygmy nuthatch who sits "high in a pine," elevated above the rest of the scene. Just as he does in the first stanza, Snyder takes care in the second stanza to emphasise a boundary and a separation between man's domestic habitat and a wild nature; he does so by noting the cypress windrow that serves as a dividing line behind which the tame "mare moves up, grazing." The mare is separated from the wild pygmy nuthatch by the windrow; she is also divided in the structure of the poem by the dash at the end of the third line, which demarcates the division between the wild and tame. Although Snyder emphasises boundaries, which could hint at or lead toward an explicit structure in the poem, he is careful not to create overt patterns through too much repetition. For instance, in the first three lines of this stanza, he puts one of the genitives—"of / cawing crows"—at the end of the line, but places the second genitive—"of a pygmy

nuthatch” at the beginning of the line. The effect undercuts any tendency to repeat syntactical and formal features.

Snyder’s third and final stanza pushes the poetic perspective further, this time past the edge of the given landscape and into a new landscape at “the far valley”:

a soft continuous roar  
 comes out of the far valley  
 of the six-lane highway—thousands  
 and thousands of cars  
 driving men to work.

The first two lines of the stanza can be misleading. The reader may initially infer, given Snyder’s previous description of a natural landscape filled with eucalyptus groves and mares grazing beyond the cypress windrows, that the “continuous roar” from the “far valley” may be a vast waterfall much like the falls described by William Carlos Williams in his epic poem *Paterson*.<sup>15</sup> Instead, the roar of the six-lane highway stands in deliberate discord with the wild and natural sounds of the “cawing crows” and the “twang / of a pygmy nuthatch.” His joke about men being driven to work by cars emphasises the contrast between the idea that technology and industrial development furnish men with greater freedom and control, and the fact that they can be forces that enslave. The idea of humanity’s enslavement to its own technologies echoes Shelley’s lament in *A Defence of Poetry* that “man, having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave” (696).

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<sup>15</sup> See Chapter Four for a further discussion of Williams and *Paterson*.

Yet just as Snyder emphasises the stark contradiction between humanity's world and the natural world, he also explores a marriage and a melding of the two through a subtle blurring of the boundaries that he has created to represent the separation between man and nature. Beginning with the description of the eucalyptus grove and the wet pasture, Snyder toys with varying degrees of wild and natural; the grove of eucalyptus trees has not been cleared for pasture and is in that respect untouched by man, but it is certainly not unexplored and was perhaps even planted by the valley's inhabitants. Although the poet is separated from the natural world in the first stanza by the window, he is connected to the natural world by the fact that the window is open, thus permitting elements of the natural world—the air, sunlight, sounds—to enter his home whilst also allowing the elements of the poet's home—the smoke and steam and so forth—to escape through the open window. The window, jokily half-rhyming with the cypress windrows, opens on to the natural world; a viewing point rather than a boundary.

The distinction between man and nature is also blurred in the second stanza as Snyder mingles elements of wildness and domesticity within the animals he describes. Dogs illustrate a particularly close relation to the human world as do horses, while crows are often carrion birds that thrive off of the waste and by-products of human civilisation and are even used and trained by men for hunting. Because of this dual status as wild and tame, the dogs, crows and mare in the poem serve as a bridge between humanity and nature. And although Snyder's final stanza presents a distinct separation of humanity's paved world of six-lane highways and cars and work from the natural world of sun and tree and bird, the "soft continuous

roar” of the highway, as previously mentioned, could easily be confused, upon initial reading of the first two lines of the stanza, with the roar of a waterfall or even a river.

In this blurring of boundaries and intermingling of man with nature, Snyder illustrates a characteristically Romantic dialectic. “Marin-An” particularly captures the difficulty of completely separating humanity from nature or achieving a complete marriage of the two. Instead, Snyder separates himself from other men by placing himself at the open window relaxing and smoking as the other men at the far end of the valley rush to work in a mindless commute. By separating himself from the rat race and the thousands of commuters on their way to work, Snyder sets himself apart as an individual who has managed to achieve a partial reconciliation with a natural life and as the contemporary Thoreauvian practitioner of that better way of life. In fact, his six-lane highway whose noise penetrates his blissful valley retreat is reminiscent of Thoreau’s railway which also infiltrated the serene natural environment at Walden. Leo Marx, in *The Machine in the Garden*, aptly discusses Thoreau’s struggle with the railroad as an intrusion upon the author’s pastoral ideal and the “Deep Cut” the railway embankment has made upon his otherwise pristine landscape. By Marx’s view, Thoreau comes to a reconciliation with the presence of the railway through an epiphany of imagination in which he sees, at the coming of spring and the thawing of winter, the railway embankment melt into something new. Marx’s observation about Thoreau’s redemptive vision affirms the power of human consciousness:

Countless Cross-Fertilizations: Gary Snyder as a Post-Romantic Poet

Although the sand remains mere sand, the warming influence of the sun causes it to assume forms like lava, leaves, vines, coral, leopards' paws, birds' feet, stalactites, blood vessels, brains, bowels, and excrement. It is a pageant evoking the birth of life out of inorganic matter. . . . Every detail confirms the endless creation of new forms. Out of winter's frost comes spring; out of an excrementous flow, newborn creatures; out of the landscape eroded by men and machines, these forms of the molten earth.<sup>16</sup>

Marx asserts that ultimately Thoreau “restores the pastoral hope to its traditional location,” which is not in history and time, but rather in literature and in the author's consciousness.<sup>17</sup> Thus reconciliation between man and nature is achieved through consciousness and the imagination and often entails at least a partial separation of the poet from the rest of society. Snyder's recurrent image—both in “Marin-An” and “Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout” (from *Riprap*, 1959)<sup>18</sup> as well as other poems—of a poet perched in his mountain lookout, observing the world and its inhabitants as they go by recalls strongly Thoreau's desire “not to live in this restless, nervous, bustling, trivial Nineteenth Century, but stand or sit thoughtfully while it goes by.”<sup>19</sup>

Snyder acknowledges that there may not be much hope for reuniting the whole of humanity with nature, but he demonstrates that as an individual a man can obtain at least a partial communion. It is not the joke about men being driven to work by cars and its condemnation of our modern technological slavery and

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<sup>16</sup> Marx 261

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 265

<sup>18</sup> This poem will be discussed in further detail in Chapter Six.

<sup>19</sup> Thoreau 363

destructive dependence on fossil fuels that makes this poem valuable ecologically; it is Snyder's illustration of what one could possibly have—peace and satisfaction in a life lived more fully in tune with the natural world of which human beings are a part—if one did abandon destructive modern conveniences and set out to live a simpler, more “deliberate” life, as Thoreau would call it. In “Marin-An” Snyder omits any overt comment or expression of emotion and therefore leaves room for the reader to wonder whether the poet feels a sadness for the enslaved and drudging masses or a smugness in the fact that he is not one of them. This potential smugness smacks of the egotism of the “egotistical sublime,” which Keats observed of Wordsworth. It is perhaps a self-centredness, when its accompanying sublimity goes unperceived, that could potentially alienate readers from Snyder's work.<sup>20</sup> Snyder acknowledges this conflict of separation—with no trace of smugness—in an entry from his “Lookout's Journal” in *Earth House Hold* (1969) dated 28 July 1952:

Down for a new radio, to Ross Lake, and back up. Three days walking. Strange how unmoved this place leaves one; neither articulate or worshipful; rather the pressing need to look within and adjust the mechanism of perception.

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<sup>20</sup> I refer to the “egotistical sublime” with caution and with the understanding that Keats was not merely damning Wordsworth for his egotism, but rather acknowledging the contradictory nature of the “egotistical sublime.” For however egotistical Wordsworth was, he also managed to express the sublime in his poetry. Perhaps the irony is that in order to obtain an element of sublime understanding, a poet must separate himself from the rest of humanity—an action that can certainly be deemed egotistical and self-centered, and yet is often necessary for poetic understanding. This idea of a poet's desire for both a separation from the rest of humanity and a deeper connection with humanity is further explored in chapters Three and Four.

A dead sharp-shinned hawk, blown by the wind against the  
lookout. Fierce compact little bird with a 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 nonhuman background? like Jeffers?)      (EHH 4)

In this passage Snyder explores the difficulty in finding inspiration from nature and the discrepancy in writing natural poetry for a potentially non-existent audience that is separated from nature by its humanistic self-awareness and self-absorption. But it is an immersion in the natural world that connects the human mind with nature, as Snyder observes, and urges one to “look within” and thus become more self-aware. For Snyder, there must be a balance between self-absorption and a complete rejection of human traits and characteristics, which must be found in a self-awareness that leads to a perception attuned to nature as well as man. Thus Snyder sees that he cannot reject human issues entirely, but that he must find a balance between “human events” and “a nonhuman background” and questions whether the “inhumanism” of the poetry of Robinson Jeffers is the means by which he can “articulate the vision poetry & nature” he seeks to embody in verse. This “inhumanism” in the poetry of Jeffers is articulated in a well-known—and



particularly controversial—line from his poem, “Hurt Hawks”<sup>21</sup>, which recounts an encounter the poet had with an injured hawk wherein the poet eventually kills the hawk out of mercy, saying, “I’d sooner, except the penalties, kill a man than a hawk” (18). One of the difficulties of Jeffers’s approach to expressing the ideas of “inhumanism” in his poetry is that Jeffers is guilty of a pathetic fallacy which, rather than actually representing the inhuman in nature, simply makes the inhuman human and the human inhumane. In “Hurt Hawks,” for example, the poet imbues the injured hawk with noble and courageous characteristics as he knowingly faces death: “He wandered over the foreland hill and returned in the evening, asking for death, / Not like a beggar, still eyed with the old / Implacable arrogance” (22-24). This preference for the non-human, often expressed in Jeffers’s poetry, creates an imbalance in its overreaction to the solipsism inherent in human consciousness and traditional poetics.

In Snyder’s poetry we can see that he has come to a rejection, at least in part, of Jeffers’s brand of inhumanism: rejection which Snyder expresses in the second stanza of “Word Basket Woman” where he underscores the value of humanity in its ecological environment and recognises the contradiction and discrepancy of attempting to abandon human characteristics, desires and feelings for a “cold” union with wild nature:

Robinson Jeffers, his tall cold view  
quite true in a way, but why did he say it  
as though he alone

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<sup>21</sup> Robinson Jeffers. *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*. Ed. Tim Hunt. 5 vols. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001. 1377.

stood above our delusions, he also  
 feared death, insignificance,  
 and was not quite up to the inhuman beauty  
 of parsnips or diapers, the deathless  
 nobility at the core of all ordinary things (NN 371)

These lines, in articulating what Snyder felt was lacking in Jeffers's poetry, also articulate the value Snyder places on a poet who is able to mediate between the ascetic and the prophet. Because Jeffers expressed a "tall cold view" . . . "as though he alone / stood above our delusions," he disqualified himself from speaking to and for his human community because they would not be able to relate to his view regardless of how "true in a way" he was. Snyder's poetic commentary on Jeffers also identifies another imbalance in Jeffers's poetic approach—his lack of attention to the worthy aspects of day-to-day human life and "the deathless / nobility at the core of all ordinary things." There is a sardonic undertone in Snyder's contention that Jeffers "was not quite up to the inhuman beauty / of parsnips or diapers," and Snyder sees that although Jeffers values the animal world, his vision beyond humanity still doesn't reach as far as an appreciation of the "inhuman beauty" of vegetables or the everyday business of living and care giving. Jeffers's value and regard seems to be withheld for only those animals and living things that are easily personified and imaginatively imbued with the traits that Jeffers values. This passage and its expressed concerns with Jeffers's ideas illustrate the sensitivity that Terry Gifford praises in Snyder's poetry and which Snyder feels Jeffers is lacking—rather than condemn humanity and elevate oneself apart from or above one's

readers, a poet must be able to recognise “inhuman beauty,” “deathless / nobility” and equality in everything.

For all his emphasis on a connection with nature, Snyder writes a great deal about people set apart from the natural world, or at least from the idealised classical pastoral world. It seems his focus—a focus of equal importance to writing about nature in Snyder’s work—is exploring the mind or rather the “human mind’s imaginings” with compassion to the plight of mankind in its poverty and lack as well as its often more tragic opulence and privilege. This twofold concentration is similar to the double vision underlying Stuart Curran’s discussion of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and the British Romantic reworking of the pastoral explored in Chapter One.

Snyder’s attention to the destruction and sadness inherent in human existence and the conflict in maintaining a connection with humanity as well as nature is demonstrated in “Circumambulating Arunachala,” from *The Back Country*. The title of the poem refers to the actual act of walking around Arunachala, the holy hill in Tamil Nadu, India, as a traditional means of meditation, self-enquiry and worship of the Hindu god Shiva.<sup>22</sup> Snyder poses two contrasting images and observations in the first two stanzas of the poem. The first is an observation of how the ascetics, or sadhus, on the holy mountain live:

for centuries sadhus live and die

in dolmen rock-slab huts near

Arunachala

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<sup>22</sup> According to Hindu tradition, the hill is considered to be an actual embodiment of Shiva.

The second stanza, in sharp contrast to the first, observes the non-ascetic life of the young girls who also live in the vicinity of Arunachala hill:

Small girls with gaudy flowers  
flash down the bare walk road,  
the weight, the power,  
the full warm brilliance of the human mind  
behind their eyes:  
they die or sicken in a year.

In his comparison between the sadhus—ascetics or yogis, presumably old men who have renounced a life in society and all its material and sexual (and/or physical) attachments in order to concentrate on their own spirituality through isolation and renunciation—and the small girls, Snyder addresses the question of whether one must choose between immersion within a human community or a communion with nature in order to experience enlightenment and understanding. His evaluation, although never explicitly articulated, is clearly implied in his descriptions.

On the surface Snyder's word-choice and sparse approach gives the reader a thumbnail and neutral history of the sacred hill and its ascetic inhabitants in the first stanza, but the underlying implication in the words is that of a living death. Snyder uses the word "dolmen," a term traditionally employed to describe ancient megalithic tombs, in reference to the dwelling-places of the Arunachala sadhus. But what Snyder leaves unsaid about the sadhus, and therefore assumes in his reader's understanding, is even more significant. Sadhus are considered dead unto themselves and to their former lives, and some, as an initiation, perform an

enactment of their own symbolic death with an accompanying funeral before beginning the life of a sadhu.<sup>23</sup> Thus, when Snyder says that they “live and die” in their huts at Arunachala, the sense of a living death is both literal and symbolic. In addition, there is a hint, in that first line, of a cyclic repetition of sadhus perpetually living and dying in their dolmen huts and being reborn again only to become sadhus once more, never obtaining *moksha*, the liberation from the cycle of death and reincarnation, which they seek. Snyder’s observation of these austere men (and sometimes women) and their meagre lifestyle is equally sparse; the poet gives no explicit judgment or evaluation of their approach to obtaining liberation.

In contrast, Snyder’s treatment of the “Small girls with gaudy flowers” gives the reader a clue as to where the poet places value. With words such as “flash,” “power” and “brilliance” Snyder lends emphasis and worth to the girls who live and quickly die in close proximity to Arunachala and its sadhus. These girls, who presumably pass between the sacred hill and the city<sup>24</sup> at its feet as they walk along the road where worshipers circumambulate Arunachala, are the ones who truly possess “the weight, the power, / the full warm brilliance of the human mind / behind their eyes.” It is important to note Snyder’s use of iambic pentameter in the line, “the full warm brilliance of the human mind,” imbuing the line with a subtle dignity. He also adds value and impact to the statement that continues from the iambic pentameter in the last three lines of the stanza—“ . . . of the human mind / behind their eyes: / they die or sicken in a year”—by supplying a pause-inducing

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<sup>23</sup> See the *New World Encyclopedia* article entitled “Sadhu and Swami” for further details.

<sup>24</sup> Thiruvannamalai

assonance in the repetition of the long *i* in “mind,” “behind,” “eyes” and “die.”

Another important aspect of Snyder’s description of these “Small girls” is his use of Wordsworthian words such as “flash” and “power,” which are found throughout Wordsworth’s oeuvre. These two words, among others, are often used by Wordsworth in his description of the human mind, as in his “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,” which demonstrates his theory and idea concerning the power of imagination and the composition of poetry:

For oft when on my couch I lie  
 In vacant or in pensive mood,  
 They flash upon that inward eye  
 Which is the bliss of solitude,           (13-16)

“Flash” and “power” are also significant words used by Wordsworth in his epiphanic “spots of time” passages in *The Prelude*, most significant of which is the Simplon Pass passage from Book VI in which the poet uses both the words “flash” (602) and “Power” (593) as he wonders at the might and weight of the human mind in his apostrophe to Imagination with phrases such as: “That awful Power rose from the mind’s abyss” (594) and “with a flash that has revealed / The invisible world, . . .” (601-02). Although the use of these words in “Circumambulating Arunachala” may not be from Snyder directly reading Wordsworth, it draws on a vocabulary of Romantic vision that has been passed down and eventually inherited by Snyder.

Because Snyder’s, and in many ways any ecological poet’s, preference for and attempt to embody a return to the pastoral is often in conflict with a contemporary culture based on consumerism and waste, he must create a new

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pastoral that mediates the gap between the two. In his presentation of the contrasting inhabitants of Arunachala, Snyder reworks the pastoral into a more authentic mode which incorporates a dual vision of “the full warm brilliance of the human mind” mingled with the inevitable tragedy of sickness, deprivation and death. The three sections of the poem illustrate three potential approaches to nature and society: the first section suggests a complete immersion in nature and isolation from society as exemplified by the sadhus who live near the hill in their “rock-slab huts”; the second section, or stanza, reveals a balance between human society and nature through the “Small girls” who navigate the “bare walk road” between Arunachala and the city below; and the third section, a reference to the temple of Arunachala and the teeming city below the sacred hill,—

Below the hill—  
wells, ponds, spiky trees,  
carvd fragments of soft bodies,  
female bellies,  
centuries old.

—serves as an illustration of city life with its manmade creations and constructed elements of nature (wells, ponds and spiky trees) which stand in contrast to the more wild and natural world.

Within these three sections of the poem Snyder experiments with contrasting elements of time. He begins and ends his poem with the passing centuries, and both the first and last stanzas describe enduring traditions and structures. But the substance of the poem lies within the second stanza where Snyder weighs these

lasting impersonal traditions against the fleeting and momentary lives of individual human beings, which he emphasises particularly with the word “flash.” This transition between contrasting senses of time—the impersonal expanse of hundreds of years juxtaposed with the sometimes tragic brevity of an individual human life—gives the poem a dual vision. Pastoral explores its generic possibilities in a poem that encompasses both the simplistic classical escape from society and the complicated, bitter-sweet reality of the human condition.

Snyder also acknowledges contradiction in himself and his American homeland with its European roots. Many of his poems recognise and explore the conflict and irony in the fact that he is, by definition, a “WASP” (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant), and therefore guilty by association of all the trespasses of his middle to upper-class demographic group. In his poem, “For the West,” from “Back,” the fourth and final section of *The Back Country*, Snyder plays with the dialectical discord within his genetic as well as his national heritage. The poem is divided into three numbered sections, the first of which acts as an invocation, addressing the mythological Phoenician princess Europa and thus her continental namesake by calling to her in the vocative in the opening lines:

Europa,  
     your red-haired  
     hazel-eyed  
     Thracian girls  
 your beautiful thighs  
 everlasting damnations



and grave insouciance—

Snyder's invocation of the muse begins his own updated pastoral elegy in which his lament is declared openly for the loss of a pastoral country life and culture—an elegy which forgoes even the pretence and convention of losing a great shepherd, poet or friend. By the end of the first stanza, with his accusation of Europe's "everlasting damnations" and hypocritical "grave insouciance," it is apparent that Snyder has not forgotten the satirical element of the pastoral elegy and its social critique. With his catalogue of complaints against Europe and western culture, his poem is primarily built upon this satirical aspect of the pastoral elegy. But by the end of the second short stanza, Snyder can no longer maintain this criticism without excess, and he tempers it with a self-conscious irony that gives the poem depth and makes Snyder's social critique cum pastoral elegy bearable. The fact that he knows he is a part of western culture and a product of the society that he criticises becomes the poem's redeeming element:

a woman's country,

even your fat little popes.

groin'd temples

groov'd canals

—me too, I see thru

these green eyes—

Although Snyder incorporates his trademark sporadic and unconventional style in this poem, his poetic subtleties are a touch more obvious and deliberate—less nuanced, perhaps, in keeping with his parody of the classical tradition and

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western culture. For example, he repeats easily discerned patterns in punctuation such as “red-haired / hazel-eyed” and “groin’d temples / groov’d canals.” Snyder also deliberately structures his short catalogue of European characteristics (and, within this perspective, faults) into a list, formulated with one trait per line like a shopping list or collection of bulleted items. He demonstrates the underlying intonation of religious and socio/racial hypocrisy within the poem—a duplicity which is ultimately the main object of his complaint against Europe—by juxtaposing contradictory words such as “everlasting damnations” and “grave insouciance.”

This first section of “For the West” also sets up a pattern for Snyder’s poem that follows Wordsworth’s Romantic pastoral pattern of progression from innocence to a fall and then to redemption. It is true that Snyder’s first section in “For the West” hardly represents innocence. However, the poem is written under the point of view or presumption that there was an element of innocence to the world that is now lost, having fallen and been pushed back or cornered at the hands of Europe and western culture, as is shown in the last stanza of the section with the enjambed lines: “what next? a farmer’s / corner of the planet—.” The idea of a corner of the planet designated for farmers is very suggestive of the reservations of land that the United States government allocated for Native American tribes who had been persecuted, slaughtered and driven out of their homelands by European settlers through centuries of violence and exploitation. The transition that the North American continent, and indeed the entire “New World” of North and South America, went through as it was settled and “civilised” by European explorers and conquerors

exemplifies a literal fall from the pastoral and environmental innocence of the cultures and societies originally native to America to its current state of near-complete loss and destruction at the hands of western civilisation. The farmer also becomes an updated substitute for or replacement of the shepherd, as the traditional symbol or human representative of the pastoral ideal. It is also worth commenting at this point on the metapoetic significance of the farmer, particularly in view of Snyder's considerable poetic inheritance from William Carlos Williams—and thus Snyder's indirect and complex literary inheritance from the Romantics—whose image and description of the farmer from *Spring and All*, collected in *Imaginations*<sup>25</sup>, casts light on Snyder's farmers. For Williams, the farmer is equated with the poet and artist, as the final lines of “III: The farmer in deep thought” demonstrate:

Down past the brushwood  
 bristling by  
 the rainsluced wagonroad  
 looms the artist figure of  
 the farmer—composing  
 —antagonist           (14-19)

Not quite an “unacknowledged legislator,” Williams tries to find a way to describe the farmer as an arranger and organiser, a planner who, in his mind, has a vision of his planted harvest—a prescription for nature to follow. Williams's description of the farmer as both composer and “antagonist” is significant and full of latent and

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<sup>25</sup> William Carlos Williams. *Imaginations: Five Experimental Prose Pieces*. London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1970. 98-99.

contradictory meaning. Because of the dual nature of the farmer, both advocate of and antagonist to nature's inherently wild character and all its creative and destructive powers, the farmer can be both good and bad, or rather, neither good nor bad. This idea of the farmer as artist and/or poet provides Snyder with an idiom which informs the implications of his "farmer's / corner of the planet": not only does the industrialist, invasive, consumer culture of the western tradition destroy the earth's natural ecological balances, but it also creates a disparity between what Snyder sees as a vital balance—an interpenetration—of the creative and destructive elements of the universe. In contrast to Williams's objectivist presentation of the farmer, Snyder moralises his farmer figure. By relegating farmers—and therefore nature and the wild—to a small plot of land at some far corner of the earth, Snyder shows how creativity in all its forms, both artistic and otherwise, has been relegated to a small and ineffectual allotment from which it cannot effectively participate as antagonist or opposition in the vital conversation that might lead to a balance between man and nature.

That short question—"what next?"—and its infinitely loaded answer illustrates the potential power of Snyder's poetry. If his poetry works, it does so because it is a kind of poetry that surrenders its meaning to the reader. Because it employs a fluid, unconstraining syntax, it often leaves the exact meaning to be negotiated by the reader. Thus Snyder deliberately asks the question "what next?" and takes care to punctuate it with a question mark. But his reply is not so clearly punctuated: "a farmer's / corner of the planet—"; and Snyder capitalises on the many possibilities of this ambiguous punctuation. A reader's natural instinct will

likely be to read the two lines as a set of questions in which the second answers the first: “what next? A farmer’s corner of the planet?” But Snyder does not supply the second question mark, perhaps because it devalues the statement by implying incredulity and exaggeration, as though the question were a hyperbole meant only for dramatic effect. Snyder also avoids a full stop, which he often excludes, in order to leave the possibilities of a phrase or arrangement of words open. Snyder’s choice of an em dash gives the line the possibility of being both a hyperbolic question and a matter-of-fact answer of a full-stopped statement. The em dash also gives Snyder’s line the strength of aposiopesis and all the rhetorical effect that an unfinished thought left to the imagination entails.

Section two of “For the West” is a poetic portrayal of the Hindu idea of the cyclic process of the creation and destruction of the universe. In Hinduism the cycle from creation to destruction comprises “one turn” of the infinitely turning wheel of time. Thus, as the wheel of time continues to turn, so does the transition from creation to destruction continue in a perpetual revolution of successive creative and destructive cycles. So Snyder begins this section of his poem with a brief statement in the first two lines of what the section embodies: “this universe—‘one turn’—  
turnd over. / gods of revolution.” Snyder plays with the meanings of “universe” and “revolution,” implying in the case of the latter word, particularly through the words “turn” and “turnd,” the most obvious definition: that of an object (presumably a celestial body, given that Snyder is talking about the universe) moving in a circular motion or orbit. But as the poem progresses, Snyder’s exploration of revolution also develops; and as he catalogues a history of change in the traditions and habits of

human beings, the idea of revolution expands to include social and industrial revolution. In the middle stanza Snyder traces the evolution of farming technology through the use of different animals to a climax marked by the “tractors” and “firing of pistons” of the industrial revolution:

wheat, rye, barley,  
     adding asses to donkeys  
     to fat-haunch horses,  
 it takes tractors and the  
     multiple firing of pistons  
 to make revolution.

This point in the poem marks a transition from an epoch that begins with slow progression and creation to what becomes accelerated development, which could be seen as entering upon an epoch of destruction. He continues in the next lines by emphasising the perpetual revolution of the universe and its momentum toward a sort of combustion:

still turning. flywheel heavy  
     elbow-bending awkward  
     flippety drive goes  
 on, white chicks;

Snyder’s mention of “white chicks” symbolizes the changes and outcomes of the industrial revolution. Where the majority of the human population had once spent most of their days under the sun whilst working on the land, their skin browned, weathered and freckled from a lifetime spent in the elements, many now pass the

days inside, sheltered from the sunny heat and the windy, rainy cold of a nearly extinct rustic lifestyle. Thus in Snyder's fourth stanza we read of "dark skin" in comparison to skin that is "foggy white," "pale" and "never freckled." In the final couplet of this section, Snyder again emphasises revolution and change, not as progress, but as regression—a fall—in which what is valuable becomes lost: "they turn and / slowly turn away—." The repetition of and variation on the word "turn" throughout calls attention to the underlying theme and motif of revolution and change in section two. But there is a change of tone in the final couplet where Snyder transforms the direction of the poem from that of a building up of momentum—exemplified by such words, phrases and actions as "adding," "multiple firing of pistons," "still turning" and "drive goes / on"—to a winding down as the elements of the poem "slowly turn away" and are lost or left behind as the revolution moves on into the final section of Snyder's poem.

Although Snyder expresses obvious disdain for western revolutionised culture and its destructive consumer tendencies, as the first section of "For the West" illustrates, he also incorporates a sense in his poems of a wider perspective in which he acknowledges that destruction begets creation which in turn begets destruction in a process that is both beautiful and terrible, as is necessary. This enlightened point of view in which the poet sees the future with both a light of hope for eventual renewal and a shade of regret for what once was becomes an element of redemption akin to the Wordsworthian Romantic pastoral pattern of progression from innocence to fall to redemption, much like Shelley's West Wind which is both Destroyer and Preserver. This dialectic of hope and despair, love and disdain

provides the essence of the third and final section of “For the West.” In an image that is tinged with the disparagement of the first section of the poem, Snyder compares America to a drop of oil on water: something both beautiful and harmful, like the dust and pollution in the atmosphere, which, as the rays of a sunset reflect off those particles, creates a glow in the western evening sky. By comparing America to a drop of oil—presumably petroleum or crude oil—Snyder incorporates the negative connotations of industry and pollution and politics along with the image of a beautifully multi-coloured rainbow reflection, a flower. In the first lines of the section Snyder traces the history and growth of America through the movement of this drop of oil upon the water:

Ah, that’s America:

the flowery glistening oil blossom

spreading on water—

it was so tiny, nothing, now it keeps expanding

all those colors,

In spite of the environmental hazard Snyder presents in these lines, one must be on guard against reading his comparison of America to oil as entirely negative. Snyder seeks balance and a middle ground between destruction and creation—darkness and light, *yin* and *yang*—in his view of the universe, which is therefore reflected in his writings. His description is peppered with adjectives—“flowery,” “glistening,” “blossom”—that belie his disapproval of American growth and expansion and acknowledge that it was once, and still can be, a place of potential and rich diversity. Even crude oil, dark and thick, has the ability to reflect a vast rainbow of



colours and patterns and is itself an accumulation of biomass such as algae and plankton, dead trees and other organic materials. This oily rainbow, a conglomeration of colours, recalls visions of the American “melting pot” in which the world’s tired, poor, huddled masses sought a realisation of the American dream in a new frontier that was still untouched and bore the potential of a return to the pastoral idyll. Throughout the three sections of “For the West” Snyder returns to the idea of colour as something that is fading and becoming diluted as the cycle of creation turns toward destruction. An abundance and variety of colour is something that is lost in accordance with and proportion to the loss of the pastoral landscape and lifestyle.

In keeping with the Wordsworthian pastoral cycle, the redemption of the poem comes in the second half of the stanza, in which America, the great oil slick, comes full circle through the process of creation and destruction as it grows and spreads until it finally dissipates and is gone, leaving a blank canvass upon which a new era of creation can begin to generate new colours:

our world  
 opening inside outward toward us,  
 each part swelling and turning  
 who would have thought such turning;  
 as it covers,  
 the colors fade.  
 and the fantastic patterns  
 fade.

I see down again through clear water.

What Snyder expresses is an awareness that this hope for a new epoch of creation is only possible as it is built upon the despair and disappointment and destruction of the failure of American culture. Snyder's vision seen finally through clear water recalls Blake's "Introduction" from *Songs of Innocence* in which the poet, having "made a rural pen" from a "hollow reed," then "stain'd the water clear" in order to write his songs.<sup>26</sup> The multiplicity of possibilities in the paradoxical line, "And I stain'd the water clear," has been the subject of much critical discussion. This critic views Blake's ambiguous line as an acknowledgement of the necessity of experience, that innocence cannot continue forever without becoming stagnant and without progression, and that through the colour of experience a richer knowledge is gained, one that recognises the coexistence of meanings in the word "stain'd," and able to see the interdependence of dark and light and their medium, colour. This dual vision of hope and its necessary counterparts—disillusionment, disappointment and despair—is what Snyder seeks to express in "For the West." In this last section of "For the West" Snyder incorporates intricacies of the language to accompany the sentiment expressed. This is particularly seen in the repetition of the word "fade" and the added emphasis on the word through the alliteration of the letter *f*: "the colors fade. / and the fantastic patterns / fade." Snyder also illustrates the idea of

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<sup>26</sup> Blake's influence upon Snyder can be traced, in one instance, through Snyder's friendship with Allen Ginsberg, whose near obsession with Blake's poetry is well known and documented, as well as through Snyder's own discussion of influences throughout various interviews and essays, such as "the Path to Matsuyama" from *Back on the Fire* (52-53).

transformation in the words that he chooses; for example, “covers” slightly morphs into “colors” from one line to the next.

As “For the West” reveals, Snyder often expresses a distrust and dislike of civilization, and has declared “the whole Western Tradition” to be “off the track” (EHH 114). But throughout his career Snyder has also maintained an attitude toward America that is incongruous with a general attitude of disdain. In the opening paragraphs of an essay on Gary Snyder, from *Towards a New American Poetics*, Ekbert Faas observes that:

Paradoxically, Snyder believes that it is neither the East nor the underdeveloped nations, but his own country which offers the only prospect for a future society. For America, as Snyder observed in 1967, “is the only culture in which a number of people” have recognized the life-destroying potential of Western civilization “and are able to go beyond it”<sup>27</sup>. . . . In this way America may harbor the only hope for mankind.<sup>28</sup>

Faas also observes that “Snyder remains deeply committed to Western pragmatism, humanitarian optimism, and belief in progress.”<sup>29</sup> Perhaps this is why Snyder saves his criticism for Western culture and specifically America. For if Snyder had no hope for his own country and community, he would have no struggle in choosing between the role of the ascetic, withdrawn visionary and the more human-centred poet who mediates between the natural world, the visionary and the human worlds so that all may understand. If Snyder did not believe in an America that is able to

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<sup>27</sup> Faas quotes here from J. Kornbluth, ed. *Notes from the New Underground*. New York: Viking Press, 1968.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 91-92

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

“go beyond” the “life-destroying potential of Western civilization,” he would surely have joined the sadhus in their dolmen tombs long ago.

Snyder finishes his third section of “For the West,” and in fact the entire poem, with a short coda:

it is the same  
 ball bounce rhyme the  
 little girl was singing,  
 all those years.

Although Snyder gives his readers no hint at what the actual “ball bounce rhyme” is, one must only draw on childhood memories to recall any children’s folk game in which repetition, often ritualistic and unending, is a primary element. No doubt Snyder implies that, like a little girl’s “ball bounce rhyme,” the universe continues its infinite revolution as it turns over from creation to destruction and then to creation again.

It is this sense of the interplay between creation and destruction, between the pastoral and its cycle of innocence to its fall and eventual recovery—albeit tainted—that gives Snyder’s work a strong connection to the Romantic tradition in its implications for nature, poetry and the human mind.

## Chapter Three: Romantic Aspiration, Romantic Doubt

“Numerous paradoxes attend the dream we have inherited from the Romantics that poetry somehow performs epistemological and social functions.”<sup>1</sup> These paradoxes, as Altieri brings out in his reading of Gary Snyder’s *Turtle Island* (1974), primarily stem from the divergent roles of the poet as seer, whose visionary “expressions are never intelligible to the society”<sup>2</sup>, and as prophet, whose role is to speak to and for society. Altieri suggests that Snyder’s strengths in *Turtle Island* lie in his accomplishments as a poetic seer and that his failures arise from his weakness as a prophet in the sense that he is often unwilling to compromise the integrity of his message in order that a wider audience may understand. Much of what Altieri has to say on the subject of Snyder as a successful seer and perhaps less-than-successful prophet is persuasive, and his ideas have served as a catalyst for the explorations of this chapter. However, my examination of Snyder as a poet who attempts to mediate between the roles of seer and prophet is concerned more specifically with examining how Snyder’s poetic aspirations reflect the aspirations of his Romantic predecessors toward becoming prophets, seers and poets, or what Shelley calls “the unacknowledged legislators of the World” (*A Defence of Poetry* 701). Snyder’s poetic aspiration involves the desire to speak as a prophet of nature and to guide his community to a recovery of the pastoral.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Altieri. “Gary Snyder’s *Turtle Island*: The Problem of Reconciling the Roles of Seer and Prophet.” *Boundary 2* 4.3 (Spring 1976): 761-778. *JSTOR*. 7 Oct 2007. 761.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 762

This discrepancy between the roles of the poet as seer and as prophet is one of which the Romantics were aware and about which they were anxious, as is Snyder. Shelley sought to articulate the role of the poet in relation to that of a prophet in *A Defence of Poetry*, and his ideas are very much relevant to Snyder's ideas about poetry:

Poets . . . were called in the earlier epochs of the world legislators or prophets: a poet essentially comprises and unites both these characters. For he not only beholds intensely the present as it is . . . but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time. Not that I assert poets to be prophets in the gross sense of the word, or that they can foretell the form as surely as they foreknow the spirit of events: such is the pretence of superstition which would make poetry an attribute of prophecy, rather than prophecy an attribute of poetry. A Poet participates in the eternal, the infinite and the one . . . (677)

Shelley beheld the future himself as he sought to foretell the role of both poetry and the poet in today's society. As a poet with an ecological vision, Snyder's struggle to find a balance between the vision of what he beholds, a vision both of "the present" and of "the future in the present," and an articulation or legislation of that vision in a way that creates balance between humanity and the natural world.

Wordsworth explored the "language of the common man" in an attempt to reconcile these inconsistencies. He recognised that a poet's value is lost when he cannot speak to and for all men. His Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*

postulates the value and need of a poetry written in a language accessible to all.<sup>3</sup> Yet Wordsworth did not devalue the role of the seer in favour of the prophet, as he also experimented with visionary poetics wherein his “spots of time” in *The Prelude* and other works exemplify a poetry brimming with epiphanic revelation. At the same time, Wordsworth also displays a mode of poetic anxiety best described by Harold Bloom as an anxiety which is the shadow of ambition, “or rather, the shadow or Spectre of . . . desire.”<sup>4</sup>

Ultimately, Wordsworth’s (and any potential poet’s) anxiety lies in the quest to become or to be confirmed and/or affirmed as a poet. Wordsworth describes this sense of poetic self-discovery in the Preface to *The Excursion* (1814), where he explains that he returned to the mountains of his native home where he could “take a review of his own Mind, and examine how far Nature and Education had qualified him for such employment” (38). In other words, Wordsworth’s first step in becoming an epic poet is to discover whether or not he is an epic poet. This quest for affirmation as a poet is akin to asking whether the chicken or the egg came first. In order for a poet to discover whether he is a poet, the poet must write a poem that proves he is a poet.

In the Preface to *The Excursion* Wordsworth expresses his poetic ambitions: “the Author retired to his native Mountains, with the hope of being enabled to

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<sup>3</sup> Or at least accessible to those whose tastes correspond to his own. For Wordsworth also said, in a letter to Lady Beaumont dated 21 May 1807, that: “every great and original writer, in proportion as he is great and original, must himself create the taste by which he is to be relished” (*The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Years*. Vol. 1. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Ed. Ernest De Selincourt. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969.).

<sup>4</sup> Bloom *Anxiety* 24

construct a literary Work that might live” (38). Then, in the Prospectus to the poem, Wordsworth describes in detail these poetic aspirations by creating a passage that both articulates and illustrates such spectacular ambitions and has become a “Work” that certainly does “live”:

—To these emotions, whencesoe’er they come,  
 Whether from breath of outward circumstance,  
 Or from the Soul—an impulse to herself,  
 I would give utterance in numerous Verse.  
 —Of Truth, of Grandeur, Beauty, Love, and Hope—  
 And melancholy Fear subdued by Faith;  
 Of blessed consolations in distress;  
 Of moral strength, and intellectual power;  
 Of joy in widest commonalty spread;  
 Of the individual Mind that keeps her own  
 Inviolate retirement, subject there  
 To Conscience only, and the law supreme  
 Of that Intelligence which governs all;  
 I sing:—“fit audience let me find though few!” (10-23)

These few lines encompass serious poetic ambitions. Yet they also express and betray anxieties. Wordsworth is aware that his desire to “give utterance” to Truth, Grandeur, Beauty, Love, Hope, Faith, intellectual Power, and even “that Intelligence which governs all” is potentially eclipsed by the anxiety of failure, the doubt that accompanies any aspiration. Line 13 of the quoted passage, “I would give



utterance,” betrays Wordsworth’s doubt. The word “would” expresses the poet’s desire, but does not necessarily confirm his ability: he may want to create an epic poem, but that does not verify that he can. The final line of the passage, quoted from Milton<sup>5</sup>—“I sing:—‘fit audience let me find though few!’”—may seem to associate Wordsworth with a tradition of high poetic achievement. Yet the quotation cannot but expose an anxiety about the poet’s potential audience. There may even be a strain of defensiveness in Wordsworth’s assumption that his audience is likely to be few. Wordsworth seeks to anticipate this possibility and protects himself from potential failure by quoting Milton, whose poetic skills and works have been universally acknowledged. But at the same time, Wordsworth’s visionary words involve a sense of strain on occasions, and these can be among the most affecting moments in his work. His hopeful verse is simultaneously doubtful as he attempts to mediate between the role of poet as visionary seer and the role of poet as spokesman of a community.

This relatively short passage at the beginning of *The Excursion*, embodies many of Wordsworth’s principal themes—on the melding of nature with the mind and the power of the imagination—as well as his aspirations and doubts about his poetic ability and the potential of humanity. Gary Snyder has taken up these themes through a long and perhaps indirect inheritance from Wordsworth and the Romantics through such mediating poets as Pound and Williams.

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<sup>5</sup> *Paradise Lost*, Book VII, lines 30-31 read: “. . . still govern thou my song, / Urania, and fit audience find, though few” in: John Milton. *Milton: The Major Works*. Ed. Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990. The Oxford Authors.

Snyder acknowledges Blake as an influence on his own poetry and as a poet whose poetry is still relevant today.<sup>6</sup> However, he finds Wordsworth's poetry to be less inspiring and less relevant, or, as he tells Ekbert Faas, "tiresome."<sup>7</sup> This aversion to Wordsworth is ironic because both Wordsworth and Snyder share the same poetic aspirations, not to mention their similar roles as nature poets and champions of the language of the common man. Snyder's open form is, in a way, a modern equivalent to Wordsworth's blank verse. His short line lengths are suited to a probing yet tentative feeling forward of the imagination and understanding, and, like Wordsworth's blank verse, Snyder's informally structured lines serve to reflect speech and thoughts. Both Wordsworth and Snyder also recognise a need in society for a poet to serve as prophet and seer—a mediator between man and the natural world—and both desire to fill that role. However, because Snyder's poetry often endeavours to incorporate a Buddhist exclusion of suffering, it is difficult to determine whether Snyder shares the same underlying apprehensions that Wordsworth did about his poetic ability to achieve such lofty goals.

One of the principal ideas in Snyder's poetic and political philosophy is the role of the poet as shaman. Snyder often refers to the role of the poet in society as analogous to that of the shaman who acts as a mediator between man and nature or, perhaps more accurately, man and the unknown, for his community. Like Wordsworth, he is keenly aware of the duality of the role of poet as seer and prophet, and he uses the concept of the shaman as a poet who is able to serve as

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Faas 117

<sup>7</sup> Faas 124

both seer and prophet for the community. In *Earth House Hold* (1969) Snyder articulates the contrast between seer and prophet. He says that a time comes

when the poet must choose: either to step deep in the stream of his people, history, tradition, folding and folding himself in wealth of persons and pasts; philosophy, humanity, to become richly foundationed and great and sane and ordered. Or, to step beyond the bound onto the way out, into horrors and angels, possible madness or silly Faustian doom, possible utter transcendence, possible enlightened return, possible ignominious wormish perishing. (EHH 39)

It seems, according to this passage, that Snyder's aspiration is to serve as the poetic mediator, or prophet, who articulates understanding and shares knowledge with his community rather than the ascetic seer whose visions are dangerous and risk being so visionary that they are irrelevant and inaccessible to the whole—or even a significant group, however small—of society. But the wording in the passage suggests that Snyder knows about the temptations to be both kinds of poet. His characterisation of “silly Faustian doom” sounds dismissive, but the wondering possibilities that follow—the “possible utter transcendence, possible enlightened return” and even “possible ignominious wormish perishing”—give weight to the lure of the latter role as potentially valuable and as something that never wholly vanishes from Snyder's thinking or poetry.

Snyder's own thinking about the social purpose and function of poetry recalls Wordsworth's ideas in *Lyrical Ballads*: a poet's responsibility is to speak

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truths about all men, to embody a community and speak to and for that community in a language rooted in that community. Snyder explains matters thus:

I'd emphasize again the importance of a sense of community, a need for the poet to identify with *real* people, not a faceless audience. . . . I think the poet articulates the semi-known for the tribe. This is close to the ancient function of the shaman. It's not a dead function. The poet needs a long view. . . . Poetry is a life's work. (TRW 5-6)

This idea that a poet's role is "close to the ancient function of the shaman" is Snyder's way of reconciling the duality of the poet's role as both the seer, who is in danger of being misunderstood as an isolated ascetic visionary, and the prophet, or sage who interprets the unknown and distills knowledge in a form accessible to the community. Snyder's notion that "poetry is a life's work" also reflects Milton's conviction that a poet's life must be the pattern of a true poem<sup>8</sup> and is akin to Shelley's assertion in *A Defence of Poetry* that a "poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth" (679).

In his Pulitzer Prize winning collection of poetry, *Turtle Island* (1974), Snyder outlines some of his poetic aspirations in a poem entitled "As for Poets." Each stanza focuses on a certain type of poet, and so, according to Snyder, there are Earth Poets, Air Poets, Fire Poets, Water Poets, Space Poets, and Mind Poets. With each stanza and each type of poet, Snyder discusses the strengths and characteristics of that kind of poet and his or her poetry. What he leaves generally unsaid but

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<sup>8</sup> From *An Apology for Smectymnuus*: ". . . he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought himself to be a true poem . . ." in *John Milton: The Major Works*. Ed. Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990. The Oxford Authors. 180.

certainly implied is that there is a weakness to each type of specialized poetry. This becomes apparent particularly when he is addressing the poetry of the Space Poet:

With the Sun and Moon  
 In his belly,  
 The Space Poet  
 Sleeps.  
 No end to the sky—  
 But his poems,  
 Like wild geese,  
 Fly off the edge.

Although Snyder celebrates the fact that the Space Poet seems to have no bounds, he does so with a hint of misgiving. For Snyder commingles with the celebration of the visionary infinitude of the Space Poet and his poetry a subtle caveat found bundled in the small, yet powerful word, “But.” For all his championing of wild, unfettered language, Snyder acknowledges that poetry and vision can possibly become too wild and out of control to be understood by others, “Like wild geese” that “Fly off the edge.” This acknowledgement becomes an exploration of the dialectic between the need for boundaries and the compulsion to push and defy those boundaries.

Within this passage on the Space Poet, as throughout much of Snyder’s visionary poetry, one finds residual strands of Blakean poetics that defy boundaries and elude concrete meaning. One example is found in the reference to the “Sun and Moon” in the belly of the Space Poet, which may echo Blake’s *Auguries of*

*Innocence* where, in lines 109-110, the poet's discussion of doubt includes heavenly bodies: "If the Sun & Moon should doubt / Theyd immediately Go out." In contrast to being extinguished by doubt, the unclipped light of the sun and moon often represents knowledge, truth and understanding, even faith, imagination and inspiration. Blake's chosen title and the use of the word "auguries" concretely asserts that his poem is quite literally a divination and interpretation of an omen.

Snyder combines this western idea of knowledge as symbolised by natural light from the sun and moon with the eastern concept of energy, *ch'i* or *qi* in Chinese (*ki* in Japanese), which deserves a short explanatory discussion. *Ch'i* is "the ethereal psychophysical energies of which everything is composed" and "a vital force inhering in the breath and bodily fluids." *Qi* or *ch'i* literally means "air" or "breath," and the stomach is therefore considered the seat of one's *ch'i*.<sup>9</sup> The significance of the belly, or stomach, in eastern philosophy is further expounded by C.A.S. Williams who, in describing Chinese Medicine, explained: "The lungs are white, and placed in the thorax; . . . The centre of the thorax (or pit of the stomach) is the seat of the breath; joy and delight emanate from it, and it cannot be injured without danger."<sup>10</sup> Manfred Porkert gives another general definition of *ch'i* as "configurational energy of the Cosmos" as well as "configurational energy of the Microcosm" and goes on to quote a Chinese medical essay, written by Chang Ching-yüeh, in which *ch'i* is further explained:

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<sup>9</sup> "qi." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2009. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 22 Oct. 2009.

<sup>10</sup> C. A. S. Williams. "Medicine." *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism and Art Motives: An Alphabetical compendium of antique legends and beliefs, as reflected in the manners and customs of the Chinese*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. New York: Dover, 1976. 271-274. 271.

Change, both inception and transformation, rests on *ch'i*, and there is no being in the Cosmos that does not originate from it. Thus *ch'i* envelops the Cosmos from without and moves the Cosmos from within. How else than by *ch'i* can the sun and the moon, the planets and the fixed stars shine, can thunder resound and rain, wind, and clouds be formed, can all beings take rise, mature, bear fruit, and withdraw in the course of the Four Seasons? Man's existence too depends entirely upon this *ch'i*.<sup>11</sup>

By placing the sun and moon in the Space Poet's belly, Snyder creates an image of a poet whose vital creative energy "envelops the Cosmos from without" as well as "moves the Cosmos from within." The Space Poet, then, is one whose poetic power is "configurational" and instigative of change and transformation. One could even interpret the Space Poet as actually being *ch'i* itself or the physical and poetic embodiment of *ch'i*.

Snyder also tells us that the Space Poet "Sleeps," which leads the reader to understand that in sleeping the Space Poet dreams. By so dreaming, the Space Poet encounters and creates visions, auguries, poems of wild imagination and truth which are fuelled and transformed by the light of the sun and moon: visionary poems too free and limitless to be contained by the human mind's bounded capacity for understanding. Thus Snyder celebrates the Space Poet who, like Blake, creates poems that "Fly off the edge" beyond contemporary understanding and then wait for society to catch up. And like Blake, Snyder explores the dialectic of contraries

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<sup>11</sup> Manfred Porkert. *The Theoretical Foundations of Chinese Medicine: Systems of Correspondence*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1974. MIT East Asian Science Series. 173-74.

within the role of the poet. The Space Poet thus serves as an illustration of the poet who, as previously quoted from *Earth House Hold*, “step[s] beyond the bound onto the way out, into horrors and angels, possible madness or silly Faustian doom, possible utter transcendence, possible enlightened return, possible ignominious wormish perishing.”

This combined praise of and slight apprehension about the Space Poet is also demonstrated in its placement in the poem as the penultimate stanza, the next-to-last and perhaps next-to-best type of poet. Snyder provides a remedy for, or at least a contrast to, the potential shortcomings of the Space Poet and his other specialized counterparts in the final stanza of the poem, which is reserved for what a reader can assume he considers the greatest type of poet: the Mind Poet:

A Mind Poet  
 Stays in the house.  
 The house is empty  
 And it has no walls.  
 The poem  
 Is seen from all sides,  
 Everywhere,  
 At once.

Therefore, the last two stanzas of the poem become a climax and a resolution wherein Snyder discusses the contrast between, and melding of, the poet as visionary seer and the poet as shamanistic prophet. The Mind Poet’s visionary poetry is balanced between set and respected boundaries, which give the poetry a



perspective from which to make meaning, and the simultaneous dissolution of those boundaries in order to create possibilities built upon, but often differing from or even challenging, that meaning. An empty house with no walls exemplifies this polarity well and creates the possibility for many perspectives to be “seen from all sides, / Everywhere, / At once.” The form of the poem also facilitates Snyder’s attempt to express the vision of the mind poet. The short lines involve a dazzling shift of perspectives and create great possibility for reading the poem as separate elements, individual lines, or as combinations and interrelations of lines.

Although Snyder never explicitly declares himself a Mind Poet, a poet who is able to create poetry that engenders understanding and relevance by incorporating all possible perspectives, both bound and unbound, this is undoubtedly what he implies. In fact, rather than expressing a desire to become a Mind Poet, Snyder has declared to the reader that he is a Mind Poet. Ironically, Snyder risks contradiction in his stanza on the Mind Poet. For, although it is clear that he places great value on the role and ability of the Mind Poet, the conception and expression of the Mind Poet is built upon specialist knowledge of Buddhism, which many of his western readers would fail to understand. His verse describing a metaphorical empty house with no walls risks becoming overly esoteric, thus potentially alienating some of his readers and approaching the often impenetrable verse of the Space Poet. There is a sense, as well, that the Space Poet, although seemingly relegated to secondary status, is actually often indistinguishable, or only very finely distinguishable, from the Mind poet, and therefore equivalent in strength and value.

Snyder's discussion of the Mind Poet and his reference to the "house" which is "empty" allude to the Tibetan Buddhist metaphor of "The Empty House of the Senses," as incorporated in the *Wheel of Life*, or *Bhavacakra*. The *Wheel of Life* is a complicated illustration which serves as a metaphor for *samsara*, the continuing cycle of life from birth to death, and the path to enlightenment and liberation from *samsara*. "The Empty House of the Senses" refers to an illustration found within the outer rim of the *Wheel of Life* which represents the fifth of twelve causes of individuality that keep a being from enlightenment and therefore an understanding of interconnectedness. T. W. Rhys Davids gives a useful description:

The fifth is the SAL-ĀYATANA, the six "provinces" or "territories," i.e., of the senses – to wit, our five senses and the mind (or mano), regarded as itself an organ of sense. These are represented in the fresco as the mask of a face, with eyes, nose, ears, and mouth, and with blank eye-sockets in the forehead to represent the inner sense or mind. This face is, as it were, "The Empty House of the Senses," and is represented in the Tibetan picture by a house with six windows; and in the Japanese, by the figure of a man.<sup>12</sup>

It seems contradictory that his house of senses would be called *empty*, as all these senses lead to a notion of individuality and desire—a challenge to the concept of emptiness as being detached from the concepts of individuality and identity.

However, Snyder's Mind Poet is one who can achieve an interconnectedness beyond his own senses through a connection to the external world. His house

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<sup>12</sup> T. W. Rhys Davids. *Buddhism: Its History and Literature*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1896. American Lectures on the History of Religions, First Series 1894-1895. 158.

becomes “empty” and without “walls” so that the poem—a representation of the universe and all things—can be “seen from all sides, / Everywhere, / At once” because its boundaries and points of reference are overcome until one realizes that there is no house and therefore no separation between the mind and nature. In addition, the structure of Snyder’s poem is separated into six sections, which are dedicated to the description of six different types of poets. This structure possibly reflects the six senses represented by “The Empty House of the Senses” as well as the six worlds—of Devas (Gods), Asuras (Demigods), Humans, Animals, Pretas (ghosts), and Hell—which are also represented as separated by the six spokes of the wheel in the depiction of the *Wheel of Life*.<sup>13</sup>

Another example of Snyder’s confidence in his ability as a Mind Poet is found in “Bubbs Creek Haircut” from his *Mountains and Rivers Without End* (33-38).<sup>14</sup> At the zenith of the poem, the poet finds himself at the top of a mountain:

A deva world of sorts—it’s high  
                                   —a view that few men see, a point  
                                   bare sunlight  
                                   on the spaces  
                                   empty sky

On the mountain’s summit, Snyder places himself in a quasi-celestial or semi-divine deva world—a place where he can obtain enlightenment—much like a Native American shaman who has set out on a vision quest and has reached the prophetic moment in which the knowledge he seeks will finally be obtained. In this way,

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<sup>13</sup> “Realms of Existence” *Encyclopedia of Buddhism* 712

<sup>14</sup> This poem will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Seven.

Snyder asserts that he has gained knowledge that “few men” have, and positions himself as a rare poet, prophet, visionary and shaman for modern America and all western civilization. The form of the passage also physically reflects the content Snyder seeks to convey. The second line of the passage above forms a literal point in relation to the accompanying lines, and reflects the highest point of a mountain peak as well as the point of revelation within the poem.

The discourse on the interplay between the human mind and the natural world is also of particular interest to Snyder, who explained his philosophy on the subject to Gene Fowler in an interview in 1964 aptly entitled “The Landscape of Consciousness”:

We can reach beyond our social nature and see our relationships in nature, or reach inward and see the relationships that hold there. . . . More and more I am aware of very close correspondences between the external and internal landscape. . . . By “architecture of consciousness” I mean the structure of the whole mind, from contentless ground through the unconscious and conscious, and on out through the sense perception and immediate emotion into the reaches of abstract, scientific theorizing and pure mathematics.

(TRW 4-5)

Snyder’s interest in the “close correspondences between the external and internal landscape” is the poet’s own renewal of the Romantic study of the discourse between the human mind and the natural world. Snyder’s interest in the “structure of the whole mind” and its wide spectrum from “contentless ground” through emotions and perceptions to “abstract, scientific theorizing and pure mathematics” echoes this

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Romantic discourse. An example of Snyder's poetry of the mind and its marriage with nature is found in "Without" from *Turtle Island* (1974):

the silence  
of nature  
within.

the power within.  
the power

without.

the path is whatever passes—no  
end in itself.

the end is,  
grace—ease—

healing,  
not saving.

*singing*  
the proof

the proof of the power within.

This poem illustrates Snyder's belief in the value and strength of the human mind's capacity and that its strength, or "power," comes from realising "the silence / of nature / within." "Without" is Snyder's articulation or poetic rendering of the Buddhist idea of meditative silence within the mind. Snyder's attempt to create a poem that illustrates this Buddhist meditation for the reader is a great example of

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Snyder's effort to act as Shaman who combines his difficult personal and spiritual vision into a poem which is intended to serve as a prophetic teaching tool for his community, in this instance by demonstrating the act and art of meditation.

For Buddhism, silence through meditation is paramount to discovering truth, and in fact, because silence is the path to truth, it essentially is truth. Many explanations of Buddhist meditation and silence begin in the same way that Snyder begins his poem, with an idea that is commonplace and recognisable for most if not all of humanity—the concept of external silence, or silence with respect to physical noise and hearing. Snyder begins in his first two lines by speaking of “the silence / of nature”; and although, technically speaking, nature is full of its own noises—wind blowing through trees, insects and birds chirping—by contrast, the natural world provides relative silence in comparison to the every day bustle of a busy city. But in the third line of the poem he adds one important word that changes the first stanza into a description of meditation: “within.” Thus he demonstrates the concept of meditation, and its prerequisite, which is not only to find silent surrounds but also to silence inner thoughts and noise. Then “the power within” becomes akin to “the power / without.” Snyder goes on to illustrate for us the act of meditation: “the path is whatever passes—no / end in itself.” Specifically, he enacts the Buddhist concept of impermanence and the idea that we must accept the impermanence of all things, thus letting go of the human tendency toward desire. His following stanzas build upon the previous, which is that the end we should seek is “grace—ease— / healing, / not saving,” an allusion to the Buddhist objective to alleviate suffering and disease, whether it be mental, emotional or physical unrest and anxiety as well as

physical disease. The idea of “healing, / not saving” also implies a contrast between a Buddhist point of view and a western point of view, namely that salvation is a western religious concept and not the goal of Buddhism, which is, rather, healing suffering and gaining enlightenment. Snyder then adds one last direction for meditation by placing emphasis on the word “*singing*,” by italicizing and setting it alone in its own line. This effect recalls Snyder’s emphasis on mantras and singing meditation in which a person chants or sings a mantra alternated with silence in order to further facilitate meditation.

Because Snyder is a poet, he cannot completely do away with words in the pursuit of silence, but he must rather use an economy of words to create an understanding in the reader’s mind, which can then carry on into silent meditation. “Without” is also a fine example of Snyder’s elliptical mode in which he not only uses extremely sparse diction, but also incorporates spaces, both visually on the page and audibly in the poem, that serve as poetic renderings of silence. If Snyder is fully aware and in control of traditional poetic devices, much of his skill lies in his ability either to do away with traditional forms and methods, or to incorporate them in a way that they become hidden and difficult to distinguish, particularly when reading superficially. For example, Snyder incorporates repetition in “Without” in an effective manner. He repeats important words such as “within,” and “power” to create parallel phrases such as “the power within” and “the power / without.” He also repeats “end” to create a seemingly contradictory point of view by first saying that there is “no / end,” only to follow by saying that an end does exist with the words, “the end is.” Snyder also uses assonance to give his poem a subtle hint of

rhyme and alliteration, an example of which is found in the use of “path,” “whatever” and “passes” or in the words “ease” and “healing” which transitions into a repetition of gerunds with “healing, / not saving. / *singing*” and then transitions to alliteration with the words “saving” and “*singing*” as well as “the proof / the proof of the power within.”

Snyder also plays with the title of his poem, “Without,” and the dual meanings that the word suggests: “without” might mean outside, or it might mean being devoid of something. Throughout the body of the poem, Snyder repeats the word “within,” and implies the contrast between “without” and “within” as being the contrast between external and internal. However, Snyder’s poem serves as a verbal equivalent to a Buddhist meditation wherein the purpose of meditation is to find truth through a recognition of the interpenetration and interrelation of all things, and an end to suffering which is ultimately caused by human desire, greed, lust, selfishness, and so forth. Therefore, one who successfully meditates is able to attain, at least to a certain extent, a state of being without—without desires, greed, lust, selfishness, etc., and therefore a state of being without suffering. Additionally, one who successfully meditates is able to realise a disintegration of the boundaries between the internal and the external—“within” and “without”—as they become interpenetrated, interrelated, the same. Thus, in the end, the “the power within” is “the power / without.” This raises the question of whether a poem can actually be a meditation. If it is suggestive of a meditation, it is so because of its achievement as a verbal artefact.



Ultimately, Snyder's goal in writing "Without" is not so very different from Wordsworth's poetic aspirations outlined in *The Excursion*—namely, to "give utterance" (13) to the poet's deepest reflections "On Man, on Nature, and on Human Life / Musing in Solitude" (1-2). Snyder, too, comments on the marriage of the Mind of Man with Nature, as was previously quoted from *The Real Work* and is repeated here:

We can reach beyond our social nature and see our relationships in nature, or reach inward and see the relationships that hold there. . . . More and more I am aware of very close correspondences between the external and internal landscape.

The difficulty of "Without" as with many of Snyder's poems is that it requires the reader to have a certain amount of background knowledge about Buddhism and its concepts and teachings. Otherwise, much of the lesson Snyder teaches is lost. This is the discrepancy that inhibits Snyder's pursuit of a poetics that serves spiritually to enlighten a community—particularly a western community. If the population does not possess the necessary background knowledge, the poet risks becoming an incomprehensible seer and visionary, dangerously akin to a madman, or at the very least, an esoteric poet whose works are reserved for a select and privileged few. Perhaps this is why Snyder has also written a great deal of prose, beginning with *Earth House Hold* in 1969 and continuing with his latest collection of essays, *Back on the Fire*, 2007. In *Earth House Hold: Technical Notes and Queries for Fellow Dharma Revolutionaries*, his first published collection of essays and journal excerpts, Snyder provides guiding insights into his approach to poetry

and language. In particular, in his chapter “Poetry and the Primitive,” Snyder, connecting poetry with its “roots in the paleolithic,” justifies his own sometimes difficult and even hardly decipherable poetics by placing them within the framework of a primitive consciousness. This connecting of poetry to the archaic and the mystical, in which primitive “daily reality is a fabric of friends and family, the field of feeling and energy that one’s own body is, the earth . . . and the wind that wraps around it; and various areas of consciousness,” provides Snyder with his own justification for “steering a course between crystal clouds of utterly incommunicable nonverbal states—and the gleaming daggers and glittering nets of language” (EHH 117-18). But however well Snyder’s essays may serve to inform a reading of his poetry, the question posed by Altieri remains: can Snyder’s poems stand on their own and still successfully communicate his message to the uninitiated?

“Control Burn,” another poem from his collection in *Turtle Island*, proves successful and accessible as a poem that combines visionary foresight and practical application for successful living.<sup>15</sup> It incorporates both Milton’s idea that a poet’s life is the pattern of a poem and Wordsworth’s hope that the marriage of mind and nature could elevate men to something greater. In “Control Burn” Snyder illustrates an incorporation of old knowledge with an understanding of nature that gives human beings power and understanding. The beginning of the poem recollects old traditions when the “Indians / here / used to” . . . “burn out the brush every year” so

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<sup>15</sup> Terry Gifford, in a passage quoted in Chapter Two, finds “Control Burn” to be marred by Snyder’s overly earnest ecopieties. I, however, find it to be a successful poem because of the self-deprecation and sensitivity also found within the poem.

that there is “never enough fuel there / that a fire could crown.” Interestingly, Snyder evokes a crowning fire that never happened, and thus exerts the mind’s ability to conceive a past that is factual—rooted in history and reality—as well as an alternate past, or history, based on a possibility unrealised—a crowning fire that never happened. The artful accomplishment in alluding to a potential event that was avoided in the past lies in the reader’s realisation that this unfulfilled event is still a possibility in the future. In the second stanza the poet shifts to a present-day point of view with an understanding of and foresight into the consequences of his current situation:

Now, manzanita,  
 (a fine bush in its right)  
 crowds up under the new trees  
 mixed up with logging slash  
 and a fire can wipe out all.

Because of the poet’s understanding of the “laws of nature” and natural workings of fire, he has the power and knowledge to prevent a future that he sees as destructive. In the third stanza, the poet proposes a solution that will be beneficial not only to himself, but also to the natural world in which he lives:

Fire is an old story.  
 I would like,  
 with a sense of helpful order,  
 with respect for laws  
 of nature,

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to help my land  
 with a burn. a hot clean  
 burn.

(manzanita seeds will only open  
 after a fire passes over  
 or once passed through a bear)

Importantly, the poet proposes to burn all the manzanita bush which has become overgrown and therefore poses a threat to the other trees, plants, animals and humans in its ecosystem. However, the poet recognises the value of the bush with an aside, “(a fine bush in its right).” The locution of the aside is odd in that a reader would expect to see the more traditional phrase, “in its *own* right”; however, “a fine bush in its right” corresponds to the loose metre of the neighbouring lines, such as “mixed up with logging slash.” Snyder then illustrates in another aside at the end of the third stanza that in destroying the overgrown manzanita bushes he is helping them by creating a means by which their seeds can grow afresh, for their “seeds will only open / after a fire passes over.”

In the last stanza, the poet’s final statement brings the poem full circle. The first stanza was a reflection of the past, the second an observation of the present with a vision of the future, and the third a proposal for the future so that the poet can bring his land back to the past:

And then  
 it would be more  
 like,

when it belonged to the Indians

Before.

Although the poem is a thoughtful fusion of past, present and future, and the interaction of the external world with the mind, there is a twinge of doubt that is detected beginning with the words “I would like.” He acknowledges that in such an undertaking as a controlled or prescribed burn, he must maintain a “sense of helpful order, / with respect for laws / of nature.” Even though the poet’s desires seem justified and informed, he acknowledges that he may ultimately have little control in the face of fire and the force of nature. Even a controlled burn can be potentially dangerous and can quickly get out of control. But the poetic and human aspiration of the poem is also astonishing. Snyder fathoms that he can leash and control fire—one of nature’s most powerful and fearful means of destruction and creation.

The poem illustrates well Snyder’s aspirations as poet. Snyder’s use, or supposed disuse, of poetic device and structure reflects a similar approach to that of Wordsworth’s blank verse as illustrated in the passage at the opening of *The Excursion*. At first glance, Snyder seems to have abandoned any use of rhyme or alliteration and has structured sentences into lines that look like poetry, whilst occasionally forgetting to capitalise the beginning of a new sentence. In many of his poems the lines are short, often consisting only of a single word, creating a layout on the page that presents a stripped-down poem which forces the reader to pay close attention to each individual word. At the same time, the line is used adroitly to enact the development of a process of thought. Rather than adhering to a set rhyme

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scheme and meter, Snyder attempts to create a poem that reflects natural speech and thought patterns of men, inserting the sporadic parenthetical aside, opting for the occasional off rhyme and playing with slight repetition, unobtrusive alliteration, and veiled assonance.

“Control Burn,” then, is a poem of micro effects where Snyder plays with poetic conventions by teasing the reader. He never commits to using any of these devices enough to make them quickly or easily discernible to the reader and its effect is subtle but subconsciously powerful. Like watching for fireflies at night—hidden by the darkness, their tiny sparks of light flash and disappear before one can focus on the location—the effect leaves the reader dazzled, even confused, but also mesmerized by what seems to be something magical and not easily explained. The trick is to slip these sparks of poetic magic in with the mundane, or even to create these sparks from the material of everyday experience.

“Control Burn” presents a plenitude of examples of Snyder’s poetic fireflies. Throughout, the poem contains a sprinkling of nuances, such as the subtle half-chime of “used” and “do” in the third line—both seemingly insignificant words that a reader would not concentrate on—or the alliteration of “burn out the brush.” Such effects are not deliberate enough to confirm to the reader that they are conscious poetic devices. Snyder repeats vowel or consonant sounds usually only twice—just enough to be a coincidence, but not enough to be contrived. If Snyder were to add one more word, just to consummate the alliteration, say something like: “burn out the brush *below* the pine,” the reader would be easily able to identify how Snyder is working. Instead, he subtly guides his reader along, slipping in little flashes under

the radar. He rhymes “year” in line four with “clear” in line seven, alliterates “fuel” with “fire” in lines ten and eleven respectively, and “could crown” in line eleven. But he also slips in more subtle sound-connections, such as the vowels of “fine” and “right” in line thirteen and “fire” and “wipe” in line sixteen. He plays with the word “pass” and shows us his sense of humour where fire “passes over” the manzanita seeds, which are also “passed through a bear.” In the final five lines of the poem, he matches “be more” with “belonged,” which builds up to and underscores his finish with “Before.”

Snyder also uses parallel structure in certain phrases, such as that found in line five: “in the woods, up the gorges.” But just as the reader begins to predict another prepositional phrase (something like “down the valleys”), Snyder switches modes and pulls the rug out from under us, never quite committing to deliberate poetic device. It is also helpful to note the way that Snyder uses and isolates certain words. Line two consists only of the seemingly insignificant word “here.” But Snyder has always placed a strong emphasis on place and a value in knowing the history of your home and placing your roots deep into that particular location. Thus Snyder emphasises the word “here” and its underlying implications by isolating it in its own line. Similarly, Snyder finishes his poem by not only giving the word “Before” its own line, but by separating it by an extra space from the previous stanza and capitalizing it. The emphasis is evident, if one but gives “Before” the attention Snyder asks of us. For, as with his emphasis on place, Snyder, throughout his career, has also emphasised the value of learning from the past—past civilizations, past communities, those who lived before.

Snyder does occasionally use an easily apparent poetic device to put a more obvious emphasis on what he wants us to see. In this case, Snyder illustrates to us what he sees to be the solution to the problem of overgrown manzanita bush on his land and the imminent disaster of a wildfire by using deliberate repetition in the lines: “with a burn. a hot clean / burn.” The repetition serves not only to emphasise but also to clarify: this is not a crowning fire of destruction like that of the opening stanza, but a “hot clean / burn” meant to cleanse and rejuvenate like the mythical phoenix who is consumed by fire and is then reborn from the ash. For Snyder, the problem is also the solution, given the right balance.

In “Control Burn” Snyder is able to attain a difficult balance between the demands of being a poet/prophet and a poet/seer. He uses metaphor to illustrate an ecological message concerning human beings’ relationship with their environment and the necessity of balance in an ecosystem. The manzanita bush is used as an example of any imbalance in an ecosystem or ecological community and could possibly be seen as a metaphor for humanity and its overgrowth and subsequent destruction of its environment. Snyder is not against people any more than he is against the manzanita bush “(a fine bush in its right),” but he recognises that overgrowth and overpopulation can cause destruction because of the imbalance it causes in a delicate system based on balance and equality. Ultimately, Snyder knows that a little burn can be beneficial for everything, even the manzanita bush, whose seeds need the help of a fire or a bear’s digestive tract in order to grow and replenish. In the case of “Control Burn” Snyder, although less self-conscious than a critic such as Altieri would likely wish him to be, enacts a balance between being a



visionary and a teacher for the community. The additional value of this particular poem is that in it Snyder has incorporated characteristics of his poetic personality and skill that follow and update the ideas of his Romantic predecessors by adopting a more organic form or lack of form. His skill as a poet is magnified by the subtlety that forces the reader to invest a little more effort and attention in order to understand, much like a stereo whose volume is set so low that one must concentrate in order to hear it.

As mentioned previously, Altieri finds that Snyder's strength lies in his ability as a poet/seer "to image and celebrate the relationship between mental and natural energies."<sup>16</sup> But Altieri says that "Snyder's images of authenticity . . . lack . . . self-consciousness and, above all, . . . uncertainty and terror."<sup>17</sup> Yet the visionary aspect of Snyder's poetry, which is often informed by his education and training in eastern philosophies and religion, can often be impressive. This eastern element follows a long tradition of interest in Asian and Buddhist poetry that traces back from Snyder through the modernist poets and to the Romantics. Although Snyder's interest in eastern philosophy, poetics and art was not necessarily a direct and deliberate inheritance from the Romantics, but rather sparked by his own discovery of Chinese landscape painting as a teenager and an association with Modern poets such as Pound and Lawrence, this common element that he shares with Romantic poetry is more than coincidence.

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<sup>16</sup> Altieri "Gary Snyder's *Turtle Island*" 763

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 774

Albert Gelpi discusses the subtle “continuity between Romanticism and Modernism beneath the avowed discontinuity”<sup>18</sup> in *A Coherent Splendor*, where he addresses the imagery that Modernist poetry inherited from Romanticism that corresponds to one of the main elements of Snyder’s poetic ideology: his emphasis on the interconnectedness of all things and his technique of expressing such epiphanic connections in haiku-like brevity. Gelpi describes this similarity and its connection to Modernism:

Romanticism, then, rested on the assumption that meaning—and therefore expression—proceeded from the momentary gestalt, wherein subject and object not merely encountered each other but completed, or at least potentially completed, each other. This personal and individual experience of potential correspondence was the source of Romantic psychology, Romantic politics, Romantic aesthetics. But it was also the source of Romantic instability and self-doubt, and so the genesis of Modernism.<sup>19</sup>

Imagism, which Gelpi suggests acted as a foil to Symbolisme and began “the effort within Modernism to recover something of the Romantic epistemology”<sup>20</sup>, involves a reworking of the Romantic epiphany. The Modernist regard for a stripped-down art, the capturing of a single moment, an image and an epiphany, becomes a variant of Romantic revelation. For example, T. S. Eliot echoes Shelley’s previously quoted idea that a poet “beholds intensely the present as it is” and also “beholds the future in the present.” In “Burnt Norton,” from *Four Quartets*, Eliot repeats the idea that

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<sup>18</sup> Gelpi *A Coherent* 2

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 4

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 5

“Time past and time future / What might have been and what has been / Point to one end, which is always present” (46-48). Thus Eliot creates a poetic epiphanic moment in which the past, the memory of “what has been,” and the future, “what might have been,” combine into “one end,” the “present.”<sup>21</sup>

Ezra Pound, whose works had a great influence on Snyder, mastered a poetic imagery which serves as an example of Modernist poetics and which strives for the same effect that Wordsworth’s spots of time hope to achieve. David Simpson suggests that “the Romantic formulation of the relations between the poet, his language and his world has a good deal to offer in assisting the understanding of the historical specificity of Imagism and of Pound’s contribution to that movement” and that “the prevailing structure of ideas within Modernism seem . . . to be closely related to that of Romanticism.”<sup>22</sup> The contrast between the two poets—Wordsworth and Pound—is summarised by Simpson thus:

Pound has little time for a poetry that dramatizes a meditation *upon* its object, as opposed to a direct presentation *of* it; he is reacting against the Wordsworthian persona or “speaker” as he struggles with the activity of trying to make poetry, to achieve “meaning,” thus bringing to attention the status of the subject as it interprets and perhaps even manipulates the messages it purports to receive from nature.<sup>23</sup>

Yet the contrast between Pound’s and Wordsworth’s poetics also serves to expose the similarities between the poets and their ideals, which Pound illustrated, however

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<sup>21</sup> T. S. Eliot. *Collected Poems: 1909-1962*. 1974. London: Faber & Faber, 2002.

<sup>22</sup> David Simpson. “Pound’s Wordsworth; or Growth of a Poet’s Mind.” *ELH* 45:4 (Winter 1978), 660-686. *JSTOR*. 14 Aug 2008. 660.

<sup>23</sup> Simpson 662.

sarcastically, when he referred to Wordsworth as having “a genius, an unquestionable genius, for imagisme, for a presentation of natural detail.”<sup>24</sup> Thus Pound strove for, as he called it, “*le mot juste*” with the idea that the poetry should consist of nothing but the bare necessities, like ideograms of “compressed and abstracted visual metaphors”<sup>25</sup> without evidence of the poetic process itself—a purified and condensed version of the Romantic epiphany, a stripped-down rendering of Wordsworth’s spots of time.

Like Wordsworth, Pound had epic ambitions. Gelpi points out that whilst “not yet twenty and still an undergraduate at Hamilton College, he had conceived the ambition of writing an epic” and “determined to make himself the great *modern* American poet.”<sup>26</sup> Gelpi traces Pound’s poetic development from Imagism through Vorticism and back to nature and the organic “by way of the Orient.”<sup>27</sup> His interaction with the work of Fenollosa, particularly Fenollosa’s essay on the Chinese language and his notebooks of transliterations of ideograms, helped Pound to further develop his poetic style and ability to capture the movement of a moment in words. As Gelpi sees it, “Pound recovered the Romantic connection between linguistic and organic processes” through his discovery of the Chinese ideogram and incorporation of an ideogramic method into his own poetry:

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<sup>24</sup> Ezra Pound. “The Rev. G. Crabbe, LL.B.” *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*. Ed. T. S. Eliot. New York: New Directions, 1954. 276-80. 277.

<sup>25</sup> Clive Wilmer. “Pound’s Life and Career.” *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-century Poetry in English*. Ed. Ian Hamilton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994. 428-430. 428.

<sup>26</sup> Gelpi *A Coherent* 169

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 180

Pound via Fenollosa seized upon a notion of the ideogramic character of language . . . as a way to organize a sequence of “moving images” into longer, more complex verbal structures—into a poem with a temporal factor, into an epic “poem including history.”<sup>28</sup>

This connection between Pound and the Romantic organic process of language is also inherent in Snyder’s imagist-like natural poetry. In fact, Snyder often refers to Pound as his teacher and has carried on much of Pound’s visionary and esoteric poetic traditions.

In the context of this discussion—on the discrepancy between the poet as seer and the poet as prophet—Wordsworth and Pound can be considered representations of opposing poles where Wordsworth is the incarnation of the poet as prophet with his use of the “ordinary word” and Pound is the image of the poet as seer whose esoteric poetic visions are often like the geese that fly off the edge like the poetry of Snyder’s “Space Poet.” Pound has always been known for the obscurity of his poetry, and yet the images created through his brief, bare descriptions aspire to accomplish many of the same goals that Wordsworth sought to achieve through his natural poetics. Clive Wilmer describes Pound’s skill and accomplishment with much insight: “Such is the sensitivity of his verse movement that it seems to release independent life and otherness in his subjects, as if it had discovered them by chance.”<sup>29</sup> As an example of this observation, Wilmer refers specifically to Pound’s description of olive leaves from Canto LXXIV where Pound

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 181

<sup>29</sup> Clive Wilmer, “Pound’s Life and Career.” *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-century Poetry in English*. Ed. Ian Hamilton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994. 428-430. 429.

explores the ability of the olive leaf, much like the eyes of an owl<sup>30</sup>, to both shine and not shine depending on its angle in the sun:

olivi  
 that which gleams and then does not gleam  
 as the leaf turns in the air (473-75)

This passage captures beautifully the Modernist moment, the “momentary gestalt” wherein a few words can create an infinitely dimensioned picture, an instant, in the reader’s mind, which, in turn “paints a thousand words” (as the Chinese proverb goes) that also continue in the reader’s mind. Pound’s ability to capture both the stillness of the moment and the movement of an eternity is remarkable. The difficulty with the passage is that although the reader is left with a beautiful image of an olive leaf turning in the wind, the reader is also left with much unsaid and must then struggle to infer Pound’s further meaning with its implications of stillness and movement, the passage of time in its eternal round as well as the momentary stillness of poetic vision.

Snyder has created for himself a new poetic tradition derived from Pound’s Imagism and Wordsworth’s spots of time, and has made himself a poet whose work attempts to mediate between the abstract obscurity of Pound’s stark and fragmented imagery and the verbose storytelling of Wordsworth’s egotistical sublime. It is this attempt at mediation and balance—between prophet and seer, past and future, east

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<sup>30</sup> See Richard Sieburth’s annotated note in which he discusses Pound’s interest in Allen Upward’s explanation of the association of Athena, goddess of wisdom, and an owl whose eyes “shine and then not shine, ‘glint’ rather than shine” (in Ezra Pound. *The Pisan Cantos*. Ed. Richard Sieburth. New York: New Directions, 2003. 146.).

and west, Romanticism and Modernism—at the heart of Snyder’s poetry to which my next chapter will turn.

## Chapter Four: Snyder's Post-Romantic Vision: The Shaman as Poet/Prophet


In *The Back Country* (1968) Snyder observes that “Poets and storytellers have throughout time stepped in to mediate between gods, nature, religion, and society” (43). In an attempt to become such a mediator and poet, Snyder has created for himself a new poetic tradition derived from Wordsworth’s spots of time through Pound’s Imagism and Williams’s belief in “No ideas but in things” (9).<sup>1</sup> Snyder’s poetry attempts to blend the Modernist moment with the Romantic, especially Wordsworthian, valuation of the ordinary, which becomes, through the eyes of the poet, extraordinary. His epiphanic moments are Zen-like visions of the mind interconnected with nature.

“Regarding Wave,” from Snyder’s 1970 collection of the same name, illustrates this combination of Wordsworthian observation and Modernist/Poundian imagism that the poet artfully achieves. Snyder structures the poem in three sections separated by a symbol<sup>2</sup> that is similar to a Sanskrit character or a variation thereof;

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<sup>1</sup> William Carlos Williams. *Paterson*. New York: New Directions, 1963. Quotations from *Paterson* will be referred to throughout by page number based on the 1963 New Directions edition, as the poem itself does not contain line numbers and is a combination of poetry and prose.

<sup>2</sup> In Snyder’s later collection, *The Gary Snyder Reader*, this Sanskrit-like symbol is

replaced by an image of Kokopelli, , the Native American god of fertility found in petroglyphs all over the southwestern United States. Like Coyote, a frequent character in Snyder’s poetry and essays, Kokopelli is a trickster—a god, spirit or mystical creature who disobeys the rules of nature or conventional behaviour and whose personality is often a combination of contradictions: guile and innocence, foolishness and omniscience, etc. (see “trickster tale” in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*). Importantly, the trickster, particularly coyote in Snyder’s poetics, “breaks down any dichotomous black-and-white sense of good and evil” because

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in it the right and left hemispheres of the symbol are mirror images of each other along a vertical axis. This symbol is incorporated within poems intermittently throughout the collection as well as on its title page and demonstrates Snyder's attention to the visual and spatial aspect of a poem as well as a collection of poems.

The title of the poem, and particularly the word "Regarding," gives an important insight into understanding Snyder's possible intentions. Snyder explained in an interview with Katherine McNeil that the title of the poem "connect[s] enlightenment to hearing, to sound as a 'way in.'"<sup>3</sup> He explains that "it is the sense of hearing by which people become enlightened most directly" and that the literal translation of Kuan Yin's name is "Regarding the Sound Waves."<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Snyder explains that "'Kuan' means 'to regard intently,' and 'on' is 'sound waves.'"<sup>5</sup> Thus Snyder intends to create for his reader a poem that regards, listens and ponders intently upon sound waves. Additionally, the word *regard* connotes a sense of connection as its definition, "to concern, have relation or respect to" implies.<sup>6</sup> The word also indicates a sense of looking at or contemplating an object within the scope of one's own perspective—to "look at; gaze at; observe."<sup>7</sup>

The word *regard* is also used by another post-Romantic poet, Wallace Stevens, whose use of the word is significant and worth supplementary discussion.

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not only is he "quick, sly, lecherous" he is also "a carrier of valuable knowledge, a rebel, a survivor" (BOF 45).

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Hunt 83

<sup>4</sup> A bodhisattva, or enlightened being, who exemplifies compassion and mercy and is often considered the most beloved of all the Buddhist deities. (See "Avalokitesvara." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2010. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 4 Mar. 2010.)

<sup>5</sup> Hunt 83

<sup>6</sup> "regard, v." Def. 8a.

<sup>7</sup> "regard, v." Def. 9a.

As I discussed in Chapter Two, Stevens, like Snyder, explored the role of the poet as “the priest of the invisible”<sup>8</sup> who is able to *regard* things in the sense that he can see by means of contemplation, consideration and by hearing what only a poet could hear, see or understand through the imagination. Snyder actually used Stevens’s poem, “The Snow Man,” in a panel on Zen in literature at the Modern Language Association.<sup>9</sup> In the opening two lines of “The Snow Man” Stevens explains that “One must have a mind of winter / To regard the frost . . .”<sup>10</sup> Stevens’s use of the word “regard” implies, as Snyder says, “the sense of hearing by which people become enlightened most directly.” Stevens acknowledges this idea—that to regard is to hear—throughout the poem as he discusses, particularly in lines 8 through 10, “the sound of the wind / In the sound of a few leaves,” and in the “sound of the land.”

But there is also a sense that the word *regard* implies an ability or desire to look at something from one’s own perspective and based on one’s own experience. And yet Stevens undermines the self-aware and egotistical element of the poem even as he acknowledges it. For just as the listener in the poem “regards” and “beholds” the “frost” and “junipers shagged with ice,” he also must *not* “think / Of any misery in the sound of the wind.” But in mentioning such misery the listener has thought of what he must not think, which leads to the equally contradictory conclusion:

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<sup>8</sup> Stevens *Opus* 169

<sup>9</sup> William W. Bevis. *Mind of Winter: Wallace Stevens, Meditation, and Literature*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1988. 37.

<sup>10</sup> Wallace Stevens. *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*. London: Faber and Faber, 1955. 9-10.

For the listener, who listens in the snow,  
 And, nothing himself, beholds  
 Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

Maureen Kravec notes that the conclusion of the poem paraphrases, or at least explores the implications of, Nietzsche's idea in *The Birth of Tragedy* that there is an underlying subjectivity in lyric poetry which involves "the artist's struggle between willing and 'will-lessness.'"<sup>11</sup> The shift from the verb "regard" to the verb "behold" also indicates the dual action of being able to both regard—in the sense of looking at something with one's own perspective or subjectivity—and to behold, "to receive the impression of (anything) through the eyes"<sup>12</sup>—in the sense of receiving or taking in a thing or idea in an objective manner. In fact, the entry on *behold* in the *OED* makes observation of the change in the definition of the word from an active to a "passive sensation" that is subtle and difficult to distinguish:

- a. To hold or keep in view, to watch; to regard or contemplate with the eyes; to look upon, look at (implying active voluntary exercise of the faculty of vision). arch. This has passed imperceptibly into the resulting passive sensation:
- b. To receive the impression of (anything) through the eyes, to see: the ordinary current sense.<sup>13</sup>

The oscillation between activity and passivity is caught in the word *behold* and lets the listener act in a wise or knowing passiveness—both acting and being acted upon.

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<sup>11</sup> Maureen Kravec. "Stevens's The Snow Man." *The Explicator* 50.2 (Winter 1992): 86-87. *Literature Online*. 16 March 2010. 86.

<sup>12</sup> "behold, v." Def. 7b.

<sup>13</sup> "behold, v." Def. 7a, b.

Stevens's representative struggle between "willing and 'will-lessness'" is thus dramatised in the dual possibility of the words *regard* and *behold*. The listener not only regards the winter scene with a mind to connect "enlightenment to hearing"<sup>14</sup>, but also contemplates his own nothingness—in other words, his emptiness of individuality and therefore his interconnectedness to all things. This incorporation of a Buddhist meditative perspective is surely a precursor to Snyder's own experiments with Zen in literature.

Stevens's—and Snyder's—approach to examining the interaction between the mind's imagination and the external world converts for its own often residually positive ends the Romantic fear of Wordsworth and Coleridge that the imagination could be a mere projection. This relationship between fear and awe of the imagination is the dialectical drama at the heart of much Romantic poetry in which a celebration of the imagination is often intertwined with a fear and a warning concerning the imagination's deceptive and illusory potential. Harold Bloom recognises this aspect of Stevens's poetry by noting that "Stevens re-enacts the central Romantic confrontations between the power of a poet's mind and the object-world or universe of death."<sup>15</sup> Bloom credits Shelley as being "the true point of origin for Stevens," particularly with respect to Stevens's "The Auroras of Autumn."<sup>16</sup> In *Mont Blanc*, Shelley creates again the Romantic dialectic or intricate conversation in which the power of nature and the power of the mind interact as thesis and corresponding antithesis. The resulting poem creates, or acknowledges, a

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<sup>14</sup> See previous Snyder quotation.

<sup>15</sup> Harold Bloom. *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1976. 254.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

negative Romanticism which challenges the first-generation Romantics' partial distrust of the imagination and deference to the benevolent power of nature. Even as Shelley opens his poem, he acknowledges in lines 1 through 4 that although the "everlasting universe of things" lends "splendour," its power wavers from the positive to something often negative or dark: "Now dark—now glittering—now reflecting gloom." Shelley also acknowledges, much like Wordsworth's "corresponding mild creative breeze" (which I will look at more closely later in this chapter), a correspondence and reflection between idea and object in phrases such as, "Where Power in likeness of the Arve" (16), or in the image of the waterfall's veil which "Robes some unsculptured image" (27). Shelley's poem also enacts—particularly in lines 37-40, quoted below—the dual nature of the correspondence between the mind and the external "object-world" as the mind both *regards* and *beholds* (or in Shelley's terms, "renders and receives") the "universe of things":

My own, my human mind, which passively  
 Now renders and receives fast influencings,  
 Holding an unremitting interchange  
 With the clear universe of things around;

But in spite of this "interchange," *Mont Blanc* also creates an emptied-out Romanticism in which Shelley asserts that the "Power" of the "everlasting universe of things" "dwells apart in its tranquillity / Remote, serene, and inaccessible" (96-97). Ultimately, it is Shelley's "human mind" which rendered and received and held interchange. Thus the poem provides a decided emphasis on the power of "the human mind's imaginings." And although Shelley ends his poem by formulating his

assertion into a question, the thought is nonetheless acknowledged that even the “secret strength of things” that “inhabits” the mountain (139-41) ultimately depends upon the imagination for validation:

And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,

If to the human mind’s imaginings

Silence and solitude were vacancy? (142-44)

Stevens builds upon Shelley’s Romantic correspondence between the thesis and antithesis of the mind and the external object-image by creating a further synthesis of the two. He acknowledges the possible negative vacancy of the inaccessible power in Shelley’s *Mont Blanc* as well as the negative possibility of the deceptive potential of the imagination, thus creating, by way of two negatives, a positive incorporation of “Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.” Importantly as well, Stevens indicates that the listener of “The Snow Man” is aware that he is “nothing himself” and in recognising this the listener can therefore behold the corresponding nothing that is and is not there in the external world of winter.

“Regarding Wave” is a post-Romantic beneficiary of Stevens’s own post-Romantic entanglements with the possibilities of interchange between the mind and what the mind beholds and regards. Before returning directly to my discussion of Snyder’s “Regarding Wave,” it must be noted that the idea of *regarding* and *beholding* inspiration in the form of waves is overtly seen in canonical Romantic poems. Wordsworth incorporates the idea of both listening and contemplating waves of water as well as inspiration in *Tintern Abbey*. He opens the poem with the sound, heard again after five long years, of “waters, rolling from their mountain-

springs / With a sweet inland murmur” (3-4). Wordsworth then continues by adding to the sound an image and by specifically using the word *behold*, which is continually repeated throughout the poem:

—Once again

Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,  
Which on a wild secluded scene impress  
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; (4-7)

As Wordsworth develops this poetic vision in one of its most often (and previously) quoted passages, he again combines image with sound in order to express the process of inspiration:

For I have learned

To look on nature, not as in the hour  
Of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes  
The still, sad music of humanity, (89-92)

Shelley, in the opening lines of *Mont Blanc*, also refers to this Wordsworthian idea of inspiration when he writes that “The everlasting universe of things / Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves” (1-2), adding an acknowledgement of the aural element to inspiration: “with a sound but half its own” (6).

Snyder’s poem is both the Zen-like expression and representation of the literal translation of Kuan Yin’s name and an incarnation of the Romantic dialectic wherein the poet again explores the relationship of interchange between the mind and the natural world. He does so in the first section of “Regarding Wave” by creating an image and a sound incorporated into one moment:

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The voice of the Dharma

the voice

*now*

A shimmering bell

through all.

Snyder encapsulates in these first two stanzas a moment, signified by the simple word “*now*” and emphasised by the poet’s use of italics, in which the sound of a bell becomes the voice of the Dharma, resonating through everything, for its hearer. This first section with its description of the bell serves to function in the same way that a bell does in a Zen monastery. That is, the ringing of the bell (which itself represents wisdom and the Buddhist concept of emptiness—one of Snyder’s recurring themes) signifies the beginning of enlightenment when one’s perspective changes. The first section of “Regarding Wave,” then, captures in its description of a moment the sound of a “shimmering bell,” much like Pound’s gleaming olive leaf, that resonates “through all,” thus implying again the Buddhist concept of emptiness, or the interconnectedness of all things.

The second section of the poem presents images that function in ways that are at once separate and together as well as still and moving. These images illustrate Snyder’s conceptualisation of interpenetration, particularly, the interpenetration of the mind and nature:

Every hill, still.

Every tree alive. Every leaf.

All the slopes flow.

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old woods, new seedlings,  
tall grasses plumes.

Dark hollows; peaks of light.  
wind stirs the cool side  
Each leaf living.  
All the hills.

Thus Snyder presents his vision of interconnectedness and interpenetration as a moment in which he can see both the minute detail and the vastness of all these details combined into a landscape. He sees opposites such as “Dark hollows” and “peaks of light” or “old woods” and “new seedlings” that, together and separately as each individual leaf is blown in the wind, create a movement amid the stillness that illustrates the life of the hills. Such an image of stillness and movement caught up in a timeless moment recalls the impact of Pound’s imagery, and these two stanzas by themselves could stand as an impressive example of imagism and Snyder’s visionary skill. Yet the final section of “Regarding Wave” adds a concluding perspective in which the vision represented changes from an eternal moment to something that happened in the past and yet still lingers:

The Voice  
is a wife  
to  
him still.

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ōm ah hūm

Thus Snyder concludes the poem with a final section that reflects much of Wordsworth’s retrospective poetics in which he finds enlightenment in the

experience long after the event. For “The Voice” that accompanies the poet as “a wife” and changes his perspective, enabling him to see things through an enlightened point of view, is with “him still.” The passage also implies that this moment of illumination, although a thing of the past in terms of our finite understanding of time, becomes eternal in that this voice—the sound of the bell, the voice of the Dharma—continues with the poet and enables him to see all things in the enlightened way that he has seen “Every hill.” Snyder concludes with “ōm ah hūm,” three mantric words that create a meditation in the reader’s mind with a plenitude of Buddhist implications, particularly that of a trinity (hinted at by the use of three words) comprised of body, sound or voice, and mind or spirit. The three mantric words are also reminiscent of the final words of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*: “Shantih shantih shantih.”<sup>17</sup> Like Eliot’s “formal ending” to his “Upanishad”<sup>18</sup>, Snyder’s mantric triad rounds out the poem in a ceremonious way.

By incorporating the first and last sections of the poem with the pith of his visionary middle section, Snyder combines the techniques of Pound and Wordsworth, the seer and the prophet. His poetry is constructed of sparse and stripped-down imagery in the tradition of Pound, but Snyder recognises the social function of poetry and attempts to mediate between the purely visionary aspect of his poem by leading the reader through the before and after process of the vision. The first section serves to show the reader the catalyst, the “voice of the Dharma” as “A shimmering bell,” through which understanding is obtained, and the last section

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<sup>17</sup> T. S. Eliot. *The Waste Land. Collected Poems 1909-1962*. London: Faber and Faber, 2002. 51-69. 69.

<sup>18</sup> See Eliot’s “Notes on *The Waste Land*” from *Collected* 70-76, n434.

serves to illustrate that this voice which accompanies him as a wife (recalling the Wordsworthian marriage of the “Mind of Man” to this “goodly universe”) gives the poet continual understanding and authority to speak of the interconnectedness of all things.

Not only does Snyder’s imagistic style and treatment of the poet as prophet and seer continue in many ways in the tradition of Pound, but it also carries on from another important figure in Modern American poetry, William Carlos Williams, whose connection to the British Romantics through his love and intense study of Keats is well known and was often acknowledged by Williams.<sup>19</sup> In *William Carlos Williams and Romantic Idealism*, Carl Rapp opens his book by asserting that although many critics argue that Williams was able to outstrip the trappings of Romanticism, he nevertheless has “strong ties with the traditions he is supposed to have transcended.”<sup>20</sup> Rapp associates Williams with the Romantics in the paradox of his “most intimate connection but also the most severe disjunction between Williams himself and the phenomenal world.” This paradoxical connection and simultaneous disjunction, Rapp notes, “is characteristic of romantic poetry generally.” For:

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<sup>19</sup> In turn, Williams’s influence upon Snyder is well documented and acknowledged. In a letter to Allen Ginsberg, dated 8 January 1957, Snyder says that Williams “met me once at Reed [College] and read my poems and said some nice things to me—more encouraging than he even thought I suppose—and met me again at Lloyd Reynolds’ house in Portland, and I owe something to him for his good-spirit then.” See Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder. *Selected Letters of Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder*. Ed. Bill Morgan. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2009. 15.

<sup>20</sup> Carl Rapp. *William Carlos Williams and Romantic Idealism*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1984. 5.

The romantic poet is typically drawn in two different directions. On the one hand, he is enticed into the world of the senses, to “the mighty world / Of eye, and ear,” to “this goodly universe,” which is usually called “Nature.” On the other hand, he is equally attracted to what Wordsworth calls “the invisible world,” which is not available to the gross bodily eye but only to the “inward eye” of contemplation. Thus for every passage that celebrates a harmonious interrelationship, “an ennobling interchange,” between the poet’s mind and the “external” world, there is a counterpassage somewhere that celebrates the preeminence of mind over world.<sup>21</sup>

This reincarnation of the Romantic dilemma of both interchange and disparity between the mind and the phenomenal world in Williams’s poetry provides another link in the varied line of Romantic influence upon Snyder. Many critics and poetic historians indicate Snyder as a beneficiary of Williams’s revolutionary ideas in form and American identity. Certainly Williams’s contribution to Snyder’s vision of the poet as shamanistic mediator between esoteric vision and the language of the common person cannot be overlooked. Williams’s connection to the Imagist and Modern movements in poetry is not unlike Pound’s; however, his distinctly and even adamantly American poetic identity and his rejection of what he considered to be the old and stale, worn-out language of Britain and Europe set the scene for Snyder as well as for many of Snyder’s contemporaries and peers. Williams was a mentor and influence for poets all over the US, including the Black Mountain poets, the poets of the San Francisco Renaissance, and the Beat poets—in particular, Allen

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 24

Ginsberg, whose correspondences with Williams contributed to material in Book V of Williams's *Paterson*.

When Williams's contemporaries and friends, Pound and Eliot, became expatriates and followed in the English tradition, Williams sought a different approach to poetry and language as he incorporated an emphasis on the local. In contrast to "Pound's irrepressible arrogance," Gelpi sees Williams as carrying on much of the tradition of Whitman, "the American bard as doctor and healer, as cultural wound dresser."<sup>22</sup> Williams's goal was (like Wordsworth's attempt to imitate the language of the common man and to represent the people and landscape of his native Lake District in England) to create poetry that reflected the life and speech of American people. Marc Hofstadter describes Williams's distinctly American poetry thus:

Thinking of himself as a local poet who possessed neither the high culture nor the old-world manners of an Eliot or Pound, he sought to express his democracy through his way of speaking. . . . His point was to speak on an equal level with the reader, and to use the language and thought materials of America in expressing his point of view. The result, in the late poems, is a poetry of personal experience and an accessible, spoken idiom.<sup>23</sup>

And Williams, like his imagist contemporaries, attempts to capture the eternal moment in poetic form—an incorporation of "personal experience" into "an accessible, spoken idiom." Yet his approach is decidedly different: more American,

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<sup>22</sup> Gelpi *A Coherent* 321

<sup>23</sup> Marc Hofstadter. "A Different Speech: William Carlos Williams' Later Poetry." *Twentieth Century Literature* 23.4 (Dec. 1977): 451-466. *JSTOR*. 20 August 2008. 459.

more self-conscious, more natural when compared to Pound's mystical gestalt. This embodiment of Williams's Modern American poetics is culminated in *Paterson*, his epic poem which illustrates his own rendering of imagism, which Williams progressed from a mere "direct presentation of the thing" to a combination of images and the substances, movements and ideas those images represent.

Walter Scott Peterson, in his insightful interpretation of *Paterson* observes that this tendency of Modern poets to focus on a particular instant of time is rooted in Romanticism. In addition to Wordsworth's "spots of time" in *The Prelude* (Peterson connects Wordsworth's description of the Simplon Pass with Williams's description of the Passaic Falls in *Paterson*), Peterson traces a connection to Blake and quotes a passage from *Milton* in which the poetic seer describes an "eternal moment":

Every Time less than a pulsation of the artery  
Is equal in its period & value to Six Thousand Years.  
For in this Period the Poet's Work is Done, and all the Great  
Events of Time start forth & are conceiv'd in such a Period,  
Within a Moment, a Pulsation of the Artery.            (*Milton, Book the First*  
28:62-63, 29:1-3)

Peterson goes on to connect Blake's description of the "Moment"—in which "all the Great / Events of Time start forth & are conceiv'd" and in which "Period the Poet's Work is Done," as illustrated by the "Pulsation of the Artery"—with several of Blake's successors who have been credited as influencing Williams and also Snyder:

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“The moment” is described by Yeats as the point where “The Zodiac [gyres] is changed into a sphere” (*Chosen*); by Joyce as “the moment the focus is reached [and] the object is epiphanized” (*Stephen Hero*); by Eliot as “the still point of the turning world,” where time intersects with the timeless (*Four Quartets*); by Pound as the “instant of time” in which the “intellectual and emotional complex” which is the “image” is “presented” (*A Few Don'ts by an Imagist*); and by D.H. Lawrence as a moment . . . “at the core of space/ at the quick/ of time” (*Swan*).<sup>24</sup>

*Paterson* is infused with many examples of Williams’s version of the visionary eternal “moment,” “where time intersects with the timeless.” One particular example is found in Williams’s lyrical description of the Passaic Falls at the end of Book III (172), which incorporates the description of the Falls as a representation of the present moment—the freefalling water is momentarily suspended in its forward progression along the river which represents the past (before the Falls) and the future (after the Falls). In a way, Williams’s Passaic River and Falls is a poetic representation of a space-time continuum. It is as though the Falls represent a small blip or “wrinkle in time” that suspends the present moment and separates it from the past and the future, if only for a brief instant that lasts no longer than a “Pulsation of the Artery.” Thus Williams creates a poetic moment where time stops, but consciousness continues on, as represented by the falling water of the falls—it does not progress forward, but is moving nevertheless. In the

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<sup>24</sup> Walter Scott Peterson. *An Approach to Paterson*. Yale College Series. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967. 24.

first stanza of his concluding lyric in Book III Williams presents this image of the Passaic Falls as a suspended moment:

The past above, the future below  
and the present pouring down: the roar,  
the roar of the present, a speech—  
is, of necessity, my sole concern . . . (172)

A waterfall is a fitting choice for a presentation of the combined and contradictory stillness and movement of a moment. The rush of the water as it flows along and over the edge, then freefalls through the air and lands again into a churning pool of mist and spray and foam and swirling waves creates a display of spectacular powerful movement. Yet as thousands of millions of water molecules launch from the top of the Passaic Falls and plunge to the bottom of the cliff, Williams is able to create a single image of a waterfall whose innumerable individual moving parts flow together to create a picture of rushing stillness. The movement is there, but because the action and the path of the flowing, spraying, vaulting water is more or less the same, Williams's waterfall can appear, in this respect, to be static and unchanging—an eternal moment.

In addition to the simultaneous movement and stillness, Williams adds to the visual image he has created a description of the auditory characteristic of the Falls: “the roar, / the roar of the present.” This roar certainly reflects the immense noise commensurate with the immense movement and action of the Falls whilst also reflecting the Falls' stillness. For, although initially one is typically strongly affected by such a noise, its continuous and repetitive din makes it difficult for an



observer, and therefore listener, of the Falls to hear much else. Eventually, within a short time, the roar of the Falls becomes, in a way, a form of silence. It is amidst this clamour of movement and stillness, noise and silence, that Williams's (and Paterson's) thoughts and ideas, as he describes them in Book I, like the flow of the river and the clamour of the Falls,—

interlace, repel and cut under,  
 rise rock-thwarted and turn aside  
 but forever strain forward—

and

retake their course, the air full  
 of the tumult and of spray  
 connotative of the equal air, coeval,  
 filling the void       (16-17)

In fact, as the words “equal” and “coeval” suggest, Williams's thoughts and ideas become intermingled and married and ultimately indistinguishable from the Falls. And thus Williams creates a Modernist visionary gestalt wherein he illustrates his notion that there are “no ideas but in things” as an adaptation of Pound's Imagist assertion that poetry ought to be a “direct presentation of the thing.” But Williams's Modernist epiphany—his fusion of ideas and things—is, in addition to a restructuring of Modernist Imagism, an adaptation of the Romantic notion of the marriage of the “Mind of Man” with this “goodly universe.” In the previously quoted passage from Book I of *Paterson*, Williams adeptly presents the melding of ideas and things with mastery and grace, and, simultaneously portrays the Romantic

striving of a poet to attain such a consummation of a poetry created of such ideas and things. The second stanza of Williams's description of the Passaic Falls in Book I recounts the build-up toward and achievement of a moment, like the surge of the single pulse of an artery, in which an impact is felt as thoughts and ideas and things collide:

his thoughts

.....

Retake later the advance and  
 are replaced by succeeding hordes  
 pushing forward—they coalesce now  
 glass-smooth with their swiftness,  
 quiet or seem to quiet as at the close  
 they leap to the conclusion and  
 fall, fall in air! as if  
 floating, relieved of their weight,  
 split apart, ribbons; dazed, drunk  
 with the catastrophe of the descent  
 floating unsupported  
 to hit the rocks: to a thunder,  
 as if lightning had struck (16)

And then, after the impact, Williams illustrates the aftermath of such a collision of thoughts and things, of realisations, as the river recovers from its freefall and carries on toward the “void”:

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All lightness lost, weight regained in  
 the repulse, a fury of  
 escape driving them to rebound  
 upon those coming after—  
 keeping nevertheless to the stream, they  
 retake their course, the air full  
 of the tumult and of spray  
 connotative of the equal air, coeval,  
 filling the void       (16-17)

Williams juggles several parallels with artistry and finesse in this passage. Not only does he liken the build-up of thoughts and ideas to the course of a river which weaves and meanders, eventually culminating in “a leap to the conclusion,” but he also likens the climactic enlightenment to the freefalling moment when the river surges, almost silently, from off the top of a cliff only to crash thunderously upon the rocks below to the instant of time between the moment when lightening strikes in seeming silence and the moment when the echoing thunder of its impact reverberates across the landscape in answer. The notion is no doubt inherited from Romantic epiphany, and with it Williams combines his own American adaptation of the language of the common man. The final two lines of the quoted passage also present a Romantic interplay and marriage represented by the melding of the air and the spray. The two elements—air and water—become “connotative” of each other, “coeval” and therefore from the same origin. The phrase “equal air” is loosely reminiscent of the classical Latin expression, *aequo animo*, meaning “an even

mind.”<sup>25</sup> One wonders if Williams implies a calm mind amidst the “tumult and . . . spray,” as well as a mind equal to its metaphorical correspondent of commingled air and water caught in the freefall of a moment in time.

In addition, the similarities between the marriage of Paterson’s own ideas with the motion of the Passaic Falls and Wordsworth’s “vital,” “creative breeze” of thoughts which correspond to the external and natural breeze, described as the “sweet breath of Heaven,” are worth a brief mention. The 1805 version of Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*, Book I, describes this correlation between ideas and things:

For I, methought, while the sweet breath of Heaven  
Was blowing on my body, felt within  
A corresponding mild creative breeze,  
A vital breeze which travell’d gently on  
O’er things which it had made, and is become  
A tempest, a redundant energy      (41-46)<sup>26</sup>

Just as Wordsworth recognises that his internal thoughts and ideas follow the same patterns and movement of the external breeze, Williams sees that his ideas correspond to and can be associated with a thing such as a waterfall. This essentially Romantic concept of correspondence and counterparts between the poet and the

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<sup>25</sup> The phrase, *aequo animo*, is used, for example, in section IX.6, “The Emotions: Presence of Mind—Composure—Despair” of *Meissner’s Latin Phrasebook*. (Carl Meissner. *Meissner’s Latin Phrasebook*. 1938. Trans. H.W. Auden. New York: Hippocrene Books, 1998.)

<sup>26</sup> The corresponding lines in the 1850 version of *The Prelude* are altered but still refer to “A correspondent breeze, that gently moved / With quickening virtue . . .” (35-36).

external world is illustrated in Williams's essay "The Basis of Faith in Art" where he asserts: "I always knew that I was I, precisely where I stood and that nothing could make me accept anything that had no counterpart in myself by which to recognize it."<sup>27</sup>

For Williams the adaptation of the language of the common man is manifest in his rejection of traditional form and meter and his subtle use of poetic device; this adaptation is also manifest in the work of Snyder, his heir in the art of restrained and understated poetics. It is worth pointing out some examples of these poetic nuances in the previously quoted passage. For example, Williams repeats the prefix, "re," in the opening two lines with the words "Retake" and "replaced" (he also uses a similar repetition with the words "regained," "repulse," "rebound," and "retake" in the third stanza); and, as previously noted in Snyder's poetry, Williams does not create an obvious pattern by promptly repeating the prefix a third time, but rather moves on to another device, such as the ever-so-slight assonance of "hordes" and "forward" in lines two and three. He uses a vague consonance/alliteration in the third and fourth lines with the repetition of an "s" sound—"coalesce now / glass-smooth with their swiftness"—wherein the words nearly become a tongue-twister, but shift rapidly to a new line and a new sound entirely. Williams plays with the word "quiet" in the fifth line, where he uses it to simultaneously function as an adjective and a verb as his thoughts and the water of the falls "quiet or seem to quiet as at the close / they leap." Williams continues in this manner throughout the passage with obvious repetition, such as "fall, fall in air!"; with easily discernible

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<sup>27</sup> William Carlos Williams. *Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams*. 1954. New York: New Directions, 1969. 177.

alliteration, such as “dazed, drunk / with the catastrophe of the descent” or “All lightness lost”; and with subtle stylistic nuances, such as the parallel prepositional phrases in the line: “to hit the rocks: to a thunder,” or the assonance in “equal” and “coeval” in the penultimate line in the passage.

Perhaps most impressive about Williams’s passage describing and introducing the Passaic Falls is that Williams is not actually describing the Passaic Falls, but is rather presenting for the reader an abstraction of thoughts, ideas, revelations, epiphanies, the greatest mental moments in the mind of man entirely in the descriptive terms of nature by way of—or under the guise of—a description of the Falls. And so it is easy for the reader to miss Williams’s subject of the passage, which is Paterson’s “Jostled” thoughts. What an incredible fulfilment of Wordsworth’s vision of the “Mind of Man” as it is “When wedded to this goodly universe”! This is Williams at his finest. In his later poetry he was able to break many of the rules of Modernism, such as Pound’s imperative that a poet must “Go in fear of abstractions.”<sup>28</sup> The result is that instead of fearing abstractions, Williams embraces them—as his literary mantra, “no ideas but in things,” underscores. Thus Williams gave Snyder a way of bringing back into poetry what had been outlawed by his Modernist predecessors. Under the guise of seeming description, Williams has found a way of talking about concepts as though they were things. This is a skill of the true poet/prophet—to not only have the ability to see the visionary potential of the world and humanity, but to also find the means by which to communicate that vision to men in terms that are both abstract and straightforward.

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<sup>28</sup> Ezra Pound. “A Retrospect.” *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*. Ed. T. S. Eliot. New York: New Directions, 1935. 3-14. 4.

Like the Passaic Falls, Williams's epic verse is an amalgamation of movement and stillness that follows the pattern of the Passaic Falls. In evaluating Williams's epigraph to *Paterson*, Peterson articulately discusses the idea that Williams structured *Paterson* as a waterfall:

Both, of course, are things of beauty, but in addition Williams sees their functions as similar. That is, each disperses complexity into relative simplicity. The individual particulars thus distinguished may then be "metamorphosed," both as particulars and in new combinations. The dual analytic/synthetic nature of such "metamorphosis" is indicated both in the phrase "by multiplication a reduction to one" and by the single word "resolve." (14)

The poet's idea that both poem and waterfall are "things of beauty" with a similar function is built upon and in reference to Keats's opening line of *Endymion* in which the Romantic poet asserts, "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever." In a poetry reading at Princeton University on 19 March 1952, Williams expounded upon this idea concerning a thing of beauty. Of his notoriously enigmatic poem, "The Red Wheelbarrow," Williams explained,

It means just the same as the opening lines of *Endymion*, "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever," and so much depends upon it. But instead of saying "A thing of beauty" I say "a red wheelbarrow glazed with rainwater beside the white chickens." Isn't that beautiful?<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> William Carlos Williams. "The Red Wheelbarrow." *Reading and Commentary at Princeton University. March 19, 1952*. Ed. Dr. Richard Swigg. PennSound.

In what to some may seem an equally inscrutable explanation, Williams builds upon traditional Romantic notions of aesthetics and beauty and adds his own assertion concerning beauty: that it is something to be depended upon, a thing of function. In so redefining “A thing of beauty,” Williams recognises the idea inherent in the thing. He has taken a valuation of the ordinary and, through the eyes of the poet, seen how it is extraordinary. In this way Williams creates his own Romantic epiphany within a Modern momentary gestalt.

Williams’s notion that the local, individual, and “particular” can represent the “general” and universal by however “defective means” is a familiar theme with Snyder. Both poets value local history and Snyder’s idea that many archetypal themes found in native cultures throughout the world are universal to humanity is reflective of Williams’s assertion that the particulars, although defective in that they are local, are a microcosm of the whole and can be seen as momentary glimpses, epiphanies, or spots of time, through which one can “[roll] up the sum,” “find beauty” however deeply “it is locked in the mind” and ultimately “see a World in a Grain of Sand” as Blake, the quintessential visionary poet, saw the world and beyond.

Snyder’s own approach to poetry, like Williams’s, is deeply rooted in a deliberately American location and identity. His emphasis on place is inherent in much of his work and is at least partially reflective of Williams’s influence. Snyder’s poetry often considers not only the local history and human culture, but also the history of the local vegetation, geography and geology. One particular

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<<http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Williams-WC.php>>. Web. 15 Feb 2010. mp3.

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image that is occasionally incorporated into Snyder's poetics and essays is the image of layered rock and earth, strata that tell a story, a history of the earth in a particular location. Snyder explicates his idea thus:

One of the formal criteria of humanistic scholarship is that it be concerned with the scrutiny of texts. A text is information stored through time. The stratigraphy of rocks, layers of pollen in a swamp, the outward expanding circles in the trunk of a tree, can be seen as texts. The calligraphy of rivers winding back and forth over the land leaving layer upon layer of traces of previous riverbeds is text. The layers of history in language become a text of language itself. (POW 71)

Williams originally incorporated this image and idea of rock strata as a history and a text in Book III<sup>30</sup> of *Paterson* where he lists the details of the "substratum" in a "tabular account of the specimens found . . . with the depths at which they were taken" (166). No doubt Snyder's incorporation of the image of layered sediment and earth is in part a reincarnation of Williams's examination of such particulars. One example of Snyder's use of the image of "rock-strata" is found in "The Manichaeans" from *The Back Country*. In the poem, Snyder explores alternating points of view in which he incorporates a visionary outlook on time and location. Like Williams's "substratum" which hark back to the passage of time and the continual layering of history and change as recorded in the layering of earth, Snyder plays with hints of geological and astrological history in order to give a dual perspective that includes both the vast and unquantifiable passage of time and the

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<sup>30</sup> First published in 1949.

brief and yet eternal moment which he shares and which is a part of the “substratum” of his own history. He begins the poem with an expansive image of space and the universe, which gives a cosmic perspective that stretches beyond our customary human conceptions of time and history and forces the reader to contemplate the creation of the stars and the mythology of our universe at its inception:

Our portion of fire  
                                   at this end of the milky way  
 (the Tun-huang fragments say, Eternal Light)  
 Two million years from M 31  
                                   the galaxy in Andromeda—  
 My eyes sting with these relics.  
 Fingers mark time.  
                                   semen is everywhere  
 Two million seeds in a spurt.

And so Snyder begins his poem with a rendering of the Manichaeistic version of how the stars and cosmos were created. Manichaeistic cosmogony, according to Mircea Eliade, asserts that originally there were two substances—darkness (or matter) and light (or spirit)—which coexisted in opposing poles separated by a “no man’s land” of sorts. The Prince of Darkness, who ruled the land in the South, saw the glory of the light of the Father of Greatness, who reigned over the land in the North, and was filled with a lust for this light. Thus began the Manichaeistic struggle between light and darkness which, among other things, involved demons

who devoured light and then, when seeing the illusion of a beautiful virgin projected by a messenger of the Father of Greatness, “gave forth their semen” and with it the light they had devoured, therefore creating the multitude of stars in the cosmos, which Snyder alludes to.<sup>31</sup>

In the second stanza, Snyder shifts his point of view drastically from the outer reaches of the Andromeda Galaxy to the minute distance between two lovers who are “a shade off touching”—

Bringing hand close to your belly

a shade off touching,

Until it feels the radiating warmth.

In this way Snyder sets up his poem so that the particular—two lovers in bed—becomes a reflection, a microcosm of the general—the Manichaeistic creation of everything and the generation of heat. Then, in the third stanza, he combines the particular and the general, the concrete, physical, real with the abstract, theoretical, mythological:

Your far off laughter

Is an earthquake in your thigh.

Coild like Ourabouros

we are the Naga King

This bed is Eternal Chaos

—and wake in a stream of light.

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<sup>31</sup> Mircea Eliade. *A History of Religious Ideas*. Trans. Willard R. Trask. Vol. 2. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982. 232-34.

The poem continues in oscillation between the present moment and a universal/eternal past and future where the speaker (presumably Snyder) and his female counterpart (presumably Joanne Kyger, to whom the poem is dedicated) are compared through metaphor to mythological representations of creation and birth. His comparison of the two lovers with the Ourabouros<sup>32</sup>—the image of a snake or dragon eating its tail, one of the oldest and most universal mythological symbols found throughout the world—implies not only eternal cyclicity, but also creates an image of sexuality and a duality of opposites: man and woman, dark and light, matter and spirit. Thus the lovers' bed becomes the frontier of "Eternal Chaos" in which the Manichaeistic contest and interaction of opposing forces is played out, resulting in the creation of the universe. Snyder's final line in stanza three, "—and wake in a stream of light," is an allusion to the Manichaeic description of conversion: when one was converted to Manichaeism, it was described as an awakening or an illumination.

Snyder's fourth stanza continues in this description of particulars as representations of Manichaeistic mythology. His description of "Cable-car cables" which "Whip over their greast rollers / Two feet underground" gives the reader a very specific location, San Francisco. But he adds to his description of the cable-cars and his seemingly ordinary location an enlightened and mystical point of view that makes it more than just San Francisco:

Cable-car cables

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<sup>32</sup> Snyder's reference to the Naga King is possibly a reference to Vasuki, one of the half-god, half-snake deities called Naga, who are fertility deities, among other things.

Whip over their greast rollers  
 Two feet underground.  
     hemmed in by mysteries  
     all moving in order.

The implication is that below the earth, even two feet underground and surrounding the “greast rollers” of the cable-cars, is a world of mystery and mythology. Snyder also creates several comparisons between the particular and the general and mythological which create a new perspective of San Francisco. The stoplights at an intersection become “catastrophes among stars, / A red whorl of minotaurs / gone out.” And the horn from “a steamship at Pier 41” becomes “The trumpet of doom.”

In the last lines of the fourth stanza Snyder also explores the theme of heat and fire, which was introduced in the first line of the poem and is ultimately the main subject of the poem—heat, fire and passion. Again, as Snyder finishes his fourth stanza by returning to the intimacy and closeness of the lovers in bed, he oscillates between the ordinary and the magnificent:

Your room is cold,  
     in the shade-drawn dusk inside  
 Light the oven, leave it open  
 Semi transparent jet flames rise  
     fire,  
 Together we make eight pounds of  
 Pure white mineral ash.

The passage is superb in its poetic craftsmanship wherein Snyder employs his talent for subtly enthralling his readers with poetic device. He slips in alliteration in “shade-drawn dusk” and plays with the repetition of “in” and “inside” from the same line. He uses a parallel structure in the phrases “Light the oven,” and “leave it open” which have the same number of syllables, and the same letters, *l* and *o*, that create a musical and traditional poetic feel which he discontinues as quickly as he begins. Then, the next four lines move from describing the typical, mundane idea of fire to evoking the spiritual, passionate conception of fire. Fire, set apart in its own line for emphasis, changes from a literal flame in the oven to the flames of passion which are so intense that the two lovers are consumed by it, leaving of their bodies only the “Pure white mineral ash”: a reduction back to the basic elements.

The imagery Snyder creates in the fifth stanza continues the idea of heat and passion whilst reincorporating the mythology and history previously evoked in the earlier passages of the poem:

Your body is fossil  
 As you rest with your chin back  
     —your arms are still flippers  
                     your lidded eyes lift from a swamp  
 Let us touch—for if two lie together  
 Then they have warmth.

The first line of the stanza carries twofold implications. The first, which is carried on in the following three lines, is a conjuring of the mythologies and theories of creation and evolution where we find evidence of earlier beings in their fossilized







indeed in the entire poem, is “once,” which indicates the shift from the present to the past. The phrase, “all over / California,” is applied to the two previous images in order to give coherence and to connect the jarringly contrasted images. Thus there is “Motorburn, oil sump dirt smell / brake drum / . . . / all over / California” where “once deer kist, grazed, pranced, / pisst, / all over / California.”

Throughout the poem Snyder incorporates his trademark elliptical spaces and occasional poetic device. In the third and fourth lines Snyder places four verbs consecutively and repetitively with a final visual emphasis placed on “pisst” as it is aligned directly beneath “kist.” The effect is not as nuanced as in some of his other, more finely tuned poems, but does achieve impact in that it draws a comparison between the waste once left “All Over the Dry Grasses” by deer and the far more destructive and toxic “Motorburn” waste left by humanity. The following three stanzas that complete the poem continue with a collage of images both of human growth and impact upon California and the contrasting perspective of its past:

household laps. gum tea  
 buds.  
 new houses,  
 found wed on block pie.

sa.  
 bring back thick walls,  
 (cools my poison,  
 poison,

scorpio itch, tick—)

dreaming of

babies

All over Mendocino County

wrappt in wild iris

leaves.

But the many ambiguities of image and idea in the poem become increasingly difficult for the reader to decipher. This is particularly so with Snyder's ambiguous "sa.," which may be a reference to the Egyptian hieroglyph meaning "protection."<sup>33</sup> Or perhaps "sa." refers to one the Japanese syllabic scripts or *kana*.<sup>34</sup> Ultimately, although not without its virtues as previously observed, the poem never really advances beyond the fundamental eco-poem in the sense that it laments the present state of environmental destruction found "All Over the Dry Grasses" of California and mourns the loss of a more pristine (and pastoral) past, but does not seem to transcend toward an approach or an articulation of the interpenetration of the mind and the external world. The poem is certainly of value, but remains outside the realm of the Space Poet or the Mind Poet.

By contrast, "Everybody Lying on their Stomachs, Head toward the Candle, Reading, Sleeping, Drawing," also from *Regarding Wave*, achieves a successful

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<sup>33</sup> "Hieroglyphs and Egyptian Art." The Metropolitan Museum of Art. 22 Mar 2010. <<http://www.metmuseum.org/explore/publications/pdfs/egypt/divided/f-Heiroglyphs.pdf>>

<sup>34</sup> "kana." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2010. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 22 Mar. 2010.

mediation between a stripped-down poetics, where a scarcity of words gives unending possibility of meaning, and just enough direction so that the reader can make a connection to the poet and the poem and its meaning. “Everybody Lying . . .” also exemplifies Snyder’s ability to bridge Romantic observation and valuation of the ordinary with the Modernist imagistic moment, thus creating Zen visions and epiphanic moments that interconnect nature with the mind of man. Snyder uses the first half of the poem to describe an ordinary occurrence—a lightning storm. The poet gives just enough information for the reader to connect through his/her own seemingly ordinary experience:

The corrugated roof  
Booms and fades night-long to

million-darted rain  
squalls and

outside

lightning

Snyder never tells his reader that the “corrugated roof” is metal, but because it “Booms” in the “rain / squalls” his reader knows that this is likely the case and can hear, or imagine in the mind, the distinct sound of the “million-darted rain” drops as they assail the roof in bursts that surge and fade through the night. Snyder incorporates his trademark flashes of poetic touches throughout. He plays with a metre in the first three lines that approaches iambic trimeter, but shies away from producing such a set structure. The first line scans nicely in iambic trimeter:

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,   ,   ,   ,   ,   ,  
 The cor | ru ga | ted roof

The following line, however, breaks up the precise metrical pattern before it can become obvious to the reader. In the second and third lines of the poem Snyder drops the first unstressed syllable of the iambic trimeter in “Booms and fades night-long,” and then enjambes the first syllable of the last line of trimeter which follows—

,   ,   ,   ,   ,   ,   ,   ,   ,   ,  
 Booms | and fades | night-long | to / mil | lion-dar | ted rain

Within these lines of near iambic trimeter Snyder also plays with other poetic effects. For example, he repeats the double *o* sound in the assonance of the two continuous words “roof” and “Booms,” which Snyder disguises from the reader by enjambling the assonance between two lines. The assonance of “fades” and “rain” is muted and may go unnoticed but contributes to the poem’s rendering of experience. The poet also plays with hyphenated words such as “night-long” and “million-darted,” and he revisits this device later in the poem with “Wind-bent” and “Half-open” (quoted below). Snyder also omits seemingly insignificant words whilst incorporating others. Rather than using the common phrase, “all night long,” he chooses to omit the adjective, all, in favor of “night-long” and knows in doing so that his reader will still understand. Snyder does utilize minuscule and sometimes unnoticed words in his poetry, but they always serve a purpose that their seeming insignificance belies. The preposition “to,” which ends the second line of the poem gives the subtle implication of musical accompaniment—as though the corrugated roof sings in its booming voice *to* the accompaniment of the rain squalled percussion. In the fourth line of the poem Snyder sets apart “and” from the



understanding. The poem not only relates the poet's experience, but also creates for the reader an experience and a memory.

Snyder plays with boundaries in the poem as well. The first half of the poem emphasizes a separation between the reader and the natural world by beginning with a description of the roof that separates him and his companions from the storm. This is explicitly stressed by the weight and emphasis Snyder gives to the word "outside." In the second half of the poem, the plank shutter serves not only as a frame for his visual picture of "Wind-bent bamboo" but also as a door "through" which the outside world can enter and by which the boundary separating the two is perforated and defied. Incidentally, Snyder also emphasizes these lines by alliterating "Wind-bent bamboo" with a subtle *b*; and Snyder rhymes "bamboo" with "through." Thus there is also movement from a separation between the poet and nature to a connection and interchange between the two. When the storm, the lightning, and the outside world enter through the plank-shuttered window<sup>35</sup>, the combined vision creates a moment of change in which the action of the poem shifts from a movement inward to a movement outward toward "eternity."

Snyder takes advantage of the title of the poem, "Everybody Lying on their Stomachs, Head toward the Candle, Reading, Sleeping, Drawing," to incorporate information that does not appropriately fit within the sparse lines of the body of the poem.<sup>36</sup> It also provides a setting in contrast to the seemingly solitary vision of the poet and the rainsquall outside. One must also wonder whether the poet's

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<sup>35</sup> This interchange through the window is also seen in "Marin-An," which I discussed in Chapter Two.

<sup>36</sup> This is also the case with "IT," which I discussed in my introduction.

companions shared the visionary experience that he recounts. If this is the case, the title of the poem serves to remind the reader that the poet is not alone and that, in fact, the vision is a shared vision which is offered to the reader as an invitation to see and experience what “Everybody” has seen and experienced and understands. However, there is no indication within the poem that the vision is shared. The poet is possibly the only person, ironically amidst the crowd, to see the spectacular scene which creates “Photographs in [his] brain” and spurs epiphanic realisation concerning the relationship between man and nature. The idea that Snyder is the sole visionary amongst a group of seemingly unaffected bystanders who carry on “Reading, Sleeping, Drawing” underscores my assertion that Snyder seeks to position himself as the shaman poet who participates within and contributes to his community but is separated and set apart as a solitary visionary who sees through the mind as well as the eye and is therefore a poet and prophet in the Romantic vein. “Everybody Lying” demonstrates Snyder’s ability to produce a combined poetics that mediates a balance and a correspondence between Romantic epiphany and the sparse Modernist moment, between prophet and seer, past and future, and even man and nature.

## Chapter Five: The Measured Chaos of Snyder's Poetic Form

Every significant poet struggles with the task of creating something that is new and completely of its time. The development of free verse and open form poetics is one of the most palpable examples of such a striving for innovation and is at the heart of many critical discussions concerning poetic creativity and aesthetics. Critics have argued whether poetry without metrical norms or an official form can even be considered poetry. There is debate whether verse or even language can truly be free and whether the term “free verse” implies a freedom from actual form or a freedom from conventional and established parameters of metre and rhyme; consequently, some poets and critics prefer the term open form.<sup>1</sup> With the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth and Coleridge set a precedent of experimentation with a more natural form that has yet to be surpassed in the magnitude of its influence on subsequent poetry. Yet many critics debate the validity of the claim that the development of an American open form poetic is the progeny, however indirectly, of British Romantic poetic ideals and aesthetics. Timothy Steele, in his examination of modern poetry and free verse, *Missing Measures*, asserts, with the twentieth-century modernists in mind, that Wordsworth “did not argue, as the modernists of this century did, that abandoning meter was a suitable means of reforming the faults of predecessors.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In this study the two terms will be used interchangeably; however, Snyder tends to use the term open form.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Steele. *Missing Measures: Modern Poetry and the Revolt against Meter*. Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1990. 31.



In examining a connection between modern and post-modern free verse, I do not argue that the major formal characteristics of the free verse of the twentieth century came directly from Wordsworth's ideas in *Lyrical Ballads*. However, the pre-eminence of the Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* and its innovative ideas concerning poetry and poetic aesthetics deserve attention in an American context, and there are compelling arguments to suggest such an inheritance is valid. Albert Gelpi's *A Coherent Splendor* is a seminal exploration of Romantic legacies in American Modernist poetry, through which free verse developed. As Gelpi states in his introduction, his study "traces the development of American Modernist poetry both out of and against American Romanticism." Gelpi argues that "the terms of the dissonance between Romanticism and Modernism and the terms of the dissonances within both Romanticism and Modernism . . . provide continuity between the two supposedly opposing ideologies" and is "deeper and more interesting than the initial points of contrast."<sup>3</sup> For his part, American poet and critic, Miller Williams, in his essay entitled "The Revolution That Gave Us Modern Poetry Never Happened," observes that many of the characteristics of modern poetry that were deemed new and innovative—such as an idiomatic irregular verse—were inherent in Blake's "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" and even Milton's "Lycidas."<sup>4</sup>

Charles Altieri's significant study of "new directions in American poetry," *Enlarging the Temple*, places "the opposition between modern and postmodern

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<sup>3</sup> Gelpi *A Coherent* 1-2

<sup>4</sup> Miller Williams. "The Revolution that Gave Us Modern Poetry Never Happened." *Making a Poem: Some Thoughts about Poetry and the People Who Write It*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2006. 25-34. 32-33.

poetry in the larger context of English Romanticism.”<sup>5</sup> Altieri connects Snyder specifically to the English Romantics through their common ground in “articulating the mental act that produces or applies ideas.”<sup>6</sup> He calls attention to the originality of the Romantic lyric and illustrates its connection to the postmodern nature lyric through similar attempts to express the numinous whilst avoiding positivism through grounding “assertions of value in particular dramatic ways of attending to the objective world of secular science.” Altieri refers to Wendell Berry’s theories on poetry in order to identify the conflict in writing a religious nature poetry such as Snyder’s: “For a postmodern religious vision to be possible, poets must find styles capable of presenting ‘a new speech—a speech that will cause the world to live and thrive in men’s minds.’” And because poets must find a new speech, Altieri suggests that “awareness in poetry . . . becomes a matter of syntax rather than of symbolism,” which, he suggests, the Romantics also attempted in their nature lyrics:

Authority in the lyric normally depends on the manner in which linguistic structures figure forth acts of mind and imaginative stances. What makes lyrics potentially universal or typical is less their arguments or ideas than their way of articulating the mental act that produces or applies ideas.

Romantic nature lyrics, then, are essentially new, more meditative ways of relating traditional lyric strategies to a particular set of stances involving the mind’s stances toward nature. And the postmodern religious nature lyric, in turn, manifests the same tendencies under the greater pressure of a vision

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Altieri. *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry during the 1960s*. London: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1979. 17.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 129

that cannot rely on symbolism or theological metaphors but instead depends entirely on the quality of mental acts dramatized in process.<sup>7</sup>

Altieri stresses that syntax is how we organize our thoughts. An implication of this assertion is any new awareness communicated through poetry involves a new way of arranging the components of poetic thoughts. This is what the modern poets and subsequently the practitioners of free verse and open form poetics experimented with as they began to do away with punctuation and rely more on juxtaposition and succession.

It is what Snyder attempts to do through the distinct open and elliptical form of his poetry. One of the most important themes in Snyder's poetry is the interrelation of things, and his poetry attempts not only to articulate a sense of this connection, or interpenetration, but also to create a visible emblem of that relationship. Thus poetry is nothing less than the whole means by which the mind exhibits its awareness of the possibilities of relationships. For Snyder's approach to open form poetry, those elements of language, the traditional words that delineate connections—for example: with, because, as well as—are often insufficient to embody all the possibilities, and so, like the Romantic poets, he has sought “more meditative ways of relating” the components of thought and the awareness of connection. Much of Snyder's poetry demonstrates this juxtaposition of words and ideas, this reorganisation of the components of the poet's thoughts in order to more aptly communicate a connection. An untitled poem from “Little Songs for Gaia,”

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 128-29

collected in *Axe Handles* (1983) illustrates his juxtaposition of thoughts and connections:

Red-shafted

Flicker—

sharp cool call

The smell of Sweet Birch blooms

Through the warm manzanita

And the soft raining-down

Invisible, crackling dry duff,

of the droppings of oak-moth caterpillars.

nibbling spring leaves

High in the oak limbs above.

The poem is a collection of images that together make up a whole, and illustrates Snyder's recurrent theme concerning the interconnectedness and interdependence of an ecosystem and its components—from the smallest particle or mineral to the largest tree, mountain or animal. The conglomeration of elements and images reflects the process in which the mind works—first observing a number of separate components and then realising a connection, which leads to recognising a whole. Snyder sets the process in motion by listing these observations and ideas in such a way that the reader must see the connection and recognise the whole that is implied, but not articulated, by the layout of the poem and the carefully arranged images and actions. By ignoring general rules of syntax and grammar Snyder is able to create an awareness of the possibilities of relationships in the poem. In this way,

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the poem makes a sweep of observations from the ground, where the “Sweet Birch blooms / Through the warm manzanita,” to the sky, where the “oak-moth caterpillars” nibble leaves “High in the oak limbs above”—connecting everything in between as the droppings of the caterpillars fall to the ground and become part of the “crackling dry duff” that will eventually be reconstituted again, perhaps as another oak leaf or Birch bloom.

Walter Sutton gives a history of the development of the free verse movement in America, and provides a detailed genealogy of influence through British and American modern poets:

For all their intransigence, the moderns were rooted, more deeply than they would admit, in the English and American Romantic revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The movement was extremely complex, with many strands of influence, many attitudes, and not a few contradictions and inconsistencies. Yet it is possible to identify certain tendencies in Romantic poetic theory and practice that have special importance for the modern revolution in poetry.<sup>8</sup>

Sutton’s enumeration of these Romantic poetic tendencies that have influenced open form poetics includes: “the abandonment of neoclassical fixed forms (like the heroic couplet) and genre distinctions in favour of organically determined functional forms”; a “rejection of established poetic diction and the promotion of a more particularized and idiomatic language representing the individual perception of the writer”; a deification of the imagination; literary democratization in which

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<sup>8</sup> Walter Sutton. *American Free Verse: The Modern Revolution in Poetry*. New York: New Directions, 1973. 3-4.

“literature was for the whole society rather than for a supposedly superior class or coterie”; and a general movement “toward the opening of literature, especially poetry, to greater possibilities of subject and form.”<sup>9</sup> Most important in the consideration of Gary Snyder’s poetic inheritance, however indirect, from the British Romantics, are the Romantic ideas concerning poetry and how they are manifest through the forms that Snyder chooses.

Snyder himself catalogued some of his poetic influences as part of a literary discussion in two articles, “The Beat Generation” and “The New Wind,” originally written for the Japanese intellectual journal, *Chuo-koron*, but translated into English and published in *American Poetry* (2.1, Fall 1984) and again in his collection of essays from *A Place in Space: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Watersheds* (1995). Among the influences and associations he acknowledges in “The Beat Generation,” Snyder lists William Blake, Walt Whitman and Henry David Thoreau as furthering a tradition which engenders “values of community, love and freedom” (PIS 12). In particular, Snyder’s ideas and approaches to poetic form take root in the implications and possibilities inherent in the concept of freedom as explored not only by Blake but also by Blake’s British Romantic contemporaries.

One such Romantic commentator on the need for freedom in poetic form is Shelley, whose *A Defence of Poetry* articulates much of what his fellow Romantic poets sought to accomplish in their search for and creation of a new and distinct and, more accurately perhaps, revolutionary poetic reflective of the freedom they hoped

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 4-5

to see in the world. When discussing musical harmony and metre and its association to poetry, Shelley states:

Yet it is by no means essential that a poet should accommodate his language to this traditional form, so that the harmony which is its spirit be observed. . . . every great poet must inevitably innovate upon the example of his predecessors in the exact structure of his peculiar versification. The distinction between poets and prose-writers is a vulgar error. . . . Plato was essentially a poet—the truth and splendour of his imagery and the melody of his language is the most intense that it is possible to conceive. He rejected the measure of the epic, dramatic and lyrical forms, because he sought to kindle a harmony in thoughts divested of shape and action, and he forebore to invent any regular plan of rhythm which would include, under determinate forms, the varied pauses of his style. (679)

The value of Shelley's statement is illustrated within the passage itself. Not only does Shelley articulate his ideas with fluidity and grace, but he also applies their principles to his own prose with a poetic force that becomes the very example of what he seeks to postulate. This is seen in the way that Shelley includes fleeting elements of poetic device, such as the alliteration of "inevitably innovate" and "Plato was essentially a poet." Even the "varied pauses" of Shelley's style indicate a sense of poetic rhythm in his prose; and the "splendour" of Shelley's own "imagery" in *A Defence of Poetry* gives rise to an understanding of his own achievement as "truly innovative" and distinct. Michael O'Neill, in an essay directly addressed to the subject of Shelley as a "Prose Poet," described Shelley's writing in

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this particular passage as approaching the poetic: “Once more the sound echoes sense, as the ‘varied pauses’ of Shelley’s own rhythms flow past the barrier of that Latinate ‘determinate’ with its associations of something bounded, defined or completed.”<sup>10</sup> Shelley’s prose is surely unbounded and free, setting the bar for future great poets to “innovate upon.”

As Romanticism crossed the Atlantic, Emerson also contributed to the question of poetry in terms of form and metre when he argued in “The Poet,” from *Nature*, that it is the idea, the new thought, that makes a poem and not the structure of the metrical form:

For it is not metres, but a metre-making argument, that makes a poem,—a thought so passionate and alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing. The thought and the form are equal in the order of time, but in the order of genesis the thought is prior to the form. The poet has a new thought: he has a whole new experience to unfold; he will tell us how it was with him, and all men will be the richer in his fortune.<sup>11</sup>

Emerson’s assertion that the “metre-making argument,” the new and innovative idea, gives rise to the form as opposed to the notion that the form of the poem must dictate its subject is a concept that Snyder’s poetry greatly benefits from and capitalises upon. His poem, “How Poetry Comes to Me” (from *No Nature*, 1992) illustrates Snyder’s application of Emerson’s principle and will be discussed later in

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<sup>10</sup> Michael O’Neill. “Emulating Plato: Shelley as Translator and Prose Poet.” *The Unfamiliar Shelley*. Ed. Alan M. Weinberg and Timothy Webb. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2009. The Nineteenth Century. 252.

<sup>11</sup> Emerson 263



this chapter. Snyder's poetry is Romantic in being his own in individual style and experimentation; it is innovative, "instantly recognizable"<sup>12</sup>, and distinctly inventive and wild. Snyder's poetry is a living embodiment of the paradoxes set out in Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in which he suggests that a poet's best work is done when he is following in the tradition of the past:

We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet's difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors; we endeavour to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed. Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously.<sup>13</sup>

Certainly experimental and refreshingly original, Snyder's poetry is made possible through the influence of *Lyrical Ballads* and the continuing strength of Romantic effect. Like Wordsworth, whose exploration and creation of a poetry of the mind and imagination—as well as a poetry representative of the common man—is much known and acknowledged, Snyder places great emphasis on creating a poetry of the mind. In his essay, "Unnatural Writing," from *A Place in Space*, Gary Snyder discusses language as being "part and parcel of consciousness" and asserts that:

. . . consciousness, mind, imagination, *and* language are fundamentally wild. "Wild" as in wild ecosystems—richly interconnected, interdependent, and incredibly complex. Diverse, ancient, and full of information. At root the

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<sup>12</sup> Weinberger

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Stearns Eliot. "Tradition and the Individual Talent, I" *The Egoist* 6.4 (Sept. 1919): 54-55. 55.

real question is how we understand the concepts of order, freedom, and chaos. Is art an imposition of order on chaotic nature, or is art (also read “language”) a matter of discovering the grain of things, of uncovering the measured chaos that structures the natural world? Observation, reflection, and practice show artistic process to be the latter. (PIS 168)

The passage reveals Snyder’s view of the natural world as structured by a “measured chaos” which extends to human consciousness and language, which he asserts is “fundamentally wild” and “incredibly complex.” It is no wonder, then, that Snyder’s poetic style reflects his idea that consciousness and language are fundamentally wild.

Snyder’s poetry is most often categorised as being written in an open form with no set metre or rhyme scheme, which carries many implications for Snyder’s work and upholds his assertion that poetry and language are and should be wild. Snyder’s open form also reflects his emphasis on the necessity of a connection between man and his environment. In an essay on Snyder, Robert Kern connects poetry to place and notes that “almost all accounts of open form poetics insist at some level on the mimetic relationship between the form of the poem and the environment in which it is written.” Robert Kern describes Snyder’s open form poetics as a style in which the form of the poem is created as a result of an “emphasis on the priority and spiritual significance of content.”<sup>14</sup> Snyder himself

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Kern. “Recipes, Catalogues, Open Form Poetics: Gary Snyder’s Archetypal Voice.” *Contemporary Literature*, v 18 no 2 (Spring 1977), p 173-97. 176.

commented on his own approach to open form in a statement written for *Naked*

*Poetry*:

For me every poem is unique. One can understand and appreciate the conditions which produce formal poetry as part of man's experiment with civilization. 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. Better the perfect, easy discipline of the swallow's dip and swoop, "without east or west."

Each poem grows from an energy-mind-field-dance, and has its own inner grain. To let it grow, to let it speak for itself, is a large part of the work of the poet.<sup>15</sup>

Snyder's biological open form poetics can also be associated with Coleridge's idea of Organic Form, or Organic Principle, which Coleridge describes as ". . . innate, it shapes as it develops itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one & the same with the perfection of its outward Form. Such is the Life, such the form."<sup>16</sup> Snyder's previously quoted approach to poetry—"Each poem grows from an energy-mind-field-dance, and has its own inner grain. To let it grow, to let it speak for itself, is a large part of the work of the poet."—is a distinctly Coleridgean, and Romantic, concept. Interestingly, when asked in a 1978 interview with Ekbert Faas about a Romantic influence on his poetry, Snyder

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<sup>15</sup> Stephen Berg and Robert Mezey, ed. *Naked Poetry*. Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969. 357.

<sup>16</sup> From Coleridge's notes for Lecture 5 of the 1812 series, delivered 2 June 1812.

replied: “I have nothing against it, although I don’t feel the influence on myself directly.” But Faas’s explanation of organic form interested Snyder, and their conversation on the subject is particularly relevant in teasing out Snyder’s Romantic roots and his Romantic approach to poetry:

*Faas:* And yet it seems to me that Coleridge’s definition of the imagination as “a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” was a first major step towards open form aesthetics, a definition he partly derived from Schlegel.

*Snyder:* And where did he get it from?

*Faas:* As far as I can tell it was Herder who first modified Aristotle’s mimesis theory in the direction of open form aesthetics by saying that the artist does not mirror nature, *natura naturata*, but imitates creation or *natura naturans*. And then Schlegel goes one step further by saying that the poet does not *imitate* cosmic creation, but repeats it, reenacts it.

*Snyder:* That’s beautiful.<sup>17</sup>

So it seems that Snyder absorbs much of his ideas about poetic aesthetics and organic form through American Romantic predecessors such as Whitman and Pound rather than by directly reading Coleridge and Wordsworth himself.

Whitman’s distinctly American Romanticism and radical style was particularly effective on Snyder’s poetic development, and Snyder has often mentioned him as an influential forerunner. Whitman’s radical and unprecedented experiments with poetic style and form are almost universally credited as a

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<sup>17</sup> Faas 124-25

precursor to modern American open form poetics. But Whitman was a poetic beneficiary of his forebears, and his debt to Emerson, and therefore Coleridge, for the idea of organic form is evident, as Sutton points out: “Whitman subscribed to Emerson’s idea of the poet as a self-sufficient seer and reinforced his theory of organic form.”<sup>18</sup> Sutton quotes from the preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, which he suggests “reverberates with echoes of Emerson’s essay ‘The Poet.’”<sup>19</sup> For example, Whitman says that

The rhyme and uniformity of perfect poems show the free growth of metrical laws and bud from them as unerringly and loosely as lilacs or roses on a bush, and take shapes as compact as the shapes of chestnuts and oranges and melons and pears, and shed the perfume impalpable to form.<sup>20</sup>

Like Thoreau, who is often considered the practitioner of Emerson’s ideas, Whitman sought to be the American poet for whom Emerson called. His catalogues in “Song of Myself” demonstrate an approach to poetry that has escaped the bounds of traditional form and structure in favour of a verse that is masterful in its organisational disarray. As Michael D. Reed points out, “those multitudinous lists of items are joined together by such poetic devices as consonance, assonance, alliteration, grammatical parallelism and initial rhyme” and are exemplified throughout Section 33 of “Song of Myself”:

Scaling mountains, pulling myself cautiously up, holding on by low scragged limbs;

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<sup>18</sup> Sutton 10

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Walt Whitman. *Leaves of Grass: The First (1855) Edition*. Ed. Malcolm Cowley. London: Penguin, 1986. Penguin Classics. 10.

Walking the path worn in the grass, and beat through the leaves of the brush;  
 Where the quail is whistling betwixt the woods and the wheat-lot;  
 Where the bat flies in the Seventh-month eve—where the great gold-bug  
 drops through the dark;  
 Where flails keep time on the barn floor;  
 Where the brook puts out of the roots of the old tree and flows to the  
 meadow;  
 Where cattle stand and shake away flies with the tremulous shuddering of  
 their hides;  
 Where the cheese-cloth hangs in the kitchen—where andirons straddle the  
 hearth-slab—where cobwebs fall in festoons from the rafters;  
 Where trip-hammers crash—where the press is whirling its cylinders;  
 Wherever the human heart beats with terrible throes under its ribs; (730-  
 38)

Throughout the section, and in fact throughout “Song of Myself” and *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman is able to embody the interconnectedness of all aspects of life, movement and nature—something that Snyder has also always valued and sought to create in his poetry. The above lines come full circle only to continue on and in doing so create a microcosm of living and dynamic interconnectedness that begins with I, “myself,” and traces a connection through “the leaves of the brush” to “the great gold-bug” that “drops through the dark,” through diverse examples of life and movement such as the brook that unites the old tree with the meadow, through the “trip-hammers” and the whirling press, back to humanity and the “terrible throes” of

the human heartbeat. At the same time that Whitman transitions through these diverse examples of life, he also manages to encompass a duality of perspective as he shifts from the individual (“myself”) to the universal (“Wherever the human heart beats”). This is also a characteristic that is emulated in Snyder’s poetry, as I have discussed in my chapters on Snyder’s Romantic vision and the Romantic poet/prophet.<sup>21</sup> Sutton concludes that “Whitman’s free verse poems demonstrate that poetic form is an open rather than closed system, susceptible always to redefinition and further development in the shifting perspective of the reader,” and that his poetry is “a fitting representative of the idea of open and relative form”<sup>22</sup> upon which ensuing generations of poets, and in particular Snyder, have built a tradition of open and distinctly free verse.

Another poetic genealogical line that connects Snyder’s approach to poetic form with Romanticism runs through Charles Olson’s idea of Projective Verse. Snyder refers to Olson in his discussion of the “new American poetry” of the 1960s and summarises Olson’s ideas on form in Projective Verse by stating that “*form* is an extension of *content*” (PIS 15). Ekbert Faas finds that Snyder incorporates Olson’s theories on form in poetry and expands Olson’s ideas on natural breath and rhythm into his own approach to form:

Not unlike Olson, who demanded the “replacement of the Classical-representational by the *primitive-abstract*” and redefined form in terms of body-creativity (the poet’s breath-rhythm in relation to the cosmic life rhythm), Snyder, by 1959, came to realize that “the rhythms of my poems

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<sup>21</sup> Chapters Three and Four.

<sup>22</sup> Sutton 23-24

follow the rhythm of the physical work I'm doing and life I'm leading at any given time."<sup>23</sup>

According to the *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*,

Projective Verse belongs in a tradition of organic form that can be traced back to Coleridge's notion of "form as proceeding" (as opposed to "form as superinduced"). In the American line, it has its roots in the poetics of Emerson and Whitman. Already in Emerson one finds a sense not only of poetic form as organic but of the primacy of process over product and of the process as dynamic.<sup>24</sup>

Snyder illustrates his own version of organic form as articulated in the excerpt from *Naked Poetry* in his poem, "How Poetry Comes to Me" from *No Nature* (1992):

It comes blundering over the  
Boulders at night, it stays  
Frightened outside the  
Range of my campfire  
I go to meet it at the  
Edge of the light

In this poem, Poetry is a living thing, like an animal. Snyder is careful not to give too many details. He does not say Poetry is a mountain lion that roars or a timid deer. Instead, he leaves room for ambiguity, which reflects the process of

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<sup>23</sup> Faas 95

<sup>24</sup> "Projective Verse." *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Ed. Preminger, Alex, et al. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993. 976-77. *Literature Online*. 26 June 2009.



discovering a poem's "own inner grain." Snyder compares the range of the campfire to the conventions of formal and structured poetry; whereas, in order to create an organic poem, the poet must go to the edge of tradition and then meet the poem outside those boundaries in the unknown. It is also important to note that Snyder expresses his view of a poet's role as one of discovery where the poet helps the poem to "grow" and "speak for itself," but does not "create" the poem because it already exists, waiting at the edge of the campfire's light. The structure of the poem also reflects Snyder's idea of a more organic, natural form. Although "How Poetry Comes to Me" is not set in a traditional rhyme scheme with a set metre, it does have its own natural rhythm and is replete with poetic device, setting forth small discoveries that imply a keen sensibility. Snyder conceals parallel phrases within the poem that share a similar structure, metre and rhyme, such as "the / Boulders at night" and "the / Edge of the light." The enjambment of the phrases creates a sense of search and discovery as the reader must wait until the next line to discover the identity of the nouns introduced by the definite articles in the preceding lines. This search and discovery give emphasis to the central idea of the poem as enacting a poem's metapoetic processes of search and discovery. The two rhymed words, "night" and "light," also imply a contrast of opposites that are interconnected and mutually dependent, which is a recurring image and theme in Snyder's poetry that traces back to his Buddhist training as well as to Whitman. Supplying another touch of poetic attentiveness, Snyder adds "Frightened" to follow and rhyme with "night." Then Snyder waits until the end of his poem to repeat the rhyme with "light." By interspersing these rhyming words at different locations in the lines ("night" is

found in the middle of its line, “Fright” is placed at the beginning of its line, and “light” is positioned at the end of its line) as well as varying the frequency by repeating the rhyme quickly in lines two and three and then waiting to repeat the rhyme again until line six, Snyder creates a feeling of natural spontaneity. For Snyder the natural world and natural speech do incorporate rhyme and metre; however, these characteristics of speech and organic music are sporadic and chaotic rather than contrived and formulaic.

The process of discovery and realisation that Snyder describes in “How Poetry Comes to Me” is akin to Keats’s idea of “a greeting of the Spirit” which he discusses in his letter to Benjamin Bailey dated 13 March 1818:

As Tradesmen say every thing is worth what it will fetch, so probably every mental pursuit takes its reality and worth from the ardour of the pursuer—being in itself a nothing—Ethereal thing[s] may at least be thus real, divided under three heads—Things real—things semireal—and no things. Things real—such as existences of Sun Moon & Stars and passages of Shakspeare. Things semi-real such as Love, the Clouds &c which require a greeting of the Spirit to make them wholly exist—and Nothings which are made Great and dignified by an ardent pursuit—which by the by stamps the burgundy mark on the bottles of our Minds, insomuch as they are able to “consec[r]ate whate'er they look upon.”<sup>25</sup>

The verbs Snyder chooses to use in “How Poetry Comes to Me” illustrate Keats’s idea of “a greeting of the Spirit” which can make a mental pursuit, an ethereal thing,

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<sup>25</sup> John Keats. *The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821*. 2 vols. Ed. Hyder Edward Rollins. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958. 242-43.

take on the form of a poem. He begins by describing the action of a poem, which makes the first gesture of movement as “It comes blundering over the / Boulders at night.” But rather than come directly to the poet, a poem “stays / Frightened outside the / Range of my campfire.” The final gesture is made by the poet who must “go to meet it at the / Edge of the light.” In Snyder’s poem, the “greeting of the Spirit” is an exchange between the poet and the poem through which the poet can “let [the poem] grow” and “speak for itself.”<sup>26</sup> For Snyder the “greeting of the Spirit” is also highlighted by the location, as is emphasised by the last line; there, the poet and the poem meet where light and darkness meet.

Snyder’s poetic syntax also reveals the concept of an organic poetry which transcends the “self-imposed bonds” of traditional poetic form. Many of his poems resemble stream of consciousness, reflecting the author’s thoughts in an associative way. With Snyder’s poetry, the reader must fill in the blanks; the sentences are often not sentences, but rather phrases or flashes of ideas intertwined with images. This is Snyder’s version of the language of the common man. It is one of the ways in which Snyder demonstrates that poetry is “fundamentally wild,” just as “consciousness, mind, imagination and language are fundamentally wild . . . richly interconnected, interdependent, and incredibly complex.”

The word *wild* is full of poetic potential and possibility upon which Snyder capitalises. Snyder investigates its etymology and connotations and what it means for him in an essay entitled “The Etiquette of Freedom” from his collection, *The Practice of the Wild* (1990). He says of the word:

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<sup>26</sup> See previously quoted passage from *Naked Poetry*.

*Wild* is largely defined in our dictionaries by what—from a human standpoint—it is not. It cannot be seen by this approach for what it *is*. Turn it the other way:

Of animals—free agents, each with its own endowments, living within natural systems.

Of plants—self-propagating, self-maintaining, flourishing in accord with innate qualities.

Of land—a place where the original and potential vegetation and fauna are intact and in full interaction and the landforms are entirely the result of nonhuman forces. Pristine. . . .

Of behavior—fiercely resisting any oppression, confinement, or exploitation. (POW 10-11)

Snyder continues with definitions of wild food crops, wild societies, and wild individuals. He then gives the following summary of his definition of *wild*:

Most of the senses in this . . . set of definitions come very close to being how the Chinese define the term *Dao*, the *way* of Great Nature: eluding analysis, beyond categories, self-organizing, self-informing, playful, surprising, impermanent, insubstantial, independent, complete, orderly, unmediated, freely manifesting, self-authenticating, self-willed, complex, quite simple. Both empty and real at the same time. In some cases we might call it sacred.

(POW 11)

“Burning the Small Dead,” from *The Back Country* (1968), exemplifies Snyder’s “fundamentally wild” form and approach to poetry:

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Burning the small dead  
           branches  
 broke from beneath  
       thick spreading  
           whitebark pine.

          a hundred summers  
 snowmelt    rock    and air

hiss in a twisted bough.

          sierra granite;  
           mt. Ritter—  
           black rock twice as old.

Deneb, Altair  
 windy fire

Snyder uses his own unorthodox form, punctuation and structure to play on the reader's background knowledge and prior experience with traditional poetic form. Thus, the first line and title of the poem lead the reader to an assumption that the poem is perhaps an elegiac piece about the act of burning small dead bodies, possibly in the tradition of a funeral pyre used in many cultures throughout the world. But when the reader continues to the second line of the poem, he/she discovers that it is actually about burning the small dead branches from the whitebark pine, a tree native to Snyder's Sierra Nevada home. This does not necessarily mean that Snyder is not writing about a funeral pyre or that he does not intend for the poem to be elegiac. Snyder's poem celebrates the life and death of the whitebark pine and in doing so urges the reader to consider a point of view which

encompasses an interconnectedness between humans and the landscape. Throughout the poem, Snyder creates images and experiences without adding explicit commentary or emotion. These images collocate seemingly unrelated things that ultimately, in their measured chaos, demonstrate Snyder's notions of interpenetration and interdependence.

Snyder does so by beginning his poem with the small and finite act of burning dead whitebark pine branches. In a way that is typical of Snyder's style, he does not follow traditional poetic patterns of rhyme and metre, but he does hint at alliteration in "Burning," "branches," "broke" and "beneath." With the jump to the second stanza, Snyder creates a larger timescale and a broader, historical point of view. The idea of "a hundred summers" combined with "snowmelt rock and air" creates a sense of the ecological and environmental cycles that repeat throughout the years. Snyder separates the words "snowmelt rock and air" to add value to each element and its natural process while also acknowledging the contrasting fact that they also work together to create an ecosystem. Snyder deliberately presents the first two stanzas as consisting of apparently unrelated images that are not connected until what might be called the third stanza.

This third stanza, which consists of a single five-word line—"hiss in a twisted bough"—, is pivotal to Snyder's poem. It is set apart not only as a single line, but also as a separate stanza to place emphasis on the image it represents, and on the ideas and meaning implied in that image. Ultimately, what Snyder wants the reader to see is that within one twisted, dead whitebark pine bough is the culmination of a hundred summers worth of natural processes—of snowmelt

absorbed through the roots of the whitebark pine, of rock nutrients ground into the earth and incorporated into the tree, and of air processed through photosynthesis to make energy. Fire then becomes the last progression involved in converting all these elements and processes into mineral ash and returning them back to begin the ecological cycle again.

In the following stanza Snyder broadens his (and the reader's) point of view to encompass the surrounding mountains as he compares their history and characteristics (Mt. Ritter is known for its strikingly dark rock, which stands in great contrast to its neighbouring light granite mountains), and invites the reader to meditate on the infinite possibility of interrelation—an often repeated and particularly important theme in Snyder's poetry and essays. Snyder's last two stanzas, each consisting of single lines, follow his train of thought as he gazes out past the mountain ranges and into the summer sky where he sees Deneb and Altair, two stars in the Summer Triangle which are visible and brightest during the summer months, and then back to the windy fire in front of him. And so, just as Blake sees "a World in a Grain of Sand"<sup>27</sup>, Snyder sees the universe in a twisted dead bough.

Ekbert Faas observes a quality, original to Snyder's poetry and evident in "Burning the Small Dead," that is characteristic of his open, wild and natural poetic form:

Little gaps of silence frequently seem to separate one utterance from the next, and like the brush strokes of calligraphic paintings, each phrase or remark, like the phenomenon or event it embodies, seems to rest within the

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<sup>27</sup> See Blake's "Auguries of Innocence."

energy of its own tension, autonomous, and yet related to all others in the hidden field of force, creating its “complexity far beneath the surface texture.”<sup>28</sup>

These “little gaps of silence” in Snyder’s poems function superbly in “Burning the Small Dead” and underscore the complexity of the relationships between the elements presented in the poem.

The image of the small dead whitebark pine branch from Snyder’s poem is reminiscent of Eliot’s “Rhapsody on a Windy Night.”<sup>29</sup> In the third stanza of Eliot’s “Rhapsody,” he invokes an image of a dead and twisted branch:

The memory throws up high and dry  
 A crowd of twisted things;  
 A twisted branch upon the beach  
 Eaten smooth, and polished  
 As if the world gave up  
 The secret of its skeleton,  
 Stiff and white.  
 A broken spring in a factory yard,  
 Rust that clings to the form that the strength has left  
 Hard and curled and ready to snap.

The contrast between the two twisted dead boughs is stark, but is a matter of poetic perception rather than an actual physical difference. Eliot’s withered branch is

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<sup>28</sup> Faas 96

<sup>29</sup> Originally published in *Blast*, 1915. Quoted here from *T.S. Eliot: Collected Poems 1909-1962*. London: Faber and Faber, 1974. 26-28.



twisted because it has been “Eaten smooth” and destroyed, or given up, by the world and time and, like the rusty spring that concludes the stanza, is completely devoid of life or strength or spiritual essence and animation. Eliot’s title is ironic, for the general connotation of a rhapsody is often a connotation of “Exaggeratedly enthusiastic or ecstatic expression of feeling.”<sup>30</sup> Eliot’s rhapsody is a rhapsody in that it is “a literary work consisting of miscellaneous or disconnected pieces.”<sup>31</sup> Rather than an expression of enthusiasm, Eliot’s poem is an expression of the mind disintegrating, its marrow gone much as the twisted, curled branch is only a skeleton of what it was.

Snyder’s “Burning the Small Dead” is an open-form ecological retort to the Eliot poem. The form and theme of the poem are more free and improvised, more enthusiastic, and therefore more fitting to an unironic rhapsody. Rather than the death and disintegration that Eliot sees, Snyder comprehends in the dead whitebark pine bough a continuation of the process of life—“a hundred summers / snowmelt rock and air,” an accumulation of growth and ecological processes, of photosynthesis, of minerals which will be reprocessed and reborn into new life and new growth—the continual development and progression of “something evermore about to be” (*The Prelude*, 1805 VI.542<sup>32</sup>). The “windy fire” that concludes Snyder’s poem shows the contrast between the two poets’ modes of perception. The wind in Snyder’s poem feeds the fire and aids it in its equally destructive and regenerative process, whereas the wind in Eliot’s poem adds to the gloom of the

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<sup>30</sup> “rhapsody” Def. 4.

<sup>31</sup> “rhapsody” Def. 2a.

<sup>32</sup> In the 1850 *Prelude*, lines 604-608 correspond to this passage.

night in that its force tends to be only destructive as it causes the street-lamp to sputter, nearly extinguishing the flame.

In the previously mentioned 1978 interview with Ekbert Faas Snyder explains that his interests mainly lie in the study of science and culture: “That is to say if I make a choice of priorities of what I’m going to read, I’ll read biology first, history second, anthropology third, poetry fourth . . .”<sup>33</sup> Snyder’s conception of “order, freedom, and chaos” and his approach to art (and therefore language) as “a matter of discovering the grain of things, of uncovering the measured chaos that structures the natural world” are often grounded in scientific and biological elements and are notably similar to philosophical elements of chaos and complex theory, evolutionary biology and ecology. Like chaos theory, in which a nonlinear dynamical system may appear to demonstrate completely random behaviour, when it is, in fact, mathematically deterministic<sup>34</sup> and not actually random at all, Snyder seeks to reflect the measured chaos of the natural world in his poetry. The mistake that some readers make is to assume that because Snyder’s poetry does not follow a traditional pattern or form, it is formless and without order. But as T.S. Eliot said in “The Music of Poetry” (1942): “no verse is free for the man who wants to do a good job.”<sup>35</sup> Snyder recognises that “It is more or less obvious that everything has form,

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<sup>33</sup> Faas 116

<sup>34</sup> A sequence is deterministic when it is pre-determined by its initial conditions. Edward N. Lorenz explains it thus: “A *deterministic* sequence is one in which only one thing can happen next; that is, its evolution is governed by precise laws. Randomness in the broader sense is therefore identical with the absence of determinism.” In: *The Essence of Chaos*. London: UCL Press, 1993.

<sup>35</sup> T. S. Eliot. “The Music of Poetry.” *On Poetry and Poets*. London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1957. 26-38. 37.

everything that we call a thing has form. There is no formlessness in the world as we know it.”<sup>36</sup> He also says that:

Nothing is formless . . . Everything takes strict pattern including the flowing water in the stream which follows the physical laws of wave movement, or the physical laws by which clouds move, or gases move, or liquids move amongst each other, or liquids of different temperatures interchange. All these things are form, but there is more or less fluidity in the form . . . (TRW 45)

Thus Snyder’s poetic form is fragmented and evolving, a form which enables him to illustrate how “consciousness, mind, imagination and language are fundamentally wild . . . richly interconnected, interdependent, and incredibly complex,” much like the biological forms in nature. Snyder combines his understanding of science, of biology and ecology, with his unique approach to poetry and form. Like the theory of natural selection in evolutionary biology, whereby heritable characteristics or traits which are useful to an organism are perpetuated through reproduction whilst undesirable or perhaps useless traits and even physical characteristics are eventually lost or become less common, Snyder does away with excess language.

In his latest collection, *Danger on Peaks* (2004), Snyder explores the relationships and contrasts between ideas and things through science, nature and poetry. In “Pearly Everlasting,” one of his poems in his section on Mount St. Helens, Snyder creates a chaotic mixture of images and associations that mirror the

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<sup>36</sup> Faas 124

contradictory nature of destruction and death in the aftermath of a volcanic eruption alongside the subsequent regeneration and life that eventually occurs afterward. The poem is partially structured as a catalogue—a form that Snyder has often been associated with—listing images, things and names, which do not follow any clear or traditional sentence structure, but which, as a whole, combine to create a panorama of the entire landscape and provide for the reader a dualistic point of view that encompasses minute details as well as a vast and general entirety. And so, Snyder’s first stanza lays the chaotic and often confusing groundwork—the riprap, and foundation stones—upon which he will eventually build an orchestra of separate microcosms that work together to create a unified system:

Walk a trail down to the lake  
 mountain ash and elderberries red  
 old-growth log bodies blown about,  
 whacked down, tumbled in the new ash *wadis*.  
 Root-mats tipped up, veiled in tall straight fireweed,  
 fields of prone logs laid by blast  
 in-line north-south down and silvery  
 limbless barkless poles—  
 clear to the alpine ridgetop all you see  
 is toothpicks of dead trees  
 thousands of summers  
 at detritus-cycle rest  
 —hard and dry in the sun—the long life of the down tree yet to go

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Although it is easy to see that this first half of the opening stanza lists images that together create an expansive view of the ecosystem surrounding Mount St. Helens several years after its eruption, it is difficult to determine a set order or structure (if there is one) or form in which Snyder has chosen to present these images. Snyder chooses his punctuation sporadically, never quite committing to a pattern or rule as to when and where to place a comma or full-stop. Sometimes he commits an entire line to the description of one item or idea, such as, “Root-mats tipped up, veiled in tall straight fireweed,” but often he may choose to continue descriptions and images throughout short, successive lines or combine several ideas on one long line that stands out from the others in the stanza. And as previously observed, Snyder often, but not always, chooses to omit unnecessary words like articles and pronouns. His sentences frequently lack a subject, leaving only the action or the image or idea to be considered by the reader.

Snyder peppers his poem with images of and allusions to death and destruction with words and phrases such as: “bodies blown about, / whacked down, tumbled in the new ash *wadis*.” It is as though he brings to mind the shadow-like reflections in Hiroshima that were left when the nuclear bomb laid waste or the pristinely preserved shapes of the inhabitants of Pompeii who were entombed in ash when Mt. Vesuvius erupted. He even employs the age-old euphemism for death—“rest”—to further illustrate his point, and combines it with an image of decomposition and organic debris as is implied in his reference to the “detritus-cycle.” All the while, Snyder continues to incorporate unpredictable rhymes, as shown by “bodies” and “*wadis*.” The title of the poem, “Pearly Everlasting,” serves

in its imagery, allusion and symbolism to highlight one of Snyder's major poetic themes: the cycle of life and death. Most of Snyder's western and/or Christian readers will associate the poem's title, "Pearly Everlasting" with the symbolism of the pearly gates which represent the gateway to heaven and life everlasting, as described in the Book of Revelation, and which lead to the idea of life after death. However, the plant, Pearly Everlasting, to which Snyder more deliberately refers, is a hardy plant which often serves, in folk medicine, as a salve for burns. As one of the first plants to thrive in the desolate aftermath of the Mount St. Helens eruption, no doubt the dual symbolism of the small flower's name and practical use is paramount to Snyder's theme. Snyder uses the natural form of his poem, and of his first stanza, to emphasise and guide the reader to a consideration of this chosen theme. For example, the longest line in the first stanza stands out visually in comparison to the shorter surrounding lines: "—hard and dry in the sun—the long life of the down tree yet to go." In this important line, Snyder gives commentary on the accompanying image that he presents and in doing so gives the reader a clue as to the poem's aim. In the previous lines which build up to this pivotal line, Snyder has offered images of both life and death where the living images he has described have been of "pioneer species," such as fireweed and elderberries, which thrive as the first plants to grow in areas that have been devastated by forest fires or cleared by logging; and his images of death have been of the dead trees and their "old-growth log bodies blown about." But in this pivotal line, Snyder implies that there is life in death, or that death begets life and is a necessary and natural process to be celebrated. The "down tree" is not actually dead, for Snyder says that its "long life"

is “yet to go.” The images and ideas which follow this line are filled with allusions to life, energy and new growth:

bedded in bushes of pearly everlasting  
 dense white flowers  
 saplings of bushy vibrant silver fir  
 the creek here once was “Harmony Falls”  
 The pristine mountain  
 just a little battered now  
 the smooth dome gone  
 ragged crown

Then, Snyder finishes this stanza with an overall image of the whole mountain as being pristine in spite of its being “just a little battered now.” The final image of the mountain’s “ragged crown” and the suggestion that because the mountain is battered and ragged, it is more pristine, recalls Byron’s idea of “ruinous perfection”<sup>37</sup> in *Manfred*:

A grove which springs through level’d battlements,  
 And twines its roots with the imperial hearths,  
 Ivy usurps the laurel’s place of growth; —  
 But the gladiators’ bloody Circus stands,  
 A noble wreck in ruinous perfection!           (III.iv.24-8)

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<sup>37</sup> For a detailed discussion of ruinous perfection in Byron’s *Manfred* and *Childe Harold*, see: Mark Sandy. “‘The Colossal Fabric’s Form’: Remodelling Memory, History, and Forgetting in Byron’s Poetic Recollections of Ruins.” *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net* 51 (Aug. 2008). 20 Mar. 2010.

Byron and Snyder (as well as many of the Romantic poets) play with the established conception of what the words “perfection” and “pristine” mean. There is an implied assumption that perfection connotes an impression of being without blemish, flaw, or error. However, Romanticism challenged this canonical idea of perfection and in its place offered a revised definition of what perfection is. In a sense, the Romantic rendering of perfection returns the word to its origin, for the etymology of the word *perfect* traces back to the Latin root: *perfectio*, meaning completion. Joseph A. Buttigieg offers an explanation of Romantic perfection and how it contrasts with the typical conceptualisation of what perfect is as explained by such modernist writer/philosophers as T E Hulme:

Romanticism . . . aims at perfection, i.e., completion, wholeness. . . .

Romanticism introduces perfection in connection with the human and organic, whereas perfection [according to T E Hulme] “properly belongs to the nonhuman.” In other words, Hulme finds fault with Romanticism not because it accommodates temporality but, on the contrary, because it aims at the perfect and atemporal while dealing with the organic, unredeemed world.<sup>38</sup>

“[R]uinous perfection” implies a microcosm containing the whole gamut of natural experience, including birth/conception/creation, growth, and death or destruction as well as the inevitability and necessity of change incorporated in that process.

“[R]uinous perfection” explores the idea of eternity, revolution, renewal. It sees

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<sup>38</sup> Joseph A Buttigieg. “Worringer among the Modernists.” Symposium Issue: *The Problems of Reading in Contemporary American Criticism* Spec. issue of *Boundary 2* 8.1 (Autumn 1979): 359-366. *JSTOR*. 30 Jan 2009.



beyond the present state of things, incorporating the past and the future into an eternal cycle that offers a renewed conception of what perfection and completion is. Byron explores this cycle of completion in his image of the “noble wreck” of the “gladiators’ bloody Circus” as its battlements have been levelled by time and natural processes. He plays with the contrast between natural forces and the achievements of men as “Ivy usurps the laurel’s place of growth.” For Byron, nature and time work together to bring an equality among men as the grove of trees springs up to twine “its roots with the imperial hearths,” thus lowering the ruling class and yet exalting the once lowly gladiator as the Coliseum still stands as a monument in its wreckage.

Wordsworth’s exploration of this endless and active progression, of anticipation, of always becoming, of revolution and renewal is expressed in his apostrophe to imagination in the Simplon Pass section of Book VI in both the 1805 and 1850 versions of *The Prelude*. Wordsworth says that: “Our destiny” is “with infinitude” and

With hope it is, hope that can never die,  
 Effort, and expectation, and desire,  
 And something evermore about to be.           (1805 VI.540)

Paul De Man comments on Wordsworth’s intention in his use of the word “infinitude” and observes that these lines “never suggest a movement towards an unmediated contact with a divine principle” but rather a “temporal sense” and that the main thrust of Wordsworth’s conception of man’s “infinitude” is based on a concept of time:

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[The] bond between men is not one of common enterprise, or of a common belonging to nature: it is much rather the recognition of a common temporal predicament that finds its expression in the individual and historical destinies that strike the poet as exemplary. Examples abound, from "The Ruined Cottage" to "Resolution and Independence," and in the various time-eroded figures that appear throughout *The Prelude*. The common denominator that they share is not nature but time, as it unfolds its power in these individual and collective histories.<sup>39</sup>

Although Snyder would likely add emphasis to the bond between men as a combination of belonging to nature along with a common temporal predicament, the significance of the passage of time in many of Wordsworth's poems is similar to its function in many of Snyder's poems. But Snyder's presentation of ruinous perfection in Mount St. Helens's ragged, yet pristine, crown gives this Romantic notion a contemporary turn. It contrasts with Byron's "noble wreck" as it illustrates an emphasis on the natural world where humans often take a more subordinate or secondary role, often in the background. Yet much of the concept remains the same as Snyder's depiction of the passage of time and its destruction and desolation leads to a renewal and regeneration that still manages to encompass the memory and image of that latent natural power—be it time or nature or both—which simultaneously destroys and creates life whilst always implying a sense of completion in the incomplete. Or, as Snyder says, "To speak of wilderness is to speak of wholeness" (POW 12).

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<sup>39</sup> Paul De Man. "Time and History in Wordsworth." *Diacritics* 17.4 (Winter 1987): 4-17. *JSTOR*. 23 Mar 2009. 15.

Although Snyder does not choose to write in traditional poetic form with its set patterns and measured lines, he does follow some natural patterns of human observation and thought. Snyder frequently begins a poem with an image or several images that are often difficult to connect associatively. But Snyder usually follows up his imagistic observations with an exploration of the thoughts and ideas that these images engender; and more often than not his understanding and observations are based on his sense of the value of the natural world and its ecological processes and his study of Buddhist and eastern philosophy and meditation. Such is the case with “Pearly Everlasting,” in which his opening stanza presents a catalogue of images and the following stanzas elaborate on the events and images presented and the understanding and ideas Snyder associates with these events and images. This second stanza provides more of the poet’s observations of the change in the ecology of Mount St. Helens, but intertwined in the comparison of change is an association with the fundamental eastern philosophy of the opposing forces, *yin* and *yang*:

the lake was shady *yin*—  
 now blinding water mirror of the sky  
 remembering days of fir and hemlock—  
 no blame to magma or the mountain  
 & sit on a clean down log at the lake’s edge,  
 the water dark as tea.

In Snyder’s association of the change in the lake’s ecosystem from a shady forest surrounding a dark lake to a clear, open lake whose “blinding water” becomes a “mirror of the sky” there is an illustration of the concept of *yin* and *yang*. The

Chinese philosophy of *yin* and *yang* is an expression of how seemingly opposite natural forces are interconnected and dependent upon each other and originate from each other. As Snyder tells us in the first line of the stanza *yin* is characterised as being dark and eclipsed or shaded as though by the bulk of a mountain. It follows, then, that *yin*'s opposite, *yang*, is characterized as sunny and bright without obstruction. One of the important aspects of the concept of *yin* and *yang* is that the two opposites give way to each other as is often illustrated by the imagery of a mountain and a valley: as the day advances and the sun moves from east to west, the area of the valley which is shaded by the mountain in the morning becomes sunny in the afternoon and darkness gives way to light. As Wing-Tsit Chan observes of *yin* and *yang* in his *Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*: “out of the interaction of the two cosmic forces, all patterns, ideas, systems, and culture are evolved.”<sup>40</sup> This inexorable transition, which is necessary, is therefore not a reason for “blame to magma or the mountain.”

Snyder's short final four stanzas in “Pearly Everlasting” continue his train of thought as he progresses to an understanding of what this collection of images on Mount St. Helens means. He recalls for the reader a previous event, depicted in “The Climb,” an earlier prose poem in the same collection, in which he climbed to the summit of Mount St. Helens before its eruption and made a “petition to the shapely mountain, ‘Please help this life.’” Years later, as Snyder explores the aftermath of the eruption and the subsequent beginnings of the re-growth of its ecosystem, the memory of that plea provides the poet and his poem, “Pearly

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<sup>40</sup> Wing-Tsit Chan. trans. and comp. *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963. 263.

Everlasting,” with an understanding of the regeneration and life that comes through destruction and death:

I had asked Mt. St. Helens for help  
 the day I climbed it, so seems she did  
 The trees all lying flat . . .

.....

“Do not be tricked by human-centered views,” says Dogen,  
 And Siddhartha looks it over, slips away—for another forest—  
 —to really get right down on life and death.

*If you ask for help it comes.*

But not in any way you’d ever know

—thank you Loowit, lawilayt-lá, *Smoky Má*

gracias xiexie grace

It is worthwhile to once again observe Snyder’s poetic subtlety in incorporating “the concepts of order, freedom, and chaos”<sup>41</sup> in his poem. As “Pearly Everlasting” follows a natural train of thought from images to ideas and meaning, Snyder also exercises freedom and autonomy from traditional poetic structure as he experiments with form throughout. He incorporates stanzas of varying lengths, and, due to the break in the page, one may never know whether the third stanza consists of the two lines before the break or whether they combine with the following four lines to create a six line stanza. Such mysteries, I imagine, Snyder enjoys; for although he is certainly deliberate in the structure and format of his poems, and in

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<sup>41</sup> See previously quoted passage from PIS.

the smallest details, his is not a poetry where every detail serves a point-by-point purpose. Form can support expressive purposes, but to say that all formal details support the meaning of a poem is likely a step too far.

One recurrent theme—and often-repeated word—in Snyder’s poetics is “grain.” Snyder uses this word as a physical and visual representation of form and pattern in the natural world. The use of the term “grain” rather than “pattern” is appropriate in that its meaning implies pattern and form, but not to the extent that the pattern is absolute and set without anomaly or natural variation. Like scientific and mathematical researchers who explore patterns and their anomalies in nature and her substances, and whose research and discoveries he values, Snyder experiments with language in order to discover and uncover natural patterns, or the “grain” of things. Thus, the term “grain” allows for approximation and variation in its pattern, much like a fractal set (used by mathematicians to reflect events and occurrences in nature) whose recursive self-similarity is often approximate rather than always exact. Snyder himself describes an aspect of what he means by the word grain in an interview with *The New York Quarterly*:

That reminds me of the Japanese term for song, *bushi* or *fushi*, which means a whorl in the grain. It means in English what we call a knot in a board. It’s a very interesting sense of song—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. . . . I like to think of poetry as that, and as that, let’s see, as

the knot of the turbulence, whorl or a term that Pound was fond of from his friend Wyndham Lewis, “vortex.” Or Yeats’s term “gyre” too. In the flow of general language, in the flow of linguistic utterance—we live in a continuous stream of speech, of utterance, which is pretty much on the same level—the poem or the song manifests itself as a special concentration of the capacities of the language and rises up into its own shape. (TRW 44-45)

The word “grain” is repeated three times in “Wave” (the first poem of his collection *Regarding Wave*, 1970), in which he explores a list of natural objects and phenomena and their varying similarities and interconnectedness. The first two occurrences of the word “grain” in Snyder’s poem are common uses of the word in which its meaning is concrete: “rip-cut tree grain” and “great dunes rolling / Each inch rippled, every grain a wave.” The third usage of the word (in the last lines of the poem), however, is more abstract: “catch me and fling me wide / To the dancing grain of things / of my mind!” This final usage of the word “grain” draws upon another, more powerful definition: the texture and internal substance of a thing. It refers to an underlying substance and source that echoes an interconnectedness in nature that is also found in the mind of man, and emphasises that the mind’s imagination can see that internal substance of a thing and make meaning out of chaos. In creating a poetry that experiments with and explores the make-up—the grain—of things and ideas, Snyder becomes a scientist or a mathematician of sorts.

Many, if not all, of Snyder’s poems explore an interconnectedness of things and an overall pattern and substance, or grain, in nature. This is a concept that is illustrated mathematically and scientifically by fractal functions, which have self-

similar and recursive properties where a part of the object is a reflection of the whole object, like a microcosm of the whole. Many objects in nature have fractal characteristics, such as coastlines, mountain ranges, broccoli florets, ferns, and so forth, and are modelled by fractal geometry.

In “Song of the Taste,” also from *Regarding Wave*, Snyder explores some recursive characteristics of nature found in all living things. Recursion in mathematics is when a term is generated by repeating a particular mathematical operation; its Latin root, *recurrere*, means to run back. Snyder’s poem explores biological recursion in which the same action, “eating,” is repeated throughout: “Eating the living germs of grasses / Eating the ova of large birds.” And finally:

Eating each other’s seed

eating

ah, each other.

In repeating this action of eating, Snyder creates a poetic embodiment of the ecological concept of the food chain, in which smaller organisms are eaten by larger organisms, which are eaten by even larger organisms. And the process is repeated until the largest organism dies and subsequently becomes food for the smallest organisms again.

In addition to recursion, Snyder incorporates the fractal characteristic of self-similarity into “Song of the Taste” as well. Snyder recognises that in all living things there is a mechanism for reproduction, some sort of seed, and he lists many of them: “living germs of grasses,” “ova of large birds,” “the fleshy sweetness



packed / around the sperm of swaying trees,” “roots grown swoll / inside the soil,”  
and:

. . . living  
clustered points of light spun  
out of space  
hidden in the grape.

Snyder’s poem also contains another fractal/chaotic/complex characteristic: the dual trait of being infinite and finite. The concept of the food chain and a biological, ecological life cycle is infinite in that it can go on repeating itself with minor changes and approximations in each recursion. It is also infinite in its scope—Snyder shows us that not only are living organisms on earth incorporated into this food chain, but “living / clustered points of light spun / out of space” are “hidden in the grape.” Thus he acknowledges the process of photosynthesis, which incorporates light from stars outside the Earth’s atmosphere and generally considered ecological range. The poem is finite in that it has an ending. However, its final lines urge a continuation of the poem in the reader’s mind by turning to human reproduction—“Kissing the lover in the mouth of bread: / lip to lip.”—and the continuing life cycle. In its consideration of birth and death and rebirth, of the interconnectedness of the points of light in space with the grape and everything in between, Snyder’s poem reveals a Whitman-like sense of identification with all elements and aspects of life.

## Chapter Six: Snyder's Experimentations with Romantic Form

Snyder's approach to poetry and form has changed and evolved over the years. In *Riprap* (1958), his first collection of poetry, his style and form reflected characteristics of the imagist style of poets who preceded him, especially Ezra Pound. Snyder has acknowledged Ezra Pound<sup>1</sup> as a poet whose works and ideas he read, and traces of the older poet's imagism can be found in Snyder's work, especially in the earlier poetry.<sup>2</sup>

Yet Snyder is never simply an imitator. One fine example of his own brand of imagism is found in the first poem from *Riprap* (1958), "Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout." This poem nods towards traditional form more overtly than most of Snyder's later poetry does; it consists of two stanzas of five lines each: a more parallel structure than is customary in later Snyder. Yet, typically, "Sourdough Mountain" presents images in a language stripped of excess unecessaries with little meddling in the form of authorial commentary and interpretation. What we get is our own experience of what Snyder saw and felt:

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.

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<sup>1</sup> See "Axe Handles" from Snyder's 1983 collection, *Axe Handles*.

<sup>2</sup> A more in-depth examination of the influence of Pound's poetry and style on Snyder can be found in Chapter Three and Chapter Four.

In very few words Snyder's first stanza manages to capture the essence of a summer spent at the top of a mountain in the Washington Cascades. The first two lines of the poem reveal Snyder's ability to distil language into a purified image by omitting occasional articles, pronouns and commentary. Rather than saying, "Down the valley there is a smoke haze," he gives the reader just enough to catch on and connect his /her own experience and understanding in order to make meaning. And in the seven sparse words of the second line, "Three days heat, after five days rain," Snyder provides for his readers a history of the weather through the passage of eight days wherein we understand precisely the humid sticky heat that extracts the pitch from pine trees and induces swarms of new flies. Lending cohesion to the piece is the delicate way in which Snyder incorporates the rhyme of "haze" and "days" as well as the subtle and fleeting parallel structure of the second line—"three days heat" and "five days rain"—which is usurped by another poetic device in the following two lines where Snyder plays with repeating vowel sounds and unstructured rhymes. The long *o* of "Pitch glows on the fir-cones" is emphasised by the metre of the line as the stressed syllables fall on "glows" and "cones." Although Snyder continues to repeat vowel sounds in the following line, he does away with the meter of the previous line and uses a short *o* in "Across rocks" and then returns to the long *o* in "meadows," which rhymes with "glows." Then Snyder finishes his first stanza by shifting gear and abandoning slight rhymes and varyingly repeated long and short *o* sounds for a long *i* sound as in "Swarms of new flies," which connects to vowel sounds in the next stanza.

Having set up a natural image of mountainous summer heat in the first stanza, Snyder adds a slightly more personal<sup>3</sup> and human element to the second stanza that provides for the reader an understanding of a mountain lookout's separation and isolation from the mainstream human world:

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.

Without giving direct commentary, Snyder illustrates the effect this isolation has upon his thoughts and memory. In turning from the first and introductory section of the poem, which serves as an imagistic exposition of the landscape in which the poet is immersed, to an internalisation and expression of the effect of these elements of nature in the last half of the poem, Snyder sets up a pattern of exposition and internalisation that can be seen in many of his poems, and which echoes, or is a poetic representation of, the basic human thought pattern: to see or experience and then to understand or to internalise. Thus Snyder begins the second stanza with "I," its connection to and rhyme with the long *i* in "flies" from the previous stanza serving to show how seemingly random events or things can trigger a recollection or new understanding. In the case of "Sourdough Mountain," Snyder uses the second stanza to explore the experience of being isolated from humanity, yet immersed in

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<sup>3</sup> Although Snyder includes a first person reference in the second stanza and refers to his own memory, the poem excludes extremely personal expressions of emotion and feeling.

nature. Separated from human-centred learning and associations, he hints, in his Zen-like lyric, at how he might approach the condition of an ascetic whose isolation leads to greater understanding and enlightenment. For Snyder, this enlightenment comes from a real communion and integration with the natural world. It comes from seemingly mundane situations and actions that are emphasised and dignified through his unorthodox use of form and poetic device, which also serves to create for the reader a natural experience and a taste of what the poet feels and sees. The first line of the second stanza, “I cannot remember things I once read,” consists of ten syllables, and hints at iambic pentameter, but does not quite meet exact iambic stresses. No doubt Snyder is able to write verse in iambic pentameter, but chooses instead the ease and grace of a more natural pattern of stresses, which he continues through the next two lines as well. In these three lines of approximate iambic pentameter Snyder presents an informal hierarchy of knowledge and experience. First, Snyder tells us that in this pristine setting he “cannot remember” the things he “once read,” implying that the value and usefulness of traditional education grows obsolete, or if not obsolete, then at least dormant. Next, he tells us of the things he can remember: “A few friends, but they are in cities.” Importantly, the friends and relationships he does remember are “few” and although personal relationships have the ability to create a more lasting impression, they too can be fleeting. And finally, Snyder describes an experience that ranks highest in value over traditional learning and general interaction with humanity: “Drinking cold snow-water from a tin cup / Looking down for miles / Through high still air.” Although Snyder says nothing about whether he will be able to remember this particular experience, he leaves no

doubt as to the impact such an image and such an experience has upon him. The use of gerunds, “Drinking” and “Looking,” set in phrases that are separated from any verbs, creates a feeling of timelessness that achieves the effect of a Japanese haiku in which a moment or image becomes suspended in time. This separation from time also sets the experience apart from the first two lines of the stanza where Snyder’s education and friends are left in the past and can hardly be remembered. This timelessness also gives the poem as a whole an element of entirety in which the images in the first stanza—the smoke haze in the valley, the heat and rain, the pitch and the rocks, meadows and flies—are all encompassed in the poet’s mind and encapsulated into an eternal and immediate moment as he drinks snow-water and looks down at the view below. Snyder adds a final, subtle touch to the last two lines by repeating the long *i* in “miles” and “high” as an echo of “flies” and the earlier repeated “I,” adding a resonance to the closing lines of the poem. “Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout” stands as a beautiful example of Snyder’s poetic and artistic ability in which he demonstrates both a knowledge of traditional poetic standards and the style, skill and imagination necessary to create new forms that reflect a more natural expression of language and ideas.

“A Stone Garden,” also published in *Riprap*, displays the earlier stage of Snyder’s poetic development as it adheres to a more formal structure. “A Stone Garden” contains more traditional poetic elements, such as a loose blank verse structure of generally unrhymed lines written mostly in iambic pentameter. And like *Tintern Abbey*, *The Prelude*, “Resolution and Independence,” and other

Wordsworthian poems, “A Stone Garden” reflects upon change effected through processes of time, as the first lines of the poem demonstrate:

Japan a great stone garden in the sea.  
 Echoes of hoes and weeding,  
 Centuries of leading hill-creeks down  
 To ditch and pool in fragile knee-deep fields.

Snyder’s first line in “A Stone Garden” creates an image of Japan as “a great stone garden in the sea.” In doing so, Snyder incorporates mountains and water as the “prototypical image for the Japanese garden.”<sup>4</sup> This depiction of the Japanese archipelago as a stone garden in which the rocks represent the islands of the country and the sand represents the surrounding ocean is one drawn from centuries of Japanese tradition and tenets of Zen Buddhism. In 1956 Snyder spent time in Kyoto, Japan living and studying in the Zen Temple Shokoku-ji. The nearby Ryoan-ji Temple in Kyoto is known for its famous contemplation garden, or *kare-san-sui*, which is speculated to be the first “Zen garden” built (circa 1499) for the purpose of contemplation and Buddhist meditation and some speculate that its stones and sand represent Japan and its surrounding waters.<sup>5</sup> The history and symbolism of the Japanese contemplation garden sheds light on Snyder’s poem and is worth summarising. Marc P. Keane explains that:

The sand-and-stone gardens that are found in courtyards of Zen temples . . . are properly called *kare-san-sui*, which literally means dry-

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<sup>4</sup> Marc P. Keane. *Japanese Garden Design*. Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle Company, Inc., 1996. 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 59

mountain-water and alludes to the garden's composition, which includes an abstracted scene of mountains and water (the sea or a river) created without using any real water at all.

. . . [*Kare-san-sui*] was meant exclusively for viewing from the nearby hall and is aptly called a contemplation garden (*kansho-niwa*). The viewer does not physically enter the garden but rather explores it mentally. In this case, what is actually a rather small garden could be found to be limitless, expressing the philosophic idea (included but not exclusive to Zen) of finding the vast in the small.<sup>6</sup>

Just as the Japanese Zen masters and artists created a sand-and-stone garden that is representative of “limitless” possibilities to be contemplated, so Snyder attempts to create the meditative nature of a “Zen garden” in poetic form as he contemplates Japan on both a magnified scale and in its minute details. And like the stone garden, Snyder's poetic garden is meticulously groomed, yet it allows for and is susceptible to the processes of nature and the progression of time by which a garden or a poem can alter by both growth and decay.

As previously mentioned, Snyder incorporates a combination of eastern and western poetic tendencies into “A Stone Garden.” His loose iambic pentameter and occasionally, and subtly, rhymed lines reveal his western education and experience with poetry, and his haiku-like images reflect an interaction with eastern poetics. In *American Free Verse* Walter Sutton recognises in Snyder another connection to Whitman in his desire to merge both eastern and western practices: “Like Whitman

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 59



before him . . . Snyder looks forward to the possibility of a productive marriage of the traditions of the East and the West.”<sup>7</sup> “A Stone Garden” is reminiscent of Whitman with its catalogues and anaphora (“For Narihira’s lover, the crying plover, / For babies grown and childhood homes,” from section 3). And one cannot help but recognise in Snyder’s narrative persona the Whitman of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.”<sup>8</sup> Both poets take on the poetic persona of the wanderer who watches and observes all aspects of the human race, who tracks “the human future / Of intelligence and despair,” the closing lines of the first section of “A Stone Garden.” Where Snyder wanders through the streets of Tokyo in the second section—

& walked a hundred nights in summer  
 Seeing in open doors and screens  
 The thousand postures of all human fond  
 Touches and gestures, glidings, nude,  
 The oldest and nakedest women more the sweet,

—Whitman watches the people of Manhattan—

Gaze, loving and thirsting eyes, in the house, or street, or public assembly!  
 Sound out, voices of young men! loudly and musically call me by my  
 nighest name!  
 Live, old life! play the part that looks back on the actor or actress!  
 Play the old role, the role that is great or small, according as one makes it!  
 (118-21)

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<sup>7</sup> Sutton 190

<sup>8</sup> Walt Whitman. “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.” *Whitman: Poetry and Prose*. New York: Library of America, 1982. 307-13.

Snyder's images are incorporations and memories not only of sights but also of sounds as he creates a poem that catalogues the history and essence of Japan and its inhabitants from its centuries old tradition of "leading hill-creeks down / To ditch and pool in fragile knee-deep fields" of rice, to naked old women with withered breasts who are noble and who defy time because they are loved, to its cities that grow and are destroyed and grow again, and to the "silver fish-scales" that "coat the hand" and the cutting board in the final section. As Snyder describes sounds and images of a timeless Japan in an imagistic, haiku fashion, he also creates an auditory experience with his use of assonance and rhyme which fluctuates through a structured yet sporadic poetic rumination on the passage of time. For example, the first four lines are replete with rhyme as in "Echoes of hoes," "weeding" and "leading," and "creeks" and "knee-deep fields." Walter Sutton recognises in the modern American tradition of free verse a connection with "Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse as seen in *Beowulf* and *The Seafarer*" whose characteristics "were absorbed into the main stream of poetry in English and provided a resource for later poets as diverse as Swinburne, Hopkins, and Pound."<sup>9</sup> Snyder's tendency toward an incorporation of alliteration and assonance is reminiscent of the connection to archetype and myth that he often supports and explores in his poetry. At the end of section two, Snyder uses a more traditional end rhyme (pairing "burning down" with "knot of sound") to complete the section and to give emphasis to and illustrate his vision of the knot in the grain of things, that *fushi*, or song, previously discussed,

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<sup>9</sup> Sutton 4

which exemplifies a concentration or fluctuation of energy which then returns to a more tempered flow:

The cities rise and fall and rise again  
 From storm and quake and fire and bomb,  
 The glittering smelly ricefields bloom,  
 And all that growing up and burning down  
 Hangs in the void a little knot of sound.

At the end of the poem, Snyder again uses a heroic couplet set apart to accentuate his conclusion and his overall vision:

Allowing such distinctions to the mind:  
 A formal garden made by fire and time.

Such use of couplets, iambic pentameter and other traditional poetic devices makes a great contrast to Snyder's later poems.

As well as experimenting with elements of traditional metre and rhyme, Snyder also deployed a confessional mode in some of his earlier poems. Akin to his contemporary and friend, Allen Ginsberg, who is often considered to be a "major confessional"<sup>10</sup> and with whom Snyder organised the historic Six Gallery reading at which Ginsberg's "Howl" and Snyder's "A Berry Feast" were first performed, Snyder makes use of elements of the confessional poetic. No doubt the friendship and interaction between the two poets accounts in part for the many convergences of style and poetic approach that they share. Ginsberg's connection to Romanticism, and to Blake in particular, is overt and provides a strong argument for the

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<sup>10</sup> Steven K. Hoffman. "Impersonal Personalism: the Making of a Confessional Poetic." *ELH* 45.4 (Winter 1978): 687-709. *JSTOR*. 6 Feb 2009. 687.

connection between Romanticism and confessional poetry as well as Beat literature and the poetry of Snyder's generation. In addition to Snyder's friendship with Ginsberg, Snyder was aware of his contemporaries and their experiments with style and form and tried his own hand at the genre.

In his examination of "confessional poetry as *poetry*; indeed as a definable poetic," Steven K Hoffman notes that this group of poets—namely Schwartz, Ginsberg, Berryman, Lowell, Snodgrass, Sexton, Plath and Roethke—"make up a distinct historical movement firmly rooted in both the Romantic and modern traditions."<sup>11</sup> Hoffman's characterisation of confessional poetics derives three main elements of the mode that correlate, however indirectly, to Romantic roots through an oblique inheritance via the modernist poetry of Eliot, Pound, Yeats, Williams and Auden, among others. Snyder's confessional mode incorporates these elements delineated by Hoffman, whilst adhering to some of the Romantic traditions that his more overtly confessional contemporaries abandon.

The first Romantic characteristic of the confessional mode that Hoffman identifies is "the prevalence of a dramatic element in what is essentially a lyric utterance."<sup>12</sup> Snyder's poetic endeavours usually follow a mode that steers clear of dramatic elements—he often avoids chronological story-telling, action and the expression of emotion in favour of disjoint and chronologically jumbled narratives and the presentation of images and ideas where the action is suspended or paused—

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 688

<sup>12</sup> Hoffman 689

yet there are unmistakable aspects of the confessional dramatic<sup>13</sup> mode in Snyder's poetry from this time period. The second Romantic characteristic identified by Hoffman in confessional poetry is the "rather explicit autobiographical connection."<sup>14</sup> Although it could be argued that it is easy to find autobiographical correlation in the works of many, if not all, poets from every period in the English language as an inheritance from the tradition of Augustine, the explicit and overt connection to autobiography is particularly intense in that of the confessionals and can be seen in Snyder's confessional experiments. Lastly, Hoffman identifies a "primary emphasis placed on moments of emotional and philosophical crisis"<sup>15</sup> as a basic trait of modern confessional poetry. All these characteristics delineated by Hoffman can be seen in Snyder's *Four Poems for Robin*, which Ginsberg particularly liked and commented on in a letter to Snyder dated 13 January 1968.<sup>16</sup> No doubt Ginsberg's affinity for this particular set of poems must be in part due to the fact that they are fashioned after his own confessional style.

*Four Poems for Robin*—a series of poems published in *The Back Country* (1968) and addressed to his former lover and Reed College classmate, Robin

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<sup>13</sup> In this sense, *dramatic* means sudden and striking or exciting and impressive rather than referring to the literary genre.

<sup>14</sup> Hoffman 689

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ginsberg tells Snyder "Since I wrote you I passed by New Directions and got and read *Back Country* all through last night—most immediately affecting set were the four poems for Robin solid as old classical Chinese poetry for presentation of that particular archetype desire ghost—Billie Holiday karma. Thinking a lot about 'presentation' concreteness since seeing Pound and *Back Country* is wonderfully dense with that specific Thusness. It's like a piece of sculpture, almost a solid object." (Ginsberg, Snyder *Selected Letters* 96)

Collins<sup>17</sup>—are a key example of Snyder’s experimentation with the confessional mode of some of his contemporary poets and friends such as Ginsberg. The four poems run together to make up a whole; although they are each individual poems, each poem is not complete or fully meaningful without the others. In “Siwashing it out once in Siuslaw Forest,” the initial poem in the series, the first word is “I,” which sets the autobiographical tone for the poem and its three subsequent poems in the series. The poem tells a story recounted as a memory of a memory (as indicated by the use of the past tense—“I slept . . .”, “I remembered . . .”) wherein the poet recalls the events and circumstances in which his relationship with Robin is brought to remembrance and is given emotional significance.

Snyder gives the poem an unusual structure where each line is separated into two halves by an extra space, furnishing the poem with the effect of being broken or split and underscoring the confessional-like theme of the series of poems, which ultimately make up a whole and trace the dramatic progression of a story of emotional and philosophical crisis. With these separating spaces and split lines, Snyder is also able to create new possibilities with meaning and form. For example, the first three lines—

I slept under    rhododendron  
 All night    blossoms fell  
 Shivering on    a sheet of cardboard

—give way to several possibilities. The separation in the first line presents the possibility of two subjects: “I” and “rhododendron,” which give way to several

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<sup>17</sup> Hunt 3

combinations. The more obvious, of course, is that Snyder slept under a rhododendron tree (or trees) all night. But there is also a possibility that in addition to his night spent under the rhododendron, blossoms also fell all night, and that both he and the blossoms shivered on the sheet of cardboard. The sixth line of the poem is structured differently from all the rest and gives emphasis again to the confessional nature of the poem and its moment of “emotional and philosophical crisis.” Snyder uses extra spaces to separate each word: “Barely able to sleep,” as though he is barely able to speak or write as well. Snyder gives us two reasons for his lack of sleep. First, he tells us that this sleepless night is spent “shivering on a sheet of cardboard” with his hands and feet stuck into his pockets and his pack, and we know he is unable to effectively escape the cold. But we also know that whether or not his sleeplessness is initiated by the cold, it is perpetuated by the memory of regret over and loss of Robin. Snyder also uses the contrast of cold and heat to emphasise a contrast in memories and to reflect emotions associated with those memories. As Snyder’s first memory—of sleeping and shivering under rhododendron—transitions into another memory of sleeping, the difference is emphasised in the contrast between hot and cold. Snyder gives value to his memory of Robin not only by associating her with warmth, but also by using iambic pentameter—the only line in the poem in such metre—to describe the memory of their relationship: “Sleeping together in a big warm bed.” And in this line, as he has in previous lines, Snyder makes use of the dividing space which separates “Sleeping together” from “in a big warm bed” to play upon both the euphemistic meaning of “Sleeping together” and the literal act of sleeping in a bed.

Ultimately, Snyder concludes his first poem in the series for Robin by placing emphasis on a moment of philosophical and emotional crisis, which is revisited and culminated throughout the other three poems for Robin. In “Siwashing it out” Snyder downplays the significance of his emotional crisis and its inherent regret by telling us: “I dont mind living this way.” Again, the separation in the line provides possibility for meaning as “I dont mind” simultaneously stands alone and cooperates with “living this way.” The obvious interpretation of the line, which stems from a literal reading of the line itself, particularly in reference to the title of the poem, is that Snyder does not mind “living this way,” “Siwashing it out” in the Siuslaw Forest, for “siwash” is a Chinook Native American term, which in the way Snyder uses it means to camp without a tent. The other possibility is that because the phrase “I dont mind” directly follows his account of their present situation; we assume that Snyder is also implying that he does not mind or regret the end of their relationship, that their friends have moved on and are married, that she has moved on. But ultimately, when Snyder tells us “I dont mind” . . . “sleeping in the open,” we know that his regret is not for the warmth of the bed, but for the time, as he says, “when I had you.”

This emotional crisis of regret and loss in Snyder’s first poem in his series for Robin is continued in the following poems addressed to his former lover, and as the poems progress, the emotional crisis increases. The regret and loss expressed through a veil of slight nonchalance are more overtly articulated in “A spring night in Shokoku-ji.” Snyder fills this series of poems with symbolism, and “A spring night in Shokoku-ji” is full of figurative expressions of bittersweet remembrance



and regret. Because Snyder is frugal with words, one should not take lightly his choice to indicate to the reader the time of year, “A spring night,” in which the action—the act of remembering—takes place. In the case of his second poem in the series for Robin, the setting is a spring night in the Shokoku-ji Buddhist temple in Kyoto Japan. The time of year is important in this particular poem, as Snyder builds upon the symbols and ideas associated with spring and its connection to a spirit of youth and the fleeting nature of love and life in general. Snyder melds eastern and western traditions throughout the poem, for the act of remembering takes place in Japan, yet the memory in question is of an event which took place in Oregon. The poem opens with one such combination of eastern and western images, as Snyder strolls under cherry blossoms in an Oregon orchard. The significance of the cherry blossoms, regardless of the fact that they are located in America, is of specific importance to the meaning and appreciation of the poem. In Japanese culture the cherry blossom is held in particular import because of its beauty and short blossoming time—it is therefore a symbolic representation of *mono no aware*, “the pathos of things,” which is a Japanese term used to describe the fleeting nature of life and the sadness felt at the realisation of its transience. “When people perceive the connexion between the beauty and the sadness of the world that they most poignantly sense *mono no aware*.”<sup>18</sup> The inception of the phrase, *mono no aware*, came from Motoori Norinaga’s literary criticism of *The Tale of Genji*, which is also of significance in understanding the nuances of Snyder’s poem and will be discussed in greater detail.

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<sup>18</sup> Ivan Morris. *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan*. London: Oxford University Press, 1964. 197.

Snyder has arranged this poem with a remnant of traditional form found in the capitalisation of the first letter in each line. The poem also presents a symmetry in that the first half of the poem—the first five lines—are dedicated to a description of the past and the last half—again, five lines—are dedicated to his present state of recollection in Japan. Snyder introduces the symbol of the cherry blossom in the first few lines of the poem, and follows it in the fourth and fifth lines with an example of the very transience the cherry blossom exemplifies in the observation that: “All that I wanted then / Is forgotten now.” Desires, like cherry blossoms, are ephemeral and insubstantial. But Snyder follows this observation of transience with an exception which is pivotal as the fourth and fifth lines in their entirety read: “All that I wanted then / Is forgotten now, but you.” Snyder’s poetic skill in these lines is subtle but masterful. Not only does he communicate the contradiction in his realisation of the transience of his teenage desires and the still-fresh memory of his first love, but he also incorporates an element of disparity in the fact that he has left his earlier life and western culture behind to study and embrace eastern philosophies such as *mono no aware* whilst the memories and experiences from a previous time and place keep returning to him like a ghost that refuses to be left behind or forgotten. And so Snyder, or his poetic persona, engages in a struggle with his desire to incorporate the Buddhist idea that it is noble not to get attached because life is transient and all will change in time, and his memory of and attachment to the past, which comes alive as he relives those experiences.

The second half of the poem exposes the more confessional element of Snyder’s lines as he returns the reader to his present location eight years after his

walk under the cherry blossoms of an orchard in Oregon. In this Japanese setting Snyder uses his current location to give the reader an understanding, at least in part, of what went wrong so long ago:

In a garden of the old capital  
I feel the trembling ghost of Yugao  
I remember your cool body  
Naked under a summer cotton dress.

Yugao is a character from *The Tale of Genji*.<sup>19</sup> When Genji takes Yugao as a new lover, the jilted Princess Rokujo is overcome with rage and envy. In some interpretations of the tale, her jealousy leaves her body and takes the form of a ghost who seeks out Genji and his lover in their bed and drags Yugao from Genji, killing her. Snyder's allusion to an ancient tale of infidelity, jealousy and revenge shades the poem with a confessional tone. As he associates Robin with the "trembling" victim, the ghost, Yugao, his admission, his confession, combined with Robin's "wild, cold, and accusing" ghost, as she is described in a poem later in the sequence, is almost unmistakable.

Snyder's subtle descriptive associations of Robin shift from one poem to the next and emphasise the change in their relationship and the change in his associations and memories of her. In "Siwashing it out" she is associated with the warmth of their shared bed, whose memory drives away the bitter cold of his sleepless night; but in "A spring night" Snyder remembers her "cool body," whose shift from warm to cool—and eventually to "cold" ("An autumn morning in

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<sup>19</sup> Murasaki Shikibu. *The Tale of Genji*. 1976. Trans. Edward G Seidensticker. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992. Everyman's Library.

Shokoku-ji”) and “grave” (“December at Yase”)—chronicles the slow death of their love.

“An autumn morning in Shokoku-ji,” the third poem in the series, is increasingly confessional. Its title and setting, “autumn,” indicates that the mood and subject of the poem will be concerned with the end of a season, the moment and process of death. Snyder’s mention of the Pleiades, an autumnal constellation, under which the poet’s “breath” smokes “in the moonlight” and the chill air, could be interpreted in many ways, and it is difficult to determine whether Snyder invokes the Seven Sisters with allusion to a particular cultural mythology, or whether the constellation is mentioned simply as a reference to the seasonal time of year. Most likely, his mention of the Pleiades is at least in part an allusion to Sappho’s famous lyric (translated below by Francis Fawkes, 1760) about watching the moon and the Pleiades disappear from the sky as she reclines in solitude:

The *Pleiads* now no more are seen,  
Nor shines the silver Moon serene,  
In dark and dismal Clouds o’ercast;  
The love appointed Hour is past:  
Midnight usurps her sable Throne,  
And yet, alas! I lie alone.<sup>20</sup>

The mood of loneliness and reflection in Sappho’s lines is effective and powerful, and a fitting companion to Snyder’s poem. The confessional elements of “An autumn morning in Shokoku-ji” are certainly dramatic, autobiographical, and filled

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<sup>20</sup> Margaret Reynolds. *The Sappho Companion*. London: Vintage, 2001. 64.

with emotional crisis as Snyder recounts the “Bitter memory like vomit” that “Choked [his] throat.”

Like the other poems in the series, and like his developing style during this time period, Snyder employs a combination of traditional and non-traditional elements of poetic device. Each line is capitalized, as in the traditional poetic mode, but there is no discernible metre, pattern or rhyme scheme through the poem. Snyder does incorporate a long *o* vowel sound that resonates and echoes throughout the poem in words such as “smoking” and “Choked my throat.” The poem continues throughout with an occasional scattering of these long *o* sounds—“unrolled,” “cold,” “woke,” “Almost,” “close”—which add an expressive element similar to that present in “Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout.” This tendency to incorporate subtle near-asonantal sounds is a trademark of Snyder’s work and can be seen with other repeated vowel sounds in “An autumn morning.” Most notable is the long and short *a* in “shamed and angry” and the *a* combined with the *r* which creates the off-rhyme of “wars of the heart.” Although one certainly cannot apply a formula to Snyder’s poetry—his almost assonantal traces do not necessarily equate to an indication of the climax or most meaningful lines of a poem—this aspect of his technique, in the case of “An autumn morning,” adds to the dramatic element of the crises expressed.

“An autumn morning in Shokoku-ji” contrasts with previously mentioned warmth of the bed in “Siwashing it out” and the coolness of Robin’s body in “A spring night” by following a progression into the cold anger of Robin’s apparition and the death of their love:

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In dream you appeared  
 (Three times in nine years)  
 Wild, cold, and accusing.  
 I woke shamed and angry:

Snyder's incorporation of dreams and visions of ghosts is reminiscent of Freudian psychoanalysis and is a dramatic and emotional confessional trait in this series of poems. The overtly autobiographical expression of emotion and feeling is uncommon in Snyder's later poems, but is an early element of his progression and development as a poet.

His incorporation of a ghostly female visitation is a familiar element of the Japanese Nō play<sup>21</sup>, but can also be found in many Romantic poems. Significantly, Snyder chooses to describe Robin's ghost as "wild"—a noteworthy word in Snyder's poetic vocabulary, as previously discussed—which also echoes the wild, ghostly female who is often a presence in Romantic poetry. In Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," for example, the ghostly woman, the "faery child," is described in terms of wildness: her "hair was long" and "foot was light, / And her eyes were wild" (15-16). Keats further emphasises this wildness in her eyes, the window to the soul, and in her very being in the lines: "And there I shut her wild wild eyes<sup>22</sup> / With kisses four" (31-32). Snyder's idea that impermanence is a part of the meaning of *wild* contributes to the meditation of transience and the passing of time in his series

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<sup>21</sup> For a detailed discussion of Snyder's use of the Japanese Nō tradition, see Anthony Hunt's study, *Genesis, Structure and Meaning in Gary Snyder's Mountains and Rivers Without End*.

<sup>22</sup> In a subsequent version Keats changed the line to read "wild sad eyes" (663n31).

of poems and to his characterisation of Robin's ghost. Both Snyder and Keats's knight are left contemplating the ghost of a memory and a time gone by.

Unlike Sappho's poem, which ends with the solitary poet musing alone, or Keats's poem, which ends with the desperate knight abandoned and searching for what is lost, Snyder's poem ends with a rare glimpse of Venus and Jupiter together in the sky just before dawn. Snyder's shift in the poem from shame and anger to a vision of a rare astronomical event gives the poem a sense of movement toward resolution as though the sight of Venus and Jupiter in the same heavens is representative of an insight and understanding that the poet and star-gazer seeks and may have finally found.

One vital issue when considering the confessionalist mode is the difficulty in separating fact from fiction, or, as Hoffman puts it: "So great is the temptation in considering the mode to accept its fictive elements as literal fact and thereby identify at virtually every point the poet and his *persona* . . ." <sup>23</sup> This must also be considered when reading Snyder's *Four Poems for Robin*. His use of ghosts and dreams and visions—"In dream you appeared / (Three times in nine years)"—adds to the dramatic element of the poems, but is not at the crux of the meaning or intent of the poems. In the last poem of the series, "December at Yase," Snyder clearly articulates the philosophical and emotional crisis that forms at the crux of these poems.

As he chronicles the death of their relationship and recounts his hopes and motivations, he explains what is really bothering him:

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<sup>23</sup> Hoffman 694

I feel ancient, as though I had  
Lived many lives.

And may never now know  
If I am a fool  
Or have done what my  
karma demands.

Certainly regret for the loss of the woman he loved is at the heart of these four poems, but ultimately, Snyder's philosophical and emotional crisis is hinged upon his own self doubt as to whether his plan ("And I was obsessed with a plan," as he previously states in the poem), presumably to go to Japan and study Buddhism and East Asian languages and culture, was the product of his own foolish will or the demands of his karma. For all the dramatic elements and expressions of emotion connected to his memories of Robin, Snyder ultimately uses the memories, the emotion, loss and regret, as a background and setting in which he can consider one of the recurring themes and issues in his poetry: whether he is "a fool" or whether he has "done what [his] / karma demands"—whether to assume the life of an ascetic, withdrawn from the everyday experience of satisfied wants and desires, or whether to embrace his own humanity at the expense of a greater, enlightened spirituality.

As previously discussed, Snyder pays more attention to traditional conventions in his earlier poems and incorporates details such as capitalizing the first letter of each line, or emulating the blank verse, heroic couplets and customary



conventions of previous poets. Later on, his poetry seems to reject those regulated forms and he is able more closely to realise his poetic ideals—that language and poetry should be “fundamentally wild” and “richly interconnected, interdependent, and incredibly complex” as well as “diverse, ancient, and full of information.”

Accounting for the difference between Snyder’s earlier attempts at creating a poetry of true interconnectedness to his later poetic achievements and their more “confident sense of interbirth,” Charles Altieri writes:

These early lyrics concentrate more on the moral task of achieving freedom from Western ways than on realizing the goal of a new religious vision.

What freedom they achieve from the struggle to escape slavery to “culture” is expressed primarily in the form of naming particulars, not of discovering relationships.<sup>24</sup>

As an example of Snyder’s early nominative poetry (a poetry which “[names] particulars”), Altieri gives “Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout” and suggests that “The poem dramatizes a sense of place and a sense of cosmos, but that cosmos is backdrop and not active agent.”<sup>25</sup> But as Snyder’s poetry has progressed, Altieri sees that “balanced elements each achieve their full significance” and “obtain their fullest life” as Snyder presents a “dialectic unity.” Snyder is able to achieve this unity in the following ways:

First of all, there is the tone that 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. Second,

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<sup>24</sup> Altieri *Enlarging* 132

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 133

the syntax of the poem supports its ecological intent, for as the speaker becomes more involved in his actions he forgoes any explicit references to himself as subject. The reader gets instead a series of verbs and almost dangling participles that tend to blend actor and action, man and world. Finally, the preponderance of concrete details has two effects. So much pointing asserts the referential power of language and denies the self-reflexive implications that accompany more metaphoric styles. It is not words but things that are being related to one another. And these concrete relations enable Snyder to communicate a non-Western frame of mind without references to occult philosophy or a series of abstractions. Ecology deals not with ideas, but with modes of action and with the unity of interrelationships in nature, and its verification is the fullness of the environment it creates.<sup>26</sup>

As Snyder's poetic development has progressed toward a more open form free from the constraints of traditional metre and rhyme, he still occasionally returns to the conventional forms of formal poetry, not for the purpose of playing "the game of inventing an abstract structure and then finding things in experience which can be forced into it"—as he explained in his statement on his poetic approach in *Naked Poetry*<sup>27</sup>—but for the purpose of incorporating those forms of poetic and metrical arrangement which more easily remain in the memory and thus serve to teach and pass on knowledge in the oral tradition. In other words, Snyder still uses traditional metre and rhyme to create poems that function as mnemonic device. He explains it

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 134-35.

<sup>27</sup> Berg 357

thus: “The oral tradition almost always puts its transmission into a form of measured language, which is easier to remember and can be chanted” (TRW 70). One example of such a poem is “The Wild Mushroom,” from *Turtle Island* (1974). The poem employs a sing-song rhythmical verse that instructs in the art of mushroom hunting. The first stanza informs us of the purpose of the poem:

Well the sunset rays are shining  
 Me and Kai have got our tools  
 A basket and a trowel  
 And a book with all the rules

Snyder’s reference to Kai, his oldest son, indicates that the poem is intended as a fun nursery rhyme for children that instructs and educates, as the fifth stanza illustrates:

If you look out under oak trees  
 Or around an old pine stump  
 You’ll know a mushroom’s coming  
 By the way the leaves are humped.

Yet in nearly the same breath, and throughout most of *Turtle Island* and Snyder’s subsequent poetic publications, he adheres to more experimental forms of poetry that reflect his own update on organic form and a poem’s intellectual and formal reflection of the interconnectedness of all things. For example, “The Hudsonian Curlew” is a fine illustration of Snyder’s free-form approach to poetry. Not only does each poem take its own individual and unique shape, but each stanza also takes its own distinctive outline.



within the reader's own imagination and interpretation. True to Snyder's imagistic inheritance from Pound and others, he starts out his poem by creating for the reader a picture, a collage of limitless elements, a "Mandala of Birds."

According to the *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, a mandala is defined as follows:

The Sanskrit noun *mandala* is often translated "circle" or "discoid object"; however, the term is also used to define visual and meditative images. Used in Hindu and Jain traditions as well as Buddhism, mandalas are described as cosmoplans both in the external sense as diagrams of the cosmos and in the internal sense a guide to the psychophysical practices of an adherent.<sup>29</sup>

Snyder's "The Hudsonian Curlew" is a poetic mandala, which meditates upon the image and experience, the interaction and interconnection between the cosmoplan of men and birds. In fact, the *Encyclopedia of Buddhism* also explains that mandalas "represent the manifestation of a specific deity (or group thereof) in the cosmos and as the cosmos" and as such:

A mandala can be understood, to some extent, as a web of forces radiating in and out of a self-contained and self-defined spiritual cosmos. Rites based on these icons presume a constant dialogue between the deity at the heart of the mandala and the practitioner who moves, at least metaphorically, from the outside to its core. Once within, the practitioner identifies with the central

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<sup>29</sup> "mandala." *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*. 2 vols. Ed. Robert E. Buswell, Jr. New York: Thompson Gale, 2004. Macmillan Reference USA. 508.

deity, apprehends all manifestations as part of a single whole, and moves closer to the goal of perfect understanding or enlightenment.<sup>30</sup>

And so, just as Snyder has said, the poem is a “Mandala of Birds” where he is the practitioner in dialogue with and meditation of the bird deity, the curlew, at the heart of his poetic mandala. In this way, the poem is also another examination of the “concerns” that Snyder is “continually investigating that tie together biology, mysticism, prehistory, [and] general systems theory.” Snyder says that his investigations of these ideas lead him “to hit different new centers in interrelationships, different interstices in those networks of ideas and feelings,” and that when he discovers “those interstices, sometimes a poem comes out of there” (TRW 36).

Because Snyder’s poetic structure is particularly and deliberately non-traditional, it is often difficult to determine when and where one stanza ends and a new stanza begins. Snyder often incorporates extra spaces between lines that do not necessarily indicate a new stanza; and he uses symbols or images, such as the figure of kokopelli—the hump-backed flute player found in many ancient Native American petroglyphs—or Japanese kanji and Chinese ideograms, to indicate a transition or the separation of one stanza from the next. In the case of “The Hudsonian Curlew,” Snyder uses an embellished cross or asterisk-like image similar to this: ✱. The symbol’s own symmetry is reflective of the symmetry found in the image of a mandala, and its significance as part of the poem is worth mention, particularly in light of a discussion about Snyder’s innovations on poetic form.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

To further the image of a “Mandala of Birds,” Snyder completes the first stanza not only by listing the many different species birds, but also by incorporating their actions and the actions of the humans, Snyder and his companions, as two worlds interact and intersect:

pelican, seagulls, and terns,  
                   one curlew  
                   far at the end—  
 they fly up as they see us  
                   and settle back down.  
 tern keep coming  
                   —skies of wide seas—  
 frigate birds keep swooping  
  
 pelicans sit nearest the foam;  
  
 tern bathing and fluttering  
                   in frothy wave-lapping  
                   between the round stones.  
  
                   we  
 gather driftwood for firewood  
 for camping  
 get four shells to serve up steamed snail  
                   ✱

Throughout this excerpt Snyder plays with the letter *f*, alliterating subtly and sporadically in some places and deliberately creating a brief parallel structure in “for firewood / for camping” which he then shifts to “four shells,” concluding the stanza with the alliterative line: “shells to serve up steamed snail.”

Snyder's second stanza is structured to indicate its central theme. Separated into two halves by a page break, and by a natural break in the poem's form, it illustrates the interaction of the "two sides of a border" he explores:

✱

in the top of the cardón cactus  
 two vultures  
 look, yawn, hunch, preen.  
 out on the point      the seabirds  
 squabble and settle, meet and leave;  
 speak.  
 two sides of a border.  
 the margins.      tidewater.      zones.  
 up in the void,      under the surface,  
 two worlds      touch  
 and greet

✱

Again Snyder uses the gaps and spaces between words to accentuate the borders and distance between ideas and things. At this point, although he describes "two worlds" which "touch / and greet," they have not yet become completely interconnected. The duality of separation and connection is underscored by Snyder's experimentation with pairs. He repeats the word "two" in the phrases "two vultures," "two sides of a border" and "two worlds." He also continues the emphasis on pairs in a subtler manner, playing with pairings of verbs, phrases and structures within the poem. For example, "the seabirds" "squabble and settle"—a pair of verbs that Snyder joins

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with a conjunction as well as with alliteration. Then, he joins and yet separates “squabble and settle” by using a comma and parallel structure with “meet and leave”—two words which are again paired not only by the conjunction but also by the rhyme of the long *e* sound within both words, which is disguised by the variant spelling. Thus the line “squabble and settle, meet and leave” presents a pair of pairs which correspond through adjacent positioning on the page and through structure and form as well as poetic device. Snyder’s talent for delicate poetic nuance is represented in the way he uses variation in his patterns. Although he indicates to the reader that “squabble and settle” and “meet and leave” correspond through literary device, he disguises the pattern by using different devices—first alliteration, and then rhyme. Snyder repeats varying pairs of opposing correspondences throughout the short passage, such as the line: “up in the void,            under the surface,” and the effect is magnificent.

For Snyder, interconnection is often indicated or illustrated through the act of eating as one living organism ingests or incorporates the minerals and elements of another. Snyder often explores different characteristics and participants of the “food chain” and its spiritual and biological implications, as exemplified in such poems as “Song of the Taste” and “Shark Meat” (both from RW). “The Hudsonian Curlew” is also one such poem, and Snyder’s dialogue with and meditation of the curlew is culminated in the act of killing, cleaning and eating the bird as well as sharing and participating in that act with others. Thus the following stanza interrupts the greeting of two worlds with “Three shotgun shots as it gets dark.”



connotation. In the Buddhist sense, *emptiness*<sup>31</sup>, or *Śūnyatā*, is the concept that nothing possesses identity without an interrelation or connection to all other things and is an element of Buddhist insight, which, if truly understood, leads to wisdom and inner peace. Thus, as the curlew is disembowelled, Snyder recognises and meditates upon minute details of the bird's anatomy and its connection to himself and to all things.

Of particular significance is Snyder's emphasis on the word "muscle," which is repeated and even set apart in its own line. Snyder tells us that the "rich body muscle" that the curlew "moved by" and the "wing-beating / muscle," which enables flight "is what you eat." And the reader understands that the significance of the muscle is not only that it happens to be "what you eat," but that it is also the source of flight, transcendence, knowledge, or as Snyder describes the "dense firm flesh, / dark and rich" in the penultimate section: "gathered news of skies and seas." The significance of the act of eating is also not lost on the reader, particularly considering the previous discussion of "Song of the Taste" and its celebration of eating.

Snyder finishes his poetic mandala by coming full circle. Rather than ending with death, Snyder recognises that natural and biological processes are continuous and without end, and he finishes his poem with another beginning, with "something evermore about to be":

at dawn  
looking out from the dunes

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<sup>31</sup> This idea of *emptiness* in Snyder's poetry was discussed in my chapters on Snyder and the role of the poet/prophet—Chapters Three and Four.

no birds at all but  
three curlew

*ker-lew!*

*ker-lew!*

pacing      and glancing      around.

*Baja: Bahía de Concepción, '69*

It is certainly no coincidence that Snyder finishes his poem with the word, “around,” set a space apart in the final line to enable its dual meaning, first as a preposition, wherein the birds glance around, and second as a reflection of the shape and, more importantly, the meaning of a mandala—a “circle” or “discoid object”—something that comes full circle and encompasses the complete interrelation of things.

In recent years Snyder’s poetry has continued to evolve and incorporate new approaches to poetic form. With the publication of *Mountains and Rivers Without End* (1996)—a long poem comprised of smaller poetic sections which embody multiple forms, themes, genres, narrators and poetic personae, and intended to represent the vast embodiment of an entire landscape, much like a painted Chinese landscape scroll—Snyder realised the culmination of a forty-year project that exemplifies his many poetic styles. In an interview published in *The Paris Review* in 1996, Snyder explained his evolving approach to poetry and metre and organic form:

As a poem comes to me, in the process of saying and writing it, the lines themselves establish a basic measure, even a sort of musical or rhythmic

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phrase for the whole poem. I let it settle down for quite a while and do a lot of fine-tuning as part of the revision. . . . I don't count syllables or stresses, but I discover after the fact what form the poem has given itself, and then I further that. Of course I write other sorts of poems as well—longer, less lyrical, formal, borrowings or parodies, and so forth. I am experimenting with switching back and forth between a prose voice and a lyric voice in some of the work I'm doing now.<sup>32</sup>

Snyder's most recent collection of poems, *Danger on Peaks* (2004), is the product of his experimentation with alternating "between a prose voice and a lyric voice." Some of the pieces are primarily, or even entirely, prose with small snippets of poetry interspersed. The opening section of *Danger on Peaks* is entitled *Mount St. Helens*, and begins with a series of prose-poems that chronicle Snyder's personal history and interaction with the mountain and the ideas and issues that arise from their interrelation and correspondence. As the section progresses, Snyder warms up to more poetic forms that are reminiscent of his own characteristic style, as illustrated by poems such as "1980: Letting Go" or "Pearly Everlasting." The collection also includes extremely short haiku-like snippets, such as "A Dent in a Bucket":

Hammering a dent out of a bucket  
 a woodpecker  
 answers from the woods

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<sup>32</sup> Weinberger

Many of the poems in *Danger on Peaks* are a pairing of both prose and poetry in which Snyder introduces or concludes the poem by way of providing the background information necessary to understand, at least in part, the poet's intention as well as the significance of the lines. He does so in the form of a paragraph or two of prose, which usually precede the more traditional (if only slightly) verse. This combination of prose and poetry recalls the practice of many Romantic poems, as in the paratextual Preface which Coleridge sets at the head of "Kubla Khan" to establish it as a fragment poem. Snyder has developed and evolved a distinct and fresh form that is not just a pairing of prose and poetry, but an interrelation and a melding of the two. This can be seen in poems such as "Baking Bread"—

Warm sun of a farmyard    a huge old chestnut tree    just yesterday  
 the woman said    been raided by wild rhesus monkeys  
 we had boar meat, *inoshishi*, stewed with chestnuts    for lunch.  
 Deer, boar, monkeys, foxes    in these mountains  
 and lots of dams    little trucks on narrow winding roads

Four hours from Tokyo  
 brightly colored work clothes  
 living on abandoned farms  
 fighting concrete dams  
 "I am hippy" says this woman  
 baking bread

*(early October 2000 in the headwaters  
of the Mibu River, Southern Japan Alps)*

The first section of the poem appears in many ways to be laid out in regular prose form as though Snyder has written a paragraph about the setting in which he was inspired to write the poem. But the gaps and spaces cause the reader to wonder whether Snyder has gone through his paragraph and deleted occasional words and punctuation or whether the paragraph is in fact a lined poem itself. The result is that there is greater possibility in the opening paragraph/poem because by omitting punctuation and excess wording, the images and ideas are able both to stand alone as separate entities and contribute to and cooperate with the other images and ideas presented. For example, “Warm sun of a farmyard” and “a huge old chestnut tree” are separate images and separate things separated by a gap in the line. Yet they share the same line and are listed consecutively in the paragraph/poem, leaving the reader to make his or her own assumptions about the relationship between the sunny farmyard and the old chestnut tree or even whether there is a relationship between the two. Presumably there is a connection—that the chestnut tree stands within and is a part of the farmyard—because of their relationship on the page, because they are in the same paragraph/poem and are on the same line, and Snyder knows that by arranging his images this way, he can demonstrate the relationship rather than articulate it. Snyder has simply created his own rules for formatting a poem. Rather than beginning a new line, he has added enough space to indicate both a separation and a connection. Perhaps he could have formatted the ideas and images of his

paragraph/poem into individual lines after the traditional lined format of a poem.

For example, it could have looked like this:

Warm sun of a farmyard  
 a huge old chestnut tree  
 just yesterday  
 the woman said  
 been raided by wild rhesus monkeys  
 we had boar meat, *inoshishi*, stewed with chestnuts  
 for lunch.

But the appearance of the lined poem eliminates the possibility of prose. Then what is the effect of formatting a poem in terms of prose? Ultimately, it seems Snyder intends to blur the lines between poetry and prose in order to more accurately embody the interconnectedness and interrelation of those forms. The poet can incorporate spaces and separation whilst upholding a connection and a fluidity by creating a combination of the two.

If Snyder is experimenting with a combined form in “Baking Bread,” one must wonder why he chooses to include in the second half a more deliberate poem in the traditional lined form. Could this poem be rearranged in the same paragraph/poem form of the first half of “Baking Bread”? What does the poem gain by formatting it into poetic lines? If we were to rearrange it, what would change? Perhaps it could appear thus:



Four hours from Tokyo    brightly colored work clothes    living on  
 abandoned farms    fighting concrete dams    “I am hippy” says this  
 woman    baking bread

The most significant change in formatting Snyder’s lined poem into a paragraph/poem is that the visual impact of the line “I am hippy’ says this woman,” which stands out and is accentuated by the misalignment of the quotation mark—set one extra space to the left of the margin in poetic form—is lost when incorporated into a paragraph. Perhaps, then, by transitioning between prose and poetry and poetic prose Snyder also illustrates a knot in the grain, like the Japanese song, or *fushi*, which continues fluidly as a prose poem until it stumbles upon an occasional knot in the grain where only an intensified poetic expression will do.

Ultimately, Snyder’s originality in poetry is born out of his poetic inheritance from past Romantic traditions and his innovations upon that inheritance. There is a clear investigation of blank verse and traditional rhyme and metre in Snyder’s earlier poems that gives way to a fresh new imagining of organic form. Recalling Eliot’s remark that poetry is “a living whole of all the other poetry that has ever been written”<sup>33</sup>, Snyder, at his best, maintains an eye on the poetry of the past in order to achieve a poetry that is new and fresh and completely of its time. For, like the twisted dead bough—the product of “a hundred summers” of snowmelt, rock and air—Snyder’s poetry is the product of all that came before; and this enables him to articulate his interconnecting vision.

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<sup>33</sup> T. S. Eliot. “Tradition and the Individual Talent, II.” *The Egoist* 6.5 (Dec 1919): 72-73. 72.

## Chapter Seven: Mountains as Romantic Emblems of Revelation

## I.

From his first publications of *Riprap* to the completion of *Mountains and Rivers Without End* and most recently in *Danger on Peaks*, Snyder has been interested in examining, through poetry, the relationship between humanity and its environment. As I have reiterated throughout my examination of Snyder, his poetry, like the poetry of his Romantic predecessors, focuses on the interplay between humanity and the natural world and the ensuing ideas and meditations such an interchange inspires. Accordingly, a recurrent eco-Romantic theme in Snyder's poetry and ideas is the interconnectedness of all things. However, whether this goal of universal interconnectedness as expressed through poetry is achievable in Snyder's poetry and poetics is a question to be continually explored; and I would assert that Snyder's poetry is often most interesting and most successful when he does not achieve this interconnectedness. Rather, it is the striving for interpenetration and not necessarily the attainment of it that makes his poetry significant. In this it resembles the Romantic fragment, as discussed in Chapter Two.

All of Snyder's Romantic tendencies, including his ecological inheritance, his fundamentally "wild" poetic form and his visionary and shamanistic prophetic mind poetry intertwine in his most recent two poetic publications: *Mountains and*

*Rivers Without End*<sup>1</sup> (1996) and *Danger on Peaks* (2005). In these collections, Snyder explores two images that are at once archetypically Romantic and open-ended in their possibility: mountains and rivers. In fact, Snyder has often commented on the significance of the two: “Mountains and Waters are a dyad that together make wholeness possible” (POW 108).

Snyder’s motivation for exploring the interaction of mountains and rivers, sometimes mountains and waters, and the symbolic implications of such an interaction undoubtedly comes from his close association with Zen Buddhism and East Asian culture and religion which began with his exposure to East Asian landscape paintings in the Seattle Art Museum at the age of ten (MRWE 153). In *The Practice of the Wild* (1990), Snyder discusses the significance of these natural phenomena and the idea of landscape as the embodiment of interpenetration:

There is the obvious fact of the water-cycle and the fact that mountains and rivers indeed form each other: waters are precipitated by heights, carve or deposit landforms in their flowing descent, and weight the offshore continental shelves with sediment to ultimately tilt more uplifts. In common usage the compound “mountains and waters”—*shan-shui* in Chinese—is the straightforward term for landscape. . . . One does not need to be a specialist to observe that landforms are a play of stream-cutting and ridge-resistance and that waters and hills interpenetrate in endlessly branching rhythms. The Chinese feel for land has always incorporated this

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<sup>1</sup> *Mountains and Rivers Without End* is Snyder’s magnum opus, which he began writing in 1956. In 1965 he published six sections from the work in progress, appropriately entitled *Six Sections from Mountains and Rivers Without End*, and the final, completed version of the epic poem was published in its entirety in 1996.

sense of a dialectic of rock and water, of downward flow and rocky uplift, and of the dynamism and “slow flowing” of earth forms. (POW 109)

Although Snyder’s thematic foundation is manifestly rooted in East Asian sources, this simultaneously creative and destructive dialectical interplay of rock and water is also significant in the literature and thought processes of western writers—namely the British Romantics—whose work should not be discounted in its contribution to Snyder’s poetic explorations. These final two chapters will explore mountains and rivers as Romantic notions and emblems, which represent a synthesis of Snyder’s transatlantic post-Romantic inheritance and poetic development as well as achievement.

## II.

In many cultures mountains are considered sacred spiritual places of communion where one can obtain revelation and inspiration. Arne Naess, the Norwegian philosopher credited with founding the *deep ecology* movement, lists several symbolic characteristics of mountains:

- “Mountains ‘touch’ the heavens, and are therefore . . . the meeting place between the heavenly and the earthly”
- Their elevation represents “excellence, nobility, majesty, steadiness, coolness, superiority”
- A person’s ascension of a mountain “is a symbol of a person increasing in every positive way.”

- “Every ‘ascension’ is a passage to the beyond, a rupture of the level, a passage from the region of the trivial or profane to that of surpassing, over-whelming importance. In short; to reach the mountain top is to transcend the human condition, reaching the unreachable.”<sup>2</sup>

Moses spoke with Jehovah on Mount Sinai; Zeus reigned from Mount Olympus; Mount Meru is the Buddhist mythological centre of the universe and the link between the hells below the earth and the heavens above; the Navajo Nation is bordered by four sacred mountains which represent the four cardinal directions; and in Hinduism Mount Kailasa in the Himalayas is the traditional home of Shiva and the centre of the universe.

It is no wonder, then, that mountains play a prominent role in literature, and particularly in the Romantic tradition. Åke Bergvall observes that “if Spenser and Milton were interested in high peaks, that was even more true for the romantic poets, who had a fixation on mountains greater than almost any other generation.”<sup>3</sup> Marjorie Hope Nicholson’s *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory* investigates the distinct shift—“a dynamic of taste,” as she calls it—at the beginning of the Romantic age, where an attitude of general cultural abhorrence towards mountainous natural landscapes transitioned to an attitude of reverence in the way that mountains and landscapes were viewed. Her formative work on the subject traces that shifting stance from the literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth

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<sup>2</sup> Arne Naess. “Mountains and Mythology.” *Trumpeter*. 12.4 (1995): 2-3. 10 Aug 2008. <<http://trumpeter.athabasca.ca/index.php/trumpet/article/view/294/435>>.

<sup>3</sup> Åke Bergvall. “Of Mountains and Men: Vision and Memory in Wordsworth and Petrarch.” *Connotations* 7.1 (1997-1998): 44-57. 10 Aug 2008. 44. <<http://www.uni-tuebingen.de/uni/nec/bergvall71.htm>>.

century to that of the Romantic era and the nineteenth century. In her preface to the work she puts it thus:

When seventeenth-century poets described mountains—the majority did not—they vacillated between lip service to classical epithets such as “heaven-kissing” or “star-touching” and condemnation of the “warts, wens, blisters, imposthumes” that mar the face of Nature. On the other hand, eighteenth-century poets went out of their way to include mountains in their descriptive poetry, introducing long and exhaustive passages showing that mountain description had become an important part of landscape poetry. In the Romantic period, as anyone knows, mountains were not only central to descriptive poetry but almost as sacred as Sinai to the patriarchs.<sup>4</sup>

This trend towards a reverence for mountains in the Romantic tradition has led to an understanding of mountains and their relative landscapes as symbols of Romantic thought which have endured and have been incorporated into the western cultural and literary tradition.<sup>5</sup> But mountains are rarely thought of in isolation, and are therefore often found in consideration alongside companion rivers and valleys.

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<sup>4</sup> Marjorie Hope Nicholson. *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite*. (1959). Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997. Weyerhaeuser Environmental Classics. xiv.

<sup>5</sup> The Romantic incorporation of mountains into the poetic tradition is something Auden identifies and challenges in his “Letter to Lord Byron.” In lines such as “The mountain-snob is a Wordsworthian fruit” and “Besides, I’m very fond of mountains, too; / I like to travel through them in a car” (90) Auden asserts a criticism of, or “private quarrel” with, what he sees as rote praise (in the wake of Romantic influence) for mountainous landscapes in poetry. Yet even Auden has a love of elevated, if not quite mountainous, landscapes. He chooses, in Part Three of “New Year Letter,” “Those limestone moors that stretch from BROUGH / To HEXHAM and the ROMAN WALL” (the Pennines) as his “symbol of us all” (182). But Auden’s interest in and love for the Pennines is connected to an exploration of

Coleridge's philosophical explorations of the imagination led him to a discussion and definition of *symbol* and/or *tautegory* within a Romantic context. In *The Statesman's Manual*, Coleridge defines a symbol thus: "A symbol . . . is characterized by a translucence of the Special in the Individual or the General in the Especial or of the Universal in the General" (30). This idea of the "General in the Especial or of the Universal in the General" is certainly relevant to Snyder's poetic observations, as illustrated through poems I have previously discussed such as "Song of the Taste" and "Shark Meat," that the individual and the universal are intertwined and reflect and inform each other. When this idea of interpenetration is applied to mountains, these vast landmarks become Romantic symbols, direct representations, and microcosms of the imagination and of the source for revelation. They become, as Snyder says, "spiritually deepening" (POW 108).

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humanity's efforts to dwell and create a home within the harsh landscape. Auden's view of and interaction with "Those limestone moors" is one that instructs him on the nature of humanity. His consideration of the River Eden and a "view / Of green and civil life that dwells / Below a cliff of savage fells" in which the landscape, bearing the markings of man's "renounced techniques"—"tramways overgrown with grass," a "derelict lead-smelting mill"—teaches the poet of "all in man that mourns and seeks" (182). "In Praise of Limestone" also articulates this relationship between humanity and landscape, which is not particularly mountainous, but is characterized, rather, by "rounded slopes," "A secret system of caves and conduits" and "springs" that carve out ravines (414). In a way, Auden's landscapes are a foil in answer to Romantic mountains. His "limestone moors" draw the poet's eyes down to a contemplation of what lies beneath, the internal, rather than drawing his eyes outward to a contemplation of the external. Although the differences between Auden and Snyder are easily apparent, Snyder could not have escaped Auden's influence, particularly in light of the observation by many critics that the Beat poets reacted against Auden's detached and ironic tone. Yet Auden's poetry is not always ironic and detached, for, like Snyder, he also experimented with haiku; and like Snyder, Auden had a strong sense of what was owed by human beings to "Dame Kind." See W. H. Auden. *W. H. Auden: Collected Poems*. London: Faber and Faber, 1976.

Wordsworth and Shelley approach mountains as symbols of the imagination and of revelation in differing senses. Wordsworth identifies mountains as locations where revelation is granted, as in his famous Simplon Pass and Mount Snowdon passages of *The Prelude*. In Wordsworth's description of his crossing of the Alps, he discusses the struggle and anxiety of seeking revelation as represented by the physical and mental struggle of climbing a mountain whilst lacking the perspective necessary to locate one's self in the landscape. The mountain first acts as an obstruction which deters the poet from a complete perspective as it blocks the poet's view and thus his ability to locate himself within the landscape:

The only track now visible was one  
 Upon the further side, right opposite,  
 And up a lofty Mountain. This we took  
 After a little scruple, and short pause,  
 And climbed with eagerness, though not, at length,  
 Without surprize and some anxiety                    (*The Prelude*, 1805 VI.504-09)

Wordsworth describes the mountain as “lofty,” indicating its significance. For Wordsworth this struggle with the mountain is rewarded as the poet's interaction with the mountain grants revelation. In the case of Wordsworth's ability to negotiate the Simplon Pass, the revelation is the poet's realisation of the strength and power of his own imagination as the poet realises that it is the capacity to aspire and to hope for “something evermore about to be” (VI.540-42) that contributes to human “greatness.” However, this section of *The Prelude* is very intricate and its complexities create a great deal of ambivalent and varying possibilities. When



Wordsworth asks a peasant where his party should go to cross the Alps, he discovers that they have actually crossed them. Rather than feeling exasperated, Wordsworth is aware that he was ardently hoping long after he had achieved his goal. This realisation makes him aware that it is the capacity to hope that makes up human greatness; we are forever longing for “something evermore about to be.”

At the end of *The Prelude* in Book XIII Wordsworth gives a detailed illustration of the revelatory nature of mountains and the poet’s ability to find in his interaction with them translucent, and yet potentially deceptive, visions. Importantly, the poet sets off on his journey in line 10 upon “a Summer’s night,” when the poet’s ability to see is hindered: “Little could we see” (15). In fact, Wordsworth describes the night in line 11 as “Wan, dull and glaring<sup>6</sup>, with a dripping mist”—hardly the setting for a transcendent vision of enlightenment and new understanding. Yet, because the “dull” and “thick” night serves to suppress conversation, the setting becomes conducive to contemplation as Wordsworth and his companions “silently . . . sunk / Each into commerce with his private thoughts” (18-19). The combined inner “commerce” and physical exertion bring the poet to a point upon the mountain in which his physical point of view is matched in brilliance by a mental and visionary revelation. As Wordsworth “panted up / With eager pace, and no less eager thoughts,” the mountain grants revelation to the poet:

When at my feet the ground appear’d to brighten,  
And with a step or two seem’d brighter still,

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<sup>6</sup> Stephen Gill (in *Wordsworth: The Major Works*. Ed. Stephen Gill. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. Rpt. 2008. Oxford World’s Classics.) notes that the word “glaring” is intended by Wordsworth to mean “clammy,” and refers the reader to James Maxwell’s discussion of the word (738 579n1).

Nor had I time to ask the cause of this,  
 For instantly a Light upon the turf  
 Fell like a flash: I looked about, and lo!  
 The Moon stood naked in the Heavens, at height  
 Immense above my head, and on the shore  
 I found myself of a huge sea of mist,  
 Which, meek and silent, rested at my feet: (31-44)

Now the poet, in his new vantage point atop the mountain, is allowed a new and prophetic perspective. Placed between the earth and heavens, he can see “The universal spectacle throughout” (60), and even where “Nature lodg’d / The Soul, the Imagination of the whole” (64-65).

In *The Borders of Vision* Jonathan Wordsworth discusses this interplay between the poet and mountain in Wordsworth’s *Prelude* (1805) through the “metaphor of usurpation.” He observes that in both the Snowdon (Book XIII) and the crossing of the Alps (Book VI) passages, reality is usurped by the imagination. However, Jonathan Wordsworth notes in *The Prelude* a third example of usurpation wherein the poet “is saying different things—or at least his standpoint varies—but the contexts are identical.”<sup>7</sup> This contrasting example, also found in Book VI, is an instance of a reversal of roles in which, as Jonathan Wordsworth notes, “reality becomes the usurper.”<sup>8</sup> For, when Wordsworth looks upon Mont Blanc, he grieves “To have a soulless image on the eye, / Which had usurp’d upon a living thought /

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<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Wordsworth. *William Wordsworth: The Borders of Vision*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982. 174.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 176

That never more could be” (VI.454-6). In this contrasting example, Jonathan Wordsworth illustrates that within Wordsworth’s approach to the interaction between nature and the imagination, although the “Power” of the imagination “In all the might of its endowments” (VI.527-28) often effects great influence on the poet’s vision, there is also possibility for nature to act as a power whose influence can “[usurp] upon a living thought.” Thus Wordsworth’s mountain passages in *The Prelude*—Snowdon, The Alps, Mont Blanc—not only act as Romantic representations of the imagination and of its source for revelation, but also serve to illustrate his ideas about nature’s capacity to frustrate the mind. If his central aim is to depict the “discerning intellect of Man / When wedded to this goodly universe” (Preface to *The Excursion* 52-53) in an interpenetrative relationship of give-and-take, he does not shirk departures from this ideal, thus offering a range of often unpredictable poetic experiences.

Shelley takes this unpredictability as his default position. He sees mountainous landscapes as locations where revelation is denied, or where the only revelation is that there is no religious revelation. For example, in *Mont Blanc*, previously discussed in Chapter Four, the poet describes “dark mountains” (18), which obstruct vision and a landscape wherein “shadows . . . pass by” (45). When the actual mountain is finally addressed in the third section of *Mont Blanc*, it is described in almost sterile, alien terms—“unearthly” (62), “unfathomable” (64), “desert” (67), “rude, bare” (70), “Ghastly” (71)—as its distance from the poet and his earthly, even mortal, realm is emphasised:

Far, far above, piercing the infinite sky,

Mont Blanc appears,—still, snowy, and serene—  
 Its subject mountains their unearthly forms  
 Pile around it, ice and rock; broad vales between  
 Of frozen floods, unfathomable deeps,  
 Blue as the overhanging heaven, that spread  
 And wind among the accumulated steeps;  
 A desert peopled by the storms alone,  
 Save when the eagle brings some hunter's bone,  
 And the wolf tracks her there—how hideously  
 Its shapes are heaped around! rude, bare, and high,  
 Ghastly, and scarred, and riven.                   (60-71)

Shelley's perception and description of Mont Blanc certainly emphasizes a disparity between the living breathing realm of man and the lifeless and inanimate realm of the peaks above. Lines 67 and 68 serve to further identify this disparity that separates the poet from the mount by implying that the mountain's height can only be inhabited by man in death. Shelley further explores this idea of the contrast between the living elements of the earth—

The fields, the lakes, the forests, and the streams,  
 Ocean, and all the living things that dwell  
 Within the daedal earth . . .  
 .....  
 All things that move and breathe with toil and sound  
 Are born and die; revolve, subside and swell.                   (84-95)

—and the mountain, whose “Power dwells apart in its tranquillity / Remote, serene, and inaccessible” (96-97). Rather than an affinity and connection, as Wordsworth finds on Mount Snowdon, Shelley finds in Mont Blanc—in spite of his hope that “these primeval mountains / Teach the adverting mind” (99-100)—A “wall impregnable of beaming ice” (106). Thus Shelley concludes, as I previously mentioned in Chapter Four, that there is duality in the nature of correspondence between the mind and the external “object-world” wherein a hope for the possibility of a response, a revelation, from the mountain corresponds with and is overridden by a concluding realisation, albeit expressed by Shelley in the form of a question in the last three lines of the poem, that even the mountain and its power are subject to the “human mind’s imaginings”:

And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,  
If to the human mind’s imaginings  
Silence and solitude were vacancy?

There are many examples within traditional Romantic literature of mountains as locales where men, poets, prophets sought revelation and inspiration.

Even Byron, for example, finds understanding on an Alpine mountaintop. His revelation, like Wordsworth, is granted in, and perhaps even by, the mountains; yet like Shelley, Byron’s revelation is an expression of the negative and darker element of Romantic literature. For in *Manfred*—a play which is set in various locales, as Byron says in the introduction to the play, “amongst the Higher Alps,” Byron’s dark hero experiences the adverse aspects of revelation and thus asserts his understanding that:

But grief should be the instructor of the wise;  
 Sorrow is knowledge: they who know the most  
 Must mourn the deepest o'er the fatal truth,  
 The Tree of Knowledge is not that of Life. (I.i.9-12)

Byron's dark hero has mastered "Philosophy and science, and the springs / Of wonder, and the wisdom of the world" (I.i.13-14), and recognises that in his mind is a greater power:

. . . and in my mind there is  
 A power to make these subject to itself—  
 But they avail not . . . (I.i.15-17)

Manfred always sought knowledge and understanding beyond that which his fellow men were concerned. His "joy was in the Wilderness, to breathe / The difficult air of the iced mountain's top" (II.i.62-63). Nevertheless, Manfred's knowledge and "Conclusions most forbidden" (II.i.83), which were obtained through communion with mountains, oceans, and the most extreme of elements, separated him from the companionship of his fellow human beings. Ultimately, for Manfred, although revelation is granted by the mountains, it is to his detriment and "avail[s] not." In the end Byron gives an ambivalent conclusion to his play and the idea of revelation and knowledge gained through communion with mountains and elements beyond mankind. For, even though Manfred's desire for revelation and knowledge is granted, Manfred's wish—"Forgetfulness," "Oblivion, self-oblivion" (I.i.136, 145) and even to have "never lived" and "never loved" (II.ii.193-94)—is denied. Although for Manfred—because of his knowledge, and therefore power, attained

within the mountains—“’tis not so difficult to die” (III.iv.151), his knowledge and power is still not enough to grant him the oblivion and non-existence which he so greatly desires.

Whether revelation is granted or denied, or both granted and denied, through communion with mountains, such interaction between man and mountains is prevalent throughout the explorations of Romantic literature and has been handed down through the western tradition. Snyder’s contemplations of mountains in many ways echo these Romantic assertions of both conviction and doubt in the revelatory nature of elevated climes.

### III.

“Bubbs Creek Haircut,”<sup>9</sup> first published in *Six Sections from Mountains and Rivers Without End* in 1965, is one of Snyder’s many poems which feature a mountainous setting wherein the poet/prophet, through the interaction and interpenetration of the mind of man with nature, seeks and eventually gains revelation. As a microcosmic representation of Snyder’s poetic philosophy, “Bubbs Creek Haircut” incorporates and illustrates his ideas concerning a number of matters: the need for poetic form to be fundamentally wild; ecological issues and the role of humanity within the earth’s ecosystem; the revelatory and insightful nature

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<sup>9</sup> Although Snyder first published “Bubbs Creek Haircut” in *Six Sections from Mountains and Rivers Without End* in 1965, the primary source for this discussion is the 1996 version of the poem from the completed *Mountains and Rivers Without End*. There are minor differences between the two published versions of the poem, none of which bear effect on this discussion.

of the “Mind Poet”<sup>10</sup>; and the sometimes conflicting nature of the role of the poet as both prophet and seer.

As previously discussed in Chapter Two, Snyder asserts that “. . . consciousness, mind, imagination, *and* language are fundamentally wild. ‘Wild’ as in wild ecosystems—richly interconnected, interdependent, and incredibly complex” (PIS 168). As part of Snyder’s epic conglomerate poem, *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, “Bubbs Creek Haircut” is structured in a way that is peculiarly suited to Snyder’s brand of poetry and ecopoetics. Its unrhymed, unmetered lines are often stripped of personal pronouns, articles and sometimes verbs, creating a poetic syntax akin to stream of consciousness prose. The poem’s lack of traditional structure represents a natural, ecological form which Snyder associates with the wildness of the natural environment. Snyder asserts that the universe is circular,<sup>11</sup> and uses the image of an arc or curve—like the arced path of the sun’s movement from east to west—to represent the circular and even cyclical nature of things such as ecosystems, the progression of the seasons or the rotation of the earth and its succession from day to night and again to day.

Snyder’s poem begins with a description of a barber’s shop—“High ceilinged and the double mirrors . . .”—and the narrator’s conversation with the barber about his intention to spend the summer in the Sierras. In a 1978 interview with Ekbert Faas, Snyder explained that each of the 25 sections of *Mountains and Rivers Without End* would be centred around a key phrase, or as Snyder calls it, a

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<sup>10</sup> See discussion on the Mind Poet and the Space Poet from “As For Poets” in Chapter Three.

<sup>11</sup> Faas 134



*ku*.<sup>12</sup> In the case of “Bubbs Creek Haircut,” the *ku*, according to Snyder, is “double mirror waver,” found in the last lines of the poem and reflected in the first line of the poem (“the double mirrors”). This “double mirror waver” sets up the structure for the entire poem. Snyder himself told Faas that:

“Double mirror waver” is a structure point. Mutually reflected mirrors. Like, you see yourself many times reflected in the barber shop. You look and you see yourself going that way and you see yourself going that way. It’s a key image in *Avatamsaka* philosophy, Buddhist interdependence philosophy.

Multiple reflections in multiple mirrors, that’s what the universe is like.<sup>13</sup>

The double mirror image creates an impression in the mind’s eye of a hypnotic time warp through which Snyder can express his vision of the structure of the universe—of history and time. Throughout “Bubbs Creek Haircut,” Snyder jumps backward and forward through time, expressing both his own experiences as well as the ideas and understanding of the universe that the associations of those experiences inspire. Thus, as Snyder looks into the double mirrors whilst having his hair cut, he catches a glimpse of eternity, of the universe, and of the “grain”<sup>14</sup> of things.

The structure of the poem is one of Wordsworthian meditation and reflection in retrospect, but is meditated through modernist and post-Romantic form and technique. Because Snyder writes in the aftermath of the poetry of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, there is a disjunction between Snyderian and Wordsworthian techniques—Wordsworth takes the reader with him through

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 135

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, “Song of the Taste” or “Wave” for an illustration of Snyder’s use of the word “grain.” Additionally, see my discussion of the word in Chapter 6.

coherent thoughts and structured sentences, Snyder abandons articulated syntax, leaving open spaces for the reader to guess and infer meaning. Snyder is not necessarily Wordsworthian, but his retrospective “spots of time”—wherein profound elements and experiences in time are jumbled and overlapped and not necessarily presented in a chronological or linear format—are. At such moments Snyder is able to persuade us that he can see poetically the figurative interpenetration and interdependence of the elements of man, nature and the universe. As the second stanza begins, Snyder speaks of coming out of the barber shop and into a good will shop next door. The act of leaving the barber shop and entering the adjacent good will shop<sup>15</sup> serves as a portal or entry-way to a transfigured perspective wherein Snyder goes from expressing a temporal and ordinary point of view, to one of spiritual and holistic understanding in which he becomes a poet/prophet whose consideration of everyday items is enlightened by a more complete, transcendent point of view. Accordingly, “Bubbs Creek Haircut” exhibits Snyder’s ability to change point of view; he is able simultaneously or varyingly to shift his perspective to see everyday life through the eyes of the common man, and, contrastingly, the interpenetration of the spiritual and physical elements of the universe through the eyes of the Romantic poet/prophet.

In the good will shop of the second stanza, Snyder’s poetic/prophetic perspective takes in the most ordinary and seemingly unspiritual of objects: “unfixed junk” cast off by owners grown tired of the items. In choosing the word

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<sup>15</sup> A good will shop is the equivalent of a charity shop. They sell second-hand, usually donated, goods at significantly reduced prices in order to raise money for any number of charitable causes.

“unfixed,” rather than words such as *broken* or *in disrepair*, Snyder plays on the reader’s likely initial presumption about good will items: that they are often broken or worn out and of no use. Instead, he gives significant emphasis to the idea that these items are “unfixed” in the sense that they are not tied to an owner, but are free. Snyder describes these articles—“tables, wheelchairs, battered trunks & lamps / & pots that boiled up coffee nineteen ten,” and, in particular, a “sag-asst rocker”—as “emblems of the past” that are left alone, “swimming on their own” and are “finally freed / from human need.” In this passage Snyder gives the inanimate objects almost anthropomorphic personas, reminiscent of the dead souls in Greek mythology who, floating free through the river Styx on a journey to the underworld, are freed from the fetters and chains of life, of “this mortal coil,” as Hamlet calls it (III.i.69). In addition, Snyder finds these castoff and lost souls “downstairs,” or, in the underworld. And thus Snyder the poet/prophet—like Orpheus, Dante, Blake, Aeneas, Heracles, Odysseus, and others—follows Joseph Campbell’s outlined journey of a hero into the underworld. In fact, in his interview with Ekbert Faas, Snyder speculated that “I probably know as much about myth as anybody. Probably [Robert] Duncan is the only other poet who has studied it as much as I have.”<sup>16</sup> This awareness of mythical tradition is certainly apparent in “Bubbs Creek Haircut.” To further add to this symbolic journey into the abyss of Hades, Snyder describes the proprietor of the good will shop as “The Master of the limbo drag-legged” who “watches / making prices.” Snyder’s “drag-legged” “Master of the limbo” seems to be a combination of Hephaestus (or Vulcan), the lame god of fire and volcanoes,

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<sup>16</sup> Faas 139

and Hades, the god of the underworld who controls the fate of the dead souls in his custody.

Midway through the second stanza, or section, Snyder jumps ahead in time to “A few days later” where he describes another journey reminiscent of a descent into the underworld. He and a companion, Locke<sup>17</sup>, travelled “down” the San Joaquin valley “barefoot in the heat.” Surely Snyder’s choice of the word *down* is suggestive of a journey to the underworld as is the association of *heat* with the burning torture of hell and the fire of Vulcan’s forge. Additionally, Snyder mentions that he and his travelling companion are barefoot, indicating several possibilities: the first possibility is an association with death as dead bodies are often barefoot (perhaps because the living, in Western society, often stole shoes from the dead who had no further use for them); second, in many religions—including Buddhist and Hindu traditions—shoes are removed before entering temples and bare feet are often associated with a pilgrimage; third, bare feet are a symbol of poverty and could also indicate an ascetic embrace of poverty; and finally, as in the American literary tradition, bare feet are often a symbol of innocence and of rustic naturalism, as in the case of Huckleberry Finn, the quintessential American wanderer. Snyder adds another association to death in the same section as he describes another descent “six thousand feet / down to Kings River Canyon” with “Hard granite canyon walls that / leave no scree,” much like being six feet under in a grave with sheer, steep walls

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<sup>17</sup> Presumably Locke McCorkle. Snyder and Jack Kerouac shared a log cabin, called Marin-An (see Chapter Two and my discussion of “Marin-An”), behind McCorkle’s house in Mill Valley (California) at the foot of Mount Tamalpais. He appears in Kerouac’s books as Sean Monahan in *The Dharma Bums*, and as Kevin McLoch in *Desolation Angels*. For further details, see: Hunt 90-91; and Ginsberg and Snyder *Selected* 3.

overhead. Amid Snyder's allusions to the mythological underworld he maintains a temporal existence with associations such as "stopping for beer and melon" and "the Giant Orange"<sup>18</sup>, creating a dual perspective of both spiritual and terrestrial awareness.

With the beginning of the third section, Snyder seems to jump in time (whether to the past or future in relation to his Bubbs Creek Haircut is unknown and surely unimportant) to an event that seems at first superficial and unrelated to the previous stanza's ruminations of death and the underworld:

Once tried a haircut at the Barber College too—  
 sat half an hour before they told me  
 white men use the other side.

The incident is relevant through the temporal association of similar experiences where the poet relates a memory of another haircut. But the spiritual significance of this haircut at the Barber College where the poet encounters one of the most troubling aspects of human nature—racism, prejudice and hatred—is a potent visionary glimpse into the cramped prejudices and flaws that plague human nature and keep mankind in a fallen and unenlightened state.

Snyder's use of the word "Goodwill" is done with precision and very deliberate consideration. Immediately following his look at the dark side of human nature through the segregated Barber College, Snyder begins the next line with another jump in time and location: "Goodwill, St. Vincent de Paul," a goodwill shop named after the Catholic priest known for his charity work. Ironically, what Snyder

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<sup>18</sup> Roadside stalls in the shape of giant oranges dotted the California highways in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century offering refreshments for sale to travelers.

finds there is a “Filson jacket with a birdblood stain,” perhaps a good bargain, but also an allusion to death. The superficial connotation, as an allusion to death, seems to be dark and sinister; however, Snyder does not necessarily view death as bad or negative. As part of the eternal cycle of *samsara*—continuing birth, death and regeneration—death becomes a natural process to be accepted: “Human cultures that demonize death or pain or sickness are thus less able to deal with the bitter side of nature” (BOF 121). In addition, Snyder refers to an “under-the-public market store” that has since been torn down, again emphasising the theme of death and destruction. Furthermore, Snyder addresses goodwill and charity shops throughout the poem as being associated with death, the underworld, and the negative aspects of humanity. He associates these goodwill shops with human domination, destruction and the western philosophies which he considers to have a destructive impact on society, and to perpetuate the very opposite of “Goodwill.” His use of the term changes toward the end of the poem, indicating that the word and its associated ideas are an important and key concept throughout. This is an idea that I shall return to later in my discussion of “Bubbs Creek Haircut.”

Snyder changes the direction of his poem as he begins his ascent “Hiking up Bubbs Creek,” continuing the hero’s journey out of the underworld and up toward a communion with the gods—or at the very least, a new perspective and position of understanding and enlightenment. On the journey up into the mountains Snyder encounters a trail crew wherein a man gives him a message for someone he may run into later on: “If you see McCool on the other trail crew over there / tell him Moorehead says to go to hell.” Snyder uses this incident much like the previously

mentioned memory of the Barber College. Superficially, the memory seems to be a random association connected with the journey up Bubbs Creek. But Snyder includes this incident as another example of the petty childishness of human beings, that dark aspect of human nature—ill will. In addition, the reference to hell reinforces the allusion to the mythical hero's journey to and from the underworld.

Snyder continues his poem with a journey to enlightenment embodied by the journey up Bubbs Creek. True to Snyder's esteem of the natural world, as the poet ascends higher into the mountains, into the natural environment and farther away from human civilisation, the poet/prophet's perspective becomes more enlightened and visionary. Snyder gives the reader a clue as to the path to this enlightenment, perhaps like Hamlet's "steep and thorny way to heaven" (I.iii.50), with "winding rock-braced switchbacks" in which one must "climb on where / pack trains have to dig or wait," implying that the effort must be accomplished through one's own merit and hard work and not on the back of another being.

Snyder's description of the top of the mountain is a combination of a temporal description of a mountainous landscape and a spiritual visionary representation of a place of enlightenment. But as the opening discussions of this chapter have established an ages-old tradition of mountains as holy places, Snyder's use of a mountain as a temple or spiritual place of communion is by no means new. The top of Snyder's sacred mountain in "Bubbs Creek" is characterised by contrasts and opposites:

A half-iced-over lake, twelve thousand feet  
its sterile boulder bank

but filled with leaping trout:

This mountain top (like Wordsworth's Snowdon) is undoubtedly a gateway or connecting point between earth and heaven, where it is both a habitat of life and death (like Shelley's view of the mountain in *Mont Blanc*). For, above the timber line, the alpine climate is too harsh (because of the extremely low temperatures, severe winds, persistent snow cover, or increased exposure to solar radiation) for trees to survive; and Snyder is well aware of this extremity. He articulates a contrast between the severe and seemingly uninhabitable landscape of the "half-iced-over lake" and the "sterile boulder bank" with the defiantly thriving "leaping trout" that fill the alpine lake at the crown of the mountain. An initial reading of these lines, as without form or meter or rhyme, disguises the fertile poetic world that Snyder has actually created. The sounds in the words that Snyder chooses can be expressive of these corresponding ideas and develop the drama in the poem. He uses words that play against each other—such as the assonantal rhymes of "thousand" and "trout," "lake" and "bank" and "feet" and "leaping"; or the brief enjambed alliteration of "boulder bank / but." Thus, the poetic form itself demonstrates that in spite of the superficially treacherous landscape, what lies beneath the surface is nurturing to that which is brave enough to confront the initial defiance of the landscape.

At this point Snyder again evokes a dual perspective in which he is able to see the world both temporally and spiritually. He begins with an observation of reflections in the alpine lake, which, when seen from a close perspective, do not make sense, but when observed from an elevated perspective, become clear:

reflections wobble in the



mingling circles always spreading out  
                   the crazy web of wavelets makes sense  
                   seen from high above.

Snyder’s technique through these lines is wild, yet measured, and adds emphasis to what he is saying. Although he does not adhere to a specific metrical structure, Snyder slips in occasional lines of pentameter, such as: “the / mingling circles always spreading out.” It is fascinating that at this moment, as the revelatory subject of the poem subtly reaches its zenith, the form of the poem approaches blank verse. By enjambling the first word of the line of pentameter, Snyder is able to create the effect without risking the cliché of the deliberate pentameter. The effect is to create a strange sense of order in the seeming chaos of the poem, which brings with it a metronomic sense to match the ideas of chaos and order expressed in the passage. This nuanced and fleeting sense of pentameter is similar to the effect that Jonathan Wordsworth, in *The Music of Humanity*, observed in Wordsworth’s *The Ruined Cottage*. Of the following lines—

And when she at her table gave me food  
                   She did not look at me. Her voice was low,  
                   Her body was subdued.           (II.378-80)

—Jonathan Wordsworth discerns that “the simplicity is carefully made,” for placing

. . . the end-stop after ‘low’ allows Wordsworth the effect, without the  
                   triteness, of a single line with heavy caesura:

Her voice was low, her body was subdued.<sup>19</sup>

In a similar way, Snyder is also able to add emphasis to the line, “the / mingling circles always spreading out,” by incorporating traditional poetic device without, as Jonathan Wordsworth says, “the triteness” of a form that is “too obvious.”<sup>20</sup>

For further effect in the line from “Bubbs Creek Haircut,” Snyder pushes the reader forward into the natural rhythm of the line of pentameter by putting “the” at the end of the previous line rather than the beginning of the actual line of pentameter. Then in the following line, “the crazy web of wavelets makes sense,” Snyder almost creates a line of pentameter again, but cuts it off at the last syllable. Thus he plays with the pleasing familiar sounds that are the consolations of poetry whilst also reminding the reader that, according to his own ideas, the natural world, when honestly represented by poetry, is not always perfectly rounded into precise components of equally distributed meter and rhyme. Yet Snyder’s use of alliteration in “wobble,” “web” and “wavelets” complements the assonance in the line, “the crazy web of wavelets makes sense,” enriches the expressiveness of the passage and the images created, and acknowledges the value of a nicely placed poetic device. These reflections and wavelets are particularly reminiscent of the double mirrors in the barber shop, and carry the same significance. Not only does the “crazy web of wavelets make sense” when seen from an elevated perspective, but the very grain of things—the structure of the earth, even the universe—also “makes sense” and gains clarity from this elevated perspective. With this connectedness in mind, Snyder’s

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<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Wordsworth. *The Music of Humanity: A Critical Study of Wordsworth’s Ruined Cottage incorporating texts from a manuscript of 1799-1800*. London: Thomas Nelson, 1969. 139.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

use of the word “mingling” in reference to the circles of waves rippling to the shore underscores his idea of a “richly interconnected, interdependent, and incredibly complex” structure of human consciousness and the organisation of the universe. Just as Snyder’s visionary point of view was first induced by the double mirrors in the barber shop at the beginning of the poem, so his point of view has now become visionary, as catalysed by the wobbling circular reflections of the alpine lake.

Snyder then continues:

A deva world of sorts—it’s high  
                                   —a view that few men see, a point  
                                   bare sunlight  
                                   on the spaces  
                                   empty sky

On the mountain’s summit, Snyder places himself in a quasi-celestial or semi-divine “deva world”—a place where he can obtain enlightenment—much like a Native American shaman who has set out on a vision quest and has reached the prophetic moment in which the knowledge he seeks will finally be obtained. Again, Snyder disguises traditional poetic form by separating a line of iambic pentameter into three lines: “bare sunlight / on the spaces / empty sky.” This combined freedom and control gives the sense that the poet is trying to receive a vision rather than impose one. In this way, Snyder asserts that he has gained knowledge that “few men” have, and positions himself as a poet, prophet, visionary and shaman for modern America and all western civilization. His description of the “deva world of sorts” at the

mountain's zenith is infused with allusions to the Buddhist concept of *sunyata*<sup>21</sup>—“emptiness” or “voidness”—with words such as “bare,” “space” and “empty.” In alluding to *sunyata*, Snyder leads the reader to an understanding of the notion of the interconnectedness of all things, which he often refers to as *interpenetration*<sup>22</sup>, defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “The action of penetrating between or among; mutual penetration; diffusion of each through the other.” It is worth note in this discussion that Shelley<sup>23</sup> and Coleridge are mentioned<sup>24</sup> in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as two of the earliest examples of use of the word *interpenetration* in the English language.<sup>25</sup>

In observing the sunlight separately by setting it apart on its own line, Snyder expresses the human tendency to compartmentalize objects and concepts. However, Snyder also acknowledges that according to the notion of *sunyata*, the

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<sup>21</sup> Refer to the more complete definition given in my introduction.

<sup>22</sup> Snyder also occasionally uses the term *interdependence*, and all three terms—*interconnectedness*, *interpenetration*, and *interdependence* (words I have used throughout my discussion of Snyder)—ultimately refer in one way or another to the Buddhist concept of *emptiness* or *sunyata*.

<sup>23</sup> See Stuart Curran's *Shelley's Annus Mirabilis: The Maturing of an Epic Vision*. San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1975. for further examination on Shelley's incorporation and understanding of eastern philosophy and religion within his own poetics.

<sup>24</sup> Shelley, for example, mentions “interpenetration” in *A Defence of Poetry*, when he says that poetry is “the interpenetration of a diviner nature through our own” (697). Shelley also uses “interpenetrate” in his dramatic works, *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Cenci*. In *Prometheus Unbound* the animate Earth explains that love “interpenetrates my granite mass” (IV.i.370). And in the Preface to *The Cenci*, Shelley declares that “In a dramatic composition the imagery and the passion should interpenetrate one another” (318). Coleridge, too, uses the term throughout *The Friend*, and notably in “Essays on the Principles of Method” in which he discusses Shakespeare's “peculiar excellence” by describing “that just proportion, that union and interpenetration of the universal and the particular, which must ever pervade all works of decided genius and true science” (I:457).

<sup>25</sup> “interpenetration, *n.*” Def. 1a and 2.

sunlight and sky are not cut off from other phenomena but are actually interdependent upon each other and upon all other phenomena, and he does so by using the adjectives “bare” and “empty.” The “bare sunlight” and “empty sky” are thus expressions of the dual vision that Snyder sees of both the uninitiated mind, which perceives only the sunlight or the sky as separate entities, and the visionary mind, which perceives that the sky is nothing without sunlight and the sunlight is nothing without the sky.

Snyder’s diction as well as the ideas expressed in the phrases “bare sunlight” and “empty sky” is also reminiscent of Wallace Stevens’s recurring poetic explorations of emptiness and the inherent duality in seeing the world in its reality as well as through inspired and imaginative eyes. Within Stevens’s poetic expression there is often a dialectical tension between the empty heaven and the idea that one must respond to that emptiness with a metaphorical imagination. He also explores contrasting conceptions of reality with the emblems of the sun and the moon, where the sun represents illumined reality and the moon acts as a weak and inconstant, sometimes even deceptive, light that distorts and clouds the imagination’s comprehension of reality. The concluding lines of “On the Manner of Addressing Clouds”<sup>26</sup> convey a suspicion—emphasized by the word “if”—that the moment the poet responds and creates meaning, he is falsifying and must find a way back to the emptiness again:

. . . These

Are the music of meet resignation; these

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<sup>26</sup> Stevens *Collected* 55-56

The responsive, still sustaining pomps for you  
 To magnify, if in that drifting waste  
 You are to be accompanied by more  
 Than mute bare splendors of the sun and moon.

Stevens's sky, unlike Snyder's, is littered with verbal clouds that potentially obstruct the "bare splendors of the sun and moon" and thus of both imagination and reality. The idea of bareness and an empty sky is further illustrated in "The Man on the Dump"<sup>27</sup> where Stevens creates a vision of contrasting reality and imagination:

That's the moment when the moon creeps up  
 To the bubbling of bassoons. That's the time  
 One looks at the elephant-colorings of tires.  
 Everything is shed; and the moon comes up as the moon  
 (All its images are in the dump) and you see  
 As a man (not like an image of a man),  
 You see the moon rise in the empty sky. (28-34)

Stevens's "empty sky" becomes a backdrop for the moon to "creep" up and distort the view of reality, even obstructing the view of the empty sky in its plainness and clarity. Stevens's dump is similar to Snyder's "universe of junk" in the good will shop; the difference is that Stevens despairs where Snyder instead has a negative Romantic vision in which the contrasting elements of sun and sky are complementary, interdependent and interpenetrative—they are different, but in their differences they define each other.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 201-03



combined with “molding to fit the shape of what ice left” so that it can function to create a variety of meaning. It works with the preceding lines—“bare sunlight / on the spaces / empty sky”—as well as the subsequent lines—“empty sky / molding to fit the shape of what ice left.” Snyder also peppers these lines with other poetic conventions, such as alliteration (“tilted, twisted”), repetition and consonance (“tilted, twisted, faulted”), and assonance (“ . . . *ice left / of fire-thrust*”). These lines also connect implicitly with Snyder’s discussion at the beginning of the poem concerning “unfixed junk” and the supposed rejects of the underworldly good will shop. Like the cast-off junk, Snyder describes the physical features of the earth by using the words “fire-thrust,” “tilted, twisted, faulted” to express deviations from the norm: imperfections and alternatives that are “cast-out from this lava belly globe,” which are more accurate expressions of the real world where imperfections and flaws and differences are more likely to occur than true, pristine, flawless perfection. What is more, the combination of adjectives—“tilted, twisted, faulted”—gives an excess of potential meaning and implication. Snyder plays with the reader’s natural inclination to read “twisted” and “faulted” as having undertones of abhorrent deformation. But the poet also likely intends more benign interpretations of the words as straightforward physical descriptions of the earth’s surface to stand as contrasts to the more extreme and almost sinister intimations that the reader may initially surmise.

While he demonstrates a mastery of poetic convention, Snyder, like Pound and others, has a sense that the modern poet has a responsibility to the chaos and fragmentation of the modern world and his poetry reflects this. Rather than adhering



to a set form with predetermined measure and meter, Snyder's poem follows a more natural course—one that is varied and winding and unpredictable. He plays off harmonic effects with dissonant effects, sprinkling sporadic lines of pentameter amidst lines where there seems to be no meter at all so that the reader can sense an almost distinguishable pattern within the disarray—a measured chaos.

Now that Snyder has achieved a position of clarity and higher understanding symbolized by reaching the top of the mountain, and as he begins a new section, Snyder contemplates the philosophies and ideas of western culture and gives us a clue as to the meaning of the earlier lines of his poem:

The boulder in my mind's eye is a chair.

. . . why was the man drag-legged?

King of Hell

Snyder's description of a boulder in his mind's eye seems an allusion to *Hamlet* that can likely be traced back to Plato and Aristotle. Horatio explains the appearance of the ghost in the opening scene of *Hamlet* as "A mote . . . to trouble the mind's eye" (I.i.112), which is in reference to Matthew 7:3 of the Bible: "And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?" Horatio's quote combines this biblical reference with a classical reference to Plato's and Aristotle's theories concerning the mind's eye, the humanity's mental and imaginative capacity for visualisation. For Snyder the mote, or boulder, that troubles his mind's eye is the chair in the good will shop and what it represents. The following line, ". . . why was the man drag-legged?" is another indication that the scene described in the good will shop is important to Snyder's



fleeting snatches of pentameter, alliteration (“freed / from acting out the function,” “thrust on a thing to think”), assonance (“object always”), and consonance combined with onomatopoeia (“sinister ritual histories”). Then Snyder finishes the stanza with a touch of subtle poetic device: “Is the Mountain God a gimp? / The halting metrics and the ritual limp” are two lines in the poem with the most even and deliberate meter and rhyme pattern. The first line, measured in trochaic tetrameter, is end-rhymed with the second line, which is pentameter. And interestingly, their subject is abnormality, “halting metrics” and a gimp with a limp.

Snyder’s next stanza begins a vision of Hindu creation. He invokes Parvati, wife of Shiva, the benevolent form of the mother goddess and daughter of the Himalayas, and then follows his invocative couplet with an allusion to Eliot’s mountainous thunder in *The Waste Land*. Stephen Spender commented that he once heard Eliot “say to the Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral that at the time when he was writing *The Waste Land*, he seriously considered becoming a Buddhist”; and Spender went on to say that a “Buddhist is as immanent as a Christian in *The Waste Land*.”<sup>28</sup> Snyder’s reference to the voice of thunder is as follows:

mountain thunder speaks  
 hair tingling static as the lightning lashes  
 is neither word of love nor wisdom;  
 though this be danger: hence thee fear.

In contrast with the utterances of Eliot’s thunder—“*Datta*” (give, or love), “*Dayadhvam*” (sympathize, or be compassionate), “*Damyata*” (control, or self-

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<sup>28</sup> Stephen Spender. “Remembering Eliot.” *T. S. Eliot: The Man and His Work*. Ed. Allen Tate. London: Chatto & Windus, 1967. 38-64. 40.

control)<sup>29</sup>—Snyder tells us that his “mountain thunder speaks” . . . “neither word of love nor wisdom.” In fact, because Snyder does not punctuate a specific quotation, his readers are left to ponder whether the poet actually gives us the words that “mountain thunder speaks.” Presumably, Snyder’s thunder from the mountain tells us: “though this be danger: hence thee fear,” and we as readers must interpret his ambiguous meaning as best we can.<sup>30</sup>

As the “Bubbs Creek” poet stands atop the mountain and looks down at the world, he interprets what he sees as a product of the actions of Hindu deities. It is commonly known that Parvati is the second wife or consort of Shiva and the reincarnation of his first wife, Sati. She is said to have the ability to calm Shiva, “the great unpredictable madman,” with her *lasya* dance.<sup>31</sup> Snyder’s interpretation of the mythology is apparent in “Bubbs Creek Haircut.” He alludes to Parvati as “Some flowing girl / whose slippery dance / en trances Shiva.” Then Snyder refers to two other mythological beings, Anahita—an Indo-Iranian goddess—and the Hindu goddess, Sarasvati, who are divinities of water and rivers<sup>32</sup> and are thus associated with wisdom, healing and fertility. Snyder refers to this idea of female water divinity as the “dark and female gate of all the world / water that cuts back quartzflake sand.” Thus Snyder incorporates dual perspectives on how the

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<sup>29</sup> See Eliot’s own notes on *The Waste Land* for his translation and source material—the *Brihadaranyaka-Upanishad*—in note 402 (*Eliot Collected* 75).

<sup>30</sup> The idea of danger upon the mountain’s peak is something that becomes a point of focus for Snyder in his most recent collection of poems, *Danger on Peaks*, as the title indicates, and will be considered more closely at the end of this chapter.

<sup>31</sup> David R. Kinsley. *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1986. 48.

<sup>32</sup> This discussion naturally leads toward a further exploration of the interaction of mountains with rivers, which will be addressed in my next chapter.

mountains and valleys were formed by combining mythology with science in observing that water does cut stone in creating the shapes and contours of the earth, just as the Hindu mythologies attribute birth and creation to the female water deities. In this way, Snyder observes that Parvati's calming dance, which pacifies Shiva—whose home is the Himalayas and whose hair is characteristically matted—is the “flowing,” “slippery” movement of a mountain stream of ice-melt:

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.  
 A room of empty sun of peaks and ridges  
 a universe of junk, all left alone.

Snyder's intention in describing these Hindu mountain and river deities is to create his own representation in “Bubbs Creek Haircut” of the Buddhist concept of space and emptiness—again *sunyata*. The epigram Snyder chose for the first page of *Mountains and Rivers Without End* is from the ancient Tibetan mystic Milarepa: “The notion of Emptiness engenders Compassion.” Eric Todd Smith suggests that this statement “compresses central tenets of Mahayana Buddhism, the branch of Buddhism practiced in most of Asia, into a single sentence.” Smith also explains that:

In the Mahayana sense, emptiness, or *shūnyatā*, does not mean simply ‘nothingness’ (as some early English translations of Buddhist texts make it seem by using ‘the void’ for K’UNG). Rather, emptiness means that everything in the universe is empty of individuality; everything is connected to everything else. When Milarepa says that emptiness ‘engenders Compassion,’ he means that if we understand that all things are related, we will act compassionately in the world.<sup>33</sup>

In addition, Smith points out that the “symbolic order behind Chinese landscape painting encourages . . . cosmic inferences.” For example:

In Chinese, the general term for “landscape” literally means “mountains and waters.” The interaction of mountains as they lift skyward and waters as they erode the land away, comes to symbolize the interrelated natural forces shaping the earth. As Snyder explains in *The Practice of the Wild*, “‘Mountains and waters’ is a way to refer to the totality of the process of nature” (102). The many scenes in the scroll—like the intricately juxtaposed places in Snyder’s vast poem—in some way represent “the totality of the process of nature.” Each entity, each place, is “empty” of individuality because it belongs to the same totality.<sup>34</sup>

Indra’s net is a Buddhist metaphor that relates to this concept. It is an illustration of emptiness, dependent origination (the understanding that any phenomenon “exists” only because of the “existence” of other phenomena in an

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<sup>33</sup> Eric Todd Smith. *Reading Gary Snyder’s Mountains and Rivers Without End*. Boise, Id: Boise State University Printing and Graphic Services, 2000. Western Writers Series. 6.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 7

incredibly complex web of cause and effect covering time past, time present and time future), and interpenetration. This net is hung in the heavens where Indra dwells and stretches out infinitely in all directions. In each junction of the net is fixed a multifaceted jewel; and because the net is infinite, the number of jewels is also infinite. In addition, each jewel, when gazed upon, reflects all the other jewels in the net, which, in turn, reflect all the other infinitely numbered jewels in the net. Thus, Indra's net reflects the infinite correspondence between and amongst all things.<sup>35</sup>

Snyder's figurative equivalent to Indra's net is the double-mirrors mentioned at the beginning and end of "Bubbs Creek Haircut." When he sits in the barber's chair and looks into the reflection echoing back, he glimpses an infinite web of things, all connected. Ultimately, in "Bubbs Creek," Snyder reaches the zenith of his boundless vision in the following two lines: "A room of empty sun of peaks and ridges / a universe of junk, all left alone." Anthony Hunt asserts that:

The metaphysical question of the poem concerns the nature of Goodness and Will. In a universe of junk, of loneliness, or of *things* being cast off and crippled, what exactly is "good"? . . . The meaning is relatively clear: the "junk" of the world becomes evil or good in accordance with how we manage it, how we apply our will to it. The value we put on the things of the world is an illusion of our mind; things in themselves exist in an indifferent limbo; attachment to things will lead us astray.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> "Indra." *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*. 2 vols. Ed. Robert E. Buswell, Jr. New York: Thompson Gale, 2004. Macmillan Reference USA. 374.

<sup>36</sup> Hunt 93-94

Hunt states that the meaning of the poem is “*relatively clear*” (my emphasis added); and although it is easy, given Snyder’s overt and lifelong commitment to Zen Buddhism, to derive a Buddhist message within the substance of the poem, it nevertheless remains a complex poem brimming with difficult metaphysical questions and even answers that spawn more questions. Such as the question Snyder faced concerning whether to become an ascetic Buddhist monk, renouncing his former lifestyle and associations, or to attempt to remain a part of society whilst maintaining his Zen values and ideals. Snyder does tell us that by leaving the “universe of junk” alone, we can experience and come to understand *sunyata*, or emptiness. By removing himself from humanity (by ascending the mountain), he is more connected to it. But the poem’s strength and value comes from its expression and reflection of the complexities and contradictions such an attempt at removing one’s self from humanity and thus obtaining *sunyata* entails.

Immediately following this mountain top vision, Snyder jumps into a new stanza with a corresponding jump in time. But following the exact dates and times of the events incorporated into the poem, as Hunt agrees, is not of much significance. “The action described in ‘Bubbs Creek Haircut’ is a composite of more than one journey into the Sierra Nevada taken by Snyder, sometimes with friends and at times alone”; and all these journeys combined serve to “convey [a] deliberately jumbled sense of time and space.”<sup>37</sup> The significance, rather, is found in the symbolic direction of these mingled and integrated journeys:

The hat I always take on mountains:

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 92



When we came back down through Oregon

(three years before)

at nightfall in the Siskiyou few cars pass.

.....

Allen in the rear on straw

forgot salami and we went on south

all night—in many cars—to Berkeley in the dawn.

Snyder uses the words ‘down’ and ‘south’ to describe the direction of the movement after his revelation on the summit, and the rest of the poem describes his descent back to the valleys at the foot of the mountains, back to Berkeley, back to life.

Snyder indents the next section of the poem, setting it apart from the poem’s other sections. The passage describes a seemingly bland and un-visionary setting; however, it is an example of Snyder’s participation within a community. Gathered around a campfire, sharing stories and experiences, he illustrates a traditional, age-old setting in which people commune together. Yet, the concept of Indra’s net is illustrated when Snyder sees McCool, the mirror image of Moorehead, from the other trail crew. The only other section of the poem that is set apart by indenting this way is the eighth stanza in which Snyder gives his own poetic depiction of the Hindu creation mythology. If considering Anthony Hunt’s assertion that “Bubbs Creek” is a poetic representation of Snyder’s deliberation over whether to stay in Japan and become a Buddhist monk or whether to return to his own community and become a poet/prophet/shaman, we can interpret these two indented sections of the poem as having particular emphasis because they embody the decision that Snyder

ultimately makes—to turn away from asceticism and embrace a life of participation with others in a community. Yet Snyder still leaves room for an amount of austerity. While he describes his descent from the mountain and his encounter with the other trail crew, he interjects another moment at the top of a mountain:

(on Whitney hair on end  
 hail stinging bare legs in the blast of wind  
 but yodel off the summit echoes clean)

In the poem's conclusion, Snyder melds contrasts and opposites:

purity of the mountains and goodwills.

The diamond drill of racing icemelt waters

and bumming trucks & watching

buildings raze

the garbage acres burning at the Bay

the girl who was the skid-row

cripple's daughter—

out of the 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.”

As Shiva is destroyer and preserver, Snyder is a poet of death and rejuvenation and the interconnectedness of those opposites as well as everything in between. He follows in the example set by Shelley in *Ode to the West Wind*, where the Romantic poet implicitly expresses his own poetic utterance of such pervasive death and rejuvenation: “Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere; / Destroyer and Preserver; hear, O, hear!” (13-14). For Snyder poetry is a form of asceticism, a form of austere detachment. The role of the poet allows him to be part of a community whilst also detached from his community at the same time. Therefore Snyder can celebrate the “purity of mountains and goodwills” and find association between the “diamond drill of racing icemelt waters”<sup>38</sup> and “bumming trucks & watching / buildings raze.” All these memories, experiences and opposing ideas are reflected in the “double mirror waver”—a line whose poetic value derives from the way its meaning is intensified through the double syllables used in each of the three words. The following line is also replete with poetic nuance as Snyder plays with the short *a* sounds of “man,” “cranks” and “cracks” whilst simultaneously peppering the line with the fleeting alliteration of “cranks” and “cracks” which abruptly shifts from the hard *c* to the *ch* of “chuckle” that still maintains the visual alliteration of the repeated *c*. But Snyder’s reflecting point in the poem—the *ku*, as he told Ekbert Faas—is “double mirror waver,” found at the beginning and the end of the poem. Like the glitter that rises “out of the memory of smoking pine,” the “double mirror

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<sup>38</sup> This is an allusion to the Diamond Sutra, so named because its philosophies and ideas cut through illusion. “Diamond Sutra.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2010. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 20 May 2010.

waver” contains a multitude of sparkling memories, concepts, and chairs reflected from the nodes of Indra’s net.

Anthony Hunt interprets “Bubbs Creek Haircut” as a “poetic rendering of” Snyder’s deliberation over whether to “‘leave the world’ as ‘[m]onks of Christianity or Buddhism’ have done” or to, “like the ‘mat-haired mountain sitter’ Shiva,” leave asceticism and isolation for the role of the “‘Shaman-poet’ to ‘give song to dreams’” and join the community as a source of knowledge, connection and responsibility.<sup>39</sup> Hunt further supports this observation by recognizing the significance of the haircut. He quotes Heinrich Zimmer who explains that: “Anyone renouncing the generative forces of the vegetable-animal realm, revolting against the procreative principle of life, sex, earth, and nature, to enter upon the spiritual path of absolute asceticism has first to be shaved.”<sup>40</sup> Therefore, the poem “commemorates the ritual setting-out of an initiate on the traditional Buddhist path of detachment.”<sup>41</sup> However, when Snyder reaches the summit and the final point of his journey to asceticism where he must make a decision, he encounters not only the emptiness and loneliness of the austere ascetic, but also the “slippery,” entrancing dance of Parvati, daughter of mountains (who, according to mythology, calmed Shiva and brought him out of his isolation and mourning over the loss of his first wife, Sati). At that point Snyder contemplates “A room of empty sun of peaks and ridges / a universe of junk, all left alone” and decides that his role is not that of isolation, but rather participation in the community as a poet/prophet/shaman. According to Hunt, Snyder completed the

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<sup>39</sup> Hunt 95

<sup>40</sup> Heinrich Zimmer. *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*. 1946. Ed. Joseph Campbell. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972. 157.

<sup>41</sup> Hunt 96

poem three months after marrying Joanne Kyger, his second wife, in 1960, and therefore chose the “Tantric rather than the monastic path.”<sup>42</sup>

The structure and layout of “Bubbs Creek Haircut” corroborates Hunt’s claim that the poem works autobiographically, at least on one level. Snyder sets out in preparation to become a monk by having his hair cut by a sage who has wisdom and experience. He journeys to the mountain top and receives a vision in a sense similar to that of Wordsworth who was granted revelation through clarity, light and a renewed perspective on a mountain top; and, like Shelley, Snyder also experiences a negative Romantic vision in the way that Shelley sees mountains as sterile and destructive and representative of the “unearthly” and the “unfathomable” (*Mont Blanc* 62, 64) where death is a reality and men are forced to struggle mentally and physically. The poem ends with Snyder’s choice to maintain a dynamic balance between asceticism and participation within a community—it is the same balance and interchange that exist between perfection and imperfection, or as Snyder describes it in the last few lines of “Bubbs Creek Haircut”: “purity of the mountains and goodwills.” It is a purity that is borne out of an imbalance in which two opposites progressively exchange strength and weakness. Like a seesaw that wavers on each end from high to low, the two points momentarily meet in the middle and over time, although the movement and interchange must never stop, the average of the two opposites creates equality or perhaps purity.

Finally, Snyder’s poem of revelation upon mountains ends where it begins—in the “double mirror waver” of reflections both of memory and time, and

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 95

with Snyder's trademark blend of wild, almost formless, poetic form and subtly crafted poetic device. The theme of visionary mountainous experience is recurrent throughout Snyder's poetic works, and is particularly evident in his most recent collection of poems: *Danger on Peaks* (2004).

#### IV.

Snyder's life and work—as an alpine fire lookout; as a logger and tree scaler; as world traveller, adventurer and mountain climber; as environmental activist; and as poet and essayist—has always been integrated and closely associated with mountains and their landscapes. Scattered throughout his body of literary work are scores of references to mountains. In fact, the first poetic piece, “Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout,” from his first published collection, *Riprap* (1959), sets the tone for a poetic perspective from atop a mountain that is revisited in many incarnations throughout Snyder's career. It makes sense, then, that Snyder's most recent collection of poems to date is titled *Danger on Peaks*; and indeed much of the body of poems in this work address in some way a poetic interaction with mountains. The beginning section of poems overtly centres around the poet's experience climbing Mount St. Helens in 1945—long before the volcano's eruption in 1980—and again in 2000. The subsequent sections and groupings of poems return now and then to a loose structure linked by the idea of mountains and peaks, as Fred Dings notes:

The final poems in the volume deal with the Taliban's destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan, Al Qaeda's destruction of the twin “peaks” of New

York, and a “peak view” of existence in a final poem called “A Turning Verse for the Billions of Beings” whose lines are each centered on the page.<sup>43</sup>

This idea of “peaks” in their varying forms and representations is interwoven through the collection with the parallel and accompanying theme of danger. Snyder’s more obvious intention in his use of the word danger is apparent in his discussion of inherently dangerous activities that arise from humanity’s interaction with nature, such as mountain climbing and even scaling an active volcano. Snyder relates this idea of danger to his idea of wildness—both in nature in general and within humanity, or human nature. In *The Practice of the Wild*, he mentions danger as not only a natural part of living, but also as a catalyst for ideas and inspiration. He defines *wilderness* as “A place of danger and difficulty: where you take your own chances, depend on your own skills, and do not count on rescue” (POW 11). Snyder expounds on this idea of danger as taking a risk in order to achieve, as well as danger as a means of expressing—in its comparison to safety or perhaps security and stability—a necessity of contrasts and opposites often represented by the idea of *yin* and *yang*.<sup>44</sup> In a foreword to *Pharmako/Poeia*<sup>45</sup>, by Dale Pendell, Snyder explores this idea of danger first in reference to Pendell’s book about medicinal plants, toxins and herb craft by asserting that it “is a book about danger: dangerous

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<sup>43</sup> Fred Dings. Rev of *Danger on Peaks*. *World Literature Today* 80:3 (May - Jun., 2006): 76. *JSTOR*. 15 Apr 2010.

<sup>44</sup> See Chapter Two for a further discussion of *yin* and *yang*.

<sup>45</sup> Snyder republished the foreword in his most recent collection of essays, *Back on the Fire* (2007).

knowledge, even more dangerous ignorance, and dangerous temptations.”<sup>46</sup> Then in a discussion of the value of such dangerous knowledge, Snyder makes commentary on a Romantic predecessor’s idea. In reference to Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790) where the British Romantic poet claims that “Milton . . . was a true Poet, and of the Devil’s party without knowing it” (plate 5), Snyder and Pendell interpret Blake’s meaning to be that “poets are of the devil’s party.”<sup>47</sup> Snyder continues in further examination of Blake’s meaning:

I think he is saying that for those who are willing to explore the fullness of their imagination—mind and senses fully engaged—there are great risks, at the very least, of massive silliness. Farther out is madness. No joke. But forget about the devil: poets and such travelers also bring a certain sanity back home.<sup>48</sup>

Thus for Snyder danger is linked with the Romantic notion of the imagination and the exploration of the imagination’s limits—from the breadth of “madness” to “sanity” which comprises, or at least contributes to, the “fullness” of the imagination.

But Snyder also alludes to other forms of danger that could be considered more sinister, particularly the danger that arises from the harm humanity inflicts upon itself and upon its environment. This is the tragedy explored in the good will shop and the segregated “Barber College” of “Bubbs Creek Haircut” as well as the

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<sup>46</sup> Snyder republished this foreword as part of his recent collection of essays, *Back on the Fire*.

<sup>47</sup> Gary Snyder. Foreword. *Pharmako/Poeia*. By Dale Pendell. San Francisco: Mercury House, 1995. xiii-xiv. xiv.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.



razed buildings and “the garbage acres burning at the Bay” near the poem’s conclusion. It is something that he has explored throughout his poetic career and which he continues to explore in *Danger on Peaks* through a juxtaposition of Mount St. Helens’s capacity for danger and destruction with the capacity of the human race for desolation and destruction of a different and more sinister kind.

In the sequence of poems in Section I, Snyder illustrates this comparison between the cleansing and replenishing destruction of mountain volcanoes and the more debilitating destruction of man. He first sets the scene of mountainous destructive cleansing and subsequent rebirth by describing Mount St. Helens in an introductory prose poem entitled “The Mountain,” which is built upon a combination of natural history, geography, and personal history. In the following poem, “The Climb”<sup>49</sup>, presented in a combination of prose and verse, Snyder describes his first ascent of the volcano as a teenager, and the general theme that he illustrates in the poem is a sense that the tallest mountains cross the border between the earth and the heavens and are a location for visionary experience. Their peaks are “in a different world” and: “pierce the realm of clouds and cranes, rest in the zone of five-colored banners and writhing crackling dragons in veils of ragged mist and frost-crystals, into a pure transparency of blue” (7).<sup>50</sup> Although Snyder experiments in this sequence with poems that are structured as prose paragraphs with snippets of traditionally lined and metered verse, he still incorporates his

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<sup>49</sup> Previously discussed in Chapter Five.

<sup>50</sup> Because Snyder’s poetic form is far from traditional, and because many of his poems in *Danger on Peaks* are written in a loose sort of prose or combined prose and verse, it is difficult to refer to line numbers. Therefore, as stated in my “Note on Texts,” I have given page numbers when line numbers are impractical.

trademark elements of poetic device such as fleeting alliteration and parallelism, as seen in “clouds of cranes” and “writhing crackling.” In the following stanza (or paragraph) Snyder describes the summit of Mount St. Helens as a place to “write,” a place of inspiration. He says: “I made my petition to the shapely mountain, ‘Please help this life.’ When I tried to look over and down to the world below—*there was nothing there.*”<sup>51</sup> This “*nothing*” Snyder sees or perhaps does not see—in addition to the literal western meaning of the noun, as quoted from the *OED*: “Not any (material or immaterial) thing; nought”<sup>52</sup>—must surely be the same nothingness—or emptiness, *sunyata*—that Stevens’s “The Snow Man” beholds. What makes the line and the related experience interesting and valuable is its capacity for opposing possibility. Snyder leads the reader toward the literal idea of physical and actual sight and the fact that the speaker of the poem cannot see the world below: this is emphasised by the word “tried,” which subtly implies that the attempt was unsuccessful particularly when combined with the line “*there was nothing there.*” However, Snyder omits any conjunctions that could affect the meaning and interpretation of the line, thus maintaining the possibility for multiple interpretations. The poet does not say “but *there was nothing there.*” Thus, in actuality, there is something there—“*nothing,*” or *sunyata*—and Snyder beholds a vision of it on the mountain’s peak.

The following poems in the Mount St. Helens sequence of *Danger on Peaks* trace in a chronological progression the ideas and experiences of Snyder’s vision upon the mountaintop along with the opposing negative vision Snyder beholds when

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<sup>51</sup> Italicization is the poet’s own original emphasis.

<sup>52</sup> “nothing, *n.*” Def. 1.

he learns, upon descending the mountain, of the atomic bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima during the Second World War. In “Atomic Dawn” Snyder relates the destruction of the atomic bomb by its ability to not only destroy life, but to also hinder any regrowth and rebirth, for “nothing will grow there again for seventy years.” In “1980: Letting Go” Snyder returns to a more traditional lined verse form which describes the actual event of the volcano’s eruption in May of 1980. Importantly, Snyder portrays the volcano as having power so forceful it can destroy both the natural world—“a heavenly host of tall trees goes flat down”—as well as the human world and its technological advancements and creations—“a photographer’s burnt camera / full of half melted pictures.” The volcano is even greater in its destruction than the atomic bombs that desolated Snyder’s beloved Japan:

roiling earth-gut-trash cloud tephra twelve miles high  
 ash falls like snow on wheatfields and orchards to the east  
 five hundred Hiroshima bombs

in Yakima, darkness at noon

In fact, Snyder emphasises the fact that the volcano’s eruption is even capable of blotting out the very brilliance of the sun at its brightest.

This recognition of and emphasis on the pre-eminence of the natural volcanic powers of the earth is a characteristic that Snyder, in some part, has inherited from Romantic poets. Shelley, in particular, gives much emphasis to volcanoes and their both literal and symbolic power for revolutionary cleansing

destruction and subsequent rebirth and renewal. Allusion to volcanic activity can be found in many of Shelley's works. In *Alastor*, we are told that "The red volcano overcanopies / . . . / with burning smoke" (83-85); in *Mont Blanc* the poet asks, "did a sea / Of fire envelop once this silent snow?" (73-74); *Laon and Cythna* employs the following similes, "Like springs of flame, which burst where'er swift Earthquake stamps" (V.i.1728) and "like a sulphurous hill" . . . "shall burst and fill / the world with cleansing fire . . ." (II.xiv.785-88)<sup>53</sup>; in "To A Skylark" Shelley addresses the bird thus: "From the earth thou springest / Like a cloud of fire" (7-8). G. M. Matthews gives great empirical and historical discussion of Shelley's use of volcanoes, but asserts that a Platonic reading of the Romantic poet's symbols is limiting and restrictive. But it can be argued that Shelley—as well as Snyder—is interested in both the empirical and the symbolic. Thus a combined approach to the poetic imagery represented, in this case by volcanoes, is useful and informs Shelley's Romantic notions of revolutionary cleansing by fire and the indirect reincarnation of such notions in Snyder's work. Matthews observes a scientific justification for Shelley's excessive "lushness" in *Prometheus Unbound*, for his characters approach "an area of volcanic fall-out, long famous for extreme fertility."<sup>54</sup> That scientific justification serves to parallel a Platonic implication, as Michael O'Neill observes in his discussion of *Prometheus Unbound* from *The Human Mind's Imaginings*: "Shelley's pastoral refuge is united in the phrase, 'And

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<sup>53</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley. *The Poems of Shelley*. Vol. 2: 1817-1819. Ed. Kelvin Everest and Geoffrey Matthews. Harlow, UK: Longman, 2000.

<sup>54</sup> Geoffrey M Matthews. "A Volcano's Voice in Shelley." *ELH* 24.3 (1957): 191-228. *JSTOR*. 26 June 2010. 206.

each dark tree that ever grew' to the phenomenal world. The stressing of 'each' and 'ever' is uncompromising."<sup>55</sup>

This melding of the physical, literal world with the symbolic and phenomenal is also inherent in Snyder's poetry, as has been acknowledged throughout my discussion of Snyder's poetics. In fact, this is one of Snyder's chief aims as a poet—to combine a scientific knowledge and understanding of the world with a spiritual and visionary view. In the case of *Danger on Peaks*, this duality is inherent in lines such as, "a heavenly host of tall trees goes flat down." The depiction of ghostly trees that once were, is reminiscent of Shelley's "dark tree[s] that ever grew" (*Prometheus Unbound* II.ii.3) in that both Snyder's and Shelley's trees live only metaphysically, phenomenally, in memory.

In his Mount St. Helens series Snyder follows the volcano's 1980 explosion with "Blast Zone," which jumps in time to "Late August 2000" in the poem's opening line. "Blast Zone" combines both prose, at the beginning of the poem, and lined verse, at the end, as the poet also combines past memories of "when it was old-growth forest" (15) with his present vision of the decimated blast zone of the volcano and its subsequent regeneration. The memory of the "old-growth forest" is recurrent and Snyder's mindfulness of the past is again redolent of Shelley. In fact, Snyder's final mention of the "old-growth forest" in the poem also draws closer to Shelley's "dark tree[s] that ever grew" with the addition of the word "dark" in Snyder's description: "dark old-growth forest gone no shadows / the lake afloat with white bone blowdown logs" (15). By describing the logs as "white bone,"

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<sup>55</sup> Michael O'Neill. *The Human Mind's Imaginings: Conflict and Achievement in Shelley's Poetry*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1989. 106.

Snyder plays with the literal and the phenomenal aspect of the scene. Although old bleached deadwood can look similar to sun bleached animal bone, and vice versa, Snyder does not use simile to describe these once living trees—he does not say something like: “white *as* bone . . . logs” or “white bone-*like* . . . logs.” Rather, he gives an implication that the trees were living in a more than vegetable sense. The melding of empirical observation and Platonic symbol is evident, and is prevalent throughout Snyder’s poetics.

As Snyder’s series of volcanic poems progress, so does the regeneration and renewal of the volcanic blast zone progress. Snyder emphasises the natural power of the volcano to restore the land, but also gives ear to the possibility of humanity’s own strength and ability to help along the land’s restoration. In the case of the Mount St. Helens eruption, Snyder finds opportunity to observe both natural and human-aided rejuvenation of the land, as the Green River valley provides a boundary between managed and unmanaged land in the blast zone. This observation of contrasts is evident in “To Ghost Lake” where Snyder also considers the spiritual along with the scientific in a combination of contrasting prose and lined verse:

This natural regeneration project has special value of its own, aesthetic, spiritual, scientific. Both the wild and the managed sides will be instructive to watch for centuries to come.

Baby plantlife, spiky, firm and tender,  
stiffly shaking in the same old breeze. (17)

The distinction between new and ancient is nicely illustrated in the two lines of verse where both the young and old elements of nature interact suggestively. Snyder uses youthful adjectives—“Baby,” “firm and tender”—to describe the regrowth springing up in the wake of the volcano’s destruction. And then he uses these adjectives as they turn on themselves and come full circle to illustrate the ailments of old age: what was “firm and tender” becomes “stiffly shaking” and “old.”

Snyder’s last two poems in the series chronicle further regeneration in “Pearly Everlasting,” a poem whose significance I previously discussed in detail in Chapter Two, and finally in “Enjoy the Day” where Snyder revisits the concept of birth and destruction coming full circle in an eternal cycle. In both “Pearly Everlasting” and “Enjoy the Day,” Snyder returns to a more traditional lined verse from the experiments in prose poetry that make up much of the previous poems in the Mount St. Helens series. “Enjoy the Day” renews the idea of mountainous inspiration and a communion with the spiritual aspect of nature upon mountain peaks. It revisits elements of destruction and regeneration from a new and yet old perspective—one of experienced retrospection. Again, Snyder plays with contrasts as he describes the “youthful old volcano” in terms of “sunrise lava” and “bowls of snow.” In a final act of communion with the mountain that parallels his journey to the top of Mount St. Helens as a youth in 1945 (in which he asked the “shapely mountain” to “Please help this life,” only to look down to the “world below” and realise “*there was nothing there*”<sup>56</sup>) the poet “went up behind a mountain hemlock / asked my old advisors where they lay / what’s going on?” Snyder’s reference to a

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<sup>56</sup> See my previous discussion on “The Climb” in Chapter Five.

“mountain hemlock” and “old advisors” carries with it an allusion to Socrates and his execution by poisoning. One wonders whether Snyder makes such an allusion to illustrate that Socrates, and the western tradition the classical philosopher represents, is replaced by counsel from nature. What Snyder’s “old advisors” tell him, “Enjoy the day,” seems a reincarnation of the old, and most tragic motifs in pastoral literature, *carpe diem*. Yet here Snyder has managed to give the tragic motif of lost time and wasted youth a positive slant. For although the volcano has wrought destruction and desolation beyond compare, the hopeful response from “old advisors” is one of affirmation in the natural processes: “New friends and dear sweet old tree ghosts / here we are again. Enjoy the day.” In this final glimpse of the mountain, and in the poet’s conversation with mountain spirits from behind the hemlock tree, Snyder and his readers see the nothing that is there.





## Chapter Eight: Rivers as Romantic Emblems of Creation

## I.

In a return to the opening discussion of the previous chapter—Snyder’s incorporation of two archetypal Romantic emblems: mountains and rivers and the interpenetrative reciprocity of the two as a holistic representation of the universe and all its individual elements—this chapter will sustain an exploration of the idea of landscape as the embodiment of interpenetration and interdependence with a specific look at the idea of rivers in poetic traditions both Romantic and Snyderian. For, as Snyder has said, “Wherever there are mountains, there are rivers. Wherever there are mountains and rivers, there are spirits” (BC 43). I shall return to Wordsworth’s visionary moment, in Book XIII of *The Prelude* (1805), atop Mount Snowdon; for, as Frederick S. Colwell asserts, “to stand astride or view [the flow of a river] from a height offers the prophetic stance by which we contemplate its entire passage, its past, present, and the brightening waters or rippling shoals ahead.”<sup>1</sup>

What the Romantic poet sees atop the mountain is certainly a living vision of a landscape in its entirety—with mountain, sky, mists, moon and sea. Wordsworth describes the scene:

The Moon stood naked in the Heavens, at height  
 Immense above my head, and on the shore  
 I found myself of a huge sea of mist,  
 Which meek and silent, rested at my feet:

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick S. Colwell. *Rivermen: A Romantic Iconography of the River and the Source*. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1989. 4.

A hundred hills their dusky back upheaved  
 All over this still Ocean, and beyond,  
 Far, far beyond, the vapours shot themselves,  
 In headlands, tongues, and promontory shapes,  
 Into the Sea, the real Sea, that seem'd  
 To dwindle and give up its majesty,  
 Usurp'd upon as far as sight could reach.  
 Meanwhile the Moon looked down upon this shew  
 In single glory, and we stood, the mist  
 Touching our very feet: (41-54)

But the scene Wordsworth articulates is a combination of literal and imaginative vision which also combines both truth and illusion. The passage is a celebration and reconciliation of a fluid transformation between the many objects that combine to set the universal scene with the poet's literal as well as imaginative vision of these objects. As he explains one object, another object catches his attention in a chain of interrelated visions that build upon one another. At first, Wordsworth knows that he is stood atop Mount Snowdon, and yet the poet "found [himself]" "on the shore / . . . of a huge sea of mist / which . . . rested at [his] feet." He then sees that this "sea of mist" and its "vapours" have "shot themselves," interpenetrated and interconnected themselves, "Into the Sea, the real Sea." Wordsworth's appositional clarification that the "Sea" is "real," draws attention to the fact that there is an active interplay and interchange in the passage between reality and illusion. As the misty vapours, the illusory sea, interact with the real sea, the poem transforms the metaphorical sea

into a reality. The fluid transformation from imaginative to actual gives the passage life and animation in a way that is magnificent. Wordsworth divulges a slight preference for the imaginative and metaphorical as the “real Sea” (which Wordsworth could not differentiate, at first, from the “sea of mist”) seems “To dwindle and give up its majesty, / Usurp’d upon as far as sight could reach.” And, what Wordsworth leaves beautifully unstated, but certainly substantiated, is that nature is undoubtedly alive.

What next catches Wordsworth’s eye and sparks another moment of revelation in the “universal spectacle” is “a blue chasm” of roaring “waters, torrents, streams / Innumerable” which creates a “breach” in the earth which simultaneously challenges and complements the mountain’s authority:

and from the shore

At distance not the third part of a mile  
 Was a blue chasm, a fracture in the vapour,  
 A deep and gloomy breathing-place, thro’ which  
 Mounted the roar of waters, torrents, streams  
 Innumerable, roaring with one voice.  
 The universal spectacle throughout  
 Was shaped for admiration and delight,  
 Grand in itself alone, but in that breach  
 Through which the homeless voice of waters rose,  
 That dark deep thorough-fare had Nature lodg’d  
 The Soul, the Imagination of the whole.      (54-65)

This is a panoramic in which the river becomes the focal point. The passage illustrates that Wordsworth, too, saw mountains and rivers without end; and where the two meet, they create a living landscape—a “breathing-place”—in which “The Soul, the Imagination of the whole” is located. He sees that just as mountains afford light-filled revelation for poets who brave the danger on their peaks, rivers respond with a “roar of waters” to fracture, breach and shape the mountainous earth creating valleys and chasms which provide a “dark deep thorough-fare,” the shadow that stands in contrast to the brightness of the noonday sky.

One of the reasons Wordsworth is so open to appropriation is that he is himself aware that he writes texts that are easily readable in different ways. This passage, as well as the Simplon Pass passage (Book VI), of *The Prelude*, illustrates a vacillating quality in its “strangeness” and “paradoxes.”<sup>2</sup> The incongruity in the passage is exemplified in Wordsworth’s use of the word “but” in line 62, which follows directly upon such positive raptures—“for admiration and delight, / Grand in itself alone”—and reintroduces a haunting contemplation upon the scene below. In what continues, Wordsworth uses words with a slightly negative connotation, such as “breach,” “homeless” and “dark.” One must not forget, as well, that it is “A deep and gloomy breathing-place.” This “breach” and “fracture in the vapour” is a hole in the whole, something beyond the “deep and gloomy breathing-place” that is wild and untameable. Yet this is where Wordsworth identifies the location in which “Nature lodg’d / The Soul, the Imagination of the whole.” Thus this deep “blue chasm” contains within it a comprehension of all that is at once both “Grand” and

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<sup>2</sup> Bradley “Wordsworth” 101

“dark,” a “breach” and rupture and also “the Imagination of the whole.” Ultimately, Wordsworth’s passage gives the notion that nature has turned the whole scene into an image of the mind. In fact, Jonathan Wordsworth comments on the passage by saying that “Wordsworth then claims that Nature in transforming the ordinary into the ideal has herself displayed an imaginative power.”<sup>3</sup> Because Wordsworth has vacillated throughout the passage between what seems and what is real, one can never be sure. However, this is also the beauty of the passage, for a vision of the “The Soul, the Imagination of the whole” in order to be “comprehensive”<sup>4</sup>, encompasses an expression of both truth and illusion.

Importantly, Wordsworth defines “The Soul” as “the Imagination of the whole,” which implies that Nature’s soul comprises the comprehension of a holistic landscape of both mountains and waters as representative of two dyadic entities, the span of which becomes a range that includes or encompasses everything in between, including affirmation as well as denial, “delight” as well as sorrow, light as well as dark. This conception of mountains and waters combining to create a representative landscape—something much greater than the sum of its parts—is certainly echoed in Snyder’s assertion, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, that “Wherever there are mountains and rivers, there are spirits.”

In contemplation of the growth of his own poetic mind, Wordsworth often makes comparison between the mind, and especially the infinite nature and capability of the imagination, and a river. In Book II of *The Prelude* (1805), the poet

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<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Wordsworth *Music* 215

<sup>4</sup> See the discussion in my Introduction of Wordsworth’s definition of a poet as a “comprehensive soul.”

first refers to the journey of his mental development and growth as the movement of a river. Wordsworth says: “This portion of the river of my mind / Came from yon fountain . . . ” (214-15). This idea of a river as a representative and corresponding image of the mind is furthered in Book IV, lines 39-45, where Wordsworth again visits the notion that the growth of his mind is as the course of a river. Most famously, in Book IX, Wordsworth again makes comparison between the movement of his thoughts and “remembrances” and the flowing progress of a river:

As oftentimes a River, it might seem,  
 Yielding in part to old remembrances,  
 Part sway'd by fear to tread an onward road  
 That leads direct to the devouring sea,  
 Turns and will measure back his course, far back  
 Towards the very regions which he cross'd  
 In his first outset; so have we . . . (1-7)

The observation that our own thoughts and ideas meander and return to memories as the course of a river often curves back on itself in the path of least resistance is insightful, as is the fear expressed of not only facing the unknown but also progressing toward an eminent confrontation with “the devouring sea.” And finally, in Book XIII, Wordsworth revisits the notion of the poet’s journey of growth as the journey of a river when he says:

we have traced the stream  
 From darkness, and the very place of birth  
 In its blind cavern, whence is faintly heard

The sound of waters, follow'd it to light  
 And open day, accompanied its course  
 Among the ways of Nature (172-77)

The notion comes full circle as Wordsworth extends the comparison between the progress of his mind and the journey of a river to a more macrocosmic view. In tracing “the stream / From darkness, and the very place of birth / In its blind cavern,” Wordsworth makes a connection between rivers and mountains<sup>5</sup>—a landscape most often presumed, by lay geographers, to be the source of rivers as tiny rivulets gather in the highest peaks and converge whilst trickling downward into vast and powerful waterways which empty eventually into the ocean or sea. The notion of the water cycle as a continual process of birth and rebirth and as a representation of the eternal nature of the mind and the limitless possibility of the imagination is carried on in the lines that follow the previously quoted passage from Book XIII:

afterwards

Lost sight of it, bewilder'd and engulph'd,  
 Then given it greeting, as it rose once more  
 With strength, reflecting in its solemn breast  
 The works of man and face of human life,  
 And lastly, from its progress have we drawn  
 The feeling of life endless, the one thought

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<sup>5</sup> This connection between mountains as the source of rivers is hinted at in the passage from Book IV where the poet refers to himself as “unruly child of mountain birth, / The froward brook,” but is not fully developed, or so directly referred to, until Book XIII—*The Prelude*'s climax.



By which we live, Infinity and God. (177-84)

In this passage Wordsworth even takes care to combine elements of the river's characteristics with that of the human mind's capacity; for, the word "reflecting" serves to illustrate the literal capability of a body of water to reflect light and images into the physical eye, and the word also represents the mind's capacity for memory and understanding—for *reflection*. In fact, *The Prelude; or, Growth of a Poet's Mind*, is the physical gathering of mental reflections, flashes of understanding, "spots of time."

Wordsworth also touches upon another important concept in the passage in Book XIII—that the source of rivers, and thus metaphorically the source of consciousness, is something of a mystery and best associated with "darkness" and "blind cavern[s]" in which secret springs lie. This concept is built upon by another of Snyder's Romantic predecessors, Percy Bysshe Shelley, whose comparison of mind and river is documented in a letter written to Thomas Love Peacock dated 17 July 1816, Shelley tells his friend of his desire to tour Europe by following the course of "great rivers." For, Shelley tells Peacock, "rivers are not like roads, the work of the hands of man; they imitate mind, which wanders at will over pathless deserts, and flows through nature's loveliest recesses, which are inaccessible to anything besides."<sup>6</sup> This parallel between rivers and minds, which both flow "through nature's loveliest recesses" is a predecessor to Snyder's idea, first quoted in Chapter Two, that: "consciousness, mind, imagination, *and* language are fundamentally wild. 'Wild' as in wild ecosystems—richly interconnected,

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<sup>6</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley. *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. 2 vols. Ed. Frederick L. Jones. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964. 489-90.

interdependent, and incredibly complex. Diverse, ancient, and full of information” (PIS 168).

Like Snyder, Shelley is interested in the potentially wild and infinite possibility of the mind and the imagination. And, like Wordsworth and his Romantic contemporaries, Shelley seeks to understand, as much as possible, the interaction and correspondence of the mind with the natural world. As I have previously mentioned in Chapters Four and Seven, *Mont Blanc*—composed in July 1816, the same month Shelley wrote his letter to Peacock—reveals Shelley’s inheritance of ideas concerning the mind and the imagination from Wordsworth as well as his independence and divergence of thought.

In a way that recalls Wordsworth’s vision of the “blue chasm” of roaring torrential waters amidst the mountainous landscape of the poet’s inspired view at the summit of Snowdon, Shelley’s *Mont Blanc* also evokes a “universal spectacle” in which mountains and rivers challenge the mind. The poem begins with an affirmation of the poet’s assertion in his letter to Peacock that rivers “imitate mind.” The entire first stanza of the poem illustrates this idea as it incorporates language explicitly dedicated to the characteristics and movement of rivers in phrases such as: “The everlasting universe of things / Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves” (1-2). Wordsworth’s idea that the source of rivers as well as thought comes often “From darkness” located in “blind cavern[s]” where it is “faintly heard” can be compared to, as well as contrasted with, Shelley’s opening stanza, where he writes that “from secret springs / The source of human thought its tribute brings / Of waters,—with a sound but half its own” (4-6). Shelley uses metaphors drawn from

the “real” landscape as opposed to Wordsworth’s imagined “sea of mist” which plays upon the poet’s senses. Additionally, Shelley’s poem begins with reflection rather than description. What also makes the poem interesting is the description of a metaphysical reflection that is almost indistinguishable from the physical landscape to which it corresponds. Shelley has created a poem that toys with our sense of the relationship between the mind and the natural world. The river description in the first stanza seems to reflect the metaphysical scene before, but in actuality, Shelley does not chronicle the mountainous setting and the river that flows through the ravine. Instead, he describes “The everlasting universe of things” in terms generally used to describe a river. But he then goes on to describe the mind as being like a river. He does not give an ordered sense of the mind and the natural world. In *Mont Blanc* Shelley has mined the sense of confusion and chaos. If one tries to read the poem as a direct correspondence between the mind and the scene before, the point-by-point comparison between the mind and the ravine breaks down very quickly. For example, in tracing the repeated pronoun, “it,” through the first stanza, one finds that its antecedent is difficult to identify.

The everlasting universe of things  
 Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves,  
 Now dark—now glittering—now reflecting gloom—  
 Now lending splendour, where from secret springs  
 The source of human thought its tribute brings  
 Of waters,—with a sound but half its own,  
 Such as a feeble brook will oft assume

In the wild woods, among the mountains lone,  
 Where waterfalls around it leap for ever,  
 Where woods and winds contend, and a vast river  
 Over its rocks ceaselessly bursts and raves.       (1-11)

In the first instance, “The everlasting universe of things / Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves” (1-2), one can safely assume that “The everlasting universe of things” corresponds to the following “it.” However, the next occurrence of the pronoun causes doubt, “where from secret springs / The source of human thought its tribute brings” (4-5), as “it” could refer to “The everlasting universe of things” or to “The source of human thought.” As the passage progresses, the relationship between “it” and its antecedent becomes more nebulous and difficult. The final two lines of the stanza demonstrate this point: “a vast river / Over its rocks ceaselessly bursts and raves.” A reader presumes that because “it” possesses “rocks,” Shelley must refer to *Mont Blanc*, and perhaps he does. But the reticent mountain is never actually mentioned in the first stanza. It is as though the mountain fascinates Shelley by its sheer resistance to his understanding. This resistance continues throughout the poem, and, as my discussion of *Mont Blanc* in Chapter Four points out, it is Shelley’s own “human mind” which held interchange with the scene before him.

In the second stanza of *Mont Blanc*, Shelley addresses the entire Ravine of Arve and in doing so, creates the visual and auditory presentation of mountain and river and cavern—“Thy caverns echoing to the Arve’s commotion” (30)—similar to

the way that Wordsworth creates his image on Snowdon of its “fracture in the vapour” where he hears “the roar of waters, torrents, streams / Innumerable, roaring with one voice.” The passages of both poets thus employ elements of visual and auditory inspiration which illustrate a Romantic incorporation of mountains and rivers in their interpenetrative association—the river springing from the mountain as its source and then carving and shaping the mountain in its path.

Shelley’s association of rivers with the imagination and with inspiration was an early aspect of his poetic endeavours. Critics and historians observe that the composition of *Alastor* (late 1815) was inspired by a “ten-day excursion in late August 1815 to the source of the Thames.”<sup>7</sup> The poem traces the journey of a poet who seeks, as the poem’s preface explains, “for a prototype of his conception” (92)—a physical correspondent to match his mental imagining—in the heights of the Hindu Kush Mountains from “which pour down / Indus and Oxus from their icy caves” (142-43). When the poet reaches the supposed source of these ancient rivers “in the vale of Cashmire, far within” (145), he does indeed receive a manifestation: for as “Beside a sparkling rivulet he stretched / His languid limbs,” “A vision on his sleep / There came” (48-50). The poet’s close proximity to the “sparkling rivulet” and the subsequent vision which falls upon the poet’s sleep are certainly not coincidental; and indeed the close association between flowing water sprung from great mountainous heights and its correlation to, and even influence upon, the mind and the imagination is further explored as the poem progresses. In fact, Shelley goes to great lengths in the creation of *Alastor* to not only trace the poet’s journey, but in

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<sup>7</sup> Colwell *Rivermen* 155

doing so he also creates a macrocosmic depiction of mountain ranges, rivers, and bodies of water as they interact in a cooperative influence of visionary rendering upon the poet's mind. This is seen particularly in the way the poet is led from the "vale of Cashmire," where he first glimpses "Vision and Love!" (365), to the cavernous recesses beneath the Georgian Caucasus—carved from the "gloomy river's flow" (371)—by way of the Caspian Sea. Shelley creates, and then revisits this portrait of mountains as the source of rivers which flow to the sea, and which, in return, rend and shape the mountains. It is seen in lines 353-58:

and lo! the ethereal cliffs

Of Caucasus, whose icy summits shone  
 Among the stars like sunlight, and around  
 Whose caverned base the whirlpools and the waves  
 Bursting and eddying irresistibly  
 Rage and resound for ever.

And in lines 374-379:

Where the mountain, riven,  
 Exposed those black depths to the azure sky,  
 Ere yet the flood's enormous volume fell  
 Even to the base of Caucasus, with sound  
 That shook the everlasting rocks, the mass  
 Filled with one whirlpool all that ample chasm;

What is interesting, as well as valuable, about Shelley's exploration of this relationship between the river and the mind is that Shelley gives credence to the

possibility of danger and the darker side of imagination and inspiration. Like Snyder's emphasis and incorporation of the Eastern concept of *yin* and *yang*—two opposing and yet cooperative forces which are integrative and dynamic rather than a simple and rigid dichotomy of poles such as good and evil—Shelley allows his mountains and rivers to become both benign and malefic simultaneously as part of a more complete whole. Thus watery “black depths” are exposed “to the azure sky” and the “ethereal cliffs” at the mountain's peak shine “among the stars of sunlight” whilst its “caverned base” melds with and is shaped by the raging “whirlpools” and “waves.” Additionally, two entities which seem on a superficial level to be opposed in Shelley's poem are often in fact interpenetrative of and cooperative with each other. This is seen repeatedly in the reflective capacity of the bodies of water, which at times take the image of the mountains upon their own surfaces. One example of this reflection is seen when the poet wanderer has abruptly awoken from his dream to the realisation of disenchantment. The poet wonders: “Were limbs, and breath, and being intertwined / Thus treacherously?” (208-09). For the rivulet-borne vision which he once thought carried the “prototype of his conception” and a voice “like the voice of his own soul” (153), seems now to him to possess a negative and deceptive, even sinister, reflection of reality; and he asks: “Does the bright arch of rainbow clouds, / And pendent mountains seen in the calm lake, / Lead only to a black and watery depth . . . ?” (213-19). Through his poet wanderer's reflections Shelley gives ear and consideration to the possibility that the imagination and its inspiration can be deceptive or at the very least illusory. Because Shelley asserts an affinity between the processes of the mind and the movements of rivers, one can see

that in *Alastor* he imbues characteristics of both truth and deception, sparkling “brightness” as well as a “black” “calm,” into his descriptions of water.

This vision of landscape—of mountains creating rivers and created by rivers; and of a natural environment which is capable of both safe truth and dangerous deception—is seen continually in Romantic poetic tradition. Coleridge, for example, evokes the image in “Kubla Khan,” “Where ALPH, the sacred river, ran / Through caverns measureless to man / Down to a sunless sea” (3-5), and he builds upon the image of limitless and immeasurable caverns as the poem progresses to a tumult of rock and river in the act of colliding at the depths of that “deep romantic chasm”:

and from forth this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,  
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing  
A mighty fountain momentarily was forced:  
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst  
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,  
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher’s flail:  
And mid these dancing rocks at once and ever  
It flung up momentarily the sacred river.       (12-24)

Coleridge, too, incorporates sound with sight in his vision of mountains and rivers. As the “dancing rocks” fling the “*sacred river*” (emphasis added) from its chosen path, the poet takes care to describe the sound of “Ancestral voices” as they are carried—much like the deceptive dream in *Alastor*—presumably on the waves of the sacred river Alph:

And ’mid this tumult Kubla heard from far



Ancestral voices prophesying war!

The shadow of the dome of pleasure

Floated midway on the waves;

Where was heard the mingled measure

From the fountain and the caves. (29-34)

Although Coleridge's version of the mountain landscape with its river-carved chasms incorporates a darker sense of danger within its spectacular power, the implication of a primordial source of inspiration and creation—alongside the destruction—is also apparent. It is a place of “fertile ground” (6), of “gardens bright” . . . “Where blossom'd many an incense-bearing tree” (8-9) and where exist “forests ancient as the hills, / Enfolding sunny spots of greenery” (10-11). Seamus Perry discusses this element of creation in tandem with destruction in “Kubla Khan” in *Coleridge and the Uses of Division*. Perry's discussion of “division” is based upon an exploration of “forces that are diverse, in contention, and unresolved” that become integral contributing elements of an “artistic whole.”<sup>8</sup> This unresolved characteristic is, as Perry points out, appropriately applied to the river Alph:

The “rills” we know to be “sinuous,” an epithet which subtly slips “sin” into the Khan's garden in serpentine guise, a guise we know Coleridge privately associated with natural genius (as in Shakespeare's “sinuous and over-varied lapses of a serpent”). It is as if the rills are smaller versions, secreted within Kubla's walls, of the mighty Alph without, “meandering with a mazy

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<sup>8</sup> Seamus Perry. *Coleridge and the Uses of Division*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. Oxford English Monographs. 1-2.

motion”—a very clear demonic echo there: the fallen angels discuss theology “in wandering mazes lost” (*Paradise Lost*, II.561)<sup>9</sup>

This ambivalent view toward rivers in Romantic poetry, wherein a river holds “demonic” characteristics that are “associated with natural genius,” attempts to take into consideration the full gamut of possibility—for creation and destruction, for shaping and being shaped, for dark depths as well as light and reflective surfaces—inherent in the very essence of a river or body of water. This poetics of simultaneous specificity and broad encompassment precedes and sets the stage for Snyder’s own poetic theories and aspirations.

## II.

Gary Snyder’s vision of landscape and his approach to rivers as a complementary and necessary response to mountains echo the Romantic tradition. He, too, recognises the relationship between the nature and movement of rivers and the nature and movement of mind. This correlation between the processes of the mind and the movements of rivers and waters is seen throughout Snyder’s poetic career, particularly in collections such as *Regarding Wave*<sup>10</sup> and *Turtle Island*, and culminates in *Mountains and Rivers Without End*. As his crowning poetic achievement, and a work forty years in the making, this epic and conglomerate long poem is an embodiment of *sunyata* as well as a poetic representation of the East Asian landscape paintings that inspired him from an early age. Snyder chronicles the inspiration for and creation of *Mountains and Rivers Without End* in an essay

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 203

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, my discussion of “Wave” from *Regarding Wave* in Chapter 2.

entitled “The Making of *Mountains and Rivers Without End*,” published as a supplement to the completed *Mountains and Rivers Without End* in 1996. In the essay he explains that: “In museums and through books I became aware of how the energies of mist, white water, rock formations, air swirls—a chaotic universe where everything is in place—are so much a part of the East Asian painter’s world” (*MRWE* 153). *Mountains and Rivers* is both a poetic description of East Asian landscape paintings and Snyder’s own artistic embodiment of the “energies of mist, white water, rock formations [and] air swirls” that make up a “chaotic universe where everything is in place.” In an interview entitled “The Landscape of Consciousness”<sup>11</sup>, Snyder explains that “More and more I am aware of very close correspondences between the external and internal landscape. In my long poem, *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, I’m dealing with these correspondences, moving back and forth.” (TRW 5) *Mountains and Rivers* is ultimately a poetic exploration of the correspondence between the movements of the mind, the internal, and the movements of nature, the external.

Snyder opens his epic collection of poems with “Endless Streams and Mountains.” This poetic section, as well as the entire work, corresponds on a structural and thematic level with the East Asian landscape paintings Snyder has often discussed, and in particular, Snyder structures his *Mountains and Rivers* after a horizontally painted hand scroll found in the Cleveland Museum of Art which was anonymously painted between the tenth and twelfth centuries (*MRWE* 156).

“Endless Streams and Mountains” sets the tone for the entire work by introducing a

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<sup>11</sup> First published in the *Literary Times* (Chicago) in December 1964 and later reprinted in TRW.

poetic and visionary frame of mind, representative of a meditative state, that directly correlates with the flowing conveyance of water. In fact, in the inaugural lines of “Endless Streams and Mountains,” and therefore the inaugural lines of the entire long poem, Snyder deliberately associates the two in a way that not only avoids trite simile but also goes so far as to create a concrete and almost literal association beyond mere metaphor:

Clearing the mind and sliding in  
                   to that created space,  
 a web of waters streaming over rocks,  
 air misty but not raining,

The “created space” in the poet’s mind *is* “a web of waters,” a place saturated with ideas to the point that even the air is infused with tangible moisture on the verge of precipitation. This “created space” is Snyder’s poetic embodiment of a visionary perspective that marries the mind with the natural world. The image that Snyder conjures in the following lines, which conclude the opening verse paragraph of his poetic opus, articulates a point of view that differs from the typical “bird’s eye” view associated with the mind’s eye:

seeing this land from a boat on a lake  
 or a broad slow river,  
 coasting by.

This atypical poetic standpoint—of viewing the landscape from an unelevated and equal mental vantage point, rather than an elevated visionary stance from on high—invokes the *periplum* of Pound’s *Pisan Cantos*. Anthony Hunt adeptly identifies a

correlation between Snyder's viewpoint "from a boat on a lake" and the Poundian idea that a poetic perspective is akin to the perspective of sailors out at sea<sup>12</sup>, as described in Canto LIX: "periplum, not as land looks on a map / but as sea bord seen by men sailing" (27-28). The concept is expanded and revisited throughout Pound's *Cantos*, but the poet makes a particular reference, in Canto LXXIV, to the idea of *periplum*: "the great periplum brings in the stars to our shore" (19). Pound's image of the stars meeting the shore on the horizon, through the passage of time and as the earth rotates, gives rise to a new poetic perspective in which the poet is situated neither above nor below the world, but upon water and at a parallel angle. The image also locates the visionary poet upon the ever moving, ever changing rivers and seas rather than the solid, elevated mountaintops traditionally associated with a visionary perspective. Additionally, Lionel Kelly gives a helpful discussion of the multiple possibilities of Pound's *periplum* by explaining that the word is a derivation of the Greek, *periplus*, meaning "circumnavigation" and that "Pound's use [of *periplus*] always takes the form *periplum*, a lexical pun expressing both circumference (peri) and center (plum)." Kelly adds that the word represents "a 'sailing after knowledge' to discover and record the center of values across the spectrum of human history."<sup>13</sup> This dual denotation of *periplum* is not lost on Snyder, who embraces and incorporates the concept of broad circumnavigation in order to arrive at or affirm a connection through a specific centred point. In this way Pound's *periplum* also "relates to the epic motions of the planetary system, and the

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<sup>12</sup> Hunt *Genesis* 60-61

<sup>13</sup> Lionel Kelly. "Periplum." *The Ezra Pound Encyclopedia*. Ed. Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos and Stephen J. Adams. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005. 215-16.

natural order of the winds and waves, the physical harmonies of the universe.”<sup>14</sup> The implications of Pound’s *periplum*, then, are perfectly suited to Snyder’s own poetic aspirations in *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, which are, in a very general sense, to conceive and express in poetic form the human mind and its participation within the “epic motions” of “the natural order” and “physical harmonies of the universe”; or, the interpenetration and interdependence of the human mind with all things. This means that in correlation with his elevated and visionary perspective found upon the zenith of mountainous heights (expressed in poems such as “Bubbs Creek”), Snyder also explores inspiration and poetic vision through a poetic stance in which the poet, or at least the poetic perspective, is located in the nadir of currents and waves that carve out the valleys of the earth and flow out to sea. Moreover, Snyder incorporates the act of circumambulation in his poetry, as previously discussed in Chapter Five, as a traditional means of meditation, self-enquiry and worship which can be compared to Pound’s circumnavigation.

In “seeing this land from a boat on a lake” or even “a broad slow river,” as the opening lines of “Endless Streams and Mountains” proposes, Snyder also, however indirectly, recalls Wordsworth, who also sought to express poetic perspectives both from elevations at sea level and at the highest peaks in the Alps. Wordsworth’s poetic expression of viewing the land from a boat upon a lake can be found in the boat-stealing episode of *The Prelude*, (1850 I.373-428), in which the young poet takes a stolen boat out on the lake at night and experiences a visionary moment, a “spot of time,” wherein his perspective of growing cliffs on the horizon

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

is changed by his imagination and he perceives something more: “a breath / And everlasting motion!” in the “forms and images” before him (431-32).

Snyder continues the river voyage throughout his opening section and even throughout the entire long poem—he does so first literally and then figuratively as a representation of the flowing movement of the mind and its journey as it traces the landscape of the earth, for the “web of waters” becomes a web of interconnection and association. One can see this continuing journey as the poet describes a literal path—found in the painted image of the ancient Chinese landscape scroll that the poem describes:

The path comes down along a lowland stream  
 slips behind boulders and leafy hardwoods  
 reappears in a pine grove,

—and a figurative path that is emblematic of the poet’s journey of spiritual and visionary discovery, of *sunyata*. As is befitting of a poem whose composition and development has spanned the majority of Snyder’s career, its poetic qualities and characteristics are also reflective of Snyder’s trademark poetic style. In the three lines quoted above one finds a syntax brimming with alliteration and assonance as well as subtle consonance. He cleverly plays with his description of the word “path” in the first line with its consonant sound—*p*—which, like the path itself, disappears after its first utterance only to reappear in the third line of the stanza with the phrase, “reappears in a pine grove.” Thus Snyder adds emphasis to the subject of the stanza as well as the auditory qualities of the words and the poetry. Snyder also plays with the alliterative quality of the letter *l* in the phrase, “along a lowland stream,” which

he revisits more subtly in the following line with “boulders and leafy.” He disguises a more deliberate series of alliteration by enjambling the first set of consonant sounds, “stream / slips behind boulders.” And Snyder also peppers his description of the path with fleeting instances of assonance, such as in “lowland,” “boulders” and “grove.” There is even a subtle eye rhyme found in the words “down” and “lowland” in the first line. Finally, one must note that within these three lines Snyder also begins with precise iambic pentameter which, although follows awkwardly through in the second line, disappears by the third line, thus leaving a sense of fleeting blank verse. These ephemeral moments of iambic pentameter are scattered throughout Snyder’s works, and can notably be seen in two of his most important lines in the opening stanza of “Endless Streams and Mountains” (and therefore the opening stanza of the entire long poem, *Mountains and Rivers Without End*)—“a web of waters streaming over rocks,” and “seeing this land from a boat on a lake.”

The poem continues as a series of descriptive images that act as both a narrative of the landscape painted on the scroll and as a narrative that recounts for the reader the act of viewing the scroll and letting the eye, as well as the mind, wander along and through its elements and images. The overall scene depicted on the scroll, and described in “Endless Streams,” is seen as the viewer unrolls the silk scroll from right to left<sup>15</sup>; and thus viewing the scroll becomes an action that follows the movement of the river as it traces the landscape and connects the various scenes

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<sup>15</sup> A note in the preliminary pages of *MRWE*—in which a copy of the landscape scroll is reproduced—reads, “Note: The scroll is meant to be viewed from the right to the left.”



depicted on the scroll. Snyder's long poem therefore also projects a series of images and scenes that depict—sometimes indirectly—a mountainous landscape which is traced by the flowing conveyance of waters as they traverse and shape the earth's surface in a process that transforms the highest peaks into the lowest valleys.

Anthony Hunt describes the interrelation of mountains and rivers in Snyder's work as “unquestionably deal[ing] with these relationships and correspondences, the ‘universal process of transformation,’ the same ‘reciprocal becoming’ of the mountains-rivers dyad.”<sup>16</sup> And just as “Endless Streams and Mountains” traces the visual path of the water's journey from the mountains to the sea, so too does the poem trace the path of the mind as it follows images and presents conceptions and interpretations of this “mountains-rivers dyad.”

In this opening poem of the long sequence, Snyder also explores the idea that a work of art—such as a painting or poem—continues to live and even transform into something more with the passage of time. In the case of the landscape scroll in the Cleveland Museum of Art, its life has thus far spanned nearly one thousand years and carries with it an accumulation of marks and responses from many of its owners and admirers. These marks and responses come in the form of owner's seals and written colophons—additional poems written on landscape scrolls by inspired admirers and viewers which, in the Chinese tradition, become an intermingling of verbal and visual forms of art. As Anthony Hunt (whose reading of “Endless Streams and Mountains” has informed much of my own reading) notes, and as Snyder said himself, “in a way the painting is not fully realized until several

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<sup>16</sup> Hunt 29

centuries of poems have been added” (*MRWE* 159). It is fitting, then, that Snyder ends “Endless Streams and Mountains” with his own translations of a few of the colophons from the Cleveland landscape scroll. However, before he transitions from his poetic interpretation of the painting into his translations of the colophons, he rounds out the poetic description of landscape with a return to the visionary point of view—the *periplum*—with which he began the poem. After the mind’s path has been traced from a “lowland stream” to a “trail” that “goes far inland,” and “somewhere back around a bay”; after following the path to “a jumble of cliffs above,” and finally to “Trail’s end at the edge of an inlet,” Snyder returns to the image of the boatman and the *periplum*-like point of view that sees the mountains and valleys across the horizon:

a boatman in the bow looks  
lost in thought.

Hills beyond rivers, willows in a swamp,  
a gentle valley reaching far inland.

The watching boat has floated off the page.

The effect Snyder creates at the conclusion of the poem—which is the poet’s own colophon to accompany the scroll—is one of poetic, imaginary and visual interpenetration in which Snyder accomplishes what Altieri credits some of Snyder’s earlier poems as achieving: a “complex relationship evoking the balance of inner and outer life, smallness and infinity.”<sup>17</sup> As the “watching boat” floats “off the page,” Snyder signifies the end of the painted images, but the continuation of

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<sup>17</sup> Altieri *Enlarging* 135

thought and ideas as the viewer, or watcher, in the boat is carried by currents to further contemplations. It is a marvellous Romantic moment created by the fact that the reader is aware that the poem is the page from which the boat has floated. The line is also reminiscent of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*: "My soul is an enchanted boat" (II.v.72). The final line also creates a sense of melding between the poet and the scroll wherein the viewer disappears in the way that an enlightened person realizes emptiness: the comprehension of being detached from the concepts of individuality and identity. Although the image of a man in a boat dissipates "off the page" Snyder resurrects the presence of a final viewer who concludes the poem following his translations of the colophons. This final viewer is Snyder himself, who takes a step back to "gaze again at the land" and ultimately sees the mountain-river dyad in its full correspondence and interpenetration: "mountains walking on the water, / water ripples every hill."

Snyder's association of the mind with the movement of water has been a characteristic of his poetry from the beginning. In a journal entry dated 12 September 1957 and published in *Earth House Hold* (1969) Snyder discusses two types of poetry—that which is "contrived" as the "result of artisan care" and that which "spring[s] out fully armed." In differentiating between the two, Snyder defines poetic inspiration in terms of the qualities and movement of water. He says:

. . . the pure  
 inspiration flow leaves one with a sense of gratitude and  
 wonder, and no sense of "I did it"—only the Muse. *That* level  
 of mind—the cool water—not intellect and not—(as romantics

and after have confusingly thought) fantasy-dream world  
 or unconscious. This is just the clear spring—it reflects all  
 things and feeds all things but is of itself transparent. Hitting  
 on it, one could try to trace it to the source; but that writes  
 no poems and is in a sense ingratitude. Or one can see where it  
 goes: to all things and in all things. The hidden water  
 underground. Anyhow—one shouts for the moon in always  
 insisting on it; and safer-minded poets settle for any muddy flow  
 and refine it as best they can.

(Shaman poems: using mantra and mudra as well—) (57)<sup>18</sup>

The passage addresses a recurring and ambivalent issue in Snyder's poetry and even general approach to life—the issue of “using mantra” versus “mudra.” Snyder—mistakenly, I would assert—condemns the Romantics for confusing inspiration with “fantasy dream-world or unconscious.” Yet Snyder himself is unable to explicitly explain “*That* level of mind” from which pure “Mind Poetry” springs, rather giving an equivocal discussion of poetic inspiration in metaphorical terms in which the movement of the mind is equated with the “flow” of “cool water.” The language and ideas, whether or not Snyder is aware of it, are very much the same terms used by Shelley when he sought to explain thought through the idea that rivers “imitate mind” and explored the implications that might arise from such an understanding.

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<sup>18</sup> Because the excerpt is a journal entry, and could be argued to be prose poetry—due to the format and layout, specifically in the spacing of the last quoted line—I have formatted the quoted passage in a way that attempts to retain a sense of the layout of the text as it is published.

In addition, the passage from *Earth House Hold* exemplifies a continuing struggle<sup>19</sup> in Snyder's poetic aspiration: Snyder has a great desire to create objective, pure, poems; nevertheless, even Snyder admits that for all the striving towards creating poems that "spring out fully armed," the result is often subjective "mudra" rather than "mantra." The beauty of this realisation—that Shaman poetry is both "mantra" and "mudra"—is tied to the contradictory role of the poet/seer who must mediate between pure vision and a more "sane," intelligible poetic message borne out of compromise in that there must be a balance between purity (which, if taken too far can become sterile) and contamination. A poet who can maintain such a balance—even by vacillating between purity and contamination—is a Shaman poet.

Snyder's association of the flowing movement of water with poetic inspiration and the thought processes and patterns of the mind is strikingly apparent in "The Flowing," from section II of *Mountains and Rivers Without End*. He begins the four-part poem with an opening section entitled "Headwaters," which begins with the image of the poet's own head immersed in the runoff from a mountainous spring:

Head doused under the bronze  
                   dragon-mouth jet  
                   from a cliff  
                   spring—headwaters, . . .

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<sup>19</sup> The description of this struggle is the subject at the heart of my chapters (Three and Four) on Snyder and the poet/prophet.

The literal interaction of the head with the water also implies a figurative association between the mind and the water<sup>20</sup>, and sets the tone for a poem—in four parts: “Headwaters,” “Riverbed,” “Falls” and “Rivermouth”—that traces the movement of a river from its headwaters (emanating, or springing, “from a cliff / spring”) to its mouth at the sea, as well as the movement of ideas as they develop into a series of images and connections that together form the process of poetic inspiration and creation. As is the case with “The Flowing,” Snyder often in his poetry mingles literal places and things with figurative ideas in an attempt to create a melding, an interpenetration, of both the specific and the abstract. In the above passage, Snyder gives this “dragon-mouth jet” of inspiration a precise location—the “Kamo / River back of Kyoto” where a “Cliff-wall statue of Fudo” is also situated—as lines four through six illustrate. Anthony Hunt, who discusses the poem in great detail, has observed that the mouth of the pipe which Snyder refers to was fashioned into the image of a dragon swallowing its tail<sup>21</sup>, like the eternal and cyclical image of the ouroboros. Snyder explains the statue of Fudo’s significance in his “Smokey the Bear Sutra”<sup>22</sup>, in which he identifies Fudo as “Lord of the Inner Mountains,” and says that Fudo’s name means “Immovable Wisdom King” (GSR 244). Thus the “dragon-mouth jet” is placed next to Fudo’s statue, adding emphasis to and again revisiting the dynamic between mountains and waters, as the last three lines in the opening “Headwaters” section of “The Flowing” underscore:

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<sup>20</sup> Hunt also notes the connection: “The river’s headwaters are energy flows in the brain” (138).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 139

<sup>22</sup> Originally distributed at a Sierra Club Wilderness conference in San Francisco, 1969; later published in *The Fudo Trilogy*, 1973; and collected in GSR, 1999.

Lord of the Headwaters, making

Rocks of water,

Water out of rocks

Snyder's ever-present theme of mutual interconnection and inter-creation—as illustrated by the image presented in these lines of rocks made and shaped by water and of water sprung from the rocks—becomes for him an illustration of poetic revelation akin to the creative and revelatory process of sexual intercourse. It revisits Snyder's incorporation of the dynamic principles of *yin* and *yang*<sup>23</sup>, with a particular emphasis on the mountain/river metaphor where *yin*—"which is negative, passive, weak, and destructive"—is represented by water and *yang*—"which is positive, active, strong, and constructive"—is embodied in the mountain as well as the poet.<sup>24</sup> Anthony Hunt gives a detailed discussion of the poem in this light, and therefore my focus on the poem is to draw attention to the fact that Snyder traces throughout a theme of interaction, interconnectedness and ultimately interpenetration between the poet—both in body and in mind—and the flowing river.

"Falls," which constitutes the third section of "The Flowing," exemplifies the melding of the river and the mind. Additionally, a connection between the Passaic Falls section of Williams's *Paterson*, which I have discussed at length in Chapter Four, and Snyder's "Falls" can be traced in which Snyder incorporates Williams's stepped triadic line in a way that connects the two poems in both theme and form. The first few stanzas of "The Falls" gives a description of the river as it

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<sup>23</sup> See my discussion of *yin* and *yang* in Snyder's poetry in Chapter Two.

<sup>24</sup> Chan 244

flows from the mountain's height, an alpine "creek" borne of "snowfields / rocked between granite ribs." Throughout this section Snyder plays with the auditory effects of the words, with a particular repetition of consonance and alliteration through the letter *s* and the digraph *sh*—sounds that echo the rushing flow and crashing tumult of a mountain river and its falls—in words and phrases such as: "spray and streamers," "spongy in the summer sun / water slips," "shimmer sandy shiny flats / then soars," and others.

The first instance of a Williams-like triadic line follows a visionary discussion of the energy cycle, embedded in a poem about the water cycle, in which light from the sun becomes the catalyst for photosynthesis within the leaves of plants, which then gives rise to a chain of energy exchange between all living things:

thus pine trees leapfrog up on sunlight  
trapped in cells of leaf—nutrient minerals called together  
like a magic song  
to lead a cedar log along, that hopes  
to get to sea at last and be  
a great canoe.

Uncharacteristically, the passage's use of poetic device is deliberately conspicuous. The meter, although not precise, is still measured and becomes more so as the passage progresses into the triadic lines that finish the stanza. The first three lines



follow a pattern of loosely<sup>25</sup> trochaic heptameter ending with a single accented syllable for the seventh foot, which Snyder disguises by enjambling the heptameter, and which scans as follows:

/    /    /    /    /    /    /  
 pine trees | leapfrog | up on | sunlight / trapped in | cells of | leaf  
 /    /    /    /    /    /    /  
 nutrient | minerals | called to | gether / like a | magic | song

The triadic lines that follow are also measured loosely in iambic feet, with a fleeting hint of pentameter in the phrase, “that hopes / to get to sea at last and be.” Finally, Snyder’s presentation of rhyme and alliteration in the passage is difficult to overlook. He plays with the proximity and similarity of the words “leapfrog” and “leaf,” which contribute to the alliteration in the words “leapfrog,” “sunlight,” “cells of leaf,” “like,” “lead a cedar log along” and “last.” And Snyder also incorporates what is almost an end-rhyme mingled with assonance in “song” and “log along.” For, although “along,” does not end the line spatially, it marks a significant pause in the phrasing and is separated by a comma from Snyder’s moment of iambic pentameter that follows. Finally, Snyder’s flash of iambic pentameter is overshadowed and effectively concealed by the overtly evident internal rhyme in “to get to sea at last and be.”

In stocking this passage with such an array of overt poetic device, Snyder indicates to the reader that the poem has reached a zenith. Certainly the four short stanzas that follow and that end the “Falls” section of “The Flowing” indicate not

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<sup>25</sup> Although “nutrient” and “minerals” are three-syllable words, the second and third syllables of both words are often slurred together when spoken in an American accent.

only a vision of the interconnection of all elements and forces of the earth—“A soft breath, world-wide, of night and day, / rising, falling,”—but also illustrate a correspondence between the poet’s mind and what he calls “The Great Mind,” meaning the river. The last three stanzas illustrate this connection by describing the river’s separation into mist and tumultuous, divergent rapids and by concluding with the image of the poet standing in the “spray” and upheaval, “drenched” by the river’s water, wet and thus in a state of communion with the river at the point of its falls:

The Great Mind passes by its own  
fine-honed thoughts,  
going each way.

Rainbow hanging steady  
only slightly wavering with the  
swing of the whole spill,  
    between the rising and the falling,  
        stands still.

I stand drenched in crashing spray and mist,  
and pray.

As previously mentioned, the correlation to Williams and the falls passages of *Paterson* is unmistakable. He also creates his own moment of visionary revelation akin to Eliot’s “still point of the turning world,” which is “Where,” as Eliot says “past and future are gathered” (“Burnt Norton” ii.16-19), and where, as in the case of Williams’s Passaic Falls (Book III), time stops for a suspended moment with “The past above, the future below / and the present pouring down” (*Paterson* 172).

Snyder's suspended moment is also one of simultaneous stillness and movement—where the “Great Mind,” the river, is able to “[pass] by its own” self (or its own “fine-honed thoughts”) in the form of water molecules suspended, separated, set to flight and “going each way” upon impact. Snyder builds upon this image of mist and spray and air, combining it with light to create a rainbow. His description of the “Rainbow hanging steady” also recalls the rainbow created by the Passaic Falls in Book I of *Paterson*:

From high above, higher than the spires, higher  
 .....  
 the river comes pouring in above the city  
 and crashes from the edge of the gorge  
 in a recoil of spray and rainbow mists— (15)

Whereas Williams's poem moves on without further commentary on the “rainbow mists,” Snyder's revisitation of the image takes on the poet's conception of a simultaneously static and dynamic moment. Snyder's rainbow is “hanging steady / only slightly wavering.” And there, in his description of the rainbow “wavering,” Snyder makes a connection to the “double mirror waver” of “Bubbs Creek Haircut,” which precedes “The Flowing” in order of poetic arrangement in *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, and whose “waver” is discussed in Chapter Seven as “a key image in . . . Buddhist interdependence philosophy. Multiple reflections in multiple mirrors, that's what the universe is like.”<sup>26</sup> Both the mirror in the barber shop and the rainbow mists of the crashing falls are reflections of light, and therefore

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<sup>26</sup> Faas 135

reflections of ideas, of understanding and of the mind. It is worth note that Snyder again incorporates overt elements of more traditional poetic device. He uses an end rhyme with “spill” and “still,” repeats the consonant *s* sound in “swing,” “spill,” and “stands still,” and uses internal rhyme in “between the rising and the falling.” Again, the manifest poetic language serves to emphasise the subject matter of the stanza, which is repeated in multiple metaphorical terms: “hanging steady,” “slightly wavering,” “between the rising and the falling.” All three terms emphasise the suspended moment of balance and revelation that a visionary mind is able to perceive and conceive. This is articulated in the final image that concludes “Falls” and which places Snyder in the midst of his suspended moment as the visionary poet. As Snyder “stand[s] drenched in crashing spray and mist, / and pray[s],” he becomes the “still point of the turning world,” a still point around which the tumult of crashing water, mist and rushing currents swirl. In praying, Snyder adds emphasis to the idea of a communion with the “Great Mind” of the river—by standing “drenched” in its midst, he is as physically connected with it as possible; and by praying whilst standing in its mist, he creates a spiritual and intellectual union to parallel the physical.

This concluding image—of the poet standing still amid the “crashing spray and mist”—in “Falls” is Snyder’s contribution to the multiple poetic representations of the suspended moment of visionary inspiration: it belongs with Wordsworth’s “spots of time,” with Pound’s image of the olive leaf “which gleams and then does not gleam” whilst suspended, turning in the air, with Blake’s “pulsation of the artery,” with Williams’s falls “The past above, the future below / and the present

pouring down,” and with Shelley’s poetic “centre and circumference of knowledge” (*A Defence* 696).

Snyder’s “The Flowing” continues with one last section, “Rivermouth,” which I will not discuss in detail<sup>27</sup> other than to observe that this section gives a final addition to Snyder’s image of the still standing poet amidst the crash and spray of the falls. The image is built up throughout the series of four sections in “The Flowing,” beginning with “Headwaters,” which presents a picture of the poet with his head immersed under a jet of mountain runoff. In “Riverbed” the poet is an observer<sup>28</sup> who describes the interaction of cultures and people who live near the river. With “Falls,” Snyder places himself “drenched in crashing spray and mist,” and one assumes that the poet is indeed standing, perhaps waist deep, in the river as its current flows around him and its mist and spray swirl about him in the air. This image is confirmed in “Rivermouth” where Snyder places himself directly in the river whose currents “curl round my testicles / drawn crinkled skin / and lazy

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<sup>27</sup> As I previously mentioned, Anthony Hunt has already given a useful explication of the poem in his highly informative *Genesis, Structure and Meaning in Gary Snyder’s Mountains and Rivers Without End*.

<sup>28</sup> It is interesting to note that at this point Snyder has not officially placed himself in the poem outright—in “Headwaters” the “I” is assumed, but never articulated, and in “Riverbed” the speaker of the poem is a withdrawn observer who does not participate in the actions described. It is not until the conclusion of “Falls” that Snyder names himself by using the pronoun “I,” and then confirms his poetic identity with “my” and again “I” in “Rivermouth.” This indicates a slight contrast, from the idea of the self in Romantic poetry and the post-Romantic self in Snyder. For the Romantics there was no problem with placing the self in the role of wanderer and quester—even if it caused anxiety, as in *Alastor*. But for Snyder the mountains and the rivers are both an analogy and a reality, which creates an ambivalence in the poet’s relation and interaction with them. Snyder wants to be objective, and therefore represent the whole of society and humanity, yet Snyder also sees value in the subjective, individual experience, which can also represent a microcosm of the whole.

swimming cock.” The sexual, creative interaction between the poet and the river is certainly more than implied, drawing emphasis to Snyder’s overarching image of the visionary moment.

This image of the meeting of two forces, in which each shapes and is shaped by the other, is a Romantic conception. Shelley’s *Ode to the West Wind* gives rise to an earnest consideration of this image and its representation of the meeting of two energies. Shelley precedes Snyder in his poetic ruminations concerning the continuous cycle of destruction and regeneration, and Shelly’s wind, the “breath of Autumn’s being” (1) is a wet wind whose “congregated might / Of vapours” (26-27) is akin to Snyder’s “crashing spray and mist.” Although, as mentioned in a footnote to Chapter Seven, Snyder does not often quote or refer to Shelley, it is apparent that he is at least familiar with the Romantic poet’s major works. One can infer that this is the case based on Snyder’s correspondence with Allen Ginsberg, who told Snyder in a letter dated 11 July 1975, of his shock at discovering that “half the class” (presumably a group of poetry students at the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics) “had never read *West Wind*.” Ginsberg goes on to tell Snyder that he and the other instructors set about addressing this glaring hole in their students’ poetic education by each reading “Shelley’s *West Wind* [in their] own interpretations in one class.”<sup>29</sup> The familiarity with which Ginsberg refers to Shelley and his *Ode to the West Wind* makes it clear that the two poet/friends esteemed Shelley’s work and considered it mandatory reading for a complete education in poetics.

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<sup>29</sup> Ginsberg, Snyder *Selected Letters* 174

Not only does Shelley's poetic masterpiece address one of Snyder's recurring poetic themes—that of destruction and regeneration—but Shelley also precedes Snyder in making reference to East Asian religion and philosophy. Shelley refers to his “wild West Wind” as both “Destroyer and Preserver” in the opening stanza of the poem, which alludes to the interchange of universal duality between opposing deities as represented by Brahma, The Preserver or creator, and Shiva, the Destroyer. The fact that Shelley was read in East Asian religions and ideologies is outlined by Stuart Curran in his *Shelley's Annus Mirabilis*. Curran also points out that the Romantic poet drew “together the central mythologies of Asiatic and European culture” in *Prometheus Unbound* as well as throughout his poetic works.<sup>30</sup> This melding of eastern philosophies into western society is something that Snyder has also sought to embody in his poetry throughout his career. For, although Snyder maintains a healthy disdain for western culture<sup>31</sup>, he “remains deeply committed to Western pragmatism, humanitarian optimism, and belief in progress”<sup>32</sup>, and seeks to act as a mediator, a legislator who seeks to negotiate a union, between East Asian philosophies and western culture.

Snyder's rivers have much in common with Shelley's West Wind, and Shelley's seminal poem bears what could be considered the seeds of much of Snyder's later works and ideas. Firstly, the “wild West Wind” is a wet wind that the poet describes as a “stream, 'mid the steep sky's commotion,” (15). In the poet's

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<sup>30</sup> Curran *Shelley's* 90

<sup>31</sup> See my discussion of Snyder and his sometimes contradictory attitude toward America in a discussion of “For the West” in Chapter Five.

<sup>32</sup> Faas 92

note to the 1820 publication of the poem, Shelley adds to the idea that the West Wind is a vaporous, damp wind when he says:

This poem was conceived and chiefly written in a wood that skirts the Arno, near Florence, and on a day when that tempestuous wind, whose temperature is at once mild and animating, was collecting the vapours which pour down the autumnal rains. (762 n412)

In combining both elements of water and air, Snyder and Shelley achieve a phenomenon that is a naturally recurring moment of interconnection. For Snyder, when the mist and spray of the river's falls are interpenetrated with light, a rainbow of visionary importance occurs. For Shelley, the combination of water drawn from the river and carried by the wind creates "The tumult of . . . mighty harmonies" (59). Shelley also uses a spectrum of descriptive colour in *Ode to the West Wind*—"Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red" (4), "azure" (9 and 35), "living hues" (12), "blue surface" (19), and "grey" (41).

Both poets incorporate similar visionary themes. For example, Snyder often revisits the notion of a visionary insight as the ripple on the surface of water, as in "Bubbs Creek Haircut"; or as a "waver" or "wavering" movement, as in his rainbow at the base of the falls, which he describes as "hanging steady / only slightly wavering" in "Falls." Shelley previously used this image of a wavering ripple upon the surface of the water many times. In *Alastor* there is the sense that the river reflects a possibly deceptive image upon its surface whilst its darker depths remain unseen to those who are unable to adjust their perspective and see through the river's reflective surface. In *West Wind* Shelley refashions this reflective image as,



looking through “the blue Mediterranean,” one can see “old palaces and towers / Quivering within the wave’s intenser day” (30-33). Additionally, although Pound’s *periplum* is in many ways revolutionary and unique to his particular brand of poetics, Shelley, too, surveys the horizontal sailor’s view from sea bed to mountain peak when he observes, in *West Wind*, the expansive panorama “from the dim verge / Of the horizon to the zenith’s height” (21-22).

Ultimately, and most importantly, Shelley’s *Ode to the West Wind* precedes and influences Snyder by articulating a visionary expression of the poet’s desire to achieve a true fusion—both physically and spiritually—of the poet and the natural source of inspiration and power, be it river or wind. Shelley articulates this desire for union through a progression of the poet’s increasingly greater levels of communion with the West Wind. Shelley desires first to be carried by the wind:

If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;  
If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;  
A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share

The impulse of thy strength, only less free  
Than thou, O, Uncontrollable!       (43-47)

Even in his yearning to be carried at the mercy of the West Wind, Shelley’s aspirations become increasingly bold. As a “dead leaf” that the Wind “mightest bear,” the poet maintains a certain amount of humility, but to “fly with” the Wind and then “share / The impulse of [its] strength” illustrates a poetic ambition that

strives to establish the poet in a position with the wind that is only just subordinate, “only less” than equal to the wind.

Shelley’s desire to become as powerful, as unfettered as the elements is illustrated in the meeting of the Atlantic with the West Wind. The relationship between the ocean and the Wind is one of ambivalence in relation to the question of superiority. Certainly Shelley, whose poem is addressed as an ode to the West Wind, reverences its power. Nevertheless, when the wind and the Atlantic meet it is the ocean which acts upon itself in order to greet the West Wind: “Thou / For whose path the Atlantic’s level powers / Cleave themselves into chasms” (36-38). In these few lines Shelley is able to incorporate a vacillating balance between the two elements and their corresponding power. Shelley uses the word “level” to describe the powers of the Atlantic, and the possibility in the meaning is multiple. The *OED* gives the following definitions, among others, for the word “level” when used as an adjective:

1. a. Having an even surface; ‘not having one part higher than another’
- b. fig. Of a race: Showing no difference between the competitors. (Cf. EVEN a. 16.)
3. a. Lying in the same horizontal plane as something else; on a level with. Also fig., on an equality with; readily accessible or intelligible to.<sup>33</sup>

All three definitions have relevant place in the interpretation of Shelley’s Atlantic and its “level powers.” There is surely the possibility that Shelley intended to play upon the reader’s initial inference of the word “level” in likely assuming that the

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<sup>33</sup> “level, *adj.*” Def. 1a, 1b, 3a.

poet describes the physical characteristics of the surface of the Atlantic Ocean as being calm, “having an even surface.” And yet the Atlantic Ocean is known for its tumultuous waves.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps Shelley means that the Atlantic’s surface is comparatively level and calm when juxtaposed against the “Uncontrollable!” West Wind. There is also the possibility that Shelley uses the word “level” to invoke an image of a horizontal plane along which the two forces, wind and wave, meet—a horizontal plane which also evokes a perspective similar to that of Pound’s *periplum*. Of greater import, however, is the idea, inherent in the word “level,” that these two natural powers are equal in strength and influence and might. Because the Atlantic’s powers are then “level” with or equal to the strength of the West Wind, it is all the more magnificent that the ocean chooses to greet the Wind in its path by “Cleav[ing]” itself “into chasms” (38). Finally, there is a sense that the two are “level” powers because of their association with America, the new republic in Shelley’s time. The West Wind travels from the west, across the Atlantic to Europe and the Atlantic’s eastern shores; and the Atlantic also connects the new land, America, to the west with its eastern, European, counterpart. The association between the two lands as mitigated by the ocean and the wind creates the picture of a see-saw, or teeter-totter, or balanced scale in which the two opposing weights, the American continent and the European continent are the counterbalances connected and levelled by the “level” powers of the West Wind and the Atlantic.

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<sup>34</sup> This is illustrated by the fact that the Pacific Ocean is so named, originally *Mar Pacifico* by Magellan, because of its relatively pacified nature in comparison to the Atlantic.

The image created by the greeting of the wind and ocean is familiar. The West Wind's path becomes an entity much like a tunnel or rod that is simultaneously moving and still, concrete and yet intangible. Its still, yet moving, path meets the current and flow of the Atlantic in such a way that the ocean's movement becomes a forked path that both partially envelops the wind and adjusts its movement to let the wind through. This imagery of a greeting and cooperation of both still and moving powers is similar to Snyder's image in "Falls" of the poet standing in the midst of the flowing river and the "crashing spray and mist" of its waterfall as the current diverges in order to surpass and surround its obstacle, the poet. Additionally, as Shelley's poetic persona strives with the West Wind "in prayer in [his] sore need" (52) to be coupled with the wind, so does Snyder's poet "stand drenched . . . / and pray" for such a union with the river.

Shelley adds an additional image in the *West Wind* that underscores this poetic striving for a union with the inspirational powers of nature and parallels Snyder's image of the poet soaked and immersed in and with the river. Shelley's final request, almost by way of commandment, of the wind, is to "Be through my lips to unawakened earth / The trumpet of a prophecy!" (68-69). This final portrayal of the wind as the poet's breath, sourced and thus located and contained *within* the poet to be breathed forth in cooperation with, and perhaps even at, the poet's will represents the realisation of a union between poet and nature, and yet one that exhibits both the imperative power of the imagination and a degree of desperate need on the poet's part.

Although Snyder's poet/prophet does not inhale or drink or breathe forth his inspirational river, he does manage a tempered union in that the poet is immersed in the river and even engages in a sexual interchange with its currents. But it must be acknowledged that Snyder is no mere imitator, and in his post-Romantic poetic tendencies he still forges his own poetic identity. One of the differences between Shelley and Snyder is that Shelley dares even to command and perhaps surpass the West Wind in the final lines of his poem, whereas Snyder attempts to create what he calls a more "sane" poetics by forging a more equal union, thus tempering the Romantic striving to surpass even nature. Snyder places the poet firmly on the ground, between the heavens and the underworld, or standing still, feet anchored in the river's bed, whilst immersed in its flow. But where his poetry is occasionally lacking, is in its tendency toward too much stability. Where Snyder's inspiration sparkles and faintly shimmers, the Romantics saw near-blinding flashes of light, "spots of time." On a spectrum between the sanity of the "Mind Poet" and the nearing ignominy of the extreme reaches of the "Space Poet," Snyder seeks to be, and often is, more "sane," approaching nearer to the "Mind Poet" in his vacillation along the spectrum between the two.

However, Snyder revisits his river image in his latest collection of poems, *Danger on Peaks*, and by so doing approaches some of the visionary daring that the Romantics embraced. "1980: Letting Go" is Snyder's poetic articulation, in poetic form, of the volcanic eruption of Mount St Helens. Snyder incorporates many of his recurring ideas and terminologies, such as the "quiver swell, glow" of the

volcano's build-up to eruption. When the mountain does finally "go," Snyder describes the scene:

swarms of earthquakes, tremors, rumbles

*she goes*

8.32 AM      18 May 1980

superheated steams and gasses

white-hot crumbling boulders lift and fly in a

burning sky-river wind of

searing lava droplet hail,

huge icebergs in the storm, exploding mud,

Much of the imagery is familiar from Snyder's earlier works, yet it is now more elevated: What was before a "waver" or a "ripple" becomes much stronger "earthquakes, tremors, rumbles." What was "spray and mist" in "Falls" becomes "superheated steams and gasses" in "1980: Letting Go." And what was "water" that "slips out under / mucky shallow flows" in "Falls," has become a "burning sky-river wind of / searing lava"—a river combined with and sprung forth from the heart of a mountain, borne upon the wind and aimed at a destruction that will, after its fearful and unstoppable blighting, clear the way for a spectacularly fertile renewal. In his description of a fiery volcanic "sky-river," Snyder manages to achieve in his poem a union of powers which, although cannot physically include the poet lest it be his destruction, does incorporate a visionary Romantic striving for interpenetration and yet still maintains the sanity of expressing a perfectly real and natural phenomenon.

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In so doing, Snyder does justice to twin and related aspects of Romanticism: its concern with the visionary recreation of experience and its under-emphasized fidelity to what Stevens calls “a plain sense of things” (which includes a carefully designed ambiguity in “sense”).<sup>35</sup> That Snyder has developed a poetic means of negotiating between these perspectives speaks eloquently of his creative re-animation of Romanticism’s bequest. Snyder’s application of Buddhist principles to the poetic creation and expression of thought can also be literary criticism of his work. His recurrent theme of *sunyata*, the idea that “everything in the universe is empty of individuality; everything is connected to everything else”<sup>36</sup>, is evident, as this thesis has argued, in his relationship with Romanticism. Without the precedents set by Romanticism in areas such as experimental poetic form, ecological thought, the role of the poet and holistic Romantic landscapes, Snyder’s own work would not assume its own original and specific life. Reciprocally, Romanticism can only continue to live as long as it receives fresh life and breath from new generations of poets and innovators. The two are deeply interconnected, interdependent, coexistent.

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<sup>35</sup> Stevens “The Plain Sense of Things” *Collected* 502

<sup>36</sup> Smith 6

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