

Philosophical Concepts of Nature and Wilderness in the Poetry of Gary Snyder

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Gary Snyder's poetry is accomplished by any measure. Since the 1950s he has published approximately twenty texts, won a number of awards (including the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry), and stands as one of the foremost environmental poets of the past few decades. His poetry often deals with concepts of nature and wilderness and the relationship we, as human beings, have with the world of which we are a part. I approach Snyder's poetry with an eye toward the philosophical character and import of these issues and offer a conceptual reading of his poetry, focusing on selections from *Turtle Island*. Snyder grapples with difficult and delicate questions regarding our place in an environment that includes many creatures besides ourselves, and he does so with penetrating poetic sensibility. My intent is to show how Snyder's poetry can be read as a philosophical comment on these issues.

Snyder begins with an experience of alienation that he views as a noteworthy dimension of contemporary human life. Consider an early poem in *Turtle Island*:

So they bomb and they bomb
Day after day, across the planet
blinding sparrows
breaking the ear-drums of owls
splintering trunks of cherries
twining and looping
deer intestines
in the shaken, dusty, rocks.
All these Americans up in special cities
in the sky
Dumping poisons and explosives
Across Asia first,
And next North America,
A war against the earth.
When it's done there'll be
no place
A Coyote could hide. (22-23)

In this poem, "The Call of the Wild," Snyder describes a situation of alienation between the earth, trees, birds, and mammals and the Americans in "special cities in the sky" who, we are told earlier in the poem, "took to the air" and "never came down." This distinction is emphasized by spatial distance and images of enmity. How does Snyder characterize this alienation? He resists the somewhat commonplace dichotomy between the sphere of human life and that of 'non-human nature'. "The city is just as natural as the country, let's not forget it," he says. "There is nothing in the universe that's not natural by definition" (*Real* 91). For Snyder, the word 'nature' — "from Latin *natura*, 'birth, constitution, character, course of things'" — refers to "the material world or its collective objects and phenomena," and includes the "products of human action and intention"; 'nature' is "the physical universe and all its properties" (*Practice* 8-9). From this perspective, there can be no "human/nature" duality, because the former term is subsumed under the latter. "The whole," Snyder explains, "with its rivers and valleys, obviously includes farms, fields, villages, cities, and the (once comparatively small) dusty world of human affairs" (109).

Nevertheless, it is clear that "The Call of the Wild" articulates some sense of alienation, as do other poems in *Turtle Island*. The title of the poem offers one suggestion: alienation from the 'wild'. Indeed, Snyder speaks of a dichotomy between civilization and the wild. Wilderness, he says, has to do with "a diversity of living and nonliving beings flourishing according to their own sorts of order" (12). It has to do with a sort of order that is innate or internal to that which is ordered, rather than imposed externally; it has to do with resistance to "economic and political

domination by civilization”; it has to do with self-reliance, independence, and spontaneity (10-11). “So we can say,” Snyder says, “that New York City and Tokyo are 'natural' but not 'wild.' They do not deviate from the laws of nature, but they are habitats so exclusive in the matter of who and what they give shelter to, and so intolerant of other creatures, as to be truly odd” (12). So Snyder poses the question: “Where do we start to resolve the dichotomy of the civilized and the wild?” (*Practice* 16).

If the wild is not equivalent to nature, though, what *is* the wild? For Snyder, the distinction is important. Take the following passage from “Survival and Sacrament”:

It comes again to an understanding of the subtle but crucial difference of meaning between the terms *nature* and *wild*. Nature is the subject, they say, of science. Nature can be deeply probed, as in microbiology. The wild is not to be made subject or object in this manner; to be approached it must be admitted from within, as a quality intrinsic to who we are. Nature is ultimately in no way endangered; wilderness is. The wild is indestructible, but we might not *see* the wild. (194)

Snyder insists that the wild cannot be articulated in the same ways that nature can. Nature refers to the collective phenomena making up the material world; these phenomena can be, as he says, probed, analyzed, articulated in various ways, symbolically related to each other, and so forth. The wild, he contends, is not like this. “The word *wild* is like a gray fox trotting off through the forest, ducking behind bushes, going in and out of sight,” he says in “The Etiquette of Freedom” (9). Irene Klaver employs a similar figure: a deer appearing and vanishing at the edge of a tree line. “What constitutes the wild and the silent is this very play between appearance and disappearance, the slipping in and out of the limits of presence,” she says. “Untamed and not named, the wild and the silent escape the frames of our knowledge” (117). If the wild escapes the frames of our knowledge, then we must be

careful how we speak about the wild — if at all. “Perhaps one should not talk (or write) too much about the wild world,” Snyder continues. After all, “Nature description is a kind of writing that comes with civilization and its habits of collection and classification” (*Practice* 23). When the wild is taken up in these ways, it is lost; to extend the earlier trope, the fox does not admit being pinned down. One is here reminded of the common distinction we make between domesticated animals and those we consider wild. “As soon as they are defined into a special name,” Klaver says, “you have to be on your guard, because wild animals just appear, like the butterfly, the raccoon; or we follow their disappearing tracks, through snow, bushes, and deserts, over the mountains. They don't come when we call them as does Jacob, or Monday the cat. When we call wild animals by a name they disappear” (128).

Wildness does not admit of naming, nor of conceptualization or the domestication that comes with the entry into the nomenclatures and taxonomies of language. “[Understanding of the wild] is a tacit knowing that is always to be determined along the way, never caught in stable definitions but always moving. Something implicit,” she says; “as with the seasons, the being of the wild is change; it is a fluttering companion located between waking and dreaming; a colorful connection between knowing and not knowing; never caught in rigidity, it always moves, comes and goes” (124, 126). The wild can suffer the probings, conceptualizations, and identifications of neither nature nor civilization. When we make our approach from these standpoints, we do not see the wild. “As soon as one stakes out the wild,” Klaver says, “it is gone” (124).

If the wild is not accessible to us in the ways to which we are accustomed, if wildness is elusive this way, how are we to understand (and evaluate) Snyder's concept of the wild? Is the wild simply shut off from thought and inaccessible to human experience? No. For

Snyder, the wild is accessible to us in two primary ways.

First, the wild is accessible to us in ordinary *experiential* terms. Snyder often quotes Basho: “Go to the pine tree to learn of the pine tree.” His second point is that we can encounter the wild at the intersection between civilization and wildness. Snyder speaks of these places of intersection as 'frontiers'. “A frontier is a burning edge, a frazzle, a strange market zone between two utterly different worlds” (*Practice* 15). These frontiers between civilization and wildness are ubiquitous. “It has always been part of basic human experience to live in a culture of wilderness,” remarks Snyder. “There has been no wilderness without some kind of human presence for several hundred thousand years” (7).

William Cronon emphasizes a related point in “The Trouble with Wilderness,” where he points out how “everything we know about environmental history suggests that people have been manipulating the natural world on various scales for as long as we have a record of their passing” (83). In “The Rediscovery of Turtle Island,” Snyder makes a similar observation: “Hominids have obviously had some effect on the natural world, going back for half a million or more years”; he cites the deliberate use of fire as an example. “Almost any apparently untouched natural environment has in fact experienced some tiny degree of human impact” (*Place* 239-240). Likewise, however, any apparently civilized environment retains some degree of wildness. Consider the following lines from “Night Herons,” another early poem in Snyder’s *Turtle Island*:

Night herons nest in the cypress
by the San Francisco
stationary boilers
with the high smoke stack
at the edge of the waters. (35)

and:

the dog knows no laws and is strictly,

illegal. His neck arches and ears prick out
to catch mice in the tundra.

a black high school boy
drinking coffee at a fake green stand
tries to be friends with the dog,
and it works. (36)

In each case, the city of San Francisco is represented to the reader with an eye for the wild which is to be experienced within it. Wildness is not restricted to those areas designated as 'wilderness areas' or 'wildlife preserves'. “Shifting scales, it is everywhere: ineradicable populations of fungi, moss, mold, yeasts, and such that surround and inhabit us. Deer mice on the back porch, deer bounding across the freeway, pigeons in the park, spiders in the corners,” Snyder says. “Exquisite complex beings in their energy webs inhabiting the fertile corners of the urban world in accord with the rules of wild systems, the visible hardy stalks and stems of vacant lots and railroads, the persistent raccoon squads, bacteria in the loam and in our yogurt” (*Practice* 15). The termites in our walls, elusive as they may be (and troublesome, especially in relation to our civilization's distaste for small, crawling critters), are a wild presence in our lives.

Cronon reminds us of “the wildness in our own backyards, of the nature that is all around us if only we have eyes to see it” (86). Must we look for the wild to find it? As Snyder said, if we are not careful we might not see the wild. In the title of one of his books (*The Practice of the Wild*) he suggests wildness is something that can be *practiced*: we can cultivate an *openness* to it. Conversely, however, one of the determining aspects of many experiences of the wild is the way which these experiences impress themselves upon us. “The state of mind that today most defines wilderness is *wonder*,” Cronon says. “The striking power of the wild is that wonder in the face of it requires no act of will, but forces itself upon us” (88). Likewise, David Strong says wilderness “is not only a place you go. Wilderness is what happens to you.

Shivered, sweated . . .” (quoted in Klaver 124).

Our experience of the wildness of our own bodies often possesses this character. “Our bodies are wild,” Snyder remarks. “The involuntary snap of the head at a sudden noise or movement, the sudden sense of dizziness when looking over a cliff, and even the beating of the heart and passage of the breath betray the wildness of our mammalian bodies (*Practice* 17). The feeling of vertigo, the involuntary duck or jerk when something flits past our eye in a certain way, the experience we sometimes have when our heartbeat or breathing seems to swell up within us, ineradicable—all these experiences of wildness seem to grab us, whether we are looking for them or not.

These experiences, however, do not exhaust our possibilities for contact with the wild. For Snyder, “A person with a clear heart and open mind can experience the wilderness anywhere on earth. It is a quality of one's own consciousness. The planet is a wild place and always will be” (Gary Snyder, quoted in *New York Times*, “Week in Review,” Sept. 18, 1994, 6.). To encounter the wild anywhere requires a certain receptivity—eyes to see it, as Cronon says, or a clear heart and open mind, in the words of Snyder. “An acute sensitivity to sense-experience with its unremitting attention to the specificities of other bodies, be they human, animal, spatial, or elemental,” says Klaver, “is one mode of opening up the here and now of everyday life into more unpredictable, wilder, layers of experience” (123). If we cultivate or practice this sensitivity, we are able to see the wild in ways and places we formerly did not see:

Such a receptivity for sense-experience creates a familiarity with the intricacies of the other or the particularities of the places we inhabit—in the face of which any static conceptualization would be undermined—so as to make room for an awareness of a never-conclusive set of performative possibilities of the other, a richness of performative behavior

that manifests itself implicitly through complex patterns of adaptive and generative activities. (Klaver 124)

Wildness is all around us. “Wildness pervades us if we are open to it and participate in it. It is implicit in us and we in it,” Klaver says (124). In pregnancy, for example, our bodies — suddenly very mammalian — are gripped by the wild in an overwhelming way; our entrance into this world, despite often being framed by the carefully regulated context of the hospital, is fraught with wildness. Snyder speaks of mites in your seats and spiders under your chair; the air is filled with billions of germs (“Freewheeling” par. 33). The food we place in our mouths offers us a chance to encounter wildness. In agriculture, “the source of fertility ultimately is the 'wild',” he observes. “It has been said that 'good soil is good because of the wildness in it’” (*Practice* 97). The houses in which we live also speak to us of wildness. “The deep woods turn, turn, and turn again. The ancient forests of the West are still around us. All the houses of San Francisco, Eureka, Corvallis, Portland, Seattle, Longview, are built with those old bodies,” Snyder says. “We live out our daily lives in the shelter of ancient trees” (144). Take this poem, given at the end of a talk entitled “Coming into the Watershed,” in which Snyder portrays the confluence of wildness and civilization:

California is gold-tan grasses, silver-gray
tule fog,
olive-green redwood, blue-gray chaparral,
silver-hue serpentine hills.
Blinding white granite,
blue-black rock sea cliffs.
—Blue summer sky, chestnut brown slough
water,
steep purple city streets—hot cream towns.
Many colors of the land, many colors of the
skin. (*Place* 235)

From this perspective, it is not difficult to see how the wild may be present in places of civilization while there yet remains a dichotomy between the two. Civilization is not

opposed to wildness; on the contrary, civilization is permeated with wildness. However, civilization reifies the wild and blinds us to its presence. In an essay entitled “Blue Mountains Constantly Walking,” Snyder offers another picture of this alienation. “People from the high civilizations in particular have elaborate notions of separateness and difference and dozens of ways to declare themselves 'out of nature,’” he says; he adds in parenthesis, “One could imagine the phylum Chordata declaring, 'We are a qualitative leap in evolution representing something entirely transcendent entering what has hitherto been merely biology’” (114). This humorous aside gives us insight into the character of the civilized/wild dichotomy: it is self-created. “Our immediate business, and our quarrel, is with ourselves,” he says in “Survival and Sacrament.” “We are ignorant of our own nature and confused about what it means to be a human being” (189-190). Since before entering college, “the question of these contradictions of living in and supposedly being a member of a society that was destroying its own ground” had become important to Snyder (*Real* 94). These contradictions arise when civilization—and here we might think of language (particularly language which is given technical determination), the pressures of civilized life, certain cultural ideas and practices, etc.—teaches us to look for, see, and be tolerant only of certain forms and modes of life. In this sense, the need for receptivity is generalized to a communal or cultural level, and Snyder can say that the city is not wild in the sense that it is a place where the wild is not encountered.

Nevertheless, even civilized life can be a place of frontier, a “burning edge” at which we can gain access to the wild in an experiential way. For Cronon, wildness can be found “in the seemingly tame fields and woodlots of Massachusetts, in the cracks of a Manhattan sidewalk, even in the cells of our

own bodies” (89). For Klaver, “Wild is what travels through our skin, through our borders. Clouds roaming the sky, worms slowly inching through heavy earth, way under any property lines” (129). Even in civilized life, these points of contact are available to us. “Beyond all this studying and managing and calculating, there's another level to knowing nature,” Snyder says. “We can go about learning the names of things and doing inventories of trees, bushes, and flowers, but nature as it flits by is not usually seen in a clear light. Our actual experience of many birds and much wildlife is chancy and quick. Wildlife is often simply a call, a cough in the dark, a shadow in the shrubs. You can watch a cougar on a wildlife video for hours, but the real cougar shows herself but once or twice in a lifetime. One must be tuned to hints and nuances” (*Place* 262). This way of knowing the wild is not like knowing the laws of physics or the classification schemes of zoology. Rather, it reflects knowledge of the wild that is fleeting and elusive, but nevertheless impressive.

The second way the wild is accessible to us, according to Snyder, is in the linguistic form proper to its presentation: poetry. He has published more than a dozen volumes of poetry and half as many of prose. Among these, *Turtle Island* is in one respect an aberrational work, for in it poetry and prose appear juxtaposed alongside each other. For this reason, *Turtle Island* is a particularly fitting text with which to explore the relationships between poetry and prose, insofar as they regard the accessibility of the wild.

Snyder warns, as we saw above, that one should not talk and write *about* the wild too much, and that is reflected in much of his prose writing—he “talks around” and hints at wildness, while generally constraining himself to the specification of what wildness is *not*. Interestingly, he observes that most attempts at defining the word 'wild'—for example,

those found in dictionaries—consist of pointing out (sometimes at great length) what 'wild' is not, but rarely offer a positive account of the wild (The Wilderness Act of 1964 defines wilderness as “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain”; we have seen the problematic character of that attempt at definition).

“The question,” according to Klaver, “is how do we preserve this kind of wildness, or, for that matter, retrieve otherness from its isolation within a merely symbolic status?” (123). For Snyder, poetry — while still a form of linguistic expression — is permitted a much more direct relationship with the wild than is prose. Most significantly, poetry offers the possibility of expressing the wild without trapping it in the domestication of the symbolic. For Snyder, the role of poetry is explicitly different from the role of prose. “Poetry is not a program,” he says, referring implicitly to his political prose, like that found at the end of *Turtle Island*. “That's basically a prose job” (“Freewheeling” par. 27). “The poet can make it on his own voice and mother tongue, while steering a course between crystal clouds of utterly incommunicable non-verbal states—and the gleaming daggers and glittering nets of language,” he says (*Earth* 118). Rather than speaking *about* the wild in the way prose does, poetry is able to 'do' wildness: poetry is able to inhabit and appropriate language so that the form of the expression is commensurate with the content of wildness. Thus Snyder can say, “I try to hold both history and wildness in my mind, that my poems may approach the true measure of things and stand against the unbalance and ignorance of our time” (quoted in *Ensign* par. 1). But how is this possible? What is it about poetry that grants it this potential that prose has not?

In part, the special potential of poetry has to do with its scope and endurance. “Of all the streams of civilization with roots in the

paleolithic, poetry is one of the few that can realistically claim an unchanged function and relevance which will outlast most of the activities that surround us today,” he says (118). He continues, “Poetry, it should not have to be said, is not writing or books. Non-literate cultures with their traditional training methods of hearing and reciting, carry thousands of poems —death, war, love, dream, work, and spirit-power songs — through time” (124). Poetry is able to render the wild linguistically accessible because, as a form of linguistic expression, it is itself (or can be) “wild” in some way.

Words and sentences have a materiality, whether in scratches on the page or vibrations in the air. At the same time, words are evoked by material. “Writing is always responding,” Klaver says. “Responding to words, scratches, thoughts, events, the rain, the trees. Taking up what is implicit. Implicit in texts, words, things, gestures, scents” (117). We must recognize here that language is not *simply* conceptual. It is also *affective*; it is also *biological*. More so than other forms of linguistic expression, poetry depends upon and has often insisted upon these non-conceptual elements of language — the timbre of the voice, its pitch and loudness; the rhythms of the body; the ebbing and surging of prosody; the affective power of metaphor. These elements, which poetry takes up explicitly, correspond to the affective and biological patterns of our lives, and thereby signify an opening of possibilities. Poetry has for this reason been associated with the expression of those aspects of life which are otherwise inexpressible, or expressible only in cumbersome, clumsy, and therefore largely inappropriate ways.

In the poem “Riprap,” Snyder takes up in poetic form the question of his poetry. Riprap, we are told, is “a cobble of stone laid on steep slick rock to make a trail for horses in the mountains” (*Nature* 4). He wants his poems to perform, in his words, “the work of seeing the

world without any prism of language, and bring that seeing into language” (quoted in Selby par. 31). The poem opens:

Lay down these words
Before your mind like rocks.
 placed solid, by hands
In choice of place, set
Before the body of the mind
 in space and time:
Solidity of bark, leaf, or wall
 riprap of things (21)

“Riprap” is the concluding poem of a collection by the same name; “these words” refer to Snyder's poetry. In the written poem, poetry becomes a material thing, with the solidity of rock, bark, and the like. He asks that his poems not be thought as abstract relationships between concepts, but as concrete relationships between the objects of experience (the poem continues, “The worlds like an endless / four-dimensional / Game of Go” (21)). Thus Tim Dean says, “This materializing of language — of which “Riprap” is Snyder's best early example — represents the effort to link poetry to the body, to work, and thus to what is taken as the immediacy of the real” (par. 9).

Just as riprap is laid over a slick rock, Snyder's poetry, by virtue of its possibilities as poetry, gives traction to the expression of that which would otherwise be inaccessible to language—the wild. “The true poem,” Snyder suggests, “is walking that edge between what can be said and that which cannot be said” (*Real* 21). In the poem “Coyote Valley Spring,” he writes:

Cubs
tumble in the damp leaves
Deer, bear, squirrel.
fresh winds scour the
spring stars.
rocks crumble
deep mud hardens
under heavy hills.

shifting things
birds, weeds,
slip through the air
through eyes and ears,

Coyote valley. (*Turtle Island* 15)

The dichotomy projected here between “civilized” and “wild” — which reflects both the alienation expressed in “The Call of the Wild” and the contradictions occupying much of Snyder's thought and work — is a *traversable* dichotomy. The wild is not inaccessible to us; rather, it can be encountered in “frontier” moments where civilization and wildness meet, and, as I have been arguing in this paper, through articulations of poetry that hang by a thread from the edge of the expressible.

But we are still left with Snyder's central question: “Where do we start to resolve the dichotomy of the civilized and the wild?” (*Practice* 16). The experiential and poetic points of contact reflected in Snyder's poetry are crucial to addressing this question, but an inquiry into the manner in which Snyder envisions our capacity to address this dichotomy, and the way in which he considers his own work a part of this project, will require much further exploration and thought.

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