

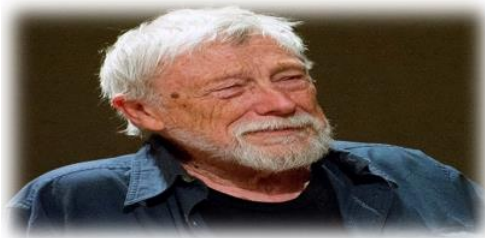
JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Book Notes #156

September 2023

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
Dr. Andrew Roth

Gary Snyder: *Beyond the "Beats"*



At the outset of last week's **Book Note** on Dana Gioia and assorted other *Notes* and topics about the type of poetry I find most satisfying I said something to the effect that I'd keep it short.

And, as usual, I failed miserably.

This week I will keep it short and let the poet do the talking.

Several readers asked me to go a bit further in explaining my poetics (how pretentious that sounds!) and to share a poet or two who make us more

present-to-the-present. Among contemporary and modern poets, there are far more than two – Gary Snyder, Seamus Heaney, Mary Oliver, Wallace Stevens, and Ezra Pound (when he is not intentionally being obscurantist) immediately spring to mind.

Going further back, well, there are many. In looking over previous ***Book Notes*** I discovered I'd covered much of this ground over three years ago in ***Book Note #17***: "Gleanings from Contemporary Poetry," which can be found [here](#).

Rather than simply reprint that ***Book Note*** as a "*Classic*," I thought it better to quote from it and to focus on the poetry of Gary Snyder.

First, some observations on poetics, or poetic theory. Regarding the kind of poetry I most enjoy in that early ***Book Note***, I commented:

It is hardly an original observation, but this, by which I mean the past 50-60 years, could arguably be called the "golden age" of American poetry. Certainly, quantity is not an issue. The internet is awash with versifiers, some worth the effort to find; others best left in their quiet anonymity.

The best boss I ever had was my first boss. John Rouch chaired the Gannon English Department when I joined it in 1970. As we started WERG, the Gannon Radio station (there was no Communications Department in those days) I had a program featuring jazz and what was then known as underground rock music interlaced with book and movie reviews. One Saturday I lambasted some long-forgotten film, but I've never forgotten John's advice.

He said to me, "If it's that bad, then why don't we let it die its own quiet Death? Find something to praise"... I'll spare you one of my favorite rants against contemporary poets so neurasthenic, so solipsistic, so agonizingly into themselves that they approach a mute scream of "*ME ME ME ME...*"

My taste runs to the limpid line so clear, so precisely apt that it can only be what it is. It not only shares with you a perception, but it recreates that perception with such clarity that you become one with it seeing what the poet sees.

It eschews (a terrible but apt word) merely *telling* and obscurity.

It celebrates *seeing* and showing.

It brings you into itself. It shares with you the aesthetic experience.

It shares the *epiphany*. [1]

Epiphany: of course, it refers to the Feast of Epiphany, the Christian festival “commemorating the manifestation of Christ to the gentiles in the persons of the Magi,” but I am using the word in the third definition Dictionary.com provides:

a sudden, intuitive perception of or insight into the reality or essential meaning of something, usually initiated by some simple, homely, or commonplace occurrence or experience” ... “a literary work or section of a work presenting, usually symbolically, such a moment of revelation or insight. [2]

An *epiphany*, in the sense I am using the word, is the moment one becomes aware of the *present*, the moment one becomes one with the *present*, and so becoming intuit (not the meaning, not the logical, discursive meaning of the thing, although that is part of the perception), but the wholeness, the *ness-ness*, if you will, of the object, the experience, being *seen*.

This can become hopelessly tangled and snarled – “the treacherous world of words.”

Cutting through the snarl, it is the moment you “*get it*.” whatever *it* might be.

Gary Snyder is someone who *gets it*.

As Alan Williamson said in ***American Poetry since 1960: Some Critical Perspectives***, Snyder’s work “suggests a process of meditation or spiritual exercise, clearing the path from temporal life to the moment of Enlightenment—the sudden dropping-away of the phenomenal world in the contemplation of the infinite and eternal, All and Nothingness.” [3]

Or, in a word, an *epiphany*.

As in “A Dent in the Bucket”:

Hammering a dent out of a bucket
a woodpecker
answers from the woods. [4]

Who is Gary Snyder?

A deceptively simple question with a complex answer. At 93, living on his 100 backcountry acres in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, one is tempted to say that Gary Snyder is the wise old man of the mountains.

And he is.

At first, for this **Book Note**, I was tempted to use as a subtitle “The Last of the Beats” because Snyder has outlived and, one might say outgrown, all of his contemporaries. He was a member of the group of writers centered in San Francisco in the early and mid-1950s seeking a counterculture revolution in American literature. He read his poem “A Berry Feast” at the famous Six Gallery poetry reading in San Francisco in October 1955 during which Allen Ginsberg first read “Howl” and launched a revolution. In addition to Ginsberg, Snyder was a part of the group that included Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gregory Corso, Jack Kerouac, and others. Kerouac, so taken with Snyder’s roughhewn, backcountry persona leavened with a deep knowledge of Buddhist religious practice, modeled the central character in his novel **The Dharma Bums**, Japhy Ryder, after him.

In fact, based on that novel, Snyder was the original of every counterculture backpacker seeking enlightenment by retreating to the woods in search of transcendence. Long before there was a **Whole Earth Catalog**, Snyder had decamped for the mountains.

Most people think the counterculture was created by Baby Boomers in the 1960s.

Most people are wrong.

The counterculture was created by the generation born in the 1930s, chief of whom were Ken Kesey, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, innumerable jazz artists, and Gary Snyder. I’m not sure Snyder would appreciate the next remark, but just about every “flower child” you ever met wanted to be Gary Snyder whether they had ever heard of him or not.

But none of the above does Snyder justice. [5]

A Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Snyder was born in San Francisco in May, 1930. He was raised in working-class, rural Washington state and later Portland, Oregon. His knowledge of both the natural world and the indigenous people come from that background. Confined to home for a time after a childhood injury, supplied with books by his parents, he became a lifetime voracious reader.

He attended Reed College and studied anthropology, becoming deeply interested in Native American folklore. At the same time, he also developed an affinity for Buddhism – Zen Buddhism in particular. The melding of his twin curiosities created a desire in him to understand myth and a sacred appreciation for nature.

In the late-1940s, he worked as a seaman. Later, he worked as a fire lookout; later still, after his San Francisco experience, he left for Japan where he was a student at the Shokoku-ji temple in Kyoto. He became a Buddhist and a formal student of Zen Buddhism. Later still, he became an espouser of the oneness of all being. To call him a dedicated, environmentalist does not do him justice. Snyder is a steward of mother earth and *turtle island*, as the indigenous people call planet earth. He has been called “the poet of deep ecology.”

So, Snyder was one of those who, like Jack Gilbert, took it all the way. No dilettante, he trained himself to be deeply ***present-to-the-present***. That led him to his deep appreciation of the natural world as a window into the nature of being.

That is getting awfully close to burying Snyder in after-the-fact metaphysical analysis. To avoid that, I’ll simply say that Snyder is the ultimate phenomenologist – he sees what there is to see. He then lets it speak for itself.

Curiously, his most Zen-like poems are among his earliest before he went to Japan. Although not published until 1959, his ***Riprap, & Cold Mountain Poems*** almost perfectly illustrate what I mean when I say a great poet enables us to see what they see and help us to be more ***present-to-the-present***.

Since I have said many times that explication can kill a poem (any work of art, really), I’m going to sign off and let you sample a brief selection of several of Snyder’s poems:

Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout

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

I cannot remember things I once read
A few friends, but they are in cities.
Drinking cold snow-water from a tin cup
Looking down for miles

Through high still air. [6]

from Piute Creek

...A clear, attentive mind
Has no meaning but that
Which is truly seen. [7]

Thin Ice

Walking in February
A warm day after a long freeze
On an old logging road
Below Sumas Mountain
Cut a walking stick of alder,
Looked down through clouds
On wet fields of the Nooksack –
And stepped on the ice
Of a frozen pool across the road.
It creaked
The white air under
Sprang away, long cracks
Shot out in the black,
My cleated mountain boots
Slipped on the hard slick
– like thin ice – the sudden
Feel of an old phrase made real –
Instant of frozen leaf,
Icewater, and staff in hand.
“Like walking on thin ice –”
I yelled back to a friend,
It broke and I dropped
Eight inches in [8]

Kyoto: March

A few light flakes of snow
Fall in the feeble sun;
Birds sing in the cold,
A warbler by the wall. The plum
Buds tight and chill soon bloom.

The moon begins first
Fourth, a faint slice west
At nightfall. Jupiter half-way
High at the end of night-
Meditation. The dove cry
Twangs like a bow.
At dawn Mt. Hiei dusted white
On top; in the clear air
Folds of all the gullied green
Hills around the town are sharp,
Breath stings. Beneath the roofs
Of frosty houses
Lovers part, from tangle warm
Of gentle bodies under quilt
And crack the icy water to the face
And wake and feed the children
And grandchildren that they love. [9]

Riprap

(Riprap: a cobble of stones laid on steep slick rock to make a trail for horses in the mountains).

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:
Cobble of milky way,
 straying planets,
These poems, people,
 lost ponies with
Dragging saddles—
 and rocky sure-foot trails.
The worlds like an endless
 four-dimensional
Game of *Go*.
 ants and pebbles
In the thin loam, each rock a word
 a creek-washed stone
Granite: ingrained
 with torment of fire and weight

Crystal and sediment linked hot
all change, in thoughts,
As well as things. [10]

For the Children

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

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

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

stay together
learn the flowers
go light [11]

As For Poets

As for poets
The Earth Poets
Who write small poems,
Need help from no man.
The Air Poets
Play out the swiftest gales
And sometimes loll in the eddies.
Poem after poem,
Curling back on the same thrust.

At fifty below
Fuel oil won't flow

And propane stays in the tank.
Fire Poets
Burn at absolute zero
Fossil love pumped backup

The first
Water Poet
Stayed down six years.
He was covered with seaweed.
The life in his poem
Left millions of tiny
Different tracks
Criss-crossing through the mud.

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.

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. [12]

That last stanza's last four lines are the essence of being **present-to-the-present** – “seen from all sides,/Everywhere,/At once.

Because quoting snippets of Snyder's poems do neither him nor the poems justice, I have taken the liberty to quote them in their wholeness. Better, however, would be to read wide and deeply in Snyder's work, in particular to grasp his deep sensitivity to the environment, to Mother Earth, to Turtle Island. You can find his work at the usual places. A good place to start is **Riprap, & Cold Mountain Poems, Turtle Island, or The Mountains and Waters Sutra**. Better, however, because it includes all of his published books of poetry and many previously unpublished poems is **Snyder: Collected Poems** in the Library of America edition. It is available from the Library of America [here](#).



-- Andrew Roth, Ph.D.
Scholar-in-Residence
The Jefferson Educational Society
roth@jeserie.org

This content is copyrighted by the Jefferson 2022.

Photo Credits

"Gary Snyder (13967272650).jpg" at Wikimedia Commons available at [File:Gary Snyder \(13967272650\).jpg - Wikimedia Commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gary_Snyder_(13967272650).jpg) accessed August 28, 2023.

"Gary Snyder as a Young Man from the cover of 'Rip Rap, & Cold Mountain Poems'" [This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND](#)

End Notes

1. Roth, Andrew. "Book Note #17: Gleanings from Contemporary Poetry" at **Book Notes Jefferson Educational Society** available at [Andy Book Notes--Gleanings.pdf \(jeserie.org\)](#) accessed August 28, 2023.
2. "Epiphany" in [Dictionary.com](#) available at [Epiphany Definition & Meaning | Dictionary.com](#) accessed August 28, 2023.
3. Quoted in "Gary Snyder" at **The Poetry Foundation** available at [Gary Snyder | Poetry Foundation](#) accessed August 29, 2023.
4. Snyder, Gary. "A Dent in the Bucket" at **Poeticous** available at [A Dent in a Bucket, by Gary Snyder | Poeticous: poems, essays, and short stories](#) accessed August 29, 2023.
5. You can find basic biographical material about Gary Snyder at all the usual places beginning with "Gary Snyder" at **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia** available at [Gary Snyder - Wikipedia](#); and "Gary Snyder" at The Poetry Foundation available at [Gary Snyder | Poetry Foundation](#); but the best biographical essay I have found is Dana Goodyear's "Zen Master: Gary Snyder and the art of life" in **The New Yorker** (October 13, 2008) available at [Zen Master | The New Yorker](#) all of the above accessed August 29, 2023.
6. Snyder, Gary. "Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout" in **Riprap, & Cold Mountain Poems** (San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1959), p.1.
7. Ibid., "from Piute Creek", p.7.
8. Ibid., "Thin Ice", p. 14.
9. Ibid., "Kyoto: March", p. 20.
10. Ibid., "Riprap", p. 30.
11. Snyder, Gary. "For the Children" in **Turtle Island** (New York: A New Directions Book, 1974), p. 86.
12. Ibid., "As For Poets", p. 87.

[Subscribe to JES Publications Mailing List!](#)

[Support JES | Donate](#)

In Case You Missed It

[Jefferson Report | Transatlantic Idea-Sharing Can Lead to Just Economic Future](#) written by JES Vice President **Ben Speggen**

[The Wider World | Prigozhin May Be Dead, but Wagner Lives On](#) written by President of DC Analytics **Diane Chido**

[Truth in Love | Malignant Normality: White Men in Leadership Refuse to Change](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Parris J. Baker**

[Probing Education | Series Summary and Conclusions \(Part Two\)](#) written by Director of the Brock Institute for Mega Issues Education **Rev. Charles Brock**

[Be Well | Champing at the Bit to Halt Charley Horse](#) written by health and wellness expert **Debbie DeAngelo**

[Book Notes #155 | Dana Gioia: Poet with an MBA](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Andrew Roth**

[GE's Erie Works: Some Kids Seemed 'Lucky'](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. David Frew**

JES Mission: The Jefferson was founded to stimulate community progress through education, research, and publications. Its mission also includes a commitment to operate in a nonpartisan, nondenominational manner without a political or philosophical bias. As such, the Jefferson intends to follow the examined truth wherever it leads and is neither liberal nor conservative, Democratic nor Republican in philosophy or action. Our writers' work reflects their own views.

