

*Janja Ciglar—Žanić*

### **Gary Snyder's Arcadian Revolutionism**

Whatever else the Beat rebellion contributed to the American cultural and social scene of the 1950 s, it certainly provided that scene with a great deal of colour and controversy. Both the idea and the practice of a radically nonconformist behaviour, soon to be labeled Beat, seemed to be closely connected with the Beat poets. Characteristically enough, it was a poet and a novelist (Jack Kerouac) who provided this rebellious American youth with a name. Those who provided it with attitudes, arguments for self-justification, sometimes even patterns of behaviour, were also poets: Allan Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gregory Corso, Michael McClure, Philip Whalen, Gary Snyder. Unorganized and divergent from the start, the movement soon spread to include certain much less desirable varieties of adherents: nonproductive pseudoartists, lonely eccentrics, disoriented young people on their way to drug-addiction and juvenile delinquency. It was not too difficult for the ever-curious and not overly sympathetic press to seize upon these less commendable aspects of the Beat movement, and thus to turn the Beat rebels into the most notorious Bohemian group America has produced in recent times.

Literary critics, when they tried to assess the poetic achievement of the Beat Generation, may have been influenced by the extent and the heightened tone of the popular controversy or by some other considerations. However this may be, most of them quite strongly took sides for or against the Beats and their literary production. While those of the disapproving side found the Beat writing more or less an inarticulate outcry of rebels without a cause, and denied it practically every relevance and literary value, the apologists conferred on these noisy young poets a posture of prophets and heralds of a new culture.

Some of the questions raised in connection with the Beat Generation and its writing have been fully and extensively answered. Others could still bear reconsideration. The position of the Beat poets within the American literary tradition as well as the true meaning of the Beat stance in the contemporary American social context undoubtedly belong to the latter group. Allen Ginsberg's stormy and overflowing poetic gesture, Whitmanesque by inspiration ("It occurs to me that I am America / I am talking to myself again"), is commonly considered most representatively Beat. But Gary Snyder's cooler, more sober variant of the Beat protest may prove a shorter way towards the clarification of certain issues.

After years of logging and mountaineering in the Sierras, Gary Snyder today, in his late forties, lives in a wood-house in a forest, obviously still faithful to his belief in the importance of man's comradeship with wild landscape. This biographical detail would in itself not amount to much if it did not so conspicuously parallel the attitudes and beliefs which Snyder's poetry expresses.

While the main impulse behind European literature is to be ultimately self-cultivating and objective, says Stephen Spender, the main impulse behind American literature is to be ultimately self-realizing and subjective. That, he believes, may be the reason why the personal life of American writers seems so much more relevant to understanding their works than does that of European ones.<sup>1</sup>

The feeling that they must be unremittingly "themselves" in order to "survive" in their writing, the conviction that their creative consciousness is at its most aware when submitted to tests of their own being, belong most typically to American literary experience. Hemingway constantly tested his own courage by going to war fronts and on big-game hunting expeditions. Fitzgerald's frenzied life-style was his own way of testing the meaning and value of the American dream and the American guilt. Thoreau retired to Walden in order to discover the principles of his "natural" ethics. The quest for the true meaning of the tradition and the past led Pound and Eliot, among others, into European self-exile. This biographical-poetic parallelism becomes relevant for the discussion about Snyder's poetry in yet another way, about which there will be more mention later on. At the moment let it suffice to point out how much the close correspondence between Snyder's lifestyle and his poetic consciousness, the iden-

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Spender, *Love-Hate Relations: English and American Sensibilities*, (New York: Random House, 1974), pp. 20-31.

tification of life and poetic experience, prove this student of Buddhism — for all his eastward glance — a heir of American literary tradition.

Unlike Pound and Eliot, however, Gary Snyder holds “the most archaic values on earth. They go back to the late Paleolithic; the fertility of the soil, the magic of animals, the power-vision in solitude, the terrifying initiation and re-birth, the love and ecstasy of the dance, the common work of the tribe”.<sup>2</sup> His fundamental belief is in the sacred ecology of all life on earth, in which man plays a small but important part. The recognition of the fact, the re-recovery of the knowledge of connection and responsibility on man’s part, the reawakening to the consciousness of the universal “interbirth”<sup>3</sup>, which primitive societies still possess, is in Snyder’s view the only solution for the spritual and physical malaise of the doomed members of these “new industrial-age dark ages”.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the way for Snyder, a new Thoreau retreating to Walden, leads into the wild landscape, where everything still plays its natural and necessary part in that perfect ecology (The Deer come for salt, not affection),<sup>5</sup> where “empirically observable interconnectedness of nature reveals itself as but a corner of the vast ‘jewelled net’ which moves from without to within.”<sup>6</sup>

It is the clean, exact and factual notation of this universal interconnectedness that makes up Snyder’s poetry, lending it that non-metaphoric, non-confessional, non-human characteristic frequently mentioned in connection with his poems. “Six-Month Song in the Foothills” is a good example:

In the cold shed sharpening saws.  
a swallows’ nest hangs by the door  
setting rakers in sunlight  
falling from meadow through doorframe  
swallows flit under the eaves.

Grinding the falling axe  
sharp for the summer  
a swallow shooting out over.  
over the river, snow on low hills  
sharpening wedges for splitting.

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<sup>2</sup> Gary Snyder, a statement for the Paterson Society in 1961, *Six San Francisco Poets*, by David Kherdian (Fresno: The Giligia Press, 1969), p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> Gary Snyder, *Earth House Hold* (New York: New Direction Books, 1969), p. 129.

<sup>4</sup> *Idem*, p. 35.

<sup>5</sup> *Ib.*, p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> *Ib.*, p. 129.

Beyond the low hills, white mountains  
and now snow is melting, sharpening tools;  
pack horses grazing new grass  
bright axes- and swallows  
fly into my shed.

The first thing that draws our attention is Snyder's dry, paratactical, for the most part merely generical presentation of the physical world, Snyder's way of saying that it is not words or human feelings but things that are inextricably related to one another, truly and significantly "interborn".

Another closely related element of Snyder's poetic structure, expressive of his belief in the unity of "divine ecology", is the conspicuous absence of all explicit references to himself as subject, or to himself as human being in any of his more strictly human capacities. Snyder's dangling participles almost annihilate the more traditional pattern of a prominent, sensitive human actor reflecting on the landscape, and tend instead to blend actor and action, man and nature into a single whole.

But while primitive man naturally perceives this vast web of interrelationship of which he is a part, thus forming the bridge between connection and responsibility (the responsibility for nature as the virtual extension of his own body), for civilized man, Snyder affirms, the way of relearning both the apprehension of oneness and the consequent responsibility is stepping back into the wild landscape outwardly, into the "back contry" of the mind, the unconscious, inwardly. "Both of these meet, one step even further on, as *one*".<sup>7</sup> And Snyder as both his lifestyle and his poetry show, is ready to lead the way. In his statement about the function of poetry he says: "There are two ways to relate to others and society. One is to tell society what you think is wrong, what you think is right; and the other is to *do* what you think is right, and both of these ways help."<sup>8</sup>

As it becomes clear from the facts of his extra-literary career, Snyder has chosen the second way.

It is at this point that the previously mentioned correspondence between Snyder's poetic and life creed become relevant again. What is obvious and important about Snyder's philosophical perspective is that it represents, to paraphrase his own paraphrase, a passage to more than poetry. In other words it is not only a poetic creed, but a program for social

<sup>7</sup> *Ib.*, p. 122.

<sup>8</sup> Snyder, Berkeley poetry conference of July, 1965, *Six San Francisco Poets*, by D. Kherdian, p. 25.

reform as well. The fact, in view of Snyder's manifest invitation to the reforestation of the pastoral, is worth thinking about.

Ecological-anthropological nomenclature notwithstanding, Snyder's call for return clearly reveals the ancient and familiar pattern of Occidental thought and poetry: the backward flight of the discontented member of a highly organized society from evils brought about by arbitrary procedures of social organization and deadening laws of abstract rational intellect, that fundamentally nostalgic backward glance which Harry Levin succinctly sums up under the term of the Golden Age retrospect.<sup>9</sup>

The archetypal image of the once happy harmony of man and nature — whether as Arcadia or as Paradise — which since Virgil's *Eclogues* has undergone innumerable transmutations, obviously still exerts a fascination for Western imagination. Although the sacred virginity of wild landscape represents one of the oldest American experiences and the desecration of the virgin land is the root of the typically American guilt complex, Snyder's invitation to return also belongs to that older and larger tradition. He himself is quite aware of his Golden Age-dream lineage as one of his perceptive and intelligent flashes of insight in *Earth House Hold* proves:

The memories of a Golden Age — the Garden of Eden — the Age of the Yellow Ancestor — were genuine expressions of civilization and its discontents. Harking back to societies where women and men were more free with each other; where there was more singing and dancing; where there were no serfs and priests and kings.

Projected into future time in Christian culture, this dream of the Millenium became the soil of many heresies. It is a dream handed down right to our own time — of ecological balance, classless society, social and economic freedom.<sup>10</sup>

The continuation of this passage is very interesting for the present line of discussion, but before completing the quotation it might be useful to recall briefly a few basic structural features of the traditional pastoral, as it has come down to our times.

The Age-old pattern of retreat shows a fascinatingly rich and complex history. One can choose to trace it as either a pattern in continuity or a pattern in transmutation. There is quite a distinct pattern in continuity due to the fact that the idea is so deeply rooted in the Western mind, from where it shows a capacity for endless reincarnation.

<sup>9</sup> Harry Levin, *The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> Snyder, *Earth House Hold*, p. 109.

The roots of its metamorphic nature are at least twofold: traditionally an image of ideal landscape and ideal human condition, *Wunschraum* and *Wunschzeit*,<sup>11</sup> the pastoral vision meets with the common difficulty of adequate representation of an abstract ideal. The difficulty of picturing perfect goodness and perfect beauty (paradises are notoriously less successful poetically than hells) is, then, transcended in either of the two ways: by consistent employment of the negative formula (Neo-Platonic deity comes to mind) or by the reversion of the negative aspects of the thinker's concrete human and natural environment into their positive counterparts. Another closely related reason for the continuous metamorphosis of the ideal Arcadia is that since Virgil, the true creator of Arcadia as we know it — an imaginary realm of perfect bliss — these ideal landscapes were never entirely conjured up for their own sake; there is always an implicit cross-reference and frequently an implicit allusion to the contemporary age, in short, it is already in Virgil's hands that Theocritus' Sicilian landscape turned into a paradigm of evaluative experience, the inverted mirror set against the society, so that one may, in Snyder's words "approach the true measure of things and stand against the unbalance and ignorance"<sup>12</sup> of one's age. As the problems and pressures changed, so the Arcadian visions — their inverted ideal mirrors — took on different shapes. So, when Snyder's pastoral landscape resounds with noise of cars on "the six-lane highways", when against it one encounters war-plane tracks in "the vertical blue", "tin cans and garbage and drooping electric wires everywhere", and the acute fear of the "white blossoming smoke of bomb", the sanctity and the perfect harmony of his Sierra landscapes with their "snowmelt rock and air and whitebark pine" and his Pacific sand beaches washed by salty water and strewn by mussel shells still prove these to be the descendants of the ancient Arcadia — the landscape of the mind.

There is, however, one thing which clearly distinguishes Snyder from the poets of the traditional Arcadias, and here seems to be the proper place to complete that already partly quoted passage where Snyder speaks about the Golden Age dream:

It is actually one of the possible futures open to us. To those who stubbornly argue 'it's against human nature' we can only

<sup>11</sup> Bruno Snell, *Entdeckung des Geistes* (Hamburg: Classen Verlag, 1955), p. 384.

<sup>12</sup> Snyder, a statement for the Paterson Society in 1961, *Six San Francisco Poets*, by D. Kherdian, p. 26.

patiently reply that you must know your own nature before you can say this. Those who have gone into their own natures deeply have, for several thousand years now, been reporting that we have nothing to fear if we are willing to train ourselves to open up, explore and grow.<sup>13</sup>

It hardly needs mentioning that for most pastoral poets the pastoral retreat has not been a live option. It has been an aesthetic ethos whose laws derived from the sphere of literary genetics rather than from social science or contemporary political issues. It seldom mingled with revolutionary motives, let alone turned into a revolutionary program for the whole society. Leo Marx observes that the traditional distinction between the pastoral retreat and concrete revolutionary program has been somewhat obscured since the emergence of the American New Left.<sup>14</sup> Gary Snyder, logging, mountaineering, backpacking, writing and lecturing, obviously believes that his variant of the retreat to the "back country", his ideal of a "totally integrated world culture with matrilineal descent, free-form marriage, natural credit economy, less industry, far less population and lots more national parks"<sup>15</sup> is a workable program for social change.

One can be deeply sympathetic towards Snyder's discontent with the overindustrialized, materially sated society of the contemporary American type as well as towards Snyder's desire for a profound change, one can accept the apotheosis of the primitive as a poetic program (as such it has in many cases worked remarkably well), one tends, however, to be somewhat careful of an invitation for the return to the primitive and the unconscious as a radical program for social reform. Nobody would, therefore, object to the caution of the critics who dealt with the problem, if this caution had been joined with a sufficient amount of critical objectivity. As it is, there seem to be some reasons for dissatisfaction. When Leo Marx speculates about the possible positive long-term consequences of this mingling of aesthetic and revolutionary motives, about the practical workability of such a pastoralized social program in the special conditions of contemporary America,<sup>16</sup> he belongs to that small group of critics who have attempted an objective evaluation of this socio-poetic program. Most critics

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<sup>13</sup> Snyder, *Earth House Hold*, p. 109.

<sup>14</sup> Leo Marx, "Susan Sontag's 'New Left' pastoral: notes on the re-pastoralism in America", *Literature in Revolution* ed. Georg Abbott White and Charles Newman (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), p. 553.

<sup>15</sup> Snyder, *Earth House Hold*, p. 92.

<sup>16</sup> Leo Marx, the same, p. 558.

and commentators have shown considerably less willingness to allow disagreement and dialogue. While for Thomas Parkinson for example, Snyder's verse and prose "compose a set of new cultural possibilities that only ignorance and unbalance can ignore"<sup>17</sup> for Paul O'Neil, Norman Podhoretz and some others neither the Beat protest nor the Beat writing have very much, if anything, to do with culture, balance and sense.

There is no doubt that even in Snyder's comparatively coherent and sober variant, the Beat protest displays a great deal of naiveté, confusion and adolescent overconfidence. But if the Beat rebellion often lacked seriousness and clarity, its critics, with some exceptions, lacked the necessary amount of critical detachment. Thus, to a certain extent the Beat Generation still remains in search of a fuller and more complete appraisal of its social motives and its literary achievement.

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas Parkinson, "The Poetry of Gary Snyder", *The Southern Review*, IV, 1968, pp. 616—632.