

JAZZ, POETRY, ETHNICITY, AND DEMOCRACY IN THE WORK OF GARY SNYDER

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ABSTRACT

The essay examines one of the key figures of the San Francisco Renaissance, Gary Snyder. It discusses those aspects of his life and work that have played a crucial role in the life and work of that pre-eminent personage in American studies scholarship, Josef Jařab. Jařab can be credited with introducing Snyder's writings, as well as the author himself, to Czech (and Czechoslovak) readers. It is not surprising that there are numerous points of contact between the careers of the two men. As the title suggests, the essay explores four selected issues. It probes into Snyder's experiments in combining verse with jazz forms, some of which took place while the poet was performing in Prague. It also deals with Snyder's unique vision of a multi-ethnic America and his all-embracing view of democracy, which goes beyond the boundaries of the human realm.

KEYWORDS

American literature; jazz; poetry; democracy; ethnicity; Gary Snyder

Having been invited to contribute to the special issue of this journal dedicated to Josef Jařab, I instantly began to think of all the eminent American writers who had lectured and read from their writings at Czech universities thanks to the efforts of Josef Jařab. It did not take long to work out that one of the authors who have been close friends to Jařab and, at the same time, are close to my heart is Gary Snyder. Even more importantly, all the notions that figure in the theme of this issue (jazz, poetry, ethnicity, and democracy) are pertinent to the life and work of Gary Snyder himself.

Despite the fact that Snyder is predominantly a creative writer, whereas Jařab is a scholar, they have a lot in common. They were both brought up on a farm, in direct contact with the soil and the natural environment, and later gained academic acclaim. In their work, they have explored (and articulated the concerns of) the silenced and the silent, be they ethnic minorities or the wilderness. Both Snyder and Jařab, under different circumstances, have oftentimes represented a countercurrent that refused to go with the mainstream. Neither of them restricted himself to the domain of literature. They publicized their beliefs not only through words but also through (political) action. Undoubtedly, more connections between the two could be enumerated; however, that is not the objective of this essay.

It does not come as a surprise that Jařab can be credited for introducing Snyder's writings, as well as the author himself, to Czech(oslovak) readers.¹

JAZZ

During his first visit to the Czech Republic in 1998, Snyder's readers had a unique chance to hear the poet's verses accompanied by a musical trio. Snyder later admitted that this session gave him new faith in the potential of poetry and music performance and inspired him so much that he promised himself that he would try it again in the United States.² It should be noted that it was at the very start of Snyder's literary career that he realized poetry's capacity to interact with jazz music. The paragon of Snyder's early life, Kenneth Rexroth, showed the novice poet the beneficial effects of jazz inspiration on the sonic quality of verses. In his interview with Jařab, Snyder admits that jazz forms serve as models for his poems.³ In the spirit of jazz poetry, Snyder explored new ways of playing with the rhythmic pattern of his verses through jazz accompaniment.⁴

In the appendix to his recent translation of Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers without End* (Hory a řeky bez konce, 2007), Luboš Snížek compiled a list of both audio and video recordings featuring Snyder's poetry, whose length took even the poet by surprise. Snyder's numerous experiments with poetry recited to the rhythm of music can be attributed to his inclination toward the oral tradition of poetry as it was practiced in tribal societies. He regards the position of a poet as close to that of a shaman, who voices the collective subconscious by means of chanting, singing, and dancing. Still, the word is of primary importance to Snyder, who has "always held that minimal music is all that poetry needs."⁵

POETRY

The aforementioned shamanistic quality of Snyder's poetry is arguably the foremost characteristic of his work, and is one which deserves a deeper examination. In many of his texts, Snyder reiterates the idea that the poet should draw creative energy from the archaic traditions, which he commonly

1. The most comprehensive selection of Snyder's poetry, before his books began to be translated into Czech, appeared in the anthology of contemporary American poetry *Dítě na skleníku* (1989), which Jařab edited and Jaroslav Kořán translated. Jařab also wrote the afterword to the first book-length translation of Snyder into Czech, which was *The Old Ways* (Staré cesty, 1995). Last but not least, Jařab was instrumental in bringing Snyder to the Czech Republic for the first time in 1998.

2. See Jiří Josek et al., *Beatníci v Praze* (Praha: Argo, 2001), 9. My translation.

3. See Josef Jařab, "O poezii Dalekého západu: S Gary Snyderem rozmlouvá Josef Jařab," interview with Gary Snyder, *Literární noviny* 10, no. 15 (April 14, 1999): 4–5.

4. The tradition of jazz poetry dates back to the Harlem Renaissance (e.g., Langston Hughes). It was also important for Snyder's closest literary friends, Kenneth Rexroth and Jack Kerouac included.

5. Gary Snyder, "Re: Music," e-mail to Luboš Snížek, May 9, 2007.

describes as “primitive.” As he maintains in *Earth House Hold* (1969), “Poets, as few others, must live close to the world of primitive men: the world, in its nakedness, which is fundamental for all of us—birth, love, death; the sheer fact of being alive.”⁶ It is important to add that this “being alive” is firmly rooted in the physical environment and its biological processes, which is a quality that the civilized mind has lost to a large extent. Through poetry, Snyder reconnects the body and the mind, which have been considerably dissociated in modern America. Poetry has the power to revive the awareness “of very close correspondences between the external and internal landscape.”⁷

In his poetry, Snyder soon purged his verses of decorations and ornaments and developed a poetics that is simple in expression and rich in thought. He has written poems about living close to the bone, as well as stone. Indeed, his poetry can be described as rock-solid. His debut poetry collection, *Riprap* (1959), draws upon his summer job in Yosemite, where he built mountain trails. Snyder himself has often referred to this period as a cornerstone in his literary career. In the poem “Riprap,” he relates the commonly dissociated physical and intellectual work:

Lay down these words
 Before your mind like rocks.

 each rock a word
 a creek-washed stone
 Granite. . . .⁸

In the 1999 interview with Josef Jařab, Snyder comments on the geological metaphors that play an important role in his imagery and are an inseparable part of what might be called *ecopoetics*.⁹ During the long years he has been living in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, he has gotten attuned to the rhythms and cycles of the land, which has left a noticeable impression on his poetry. In *The Real Work* (1980), Snyder talks about feeling the shifting landscape under his foot: “There is a periodicity of ridge, gorge, ridge, gorge . . . and tributary gorges that makes an interlacing network of, oh, 115-million-year-old geological formation rhythms.”¹⁰ It should be pointed out that the principle of an “interlacing network” is also key to an understanding of Snyder’s poems. His poetics is inspired by and based on the realization of the interconnectedness of things, which can be acquired both by intuition and erudition in ecology. Snyder did not lack either of these.

6. Gary Snyder, *Earth House Hold* (New York: New Directions, 1969), 118.

7. Gary Snyder, *The Real Work: Interviews and Talks, 1964–1979*, ed. Scott McLean (New York: New Directions, 1980), 5.

8. Gary Snyder, “Riprap,” in *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), 32.

9. For more on this topic, see, e.g., Josef Jařab, “O poezii Dalekého západu.”

10. Snyder, *Real Work*, 48.

ETHNICITY

Not only does Snyder believe in the interrelatedness of ecosystems, but he is also convinced that interdependence between the different races and ethnic minorities requires an attitude of cooperation. His inborn tendency is to search for points of unity rather than disunity. As has been argued above, he identifies the commonality of all the people in the primitive (or primal) mind, which still sleeps deep in their unconscious. It follows that the dividing line between the racial and ethnic groups is porous and can thus be penetrated. In the introductory note to *Turtle Island* (1974), Snyder expresses this conviction quite eloquently:

Anglos, Black people, Chicanos, and others beached up on these shores all share such views at the deepest levels of their old cultural traditions—African, Asian, or European. Hark again to these roots, to see our ancient Solidarity, and then to the work of being together on Turtle Island.¹¹

It is beyond question that cultural plurality has been an important distinctive feature of American society. As Jařab writes in the anthology of contemporary American poetry *Dítě na skleníku*, Snyder “has accepted the ethnic, racial, and therefore also cultural diversity of America as a historical fact.”¹² His poems are imbued with a spirit of inclusiveness when it comes to the *modus vivendi* of the various cultures in America. Snyder is able to synthesize different cultures and traditions that are seemingly worlds apart. The America (as well as the world) he envisages is free of rigid definitions of ethnic and national identity. Looking at the composition of society, Snyder refuses to think in terms of center and periphery. As Vít Erban cogently notes, he “does not strive to undermine the fundamental values and erase the Euro-American culture, but aims at the dissolving of traditional ethnocentrism and Eurocentrism and establishing an open and creative culture.”¹³

In the ecopoetical manner, Snyder draws analogies between the diversity in the human and natural realms. He regards modern civilization as a frail monoculture which is prone to various diseases. At the other end of the spectrum are so-called primitive societies, which are commonly characterized by complexity and maturity. As he contends in *The Old Ways* (1977), what is happening around us is an “unparalleled waterfall of destruction of a diversity of human cultures; plant species; animal species; of the richness of the biosphere. . . .”¹⁴ Snyder perceives the homogenization of cultures and life in general as the ultimate threat that we are facing, more serious than,

11. Gary Snyder, *Turtle Island* (New York: New Directions, 1974), n.pag.

12. *Dítě na skleníku: Výbor ze současné americké poezie*, edited by Josef Jařab (Praha: Odeon, 1989), 334. My translation.

13. Vít Erban, “Vize a cesty šamanského pěvce,” *Host* 19, no. 6 (2003): 68. This article is extracted from Erban’s remarkable master’s thesis entitled “Kultura a divočina: kultivace a přirozenost v pojetí Garyho Snydera,” which the author defended at the Department of Cultural Studies at Charles University in Prague in 2001.

14. Gary Snyder, *The Old Ways* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1977), 17.

for instance, pollution. His “practice of the wild” is intent on the preserving of both nature and culture. In “Ecology and Aesthetics: Robinson Jeffers and Gary Snyder,” Allan Johnston correctly observes that “the ‘primary experiencing’ of nature in art reaches an ideal ‘climax’ condition in cultural diversity.”¹⁵

DEMOCRACY

Snyder’s Pulitzer-Prize-winning poetry collection *Turtle Island* is full of verses which celebrate diversity and its various expressions. Most frequently, he writes about the different nonhuman forms of life. Interestingly enough, he calls them “standing tree people” and “flying bird people,” which cannot be understood as shallow anthropomorphism but a way of challenging the instrumental attitude to the nature of humans. The broadening of the semantic scope of the word “people” underscores the interrelatedness of all life.

In his writing, Snyder often lends his voice to nonhuman creatures and even whole ecosystems, rocks and creeks included. He articulates the interests of what he sees as an under-represented or wholly neglected constituency—the wilderness, which has no speaker, let alone senator. His conception of democracy is aimed at decentering the prevailing anthropocentric paradigm. In *Turtle Island*, he succinctly notes that “plants and animals are also people” and should therefore be “given a place and voice in the political discussions of the humans. They are ‘represented.’ ‘Power to all the people’ must be the slogan,”¹⁶ and criticizes the “mistaken belief that nature is not as alive as man is.”¹⁷ Thus, he opposes the notion that nature is for human use, which especially the Western world holds so dear. Indeed, the ramifications of Snyder’s ultimate democracy are revolutionary. He rejects the dualistic “me-it” perception of the world and proposes what ecophilosophers label as biological egalitarianism: “[T]here is no hierarchy of qualities in life—that the life of a stone or a weed is as completely beautiful and authentic, wise and valuable as the life of, say, an Einstein.”¹⁸

Despite the fact that Snyder is known for his radicalism, sometimes even bordering on anarchism, he has not wholly distanced himself from politics.¹⁹ Knowing that the ideal “ultimate democracy” will not materialize in his lifetime, he has made every effort to approach this ideal. In doing so, he even accepted the offer of the California Governor, Jerry Brown, to chair

15. Allan Johnston, “Ecology and Aesthetics: Robinson Jeffers and Gary Snyder,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 8, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 31.

16. Gary Snyder, *Turtle Island* (New York: New Directions, 1974), 104.

17. Snyder, *Turtle Island*, 107.

18. Snyder, *Real Work*, 17.

19. One of the most remarkable critiques published by Snyder in recent years is “Ecology, Literature, and the New World Disorder,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 11, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 1–13.

the Arts Council. In response to the voices criticizing his engaging with the establishment, Snyder plainly said: "When a head of state goes so far as to request a hermit poet to come down from the mountain, then the poet is obligated to try to do his best."²⁰ Even in this position, Snyder never gave up on his principles and ideals. He promoted small-scale projects whose aim was the fostering of a sense of community and sense of place. He has always seen the future of democracy in small, decentralized communities which would be determined by "natural and cultural boundaries rather than arbitrary political boundaries."²¹

CONCLUSION

The preceding pages have demonstrated that jazz, poetry, ethnicity, and democracy have been integral parts of the life and work of Gary Snyder, a writer whom Josef Jařab has helped to introduce to the Czech reader. On the basis of the personal experience and the reading experience of the two, one can safely state that Jařab's fondness for Snyder is not accidental. They share a profound tendency to connect, rather than dissect and separate, and accentuate diversity and inclusiveness. In my eyes, Jařab and Snyder have challenged the way knowledge and, consequently, life is fragmented. Despite their analytical mindset, they have not lost sight of the roots of the imaginary tree of knowledge, whose branches have gotten somewhat entangled in the postmodern world.

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21. Snyder, *Turtle Island*, 100.

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