

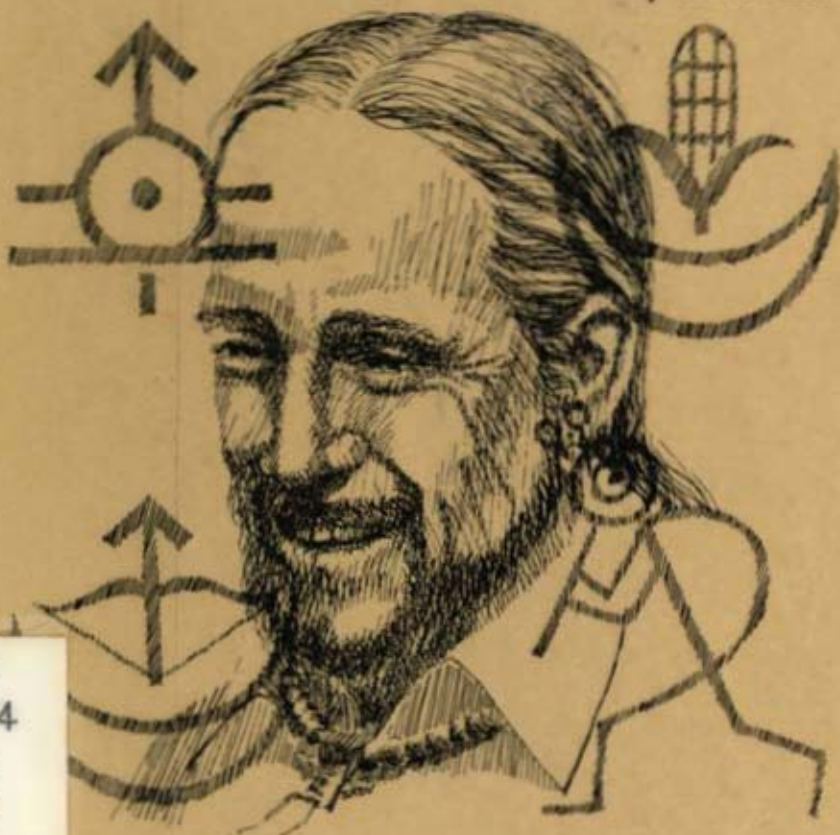
bsu

**WESTERN  
WRITERS SERIES**

no. 37

# GARY SNYDER

by Bert Almon



PS  
374  
W4  
I3  
no. 37

BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY  
BOISE, IDAHO

Boise State University Western Writers Series

Number 37

# Gary Snyder

By Bert Almon

University of Alberta

Editors: Wayne Chatterton  
James H. Maguire

Business Manager:  
James Hadden

Cover Design and Illustration  
by Arny Skov, Copyright 1979

Boise State University, Boise, Idaho

Copyright 1979  
by the  
Boise State University Western Writers Series

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Library of Congress Card No. 79-53650

International Standard Book No. 0-88430-061-7

Printed in the United States of America by  
The Caxton Printers, Ltd.  
Caldwell, Idaho

*Gary Snyder*



# Gary Snyder

## I. BACKGROUND

We thought that we had conquered the land, but we discovered that we had defeated ourselves. This truth, grasped by nature writers and conservationists of the past, has become clear to many. Gary Snyder's work in poetry and prose suggests that we can conquer the self and learn to live in harmony with the earth and each other: the newest frontier is within. Snyder's ancestors were pioneers in the old sense, people who moved out west to make a living or find adventure. He is a pioneer in a special way: he wants to move inside the self as well as reach out in a non-possessive way to the natural world. As Thomas J. Lyon has pointed out, the American West is the end of Whitman's Open Road, and the traveler must "move toward the examined life" (*John Muir*, p. 7). Snyder's Open Road took him as far west as Japan, but he now lives in the foothills of the Sierras of California, the state where he was born, in San Francisco, on May 8, 1930.

His parents were Harold and Lois Snyder. His family has a symbolic value for him: he is descended from the pioneers who "killd off the cougar and grizzly," as he puts it in one poem in *Turtle Island* ("Dusty Braces"). His paternal grandfather was a pioneer in Kitsap, Washington, and his mother's Irish stock flourished in Texas, Kansas, and Colorado. Snyder concedes in the poem that he is as restless as the "punchers, miners, railroad-men" he is descended from, and he willingly gives them the "nine bows" of homage customary in the Orient,

for he is their "sea roving/tree hearted son." On the positive side of this heritage, he has observed that his Washington grandfather was an organizer for the "Wobblies," or I. W. W., the Industrial Workers of the World, the socialist and anarchistic group that tried to organize Western workers in the early twentieth century. The Wobblies and their motto, "forming the new society within the shell of the old," have an important symbolic role in Snyder's writings. The slogan suggests a stance that Snyder holds: the need to transform society rather than to destroy it.

Shortly after his birth, Snyder's parents moved to a farm near Seattle, where they struggled for a living during the Great Depression. He is familiar with the hardships of farm life, a fact to remember when considering his proposals for living close to the land. Farm work can be back-breaking and mind-destroying, but Snyder believes that the severities come mostly in a cash crop economy; the small, diversified, and largely self-sufficient farm is another matter. Snyder's mother had been a writing student, and she encouraged her son's reading. He remembers that the house was full of socialist literature and that his mother would read poetry to him, including Browning and Poe. A childhood injury turned him into an enthusiastic reader. At the age of five or six, he entered a burned-over field, not realizing that the ashes concealed live coals. His feet were so badly burned that he was unable to walk for six months. This stroke of luck, as he described it to Roland Husson in an interview ("*Amerique, Ile Tortue*," p. 226), left him little to do but learn to read.

His favorite books seem very appropriate in retrospect—history and books about Indians and animals. The writings of Ernest Thompson Seton (1860-1946) were favorites. Seton, a Canadian nature writer and later an organizer of the American scouting movement, was a student of Indian lore. Snyder sees him as a kind of secret revolutionary who changed "the myth

of the white man" because he was "on the side of nature, on the side of the Indians, on the side of the unconscious, on the side of the primitive" ("Amerique," p. 226). Anyone who can find a battered copy of Seton's *The Book of Woodcraft and Indian Lore* in the children's section of a public library will soon discover that this book from 1912 foreshadows some of Snyder's themes and attitudes very neatly. Seton glorifies the Indian way of life as being thoroughly sane, moral, and healthy, while he condemns white culture. The U.S. Army comes in for vehement criticism because of the role of the cavalry during the Indian Wars. The Army would have crucified Christ if ordered to, Seton declares. Snyder, whose love of nature began when he was very young, was receptive to Seton's pro-Indian and pro-wilderness attitudes. He was aware from childhood that the Indians were the "prior people" and that they, like the land, had been despoiled. By the time he moved with his family to Portland, Oregon, at the age of twelve, he was able to sew moccasins and camp in the woods. In his teens he took up mountain climbing and qualified for an adult climbing club at fifteen. After the break-up of his parent's marriage, he held a number of jobs — copy boy on the Portland *Oregonian*, for example — and was virtually self-supporting while in high school.

He entered Portland's Reed College in 1947. Reed offers intensive and individualized education to its students, and Snyder undertook a combined Anthropology/Literature major. His bachelor's thesis, *The Dimensions of a Myth*, is an impressive work of scholarship which analyzes a Haida Indian myth, "He who hunted birds in his father's village," from a number of points of view; anthropological, sociological, linguistic, psychological, and other approaches are brought to bear on a single brief folk tale to illustrate its richness as a human document. Like so many Indian stories, this one (from John R. Swanton's *Haida Texts and Myths*, pp. 264-68) contains animal



characters with human qualities—the hero marries a goose maiden and deals with figures like Raven, Black Bear, and Eagle, mythic beings who will appear in Snyder's own work—and elements of the shamanistic quest. Snyder considers the intellectual and religious meaning of a simple quest narrative which many readers would find naive and almost formless. This interest in the so-called "primitive" world view has been central to Snyder's poems and essays. The influence of American anthropologists like Paul Radin and Franz Boas was important, because these men defended the intellectual powers of the "savage" and pointed to the value of their myths and philosophical assumptions. In *Myths & Texts* Snyder was to dramatize the primitive outlook as one remedy for the dilemmas of our times.

At Reed Snyder began to publish poems in the literary magazine, *Janus*, and at one point even prepared a pamphlet which he later decided not to issue. Robert Ian Scott has made these poems available, and he has noted the stylistic influence of Ezra Pound's *Cathay* and the work of T. S. Eliot, along with the thematic influence of Robert Graves ("The Uncollected Early Poems of Gary Snyder," pp. 81-82). The terseness of Pound and the allusiveness of both Pound and Eliot are certainly present in the early work. Snyder has said that D. H. Lawrence's poetry was important as an influence because it showed that nature poetry need not be genteel. Graves is a particularly interesting precedent for Snyder. Graves published *The White Goddess* the year after Snyder entered Reed. The lengthy treatise constructs an erudite theory of poetry and the role of the poet from such sources as Celtic tree alphabets, classical myth, and the anthropological researches of Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. Snyder has built an eclectic personal philosophy out of Buddhist and American Indian myth and thought. Like Graves, Snyder believes in a muse, reveres nature, and abhors patriarchal civilization. Both writers like to work from a

vantage point outside the mainstream of Western civilization: Graves from Mallorca, Snyder from Japan and, more recently, from his home at Kitkitdizze in the Sierras.

Snyder's education needs stressing because he often takes anti-intellectual attitudes that can be misleading. In his "Lookout's Journal" (*Earth House Hold*) of 1952, he says that "one does not need universities and libraries/one need be alive to what is about," but he has always been willing to seek knowledge from books and institutions. He does value experience and he expresses skepticism about the intellectual heritage of Western civilization. In *Myths & Texts*, he attacks "the ancient, meaningless/Abstractions of the educated mind," and describes the use of a philosophy book as toilet paper. Like Graves, he distrusts the Apollonian (intellectual) tendencies of Western culture, its habit of living so much in the rational mind that the natural world is ignored or turned into mere material for exploitation. But he is not a nihilist, a man who wants to trade civilization for barbarism. His praise for the primitive should not be misunderstood. One of the great advances in Western thought, an advance we owe to the intellectual discipline of anthropology, is the growing recognition that there are other modes of thought than abstraction, like the concrete logic, as Claude Lévi-Strauss puts it, of primitive peoples. Snyder proposes that we learn from one group of primitive cultures in particular, the American Indian tribes, who generally managed to live in the natural world without damaging it.

After graduating from Reed, Snyder began graduate work in anthropology at Indiana University in 1951, but soon dropped out to pursue a career as a poet. An academic career, even in the study of oral narratives, did not offer the kind of life he found essential for writing his poems: manual labor in the wilderness interspersed with periods of solitude and contemplation. He had already held a number of summer jobs

as seaman, timber scaler, and employee of the Park Service during the excavation of Fort Vancouver. Until his trip to Japan in 1956 he worked at similar jobs, mostly during the summers. He was a fire lookout on Sourdough Mountain in the Mt. Baker National Forest. He was also a cook, a logger for the Warm Springs Lumber Company in Oregon, and a trail crew worker in Yosemite National Park. He was fired from a lookout job in Gifford Pinchot National Forest as a security risk. There was no place in the Forest Service for a man of Snyder's views and background during the McCarthy era.

Interspersed with this work experience, which is reflected in the poems of his first two books, *Riprap* and *Myths & Texts*, was formal study of Chinese and Japanese at Berkeley, 1953-56. Snyder had decided, as he told Nathaniel Tarn in an interview, that "Anthropology was concerned with understanding human nature—but then why go to other people, why not study one's own nature. So . . . Zen" ("From Anthropologist to Informant," p. 110). The Zen tradition of Buddhism often defines itself as "seeing into one's own nature," and its discipline of meditation aims at gaining a clear perception of the self and the external world. Awareness is one of the basic themes of Snyder's poetry, and one of his favored techniques is to present states of awareness through strong images given without commentary. Zen also praises the life of physical labor, an attitude that Snyder shares. The commitment to Zen grew out of a need to find a living spiritual tradition. It will be clear from an examination of *Myths & Texts* that Snyder considers the Jewish and Christian traditions of the Western man inadequate, and he finds that the spiritual traditions of the American Indians are not really available to non-Indians. Snyder studied the material on Indian religion available through anthropological work, but he wanted the kind of rigorous

training that study under a Zen master offers. Hence his years in Japan studying with Oda Sesso at Daitoku-ji monastery.

While at Berkeley, Snyder became involved with the literary scene in the San Francisco Bay area. Poets like Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Jack Spicer, Robert Duncan, and Kenneth Rexroth had been writing in San Francisco for some time. Rexroth's poems, with their blend of Oriental references — Rexroth is a fine translator of Japanese and Chinese poetry — and descriptions of the Western American wilderness, were an important influence on Snyder. When Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Philip Whalen, and Snyder were added to the Bay area's writers, the result was the San Francisco Renaissance and the launching of the Beat Generation. The crucial event was a poetry reading in 1955, presided over by Kenneth Rexroth at the Six Gallery in San Francisco. Snyder took part, though the great event of the reading was Allen Ginsberg's reading of *Howl*. Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* (1958) gives a fictionalized description of this fruitful period in West coast literary life. In this book Snyder appears as the exuberant Japhy Ryder.

## II. THE MYTHOPOETIC APPROACH

Up to this time, Snyder had been working on the poems that found their way into *Myths & Texts* and *Riprap*. The publishing history is somewhat misleading, because *Myths & Texts* appeared in 1960, but was written between 1952 and 1956, while *Riprap*, Snyder's first published book (1959), contains poems written as late as 1958. Snyder plans his volumes very carefully and may hold back a major poem from publication if he believes that it belongs in a different book. The poems in *Riprap* deal with a variety of experiences in the woods and at sea, while *Myths & Texts* is a unified sequence of poems in three sections constituting a commentary on our culture and its weaknesses. The work is probably Snyder's finest achievement to

date. It is an example of the "mythopoetic" mode that he considers most important in his writing. Much of his other work, as in *Riprap*, is written in the "lyrical" mode and consists of short sensuous poems that have their own power but convey less meaning than the myths and symbolic details of the mythopoetic approach. In a "Statement on Poetics" published in Donald M. Allen's *The New American Poetry*, Snyder distinguishes the "two sources of human knowledge—symbols and sense impressions" (p. 421). Sense impressions are "texts," while symbols are "myths." The poems in *Riprap* are mostly texts, while the other collection, as its title implies, works on both levels. A forest fire in *Myths & Texts* can be both a sensory event and a symbol of apocalypse and renewal.

In *Myths & Texts*, Snyder explores the destruction of the American wilderness by our society and poses some alternative attitudes. The destruction grows out of greed, which Buddhism postulates as the source of all suffering, and the "Logging" section of the work shows greed at work. It is based on Snyder's own experiences as a logger. The "Hunting" section offers one alternative to the grasping approach to nature: the reverent and frugal way of life pursued by many Indian tribes. The poet contemplates the myths and practices of hunting peoples. The last section, "Burning," presents a Buddhist alternative, the pursuit of insight rather than self-interest. The work as a whole is an example of the personal epic typical of modern long poems. Unity comes not through plot, as in the traditional epic, but through the mind of the poet as he describes and reflects in reverie ("dream," he tells himself) upon his experience. Snyder's experiences include a knowledge of history, Indian lore, Buddhist teachings, and Hindu myths, along with logging and mountain climbing, so that there is a constant interplay of texts and myths as he strives to understand the ravaging of nature. The influence of Ezra Pound's personal epic, the *Cantos*, is everywhere apparent. But Pound's work,

written over many years, never achieved completion, much less unity. In spite of Snyder's ranging allusiveness, he sticks to a basic theme, the despoiling of the American wilderness. Like Pound, Snyder believes that Occidental civilization has gone wrong, but the root sin in *Myths & Texts* is not usury, as in the *Cantos*, but the greedy assumption that man has dominion over nature.

The epigraph to *Myths & Texts* comes from Acts 19:27, in which a young craftsman of Ephesus warns that the success of Christianity will undermine the worship of Diana, goddess of the moon and woods. In "Logging," Snyder also cites Exodus 34:15, "But ye shall destroy their altars, break their images, and cut down their groves." Snyder feels that a main source of the ecological crisis is the promise in the Bible that man will have dominion over the earth. D. T. Suzuki's essay of 1953, "The Role of Nature in Zen Buddhism," states a similar view. Suzuki suggests that the Biblical passage giving man rule over nature is "the real beginning of human tragedy" (*Zen Buddhism*, p. 231). Instead of seeing himself as a part of nature, man sees it as raw material: "Man makes use of it economically with no sense of kinship with it, hence with no sense of gratitude or sympathetic affiliation" (p. 235). Or, as Snyder puts it, "All America hung on a hook / & burned by men, in their own praise." An article by Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," cited in Snyder's *Earth House Hold*, makes a similar case.

However, Snyder is aware that other cultures have also treated nature badly. Confucius and his man-centered philosophy comes in for criticism in *Myths & Texts*, and the poet knows that the mountains of China were logged without any Judeo-Christian rationalizations. Moreover, it is important to note that there are Biblical passages enjoining kindness to animals and care for the land. Snyder's one-sided references to the "sawmill temples of Jehovah" are less effective than his imaginative pre-

sentation of alternative views of nature. The ancient Buddhist parable of the arrow suggests that it is more effective to seek treatment for a wound than to speculate over the more abstruse questions of the manufacture of the weapon.

The “Logging” section opens with a visionary passage, a kind of prologue invoking the coming of spring and the primitive roots of human culture. The first line of poem 1, “the morning star is not a star,” echoes Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*, which concludes with the suggestion that for the awakened mind “the sun is but a morning star.” According to tradition, Buddha gained enlightenment when he glimpsed the morning star while sitting under a Bo tree. For all its stress on destruction, *Myths & Texts* implies that an awakening from egotism and greed is possible. The rest of the opening poem is a swirl of lines about the planting of two seedling fir trees, another hopeful sign, about the May Queen ceremonies of spring – which Geza Roheim, the Freudian anthropologist, suggested were vestiges of a pre-human rutting season – and about the rites of Io, the woman beloved by Zeus. Io serves as a hint that the divine can enter the human world.

Much of the “Logging” section is devoted to poems about the work of cutting down trees, work that Snyder evokes in terse, image-sharp lines. In the second poem of the section, the narrator awakens at dawn from bitter dreams and starts his work: “250,000 board-feet a day” can be cut down by the camp. Trees become statistics, abstract quantities of material. The devastation of the forest has often been matched by the exploitation of the laborers. The “Logging” poems describe the “Wobblies” who were beaten and murdered for union activities, and the misery of those who lived in shanties during the Depression. Poem 10 conjures up the ghost of a ragged logger who wanders into the woods from a Seattle skidrow, “Fifty years too late.” The logging operations damage non-human beings also,

creatures whose lives are, according to Buddhism and North American Indian animism, as sacred as our own:

The D8 tears through piss-fir,  
Scrapes the seed-pine  
  chipmunks flee,  
A black ant carries an egg  
Aimlessly from the battered ground.

With laconic dryness, poem 8 goes on to tell us that "Mashed bushes make strange smells."

Yet there are touches of optimism in the section. Nature has regenerative powers. When overworked farm land is abandoned, fir trees begin to grow again, we are told in poem 3. And the lodgepole pine has cones that endure forest fires and can germinate afterwards. In poem 6, Snyder records his father's story of berry-picking in Washington back in 1914. The area had been logged very early, but fine blackberries grew up between the stumps. The poem evokes the plenitude of nature: "we took copper clothes-boilers, / Wash-tubs, buckets, and all went picking. / We were canning for days."

Each section of *Myths & Texts* ends with an apocalyptic vision of change and renewal. The bleakness of the "Logging" section leads appropriately into an apocalypse (poem 15) initiated with a vision of catastrophe. Snyder uses the mythical imagery of Hindu cosmology with its world cycles, or "kalpas." The cycle comes to an end when Shiva, the god of destruction, destroys the universe with fire. The "Men who hire men to cut groves / kill snakes, build cities, pave fields" will be swept away. The myths say that torrential rains will put out the fires and from a "germ of necessity for re-manifestation," as Heinrich Zimmer puts it in *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization* (an important source for Snyder's Hindu allusions), the gods and worlds will be reborn (p. 18). Snyder's conclusion to the "Logging" poems mentions the cones of the



lodgepole pine waiting for fire and rebirth, but the rains will be imagined only in the conclusion to the entire work. This section ends elegiacally with the possibility of preserving the wilderness through art. A painter who watched the fall of China's Ming dynasty is quoted:

“The brush  
May paint the mountains and streams  
Though the territory is lost.”

Snyder's “Logging” poems are such a painting.

The “Hunting” poems present a less somber view of the world and culminate in a less harrowing apocalypse. The attitudes of hunting tribes of North America are explored in order to give a new perspective on the relationship of man to nature. The hunter assumes that the creatures he hunts have a spiritual value of their own. They are winged people and four-legged people, as the Sioux shaman Black Elk would put it. The hunter prepares himself for his work through ritual exercises that may involve fasting, sexual abstinence, and prayers to the hunted animal. He seeks to understand the nature of the animals; and the magic he employs to assure success often includes the use of songs that express the nature of the prey, as in the opening of poem 4 of this section:

The swallow-shell that eases birth  
brought from the south by Hummingbird.  
“We pull out the seagrass, the seagrass,  
the seagrass, and it drifts away”  
— song of the geese.

When the hunt is successful — through the willingness of the prey to sacrifice itself for human beings, many tribes believe — expiation is made through prayers and offerings, and every part of the animal is put to use. In poem 5, Snyder describes the making of a spoon from mountain goat horn in a passage

that paraphrases an account in Franz Boas' *Ethnology of the Kwakiutl* (pp. 102-04).

Perhaps the finest works in the section are the poems in honor of bear and deer. The poem for bear, number 8, brings together Snyder's own knowledge of bears with materials from the folklore of several cultures. The poem tells one of the bear marriage stories found in many societies. A girl out picking berries meets a tall, dark man who carries her off to his home in the mountains. He is one of those ambiguous beings in American Indian mythology, a combination animal/deity/human being. Eventually the girl's brothers kill her husband. Snyder uses A. I. Hallowell's compendious "Bear Ceremonialism in the Northern Hemisphere" (pp. 49-51), as the source for the lines that the brothers call out to the snared bear while Marius Barbeau's *Tsimshian Songs* (pp. 130-31) provides the bear's death song. An annotated version of *Myths & Texts* would be very lengthy and somewhat pedantic. The reader who wants to become familiar with the spirit of Snyder's borrowings from American Indian myth might read works like John Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks* and Jaime de Angulo's *Indian Tales*, along with some collections of American Indian poetry.

Poem 8, the poem for deer, is particularly fine. William Blake's "Auguries of Innocence" tell us that "The wild deer, wand'ring here and there, / Keeps the Human Soul from Care." Snyder ironically echoes these lines in his account of drunken hunters who gun down a deer paralyzed by their headlights. This modern attitude is framed by two Indian songs expressing the reverence of the primitive hunter for the deer and the hunter's willingness to drink sea water and "Sleep on beach pebbles in the rain / Until the deer come down to die / in pity for my pain."

Shamanism plays an important role in the "Hunting" poems. Among many primitive peoples — Siberian tribesmen, Plains Indians, Eskimos — the shaman has an important social function.

He is the seer of the tribe, the visionary who makes dream journeys to seek supernatural help in healing or finding food. The power that he gets in his visionary journey often takes the form of a magic song associated with a totem animal. The opening poem in "Hunting" is called *first shaman song*, and the entire section could be regarded as a set of shaman songs, the record of a poet's imaginative journeys in quest of powers to heal a sick culture. We must learn, as poem 3 puts it, to "See or go blind!"

Poem 11, entitled *songs for a four-crowned dancing hat*, is based on the shamanistic myth of "Big-Tail," a story from John Swanton's *Haida Texts and Myths* (pp. 296-304), the same book from which Snyder took the myth used in his undergraduate thesis. The shaman, Big-Tail, descends into the ocean in order to meet a supernatural being called "He-at-whose-voice-the-Ravens-sit-on-the-sea" and to gain power in the form of a magic hat to save his people from famine. Poem 11 rather confusingly blends details from this myth with images from Hindu stories about Prajapati, who created the earth, and Vishnu, who took the form of a boar when he saved Mother Earth from the depths of the sea. The poem probably aims at showing the universality of redemptive patterns. Heinrich Zimmer suggests that Vishnu is a counterpart of the bodhisattva, a savior figure in Mahayana Buddhism (*Myths*, p. 97), and bodhisattvas are important in the "Burning" poems. The most plaintive lines in *songs for a four-crowned dancing hat* are spoken by the little fern women of the "Big-Tail" story: "What will you do with human beings? Are you going to save the human beings?" Such sayings symbolize the fact that human life is supported by nature. Shamanism assumes that natural forces can work for human welfare.

The next two poems move from the mythical to the textual level to make the same point. In poem 12, the poet describes picking a wild apple near a hornet's nest. He had the smell of

the mountains on him — he had been living close to nature, therefore — and “none stung.” The succeeding poem, taken from a Jicarilla Apache song, describes the many plants, animals, and insects that the tribe lived on. The catalogue of more than forty items, ranging from deer to juniper berries, makes the point that nature offers many possibilities for the support of human life.

The “Hunting” poems end with an apocalypse that recalls Isaiah, a vision of all creatures living in harmony. The last poem, number 16, opens with a saying common in Buddhist texts: “How rare to be born a human being!” Humanity has great opportunities for achieving an enlightened state. In this poem, the denunciations that closed “Logging” (“Men who hire men to cut groves”) are absent. Instead, the poet glorifies human birth, goes on to describe the mythical account of the birth of the Buddha, and tosses in the iconoclastic comments of the Zen master Chao-chou (778-897 A.D.), who found the story, with its talking baby, trembling universe, and reverent animals, a little too saccharine. But the myth, Snyder implies, expresses an important truth about the value of human life. Snyder’s vision of a world in which man and beast live in harmony suggests the Bible, lion lying down with lamb:

Girls would have in their arms  
A wild gazelle or wild wolf-cubs  
And give them their white milk,  
          those who had new-born infants home  
Breasts still full.

The meaning of such myths is compassion, Snyder tells us, and all beings, man and beast alike, can be the agents of compassion. In the Buddhist terms that he uses, all beings possess the Buddha nature (uncultivated though it might be), all but Coyote, the trickster god-and-buffoon of American Indian myth. Snyder’s ruling-out of Coyote as a potential Buddha is a kind

of wry allusion to the Master Chao-chou's other famous saying. When asked if a dog, near cousin of the coyote, has the Buddha nature, Chao-chou replied, "Wu," Chinese for "No." The reply goes against the teaching of the Mahayana branch of Buddhism to which Zen belongs, and it is usually given to beginning students in a Zen monastery as a first subject for meditation, or "koan." Snyder describes meditating on this "koan" in "Burning," poem 6. In one way, Coyote, who expresses symbolically the mischief and destructiveness of the human psyche, is beyond enlightenment. In another way, he represents the divine principle, and the same American Indian myth cycles that describe him as a clown or trickster also portray him as a creator god like the Hindu figure Prajapati.

The conclusion of "Hunting" has introduced Buddhist themes, and the "Burning" poems explore the Buddhist view of life. The title of the section is as ambiguous as Coyote. The Buddha's Fire Sermon comes to mind, the address in which the senses were described as being aflame with sensory craving, an insight that Snyder finds his own terms for: "Spikes of new smell driven up nostrils," and "Mouth filled with bright fluid coldness / Tongue crushed by the weight of its flavours" (poem 13). But fire can also represent visionary transformations, a possibility that Snyder uses at the end of the section.

According to Buddhism, the cause of suffering is selfish craving, which can be understood and eliminated through meditation. The meditator learns that he is not a permanent being, but rather a composite and temporary collection of mental and physical qualities. When the fiction of a stable ego disappears, the non-grasping state of enlightenment is attained. Selfish craving in the form of economic greed has led to the abuses that Snyder dealt with in "Logging." The "Burning" poems describe the practice of meditation and try to give a few glimpses of the enlightened state. The shamanistic descent in a myth like "Big-Tail" has its parallel in the poet's descent

into mind and body through meditation, and the Buddhist parallel to the shaman who gains power to save his tribe is the symbolic figure of the bodhisattva (Sanskrit for “enlightenment being”) who plunges into the “ocean of samsara” (the realm of birth and death) in order to save all sentient beings.

The descriptions of meditation, especially in poems 1, 2, 3, 11, 12, often employ a kind of visceral imagery: the meditator becomes aware of his body down to the level of the bones and muscles, even down to “the cells all water / frail bodies / Moistening in a quiver” (poem 12). The imagery for the levels of the mind in poem 3 is less successful, for to represent consciousness pictorially is more difficult than to illustrate physical states. But the aims of the meditator are similar in each kind of meditation: to realize the composite and fluctuating nature of sentient existence. The result of such a realization is an awareness of emptiness – the void. In Buddhism, the void is a positive concept, one of the three doors of liberation. All of existence is void: a state of flux in which nothing has a permanent, self-sufficient nature. When the meditator has an insight into emptiness, he is on the way to dissolving the ego. Hence Snyder speaks of the “empty happy body / Swarming in the light” (poem 4).

Snyder has never made any claims to enlightenment. It would be against the unpretentious spirit of Zen to do so even if he were enlightened. For Zen, enlightenment is “nothing special: Mount Lu in misty rain, the River Che at high tide.” Things are seen as they are. Snyder renders the celebrated lines from Su Tung-p’o as “it was nothing special, / misty rain on Mt. Baker, / Neah Bay at high tide” (poem 13). The enlightened state would presumably be ineffable and beyond the reach of art. Snyder wants to provide at least a glimpse of it; so he evokes an ecstatic state of drug intoxication in poem 5, and poem 8 retells an episode from John Muir’s *The Mountains of California*. Muir was scaling Mt. Ritter and found himself at a dead end.

A higher consciousness seemed to take over his body, and he was able to see and move with enormous skill (*The Mountains of California*, chapter IV).

In the mythology of the Mahayana branch of Buddhism those who attain enlightenment but refuse to enter nirvana are called bodhisattvas. They seek the enlightenment of all beings. Snyder brings a number of bodhisattvas into his work: Maitreya, the future Buddha; Maudgalyāyana, who descended into hell to save his mother; and Amitabha, the Buddha of Infinite Light. Amitabha vowed that he would never become a Buddha unless all who called upon his name could enter a “Buddha Land” of his making. Snyder provides a modern version of Amitabha’s vow in poem 10, a delightful prayer for hobos and hitchhikers.

The bodhisattvas can seek to deliver all beings because they possess the Buddha-nature dormant within them, like the seed within the cone of the lodgepole pine, or the chrysalis in the table leaf that Thoreau mentions in the last chapter of *Walden* (Snyder alludes to this parable in poem 11). The “Burning” section moves toward images of sexual love as symbols of self-transcendence, and the ecstatic imagery of nature evoked through the descriptions of back-packing in the mountains has a similar function. In poem 17, the narrator feels that he has reached the “Mt. Sumeru L.O.” That is, he has climbed the mythical mountain at the center of the Buddhist – and Hindu – cosmos and can serve as a fire watcher for the universe from that Look Out post. He sees a mythical fire: the forest fire dealt with realistically, “textually,” at the beginning of poem 17 becomes a dragon tongue that “Licks the sun.” At the end of *Myths & Texts*, the poet declares, like Thoreau, that “The sun is but a morning star.” The Buddha-nature can be aroused; the world can be transformed in a blaze of insight.

*Myths & Texts* is Snyder’s finest achievement to date in the mythopoetic mode. It is highly organized and thematically

focused. He has been working for many years on a sequence of poems called *Mountains and Rivers without End*, which appears to be an almost open-ended endeavor in this mode. The work is modeled on Zen scroll paintings in which a wealth of detail unfolds. A frequent subject of Zen paintings is the journey through a landscape of mountains and rivers; and a recurrent theme in the portions of the poem published so far is the journey—literal journeys, mythical journeys, journeys into the unconscious mind through dreams. To date the work seems to share certain virtues and failings with Pound's *Cantos*, since superb passages alternate with undigested learning or casual personal reminiscence. Sections like "The Market," a fine poem about the underdeveloped world and the transactions on which life depends, and "Journeys," a dream poem about the "back country" of the mind, offer the hope that the completed poem will be strong enough to carry a few weaker portions. It would hardly be fair to evaluate it at this stage.

### III. SHORTER POEMS AND PROSE WRITINGS

The writing of *Riprap* (published in 1959) coincided roughly with the creation of *Myths & Texts*, although Snyder added some poems about his first trip to Japan (1956-57) and his experiences in 1958 as a seaman on the tanker *Sappa Creek*. The volume contains some of his finest work in the lyrical mode. The poems set in Western America that begin the book show a skillful grasp of the arrangement of images, so that the poet manages to be extremely concrete but simultaneously creates subtle implications worthy of the Japanese haiku tradition or the Chinese lyric. The Chinese lyric has been a major influence on Snyder's style, as he pointed out in his "Statement on Poetics" for Allen's anthology, *The New American Poetry*:

"Riprap" is really a class of poems I wrote under the influence of the Sierra Nevada and the daily trail-



crew work of picking up and placing granite stones in tight cobble pattern on hard slab. "What are you doing?" I asked old Roy Marchbanks. "Riprapping," he said. His selection of natural rocks was perfect . . . . I tried writing poems of tough, simple, short words, with the complexity far beneath the surface texture. In part the line was influenced by the five- and seven-character line Chinese poems I'd been reading, which work like sharp blows on the mind. (pp. 420-421)

Well-known poems like "Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout" and "Water" are written in a style so terse that they could be mistaken for very close translations from the Chinese. Terseness is generally such a hallmark of Snyder's style that a poem like "T-2 Tanker Blues," written in the sprawling "Beat" manner of Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, comes as a surprise in *Riprap*.

For all the importance of physical labor in Snyder's work, moments of repose and Zen-inspired contemplation have equal value. The poet describes moments on mountain tops as often as he describes bucking hay or placing cobble. Even the superb description of physical labor in "Hay for the Horses" is overshadowed by the poignant remarks made by the speaker's co-worker "at lunchtime under Black oak/Out in the hot corral." Another lunch break, taken "Above Pate Valley," resulted in one of Snyder's best poems. The speaker, a trail-crew worker, discovers arrowhead leavings all around him, signs that other men worked and hunted in the same region long before. And the deer that come to the spot to feed have created trails. The human past and present are subtly juxtaposed with the timeless realm of the animals. The final line, "Ten thousand years," reverberates because the poet has skillfully prepared us for an experience of continuity as well as change, an awareness that

activities like working and feeding have a long history in the Sierra Nevada. By emphasizing concrete details at the expense of abstractions, Snyder cuts himself off from the philosophical ruminations of Wordsworth's meditations on Tintern Abbey. He relies on suggestion instead.

In "Milton by Firelight," the situation is again one of repose after work. The poet reads Milton, and Satan's anguished rhetoric, "O hell, what do mine eyes/with grief behold?" seems to come off poorly after a day of working in the mountains. What weight does such rhetoric have beside the actualities of working with Sierra granite to build trails? "What use Milton, a silly story / Of our lost general parents, / eaters of fruit." And yet, the chainsaw boy "comes riding down to camp / Hungry for tomatoes and green apples," forms of fruit, and the Sierras themselves will someday become a kind of hell, "dry and dead, home of the scorpion." Snyder shows in *Myths & Texts* that he can value the symbolic structures of religion as much as Milton did. But a less Miltonic style than Snyder's would be hard to imagine. Snyder avoids abstractions and keeps his syntax simple.

The poems about Japan are less effective than the ones set in Western America. The poet sometimes gives interesting travel impressions, but in most cases the exotic scenes remain inert. The Oriental poems in *The Back Country*, products of more intimate knowledge and closer involvement, are far better. The poems about the tanker *Sappa Creek* are also comparatively weak. They are casually written and have humorous touches that charm without quite satisfying. Except for *Myths & Texts*, all of Snyder's collections contain some light, even trivial works. He told me once in a letter that the concept of the masterpiece is "a 19th century tiresome honky notion," and he quoted a Zen saying: "Every day's a good day." Zen teaches that picking and choosing is a mistake, because every experience is potentially valuable. But the value must be demonstrated for a

poem to work. Fortunately, the percentage of successes is high in *Riprap*.

After 1965, the *Riprap* poems were supplemented by Snyder's translations of Han-shan, a hermit poet of the T'ang dynasty whose name means "Cold Mountain." The *Cold Mountain* poems were translated by Snyder in the 1950's as part of his study of Chinese. They show, he has said at a poetry reading, the influence on him of the Cascade Mountains of the Northwest. Han-shan's Chinese mountain landscape and his elusive whimsical ways engaged Snyder's imagination. The versions are in the Poundian tradition of following the spirit of the original at the occasional expense of the letter; for example, anachronisms ("silverware and cars") are used when the poet wants to give contemporary equivalents for Han-Shan's satirical targets.

With a few interruptions, Snyder studied Zen Buddhism in Japan between 1956 and 1968. His teacher was Oda Sesso Roshi of Daitoku-ji Monastery. In 1961, Snyder compiled an anthology of Zen texts in English versions with the aid of Kanetsuki Gutetsu. This collection, *The Wooden Fish*, is virtually unobtainable. Some of his Japanese experiences are recounted in poems collected in *The Back Country* (1968), while others are dealt with in two prose pieces in *Earth House Hold* (1969), "Japan First Time Around" and "Spring Sesshin at Shokoku-ji." The latter is a superb look at a training retreat held in a Zen monastery. In compact and vigorous prose, Snyder presents the concrete details of the retreat, stressing the daily routine rather than Zen thought, an approach true to the Zen spirit.

During his Japanese sojourn, Snyder married for the second time. His first marriage, to Alison Gass, lasted from 1950 to 1952. The second marriage, in 1960, was to Joanne Kyger, a fellow poet. This marriage ended in divorce in 1965. Snyder's third marriage, to the Japanese writer Masa Uehara, has had

great significance for his writing. Many of his poems since have dealt with their life together and with their sons, Kai and Gen. Both writers lived at the Banyan Ashram, an experimental community founded by Nanao Sakaki on Suwa-no-se Island between Okinawa and Japan. Snyder's stay at this Ashram, or meditation center, convinced him that communal living as a kind of recapturing of tribal life is one alternative to modern alienation.

In 1968, the year that he returned to the United States, Snyder published *The Back Country*, his longest work so far. The book is planned carefully with a division of Snyder's poems into four sections and with a selection of his translations of Miyazawa Kenji's poems as a supplement. The first part, "Far West," contains poems written as early as 1957. In theme and style, this grouping overlaps both *Myths & Texts* and *Riprap*. The opening poem, "A Berry Feast," is almost a reprise of *Myths & Texts*, and most of the other poems, as in *Riprap*, are either descriptions of work experiences or poems of tranquil contemplation after labor. The "Far West" poems represent the literal back country: the American wilderness.

The second section, "Far East," collects poems written about Japan. The major work is "Six Years," a sequence of poems with one entry for each month of the year, plus an "envoy" in which the poet relates his return to the United States in 1964 for a stint of teaching at Berkeley. The monthly poems treat a variety of experiences, ranging from dining out to working in a monastery to contemplating pine trees in the snowy hills. The poet's evolution of a more fragmentary style is clear in "Six Years." The poems tend to be written in short phrases rather than in sentences, carrying Snyder's brevity one stage further.

The most powerful poems come in the third section, entitled "Kali" and set in India, a "backward country." Snyder and Joanne Kyger visited India and Ceylon in 1962, a journey on

which they were joined by Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky. An excellent account of the trip in journal form, "Now, India," was published in a little magazine, *Caterpillar*, and a much shorter account was included in *Earth House Hold*. Snyder's view of India in his journal is remarkably balanced. He saw the dirt and poverty as well as the spiritual strength of the country.

In the "Kali" poems, misery dominates. "Kali," the Black One, is the "shakti," the consort of Shiva, god of destruction. Her depictions in art are terrifying, for she wears a garland of skulls and carries a sword or noose. Often she is shown dancing on the corpse of her consort, Shiva (see Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols*, pp. 211-15). She represents the destructive aspect of the great female goddess, Devi. Snyder's poems about poverty and personal loss in the "Kali" section explore the negative aspects of life that the goddess symbolizes. Bob Steuding has pointed out in his book on Snyder that the "Kali" section mixes the scenes of India with the poet's memories of failed love affairs, so that the section becomes an exploration of the "back country" of the unconscious mind: a tour of the hells of the mind as well as the hell of an underdeveloped country (*Gary Snyder*, pp. 125-26). The term "Kali" can be taken as an allusion to the "kali yuga," the period of declining morality and increasing misery that precedes the end of a Hindu world cycle. In "This Tokyo," the poet prophesies a time when the vice and poverty of a Japanese slum will be world-wide. The pessimism of this poem of 1956 is rare in Snyder's work, and it is balanced by the next poem, "The Manichaeans," in which two lovers "keep back the cold" of the universe by lying in each other's arms like "Shiva and Shakti."

And Kali is, as an aspect of the Great Mother, an embodiment of life as well as death. The noose and the sword can be used to bind and destroy evil passions. In the Tantric cult of this goddess, she is regarded as a beneficent mother. Hence Snyder

ends the section with an imitation of a poem by the eighteenth-century Indian poet Ramprasad Sen, who, incidentally, is mentioned at the end of Graves' *The White Goddess*. The poem opens with the conventional Hindu and Buddhist theme that rebirth is a dreadful fate. The individual is bound to a wheel of suffering:

Arms shielding my face  
Knees drawn up  
Falling through flicker  
Of womb after womb,  
    through worlds,  
Only begging, Mother,  
    must I be born again?

But the Tantric sects of Hinduism and Buddhism teach that the suffering of the passions can be turned into joy. Therefore, the poem ends with an affirmation of life that ends the section:

Snyder says: you bear me, nurse me  
I meet you, always love you,  
    you dance  
on my chest and thigh

Forever born again.

It was during his trip to India that Snyder became a close student of Tantra, an approach used by certain Hindu and Buddhist sects. He finds the Tantric approach of Vajrayana ("Diamond Vehicle") Buddhism, a sect of Northern India and Tibet, particularly appealing, although he has also studied the Tantric practices of devotees of Shiva. Tantra plunges into the world of experience, and the practitioner takes part in symbolic rites that transmute the world of the passions into an enlightened state. "Buddhist Tantra," Snyder says in *Earth House Hold* (p. 105), "is probably the finest and most modern

statement of this ancient shamanistic-yogic-gnostic-socioeconomic view: that mankind's mother is Nature and Nature should be tenderly respected; that man's life and destiny is growth and enlightenment in self-disciplined freedom; that the divine has been made flesh and that flesh is divine; that we not only should but *do* love one another." Tantra bridges a serious gap in Snyder's outlook. As a seeker of Oriental wisdom, he has studied Buddhist traditions that often teach the transcendence of the world and its passions, while his interest in the animistic attitudes of the North American Indian hunting tribes encourages a reverence for and an involvement with the experiential world. For Vajrayana, all aspects of life can be sacramental, and all of life is interdependent. Interdependence makes an animistic view philosophically plausible: because all things are alive, as an Indian told Jaime de Angulo (*Indian Tales*, pp. 241-42), down to the rocks themselves, all things are sacred.

It is doubtful that many readers will be turned into Tantric Buddhists by Snyder's poems, just as Pound's *Cantos* made few if any converts for Confucianism. Snyder's personal synthesis of Buddhism and American Indian lore is imaginative and appealing, nevertheless. His greatest influence on other contemporary poets lies in his attempts to make Indian lore and attitudes available as a source for poetry. He offers his readers a chance to enter imaginatively into modes of thought that offer some alternative views of the world, and that is the kind of conversion a poet might desire.

The final section of *The Back Country*, entitled simply "Back," deals with his return to America in 1964. There are tender love poems that come as a relief after the harrowing poems of thwarted passion in "Kali." There are also some ambitious long poems. "For the Chinese Comrades" presents Snyder's complex attitudes toward the Chinese revolution. Its blend of details from the poet's youth with simultaneous events in China seems incongruous: Mao starts out for Beijing as Snyder

removes a girl's brassiere. "For the West" is a better poem, a superbly constructed view of Western culture from the classical days of "Thracian girls" down to modern America, the contemporary "oil blossom" on the waters, a beautiful yet polluting pattern that may fade into clear water. The cycles of Occidental history, Snyder says, are all forms of the same "ball bounce rhyme." The last long poem, "Through the Smoke Hole," is one of Snyder's finest works. He summarizes the cosmology of the Pueblo Indians and then evokes their geographical setting and way of life in a span of two pages. Then the section is brought to an end with a poem about an oyster feast, a reminder of the potential beneficence of nature, for it offered the feasters "ALL WE WANTED." The book began with "A Berry Feast," we should remember.

After the four sections of his own work, Snyder provides a selection of translations from the Japanese of Miyazawa Kenji (1896-1933), a Buddhist poet. The versions are interesting in themselves and as evidence of an interesting affinity. The Japanese poet writes about pine needles, daydreaming on the trail, working in the fields — themes strikingly similar to Snyder's. Miyazawa Kenji's Iwate Prefecture in Northern Japan was just as much a frontier area as was Snyder's back country of the American Northwest.

In 1968, Snyder returned permanently to the United States, bringing with him his wife, Masa Uehara, and their infant son, Kai. The return coincided with two forms of social ferment: the ecology movement and the attention given to the so-called Hippies. Snyder had been talking about ecology for years, and as a member of the Beat Generation, he qualified as a precursor of the Hippies. He became a kind of elder statesman — in his late thirties — for both movements.

He seemed a public figure for a time, giving readings and lectures, writing articles, and appearing on television. Two works on ecology and social regeneration, "Smokey the Bear



Sutra" and "Four Changes" (the latter reprinted in *Turtle Island*), were distributed anonymously and without copyright. They were reproduced all over the continent. The "Smokey the Bear Sutra" is a droll parody of Buddhist "sutras," or scriptures. Snyder's Smokey the Bear is a manifestation of the Great Sun Buddha. He protects the forest against fires, and human beings against "cars, houses, canned food, universities and shoes." The concern that the "sutra" shows for all beings, down to the blades of grass, represents both the indigenous animism of North America and the universal compassion of Asian Buddhism. "Four Changes" is a more serious work, a thoughtful program for social and individual reform. It combines the visionary projection of a rebuilt world with practical ideas for achieving the needed changes. The goal is to build a new society "within the shell of the old," as the Wobblies put it. Snyder advocates a revolution in consciousness and the control of technology, not a mere change in ownership of the means of production.

In 1969, New Directions issued *Earth House Hold*, a gathering of the poet's prose. The title of the volume is a pun on the Greek root meaning of "ecology." The earth is indeed a household, and Snyder's metaphor for the planet has older and richer associations than Buckminster Fuller's "Spaceship Earth." We are all responsible for keeping the environment livable, but we tend (shifting the metaphor a little) to foul our own nest. This theme of keeping house is apparent in the very first selection, a "Lookout's Journal," dating back to 1952-53. The journal tells about Snyder's own housekeeping in his days as a forest lookout, and on the very first page the problem of environmental abuse appears. Sherman Paul has called the "Lookout's Journal" a "brief Walden," and the compliment seems appropriate enough. The last essay in *Earth House Hold* is a kind of communal *Walden* in which the poet's account of life

on Suwa-no-se Island suggests that the tribal spirit can be re-captured by modern dropouts.

The other essays explore a number of subjects, including Buddhism, wilderness treks, books on folklore, and "Tanker Notes." Two subjects deserve special scrutiny — Snyder's belief in a Great Subculture and his ideas about poetry and the primitive. The Subculture, Snyder claims, in an essay entitled "Why Tribe," has been a part of society since the late Neolithic, or perhaps even earlier. "This is the tradition that runs without break from Paleo-Siberian shamanism and Magdalenian cave-painting; through megaliths and Mysteries, astronomers, ritualists, alchemists and Albigensians; gnostics and vagantes, right down to Golden Gate Park." The Subculture "has taught that man's natural being is to be trusted and followed; that we need not look to a model or rule imposed from outside in searching for the center. . . ." The members of the Subculture may have, depending on the time and place, practiced shamanism, witchcraft, drug-taking, yoga, Zen meditation, or any number of other techniques for exploring human possibilities. The quest of these seekers after illumination runs counter to civilization, a result which, Snyder declares, makes human nature suspect and induces the individual to rely on the accumulated experience and working assumptions given by his culture. Anthropology, by giving a hearing to all sorts of cultural possibilities, encourages the view that there are dimensions of life not understood by civilizations. "Everything we have thought about man's welfare needs to be rethought. The tribe, it seems, is the newest development in the Great Subculture. We almost unintentionally linked ourselves to a transmission of gnosis, a potential social order, and techniques of enlightenment, surviving from prehistoric times" ("Why Tribe," p. 116).

The new tribalism is another term for the phenomenon of the mid-sixties that the press referred to as the "Hippie movement." Snyder and some of his friends, such as Allen Gins-

berg, from the days of the Beat Generation were part of the ferment of that movement. While Snyder would surely not retract any of his claims for the importance of the Subculture that he traces through history, he might not be so optimistic in the less exuberant present. There is an overwhelming enthusiasm in the articles on the Subculture collected in *Earth House Hold*. Dramatic social changes were underway, and while some attitudes have indeed changed, the mainstream of American culture has proved resistant to tribalism. In his later prose writings, Snyder has concentrated on ecological issues in talking about social reform.

In "Poetry and the Primitive," Snyder sees poetry as a discipline surviving from ancient times, as a way of getting in touch with the inner and outer worlds. It goes against the alienation from world and self that civilization in his view encourages, with its tendencies toward specialization, which narrows human possibilities, and toward valuing the rules of the society over individual perceptions. Like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Snyder assumes that the poet is a "representative man," an example of human wholeness. (In an early version of "Poetry and the Primitive," delivered as a lecture at the Berkeley Poetry Conference in 1965, Snyder referred approvingly to Emerson's essay, "The Poet," in which it is claimed that a poet "stands among partial men for the complete man. . . .") Snyder praises primitive cultures for making it possible for every member of the group to perform most of the basic activities of life: one learns what body and mind can do. His own poems present a wide range of human activities, including the kind of physical labor that rarely gets into poetry. Snyder asserts that the poet must be attentive to the fundamentals of life: "Poets, as few others, must live close to the world that primitive men are in: the world, in its nakedness, which is fundamental for all of us—birth, love, death; the sheer fact of being alive."

These ideas, which can be traced back to the Romantic

movement, if not to Paleolithic times, include the admiration for the Noble Savage, the distrust of social conventions, the faith in human potential, the poet as bardic singer. There is, of course, a case to be made for civilization and for literary tradition. But Snyder wants to offer us different perspectives, and he has influenced younger poets profoundly. The field of "ethnopoetics," i.e., the study of primitive poetries, has influenced a number of writers. The oral traditions of the North American Indian cultures have been especially influential in poetry of the past decade. Young poets almost compulsively write about Indians.

The bards discussed in Graves' *The White Goddess* had muses, earthly or divine women who inspired their poetry. Snyder also thinks of his art as muse-inspired. In a dazzlingly eclectic discussion, Snyder suggests that poetry is voice, that "voice" in Hindu tradition is a goddess, Vāk, that Vāk is a form of the Goddess Sarasvati, the lover of Brahma, that Sarasvati means "the flowing one," and that "wife," "wave," and "vibrator" are related words in Indo-European etymology. We should not mistake a play upon meanings for an argument. Snyder's puns in "Poetry and the Primitive" lay the groundwork for his next collection of poems, *Regarding Wave*, published in 1970. In it the motifs of the wife, the wave, the vibration, and the flow are pervasive. He means to express the view of reality as a flow of energy—or vibrations in space—that Oriental philosophy and modern physics hold in common. The world is a dynamic marriage of forces.

Both his sojourn in Japan and his return to Western America are subjects for poems in this remarkable volume. The poet's interest in Tantra leads him to examine the world in more detail than ever before. The detail of many of Snyder's early poems, especially in *Riprap*, was often static. The panoramic view was favored. But *Regarding Wave* shows a sensitivity to minute details, like the grains of sand in "Sand," and the poet

is as likely to describe grasses, bark-scale, or stones as he is to describe mountain vistas. He is interested in showing a world in flux, a world of energy vibrations in the void. The first poem of the book, "Wave," opens with a tracing of the wave-form in several objects:

Grooving clam shell,  
    streakt through marble,  
    sweeping down ponderosa pine bark-scale  
    rip-cut tree grain  
        sand-dunes, lava  
        flow  
Wave     wife.  
        woman — wyfman —  
"veiled; vibrating; vague"  
    sawtooth ranges pulsing;  
        veins on the back of the hand.

Such a passage seems at first glance to be rather obscure. Snyder points to the wave-form as a common pattern in the world. Physics tells us that it is the fundamental pattern, in fact. And the image of woman represents the wave-form, the mystery ("veiled"), the energy ("vibrating") and the ineffability ("vague"—with a pun on the French word for "wave," *vague*) of reality. Woman is both reality and the poetic voice (sound is a pattern of vibrations). Snyder's *Regarding Wave* is indeed aptly titled. Sound waves and ocean waves can be found in a number of poems, and the image of the muse and wife, the "wave" with whom the poet is joined in a sacramental relationship, is supremely important. Even the birth of the poet's son, Kai, is conveyed through the symbol of dolphins leaping from a wave, as Bob Steuding has pointed out (*Gary Snyder*, p. 139). Buddhism teaches that all things are the voice of the Dharma, or teaching, for those who can hear it, and the title poem of *Regarding Wave* makes this point: "The voice

of the Dharma / the voice / *now* A shimmering bell through all." All things can show the nature of reality, for all things are interconnected and embody the wave-form pattern.

Interconnectedness is a major theme in these poems. Buddhism stresses interdependence, and Tantra enacts it in ceremonies. Nor should we overlook the animism of North American Indian religion, in which everything has a spirit and everything has a kinship relation. Snyder dramatizes interrelationships with several recurrent images in addition to the wave symbol. The transmission of seeds is one example, in "Seed Pods," "Sours of the Hills," and "Beating Wings." Living beings spread seeds from one place to another, often by accident—seeds caught in hair or fur, or excreted after eating. The act of eating is itself an important interchange. A food chain by its very nature links many beings. Poems such as "Song of the Taste" and "Shark Meat" celebrate eating as a kind of sacred act.

All the activities of life—sex, work, rest, feasting, bearing children—have a sacramental quality in this book. The activities of commune members on Suwa-no-se Island are described with intensity and joy in "Rainbow Body," a poem whose title refers to the transfigured state that an adept in the Tantric practices of the Vajrayana Buddhist sect wants to attain. The implication of the poem is that the work and rest of the commune members reaches toward such an ideal. The most moving poems in the book are the ones dealing with the marriage of Snyder and Masa Uehara and with the subsequent birth of their son, Kai. Family relationships have an emotional weight that requires no knowledge of Tantra to be felt in full by the reader.

Many of the poems extend the stylistic tendencies of *The Back Country*. The poet tends to use a broken line, with images distributed freely and artfully across the page. Some of the poems are clusters of images rather than a series of gram-

matically complete statements. Such practices work especially well when the writer wants to deal with the texture and process of a physical world closely examined. There is a lyrical quality to many of the poems that should also be noted. Instead of quoting American Indian songs, he makes up his own: the second section of *Regarding Wave* contains six poems originally printed in *Poetry* as "Songs of Clouds and Water." The traditional term for a Zen monk is "unsui," literally meaning "cloud" and "water." In "Spring Sesshin at Shokoku-ji," published in *Earth House Hold*, Snyder explains the origin of the term: it is "taken from a line of an old Chinese poem, 'To drift like clouds and flow like water.'" Something of the free life of the Zen wanderer is conveyed by these poems, and the motif of "flowing," which plays a major role in the book, is present also. The poems celebrate clouds, landscapes, sexuality, and the creative zest of the phenomenal world. Occasional flashes of rhyme or consonance add to the lyric quality of these fine songs of praise.

Three sections of the book are entitled "Regarding Wave." The fourth and final section, "Long Hair," does not break with the themes and images of the earlier work by any means, but it takes up the poet's return to the United States and extolls the energies of the wild landscape. In *Earth House Hold*, Snyder states that "Long hair is to accept, go *through* the powers of nature." Hence the yogins who worship Shiva, the lamas of Tibetan Buddhist sects, and the ancient shamans all wore long hair. Snyder's "Long Hair" poems are an affirmation of the natural, and they had a particular social meaning for Americans when they were published. Long hair was taken to be a badge of the Bohemian counter-culture, the so-called Hippies. Snyder returned to an America where the wilderness could still create visions of renewal, as in "All the Spirit Powers Went to Their Dancing Place," but there was simultaneously the kind of anger and greed noted in Snyder's poem

about his return, "In the Night, Friend." Still, in "Poke Hole Fishing After the March," a conservative roofing contractor and the poet could share a beer and some friendly conversation, and in "Deer Trails" he reminds us that the ancient deer trails are still possible patterns of movement in spite of the freeways built across them.

The "Long Hair" section is followed by a set of poems called "Target Practice." They show that the author realizes that while "every day is a good day," not every poem is a major effort. But some of these casual efforts have great appeal: "Looking for Nothing" and "Some good things to be said for the Iron Age" need not have been segregated with the near misses.

In 1972, Snyder published a limited edition of poems called *Manzanita*. These poems and others were collected with a number of prose pieces as *Turtle Island* (1974), which won the Pulitzer Prize for that year. The news took some time to reach the poet in his Japanese style house at Kitkitdizze in the foothills of the Sierras, where he lives with his wife and two sons. The move to the mountains appropriately symbolizes the poet's commitment to life in the American wilderness. For years he has been making himself familiar with the geography, geology, flora, fauna, and history of the area of Northern California in which he now lives. Some of this knowledge comes out in the "Plain Talk" prose section of *Turtle Island*: the brief essay, "What's Meant by 'Here'," provides a sketch of the region. In his essay on "The Wilderness," he suggests that one role of the poet is to serve as spokesman for the mute beings of the wild country. They cannot speak for themselves; so the arts can provide imaginative projections into their lives. There are precedents for such projections, ranging from cave paintings to the corn and deer dances of the Pueblo Indians. Snyder, it might be noted, has accepted an appointment to the California Arts Council.

The poems in *Turtle Island* are mostly concerned with serv-



ing his wild constituency, by describing it lovingly, or by attacking those who threaten it. Poems such as "Anasazi" praise the "ancient ones" of the American Southwest, the pre-Columbian Indians who were "up to your hips in Gods," who lived in intimate association with natural forces. Unfortunately, contemporary man is likely to leave "The Dead by the Side of the Road," to run down animals unknowingly on the highways at night. Or coyote cries may be silenced by the government trapper. One response to the situation is to try to understand. In "I Went into the Maverick Bar," Snyder tells of a time he visited a bar in Farmington, New Mexico, to make himself familiar again with the folk ways of America, its "short-haired joy and roughness." But he leaves, ready for the "real work" again. That real work involves living not in "America," the country that Europeans have made at the expense of the land, but on "Turtle Island," the aboriginal name for the continent.

The life he lives at Kitkitdizze is detailed in a number of poems. In an age of "confessional poetry," poems in which the author admits to serious moral or emotional weaknesses, an age in which a number of leading poets have committed suicide, Snyder wants to affirm harmony and wholeness. Family love and tenderness are described in "The Bath," and the poet even writes a "Prayer for the Great Family," patterned on a Mohawk text, expressing gratitude to the earth, the elements, the plants, the wild beings, the Great Sky. This side of Snyder's writing helps make him a cult figure; it also arouses the antagonism of some reviewers, who react cynically to such positive emotion. We are not, after all, really attuned to a poetry of praise, which may seem sentimental in the face of some of the problems and horrors of the twentieth century.

However, this poet is aware enough of our losses and has helped to count them. He can express anger on behalf of his constituency in a manner worthy of Vajrayana Buddhism, a

religion for which anger is an instructive and purifying force, even a form of wisdom. Poems like "Steak" and "The Call of the Wild" condemn callous attitudes toward other beings, and in "Mother Earth: Her Whales," the anger gets out of hand and turns the poem into a weak harping on glib stereotypes ("robots in suits"). More effective is the first logging song from "Toward Climax," in which the practice of "clear-cutting" forests, taking out everything, becomes a metaphor for the Vietnam war:

Clear-cut

Forestry. "How  
Many people  
Were harvested  
In Vietnam?"

Clear-cut. "Some  
Were children,  
Some were over-ripe."

The term, "clear-cut," has multiple meanings, of course. The poet ironically reminds us that the moral issues in Vietnam were thought at the beginning to be clear, and the precise statistics of the war, the body-counts, reflected a cost-accountancy mentality, the same habit of mind that finds clear-cut logging desirable because it is most profitable.

The *Turtle Island* collection is a mixture, then, of praise and blame: praise for the wilderness and for a life of human wholeness lived in it, and blame for those who threaten such a life. One problem for critics of such a poetry has been the need to come to terms with a poet who does praise, who does not deal obsessively with alienation, neurosis, and conflict. Charles Altieri's important essay, "Gary Snyder's Lyric Poetry: Dialectic as Ecology," is one effort to explore some of his metaphors and techniques for expressing harmony rather than tension.

Another problem is the central role of the poet's life in his work. After all, *Turtle Island*, like Thoreau's *Walden*, is meant to present the details of an exemplary life. Snyder has a following that looks to him for moral leadership and intellectual direction. Even noted scholars like Thomas Parkinson and Sherman Paul find themselves discussing the man's personality, using terms like "open" and "richness of spirit." William Carlos Williams' *In the American Grain* (1925) suggested that America occasionally produces a "great voluptuary" like Daniel Boone or the young Sam Houston, an individual who wants to live happily in the land as the Indians lived in it. Snyder is a highly articulate and creative example of this type, a man who represents at least the possibility of a culture related to the land, and not imposed on it. This is what Thomas Parkinson points to when he says, with some pardonable overstatement, that Snyder "has created a new culture" ("The Poetry of Gary Snyder," p. 617).

Snyder's latest book, *The Old Ways*, continues his probes into saner cultural alternatives. The six essays touch in various ways on new approaches to life on this planet, though the newness is actually very ancient. There are brief pieces: a tribute to the North Beach ferment of the San Francisco Renaissance; a eulogy to the poet D. A. Levy as a force for freedom; an essay on "The Yogin and the Philosopher," suggesting that meditative practices, science, and shamanism should all be taken into account in a sane view of the world. The three longer essays are important explorations into Snyder's poetic and biological concerns. They are based on talks and seem a little slacker than Snyder's customary informal but lean prose.

"The Politics of Ethnopoetics," delivered to a conference on ethnopoetry, reminded the listeners that more is involved in their discipline than the recording and analysis of tribal and oral poetries. Because primitive cultures are endangered all over the world, they need allies against cultural genocide —

and in some cases, against literal genocide. And the ultimate value of primitive poetry for us, Snyder implies, comes from the intimate knowledge of the world that it contains. He suggests that it is time for us to make our own "primitive poetry," songs that are rooted in the land and that speak for human and non-human beings. The result will be "re-inhabitation," a way of life suited to the environment.

The essay on "Re-inhabitation" explores that concept a little further, talking of the sacred aspects of living in a particular place. Science now offers a spiritual dimension to life, Snyder says, because biology suggests that the cycles of life — the interchanges of air, water, food — are awe-inspiring and we must learn to see them so. The proper values are gratitude, responsibility, and "keeping contact with the sources of energy that flow into your own life (i.e. dirt, water, flesh)." As a Westerner, Snyder is aware not only of the beauty of the natural world — since so much of the remaining wilderness is west of the Mississippi — but also of the fragility of it, since the West has been heavily exploited by farming, mining, logging, and ranching.

But he has a streak of optimism. The last essay in *The Old Ways*, "The Incredible Survival of Coyote," deals with Snyder's familiar friend, the tricky, durable, much-maligned coyote. The subject of the essay is poetry about coyotes, but the tenacity and survival skills of the actual animal play an important role in the discussion. Coyote tales and poems started with the Indian tribes. Now coyote lore is an important strain in American writing, especially among the Western poets, most of them junior to Snyder, whom he discusses in his essay. The coyote is an appropriate symbol for the significance of Snyder's work in poetry and prose, because the coyote lives at the margins of the dominant culture and reminds us through its wild but appealing songs that there are possibilities

outside the campfire of civilization. As a mythical figure, it embodies the natural, the sacred, and the human. Its voice is worth heeding.

## Selected Bibliography

### MAJOR WORKS BY SNYDER

- Riprap*. Ashland, Massachusetts: Origin Press, 1959. Rpt. with *Cold Mountain Poems*, San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1965.
- Myths & Texts*. New York: Totem Press, 1960. Rpt., New York: New Directions, 1978.
- Six Sections from Mountains and Rivers Without End*. San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1965. Expanded rpt., *Six Sections From Mountains and Rivers Without End Plus One*, San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1970.
- The Back Country*. New York: New Directions, 1968.
- Earth House Hold*. New York: New Directions, 1969.
- Regarding Wave*. New York: New Directions, 1970.
- "Now, India." *Caterpillar*, No. 19 (October 1972), 1-99.
- Turtle Island*. New York: New Directions, 1974.
- The Old Ways*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1977.
- He Who Hunted Birds in His Father's Village*. Bolinas, California: Grey Fox Press, 1979.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Kherdian, David. *Six San Francisco Poets*. Fresno, California: the Giligia Press, 1969.
- For a more recent, annotated selective bibliography, see Steuding, Gary Snyder, under CRITICISM below.

### INTERVIEWS AND LETTERS

- Bartlett, Lee. "Interview: Gary Snyder." *California Quarterly*, No. 9 (Spring 1975), 43-50.

- Bertholf, Robert, ed. "Letters from Gary Snyder." *Io*, No. 14 (Summer 1972), 76-113.
- Geneson, Paul. "An Interview with Gary Snyder." *The Ohio Review*, 18 (Fall 1977), 67-105.
- Graham, Dom Aelred. *Conversations Christian and Buddhist*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968.
- Grossinger, Richard. "Gary Snyder: On Earth Geography." *Io*, No. 12 (February 1972), 5-18.
- Husson, Roland. "Amerique, Ile Tortue." *Entretiens*, No. 34 (1975), 225-32.
- Tarn, Nathaniel. "From Anthropologist to Informant: A Field Record of Gary Snyder." *Alcheringa*, No. 4 (Autumn 1972), 104-13.

#### BACKGROUND READINGS

- Allen, Donald M., ed. *The New American Poetry*. New York: Grove Press, 1960.
- Angulo, Jaime de. *Indian Tales*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1953.
- Barbeau, Marius. *Tsimshian Songs*. Publications of the American Ethnological Society, XVIII. New York, 1951.
- Bharati, Agehananda. *The Tantric Tradition*. London: Rider & Co., 1965.
- Boas, Franz. *Ethnology of the Kwakiutl*. 35th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, Part I. Washington, D.C., 1913-14.
- Graves, Robert. *The White Goddess*. London: Faber, 1948.
- Hallowell, A.I. "Bear Ceremonialism in the Northern Hemisphere." *American Anthropologist*, N.S. 28 (1926), 1-192.
- Lyon, Thomas J. *John Muir*. Western Writers Series, No. 3. Boise, Idaho: Boise State College, 1972.
- Muir, John. *The Mountains of California*. New York: Century, 1894.
- Neihardt, John. *Black Elk Speaks*. New York: William Morrow, 1932.
- Seton, Ernest Thompson. *The Book of Woodcraft and Indian Lore*. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1912.
- Suzuki, D. T. *Zen Buddhism*. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1956.
- Swanton, John R. *Haida Texts and Myths*. Bulletin 29 of the Bureau of American Ethnology. Washington, D. C., 1905.
- White, Lynn, Jr. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." *Science*, 155 (March 10, 1967), 1203-07.

#### CRITICISM

- Almon, Bert. "Buddhism and Energy in the Recent Poetry of Gary Snyder." *Mosaic*, 11 (Fall 1977), 117-25.
- Altieri, Charles. "Gary Snyder's Lyric Poetry: Dialectic As Ecology." *The Far Point*, No. 4 (Spring/Summer 1970), 55-65.
- . "Gary Snyder's *Turtle Island*: The Problem of Reconciling the Roles of Seer and Prophet." *Boundary* 2, 4 (Spring 1976), 761-77.
- Gitzen, Julian. "Gary Snyder and the Poetry of Compassion." *The Critical Quarterly*, 15 (Winter 1973), 341-57.
- Kern, Robert. "Clearing the Ground: Gary Snyder and the Modernist Imperative." *Criticism*, 19 (Spring 1977), 158-77.
- . "Recipes, Catalogues, Open Form Poetics: Gary Snyder's Archetypal Voice." *Contemporary Literature*, 18 (Spring 1977), 173-97.
- Lyon, Thomas J. "The Ecological Vision of Gary Snyder." *Kansas Quarterly*, 2 (1970), 117-24.
- . "Gary Snyder, a Western Poet." *Western American Literature*, 3 (Fall 1968), 207-16.
- McCord, Howard. *Some Notes to Gary Snyder's Myths & Texts*. Berkeley: Sand Dollar, 1971.
- Parkinson, Thomas. "The Poetry of Gary Snyder." *The Southern Review*, 4 (Summer 1968), 616-32.
- Paul, Sherman. *Repossessing and Renewing*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976. Pp. 195-235.
- Rothberg, Abraham. "A Passage to More than India: The Poetry of Gary Snyder." *Southwest Review*, 61 (Winter 1976), 26-38.
- Scott, Robert Ian. "The Uncollected Early Poetry of Gary Snyder." *The North American Review*, 262 (Fall 1977), 80-83.
- Steuding, Bob. *Gary Snyder*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976.
- Wright, James (pseud. "Crunk"). "The Work of Gary Snyder." *The Sixties*, No. 6 (Spring 1962), 25-42.



Boise State University

PS374.W4I3 no.37 Another copy in  
Almon, Bert,  
Gory Snyder /



3 9372 00173366 4

Gen

s H. Maguire

1. VARDIS FISHER: THE FRONTIER AND REGIONAL WORKS by Wayne Chatterton
2. MARY HALLOCK FOOTE by James H. Maguire
3. JOHN MUIR by Thomas J. Lybn
4. WALLACE STEGNER by Merrill and Lorene Lewis
5. BRET HARTE by Patrick Morrow
6. THOMAS HORNSBY FERRIL by A. Thomas Trusky
7. OWEN WISTER by Richard Etulain
8. WALTER VAN TILBURG CLARK by L. L. Lee
9. N. SCOTT MOMADAY by Martha Scott Trimble
10. PLAINS INDIAN AUTOBIOGRAPHIES by Lynne Woods O'Brien
11. H. L. DAVIS by Robert Bain
12. KEN KESEY by Bruce Carnes
13. FREDERICK MANFRED by Joseph M. Flora
14. WASHINGTON IRVING: THE WESTERN WORKS by Richard Csercroft
15. GEORGE FREDERICK RUXTON by Neal Lambert
16. FREDERIC REMINGTON by Fred Erisman
17. ZANE GREY by Ann Ronald
18. STEWART EDWARD WHITE by Judy Alter
19. ROBINSON JEFFERS by Robert J. Brophy
20. JACK SCHAEFER by Gerald Haslam
21. EDWARD F. RICKETTS by Richard Astro
22. BILL NYE by David B. Kesterson
23. GERTRUDE ATHERTON by Charlotte S. McClure
24. HAMLIN GARLAND: THE FAR WEST by Robert F. Gish
25. JOHN G. NEIHARDT by Lucile F. Aly
26. E. W. HOWE by Martin Bocco
27. GEORGE CATLIN by Joseph R. Millchapp
28. JOSIAH GREGG AND LEWIS H. GARRARD by Edward Halvey Foster
29. EDWARD ABBEY by Garth McCann
30. CHARLES WARREN STODDARD by Robert L. Gale
31. VIRGINIA SORENSEN by L. L. and Sylvia Lee
32. ALFRED HENRY LEWIS by Abe C. Ravitz
33. CHARLES ALEXANDER EASTMAN by Marion W. Copeland
34. RUTH SUCKOW by Abigail Ann Hamblen
35. DON BERRY by Glen A. Love
36. ENOS MILLS by Peter Wild
37. GARY SNYDER by Bert Almon
38. CHARLES MARION RUSSELL by Robert L. Gale
39. JACK KEROUAC by Harry Russell Huebel
40. C. L. SONNICHSEN by Joyce Gibson Roach

#### IN PREPARATION

ROBERT CANTWELL by Merrill Lewis; BENJAMIN CAPPS by Ernest B. Speck; DOROTHY JOHNSON by Judy Alter; JOSEPH WOOD KRUTCH by J. Golden Taylor and Paul Pavitch; JANET LEWIS by Charles Crow; JOAQUIN MILLER by Benjamin S. Lawson, Jr.; TILLIE OLSEN by Abigail Ann Hamblen; WILL ROGERS by Elton Miles; SCANDINAVIAN IMMIGRANT LITERATURE by Christer Mosberg; LESLIE SILKO by Per Seyersted; GEORGE R. STEWART by John Caldwell.

A LIST OF FORTHCOMING TITLES IS AVAILABLE FROM THE EDITORS UPON REQUEST.

EACH PAMPHLET \$2.00

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY  
BOISE, IDAHO 83725