

GARY SNYDER'S POETIC CRAFT COUPLED WITH REVOLUTIONARY AND PROGRESSIVE POETIC IDEALISM : AN APPRAISAL

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ABSTRACT

This article is nothing but an in depth analysis of the literary achievement of the universally acknowledged poet Gary Snyder and his poetic craft which is concerned with arrangement of words springs from the centre of life in its depth and intensity. His poetic experience and the poetic composition involve intuitive moments and rational elements in which his poetry is the best words in the best order to make the idea very flexible. This article also throws light on his poetic outlook and craft which may be taken up as a blend of Zen Buddhism and his intense experience of the American West.

Gary Snyder, universally acknowledged as one of the poets of distinction and considerable repute in modern American Literature, is said to have established himself a literary figure and recognizably a man commanding due honour and respect and admiration from all literary circles. The famous critic Dickey is right in acknowledging him as ‘the best of poets’ in American Literature while Louis Simpson calls him “one of the true poets” (P18). The primary reason for such a reputation is that Snyder’s poetry and prose works are very relevant to the modern situation because of their thought-content. He endears himself to the readers by means of his profound love and concern for the well-being of the human race. He impresses upon the readers with a simple and forthright style. He is, no doubt, the poet who fulfils the natural demand of the readers in being true, attentive and highly responsive to life.

Snyder is seen to be a revolutionary and reformer who spread progressive ideas through his poetry. The revolutionary reform is that poetry is treated as an extension of manual labour. Poetry is no doubt, a special endeavour but its origin and expression are vitally connected with the work-a-day preoccupations of manual labourers. He himself states, “I feel very close to the rhythm of work... I do a lot of work with my hands sometimes it’s firewood cutting, sometimes it’s working in a cars-a lot of variety” (Packard 277). Snyder’s ‘living with working’ becomes his primary act and ‘writing’ a secondary endeavour and there is felt to be an integral link between experience and expression and his poetry has been shown as a life like activity rooted in common man’s sensibility.

Snyder’s interest in imagism must not be over emphasized. For sometimes, the imagistic creed of Ezra Pound offered some poetic relief. But the soul of Snyder was longing for a revitalizing of other elements in his consciousness. Poetry, as he feels and puts it, must bring the whole soul of man to activity. But it is usually the most profound and comprehensive poetry which stirs the entire human consciousness in its totality. A rich poetic vision is there in Snyder’s poetry. But the expression of this vision takes a concrete channel unobscured by abstractions. Snyder regards poetry as Sadhana, masonry and as an extension of physical labour. Snyder believed in Pound’s

doctrine that art must control the expression of emotion. It is on this basis that Snyder treated poetry as masonry. Sustain skill is necessary for composing poems. In this respect, poetry resembles Sadhana which means intense concentration without diversions. But there are deeper reasons for Snyder regarding poetry as an extension of physical labour. His poetry hums with the zeal and liveliness of the working class community. His poetic rhythms also reflect the rhythm of physical labour.

Snyder poetic craft is very close to the rhythm of life and nature. As his poetic vision happens to be eco-mystical, he loves physical things which appear in a totally different perspective. Like D.H. Lawrence, Snyder felt that physical things have a life and an awareness of their own. Physical things are not abstract but concrete. But the concreteness in physical things is evident only to a man of higher consciousness. For example, a scientist is not open to this awareness which physical things embody. Snyder's poetic technique has a close relation to the laying of the granite stones on hard slabs. This reveals that his poetry draws inspiration from manual occupations. The idea of touch, taste, smell, concrete perception, deep penetration and a feeling for warmth get revealed in the manual labour. Moreover, a certain human element is predominant in this occupation. Snyder, therefore, believes that a poetic voice is essentially 'a human voice', an example of which can be cited from his poem "Hay for the Horses".

The poetic craft of Snyder has an eco-mystical base. It implies that poetic craft is identical with masonry and manual labour. Snyder observes three important processes in the making of poetry, which are as follows:

- i. Words must be laid down or arranged before the mind like rocks.
- ii. Words are placed in significant order before the body of the mind.
- iii. Words have their manifestation in space and time like leaf or wall.

The following passage is quoted here to make the poetic process of Snyder clear:

"Lay down these words
 Before your mind like rocks
 Placed solid by hands
In choice of place, set
 Before the body of the mind
 In space and time:
Solidity of bark, leaf, wall
 riprap of things" (Riprap 30)

The poetic purpose of Snyder follows the two stages:

- i. Concretization of abstractions
- ii. Presentation of concrete things in a realistic sensuous background with purpose and delight.

The passage quoted above embodies Snyder's method of poetic operation. The purpose of poetry is to portray life in a meaningful and lovely manner. Snyder establishes a link between poetic craft and manual labour. Any work that is performed draws its inspiration from its inner being. Similarly poetic craft draws inspiration from inner being. Manual labour is concerned with a particular way of doing the work with hands and instruments. Poetic craft is concerned with arrangement of words and keeping them in a purposive order. No manual work, according to Snyder, is worthwhile if it does not spring from the motivation of the inner heart. In the same manner, no poetic technique is worthwhile if it does not draw its nourishment from the prompting

of the inner heart. Snyder wants to achieve a perfect correspondence between the inner being and the external faculties of man.

A poetic thought comes from the stirring of the heart but it does not come all on a sudden without any previous background. Snyder is very flexible in this respect. He says that a poetic thought may have a previous background or it may be the result of the direct experience of the moment. He is not in a mood to reject the background which the human mind contains in the form of memory. In a sense, this is in agreement with Wordsworth's theory of poetry. Poetry is a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings and emotions. They take their origin from emotions recollected in tranquillity. This Wordsworthian view has had a great impact on Snyder.

The poetic experience comes first and the expression of the poetic experience in concrete intelligible terms comes next. In Snyder's opinion a poet must do a lot to express concretely what he has experienced. When the process does not become a fruitful one, poetry becomes a failure. Poetry creates, according to Snyder, an emotional link between experience and expression. This is the first stage in the art of writing poetry. The second stage is whether what is written as poetry has a close relation to the living human relations and surroundings. When human experience springs from a mature understanding of life and close relation to nature, poetry becomes rich. Poetry includes the realistic nature of life in that it reflects all activities of life. In this respect, Snyder states that real poetry must have a close relation to the actual and the real.

Poetic activity, according to Snyder, is not an ivory tower activity. It springs from the centre of life in its depth and intensity. Man expresses himself and his sense of life more fully in manual labour. Therefore, poetic activity is rooted in life. Whatever activity expresses has a poetic sense. This comes very close to the view of Shelley expressed in his essay "Defence of Poetry". Snyder lays emphasis upon human labour for one important reason. The cream of life is seen in the result of manual labour. This is a lesson partly found in Emerson also. Activity and experience intensify life. Churning of milk is necessary for getting curd. The essence of life with all its multifarious activities is what makes a very profound impact upon Snyder.

Snyder is of the view that a good poet is a friend of all and all activities have due significance. The duty of a poet is to picture and portray the rhythm found in all these activities. A poet is not opposed to anything. He is supposed to be at home with everything. A man is more at home with himself when he releases his energy in the field of work. The true being of man longs for a pure and unaffected expression. It is poetry which fulfils the longing of the heart and converts all activity into something artistic and poetically exciting. The poem "In the Night Friend" shows the necessity for man observing very closely and learning to live in communion with it. Snyder makes this idea very prominent in the following passage in the same poem:

"After midnight, the "clean time of night"
Rise to see the Morning Star.
Planting the peach tree, mopping the floor.
We all
Worked hard to get ahead
Peach orchard turned roots up
And brush – piled" (P53).

Seeing the morning star, planting the peach tree, working hard to get ahead are some of the activities indicated here in this passage to bring home the point that poetry is closely connected with all human activities. Usually deep experiences are supposed to arise in deep states of passivity and inactivity. Snyder is not in disagreement with that but he extends this dimension of experience to include the range of activity which also expresses the being of man in a dynamic

way. There is a tremendous emphasis upon activity and its significance in all poems of Snyder. In this sense, Snyder is a very modern poet. Here modernity does not mean 'recentness'. Here it means the value of an ancient insight made relevant in the modern context. The modern outlook of Snyder goes in the name of ecological consciousness or eco-mystical awareness. Poetry does not ignore the surrounding environment. The most important thing is Snyder's that his poetic concept has an essential ecological background. This is Snyder's contribution to the world of modern thought. When Snyder says that poetry is an extension of manual labour, the meaning of that statement should be understood in an ecological perspective.

Snyder does not want to give a kind of one sided priority to the thinking process in the art of composing the poem. This almost looks lawrentian what is important is that intense feeling is regarded as a primary source for life. Thinking process is treated as something subordinate to it. A poet opens himself to the reality of things more fully when he allows his entire being to participate in it. Such a broad experience is rooted in feelings. Section – III in the poem 'A Stone Garden' speaks of the value a merit of being alive to things:

“Thinking about a poem I'll never write with gut on wood and hide, and plucking thumb,
Grove and Stutter for the words, invent a tune, in any tongue, this moment one time true,
Be wine or blood or rhythm drives it through A leap of words two things and their it
stops. Creating empty case and tools in shopes And holy domes, and nothing you can
name: The long old chorus blowing under foot makes high wild notes of mountains in
the sea, O Muse, a goddess gone astray” (P22)

Snyder believes in the genuiness of the poetic experience which requires to be expressed in a simple manner. Poetic experience originates in a state of wonder and imaginative exposure to reality. The poet treats the poetic experience as a product of the entire being which includes emotion, intellect, will and other related things. Thinking process is only one particular art in the experience of the whole being. Much classical poetry gave prominence to this process of thinking in both poetic experience and poetic expression. Therefore, poetry became intellectual and lost its true appeal. Snyder has perceived such a danger in classical poetry and so he wants to provide a poetic scheme in which emotion, intellect, will are marvellously synthesized. In the classical poetic process, intellectual organization is important. It implies pre-arrangement can create an element of artificiality and the thinking process becomes very predominant. Snyder provides a due balance to the classical poetic mode and says that true poetry keeps the thinking process in due relation to other faculties like emotion and intellect.

Words, according to Snyder, are indications of reality and they are used as a means for procuring an end. But he believes in the true use of means. That is why he describes the poetic process as a leap of words to things. Ultimately poetry ends in a struggle to capture the experience of reality. Snyder treats the very struggle as a poetic one because it brings the whole being of the poet into activity. He believes that things keep on changing and human life shines with different kinds of relations and patterns and there can be no fixed process to describe it. So Snyder treats the poetic process as a flexible and a fluid one. He chooses words in accordance with his inner necessity and portrays things through words in agreement with a natural poetic rhythm. The poetic experience has a natural base and the corresponding poetic expression is equally having a free and frant search for the right use of words. He does this very wonderfully in poems like "Apocalypse" where things are captured in a very simple way. But it creates tremendous poetic effect. His poetic language is true to nature. Romantic poetry is at the base of Snyder's poetic process.

According to Snyder, poetic process is simple and a natural one and it includes the entire sensibility of man and no field of life is ignored. Snyder's way of composing a poem closely corresponds to writers like Wordsworth, Emerson and Whitman. The idea of poetic concept is a

complex one as it involves different approaches which are not reconcilable on a lower plane. But all poetic creeds and conventions become immense in the context of a writer like Snyder who represents a perfect thesis of many things. Originally, the Graeco Roman aesthetics was at the bottom of all the early literary theories. Later on, the impersonal theory was replaced by a new Romantic movement. In short, Romanticism and classicism are two opposed views which lead to the rise of different poetic conceptions and conventions. Both are two different world views. The classical convention of writing poetry laid emphasis upon suitability of subject matter and appropriateness of diction. The classical theory did not endow all objects with a poetic status and the sublimity of anything was based upon a careful choice of subject-matter. The idea of choosing an elevated subject matter and exalted language had its own positive effects. But in course of time, these ideas became stale and failed to respond to things with freshness and a new vision.

The Romantic convention arose as a kind of protest against these stale classical principles. In fact, poetry became an appeal to the head and not to the heart. A longing for knowing the deepest stirrings of the human heart became imperative and so a new way of writing poetry came as a result of a new way of looking at life. It was at this time that the modern poetic creed began with the advent of Pound, Eliot and Hulme. Pound brought about a revolution in making the poetic language concrete and objective. The main reason for such a revolution is that the Romantic poetry made the language highly subjective and abstract. The classical concept of exalted diction was replaced by a language of simplicity, precision and economy. Eliot introduced the use of myths in connecting the modern predicament and situation with the ancient situations. Therefore, the modern poetic creed is the outcome of a new revolution brought about by Pound and Eliot. It is at this critical juncture that Snyder appeared on the poetic scene and surveyed the entire crisis from a unique standpoint.

One important thing in the poetic concept of Snyder is that it is more and more inclusive in its nature and he aims at a marvellous balance by synthesizing the best qualities that are found in both classical and romantic conventions. His 'Apocalypse' may be cited as examples for classical convention while his Riprap as an example for Romantic convention. Snyder accepts the view that poetry is the best words in the best order but he makes the way to achieve this idea very flexible. The poetic experience and the poetic composition involve intuitive moments and rational elements. He gives due prominence to intuition and keeps reason as a subordinate element in his poetic concept. He describes poetry as 'an intuitive organisation of words'. The most meritorious thing is that his poetic concept includes a tremendous environmental awareness of things.

Snyder does not give prominence to mental thinking in his concept of poetry because reason and intellect do not take one below certain deeper levels. Certain levels of consciousness remain inaccessible to mental thinking and so the function of a poet is to dive deep into these levels and discover their value and worth. Snyder observes in his poem, "Piute Creek" that mind has no meaning:

"A clear, attentive mind
Has no meaning but that
Which sees is truly seen" (P6)

A man can know life much more deeply and comprehensively only through certain forms of intuitive awareness. Rational thought fixes certain areas and does not permit a free exploration of life. The real role of a poet is to know the areas which reason ignores on account of incapacity to go beyond. So the poetic concept of Snyder places much emphasis upon intuitive and imagination. Reason is not ignored in total but it is not allowed to become dogmatic in its function in his concept of poetry. Snyder used to say that his poetic concept lays stress on the

actuality of things and not an abstract idea. In his concept, what is seen and felt is more valuable than what is thought.

As a poet, Snyder's main function is to be at home with everything. He keenly observes things and tries to intuitively feel their presence. The personal experience of Snyder becomes an evidence for a reader to verify and say that he has enormous intuitive powers to become one with things and intuitively identify himself with the position of others. Otherwise, he would not spoken in favour of the welfare of the animal and the plant world. A particular is chosen from the poem "The Bed in the Sky" to speak in glory of the deep thrill and ecstasy of Snyder:

"Tires crackle the mud-puddles
The northern hills gleam white
 I ought to stay outside alone
 and watch the moon all night
But the bed is full and spread and dark
 I hug you and sink in the warm
 My stomach against your big belly
 Feels our baby turn

The beauty of Snyder's poetry lies in the way external nature is represented in a very life-like picturesque manner. The Northern Hills are gleaming white. 'Gazing' and 'watching' are deep contemplative romantic activities in which the superficial self is totally absent. Watching the moon all night, the poet drops his individual self and goes out to become one with the moon. The poet sees a bed in the sky. This is after all a metaphorical representation. What is implied is that the external nature provides material support to man. The entire European civilization completely overlooked such healing experiences which bring real fulfilment to the inner psyche.

Snyder feels and thinks poetry in this complex age has a different role to play for there is a terrible disorder in human consciousness. This is primarily because of man's failure to integrate certain levels of consciousness in him. Real poetry, according to Snyder, should reflect the unconscious and aim at integrating it with the conscious level. It is in this respect that Snyder showed his profound interest in Shamanism. Shamanism offers profound clues and hints in achieving health in the unconscious realm. The particular poem "without" from Turtle Island can be taken as an example to illustrate the reason for Snyder's emphasis upon the necessity for healing:

"the silence of nature
 Within
the power within
 the power
without
the path is whatever passed....
 no end in itself
the end is grace-ease-
healing
 not saving
singing the proof
 the proof of the power within" (P6)

This poem "without" illustrates Snyder's belief in the healing power of poetry. According to him, healing is a concrete process where in all mental disorders are removed. A poet is almost a healer. Snyder says rightly:

“The poet as healer is asserting several layers of larger realms of wholeness. The first larger realm is identity with the natural world.” Demonstrating that the social system, a little human enclave, does not stand by itself apart from the plants and animals and winds and rains and rivers that surround it. Here the poet is a voice for the non-human for the natural world... that the humans are indeed children of, sons and daughters of and eternally in relationship with the earth “(Sharma 49)

In the words of Robert Bly, “Snyder is a poet who might be called devout or religious in the most elementary sense”(Bob Steuding 105). And this observation goes to the heart of mountains and rivers without end, for Snyder’s central concern are certainly religious. As he writes in “without” included in *Turtle Island*(1974), his concern is healing and not saving. Like Whitman and Robert Duncan, Snyder has assumed in mountains and rivers without end the role of Shaman, the psychic healer Shamanism is concerned with behaviour rather than belief. Essentially, it is directed toward healing. Like Shaman, Snyder as a Shaman poet, does and writes to heal some physis disorder and wounds. In “Poetry and the Primitive”, Snyder states that Shaman poet is the man whose mind reaches easily out into all manners and behaviours” (EHH 122). Snyder who has been the natural and universal connection between sinking and healing has “set himself to train it “To Snyder, therefore, “Poetry is Shamanism “ and the major concern of Shamanism was healing. So in his poetic concept, Poetry is endowed with the power of healing the chaos and disorder in human consciousness. This is salient and glorified feature in the poetic realm of Snyder.

Thus, it may be concluded that Snyder as Shaman-Poet aims at an intuitive form of knowledge quit different from rational knowledge. In intuitive knowledge, things become one where as in rational knowledge, things conflict and appear to be contradictory. An intuitive power of becoming one with things has prominence and significance in his poetic realm. His poetry represents a new cultural phenomenon and his poetic outlook and craft is shaped by Zen Buddhism. His poetry is a blend of Zen Buddhism and his intense experience of the American West. Zen Buddhism, ecological awareness, his experience of wilderness in the American West constitute the poetic structure and craft of Gary Snyder who believes in the creative process of life and thinks that all harmony is based upon the capacity of sharing kinship with all forms of life.

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