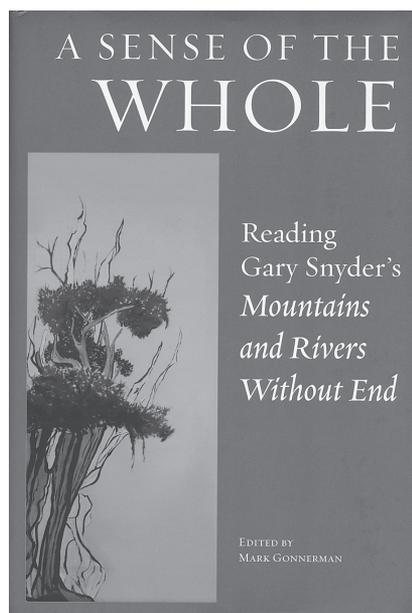


A SENSE OF THE WHOLE

Reading Gary Snyder's
Mountains and Rivers Without End

Edited by Mark Gonnerman
Counterpoint (\$28)



When Gary Snyder began giving readings of *Mountains and Rivers Without End* in 1996, he would sometimes compare the poem to whitewater rapids, saying “most of his work is like a Class III run where you can probably get through on your own, but that *Mountains and Rivers* is more like Class V: If you’re going to make it safely to take-out you will need a guide.” *A Sense of the Whole* offers not just one but many guides to the text. The book draws its contents largely from the proceedings of the Mountain and Rivers Workshop, which was organized by Mark Gonnerman in 1997 and brought together a veritable who’s who of Snyder scholars, colleagues, and friends. Taken together, their “talks, discussions, and essays . . . present a variety of ways to enter” into the watershed of this great poem.

Gonnerman’s introduction quickly establishes the singular qualities of *Mountains and Rivers Without End*. For one, the poem defies classification; it can be read as an epic poem, a “multimedia poem cycle,” a “collection of poems depicting major ecosystem types,” a “spiritual autobiography,” and more. Another remarkable feature, suggested by Gonnerman, is the integrity of the poet’s vision. Snyder first conceived of the work in 1956 while living in San Francisco, and from this genesis, Snyder composed about a poem a year over the next forty years, until the entirety was finally published in 1996. A reader cannot help but feel awe at the ways that final poem simultaneously fulfills, deepens, and even surpasses its original intent, as documented and mythologized during the Beat period by Jack Kerouac.

A Sense of the Whole is arrayed into sections that examine various dimensions of this complex work. “Hearing Native Voices” begins the critical portion of the book. In it, David Abram discusses the renewal of oral culture that the poem attempts to enact, and Jim Dodge uses Jung’s four centers of perception to evaluate the text. Tim Dean’s essay “The Other Voice” establishes that this volume will not be merely sycophantic: it considers the charges of cultural appropriation that have been levelled against Snyder for his use of Native American mythology. Dean argues that Snyder employs an impersonal voice that enables him to open “a conduit through which the other—including the otherness of nonhuman nature—may speak,” finding evidence in poems like “Bub Street Haircut” and “Elwah River.” Dean is careful to point out that this “other voice” may resemble a shamanistic approach to poetic utterance, but Snyder does not assume the stance of a “white shaman.”

The next section explores connections with Asia. Katsunori Yamazato studies the influence of Japanese Nō Theater on the structure of certain poems within *Mountains and Rivers Without End*; then the Japanese poet Nanao Sakaki shares stories and poems in reaction to Snyder’s work. Another section in the book titled “Engaging Buddhist Perspectives” helps readers to understand how the study of Zen Buddhism shaped the life, work, and environmental ethics of the poet. One especially valuable contribution from Carl Bielefeldt traces how Zen master Dōgen’s *Mountains*

and *Waters Sutra* informed Snyder’s own work. By way of explaining Dōgen’s life and views of nature, Bielefeldt helps to elucidate the many references to Dōgen’s writings that appear in the poem, such as “walking on walking / under foot earth turns.”

The meatiest section, “Exploring Poetic Roots,” brings together close readings of the poem by fellow poets Wendell Berry, Robert Haas, and Michael McClure. Each poet takes different angles to both the overall work and specific poems. Modestly titling his essay “interim thoughts” about the poem, Berry speaks not just to Snyder’s poetic vision but to how it is represented in language: “What we have here, instead, is a syntax of verbal strokes, gesturing toward a reality that is not linear and directly causative like a conventional sentence, but instead is multidimensional and accumulative, is influential in all directions, like a geological formation, an ecosystem, a city, a culture.” In a talk apparently delivered without notes but that was recorded, Haas delivers a tour de force of literary criticism, tapping into his vast knowledge of the canon to compare and contrast Snyder’s work with other epic poems of the twentieth century, like Pound’s *Cantos* and Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. In an attempt to uncover Snyder’s own writing process, he then proceeds through the notes to the poem and the first section, commenting as he goes.

In addition to the critical essays, the volume contains passages from other books on Snyder, an extensive bibliography, and a few other texts that shed light on the poem. Interviews with Snyder begin and end the book, and in the second one, Snyder responds to several of the comments that emerged during the *Mountains and Rivers* Workshop, lending the book a true sense of conversation. Tucked in an appendix at the end of volume, another essay by Gonnerman titled “Fieldwork: Gary Snyder, Libraries, and Book Learning” offers a fascinating survey of the important place textual study has had in the poet’s life: “Contrary to what may be a popular misunderstanding of Zen Buddhist life, Snyder enjoys extraordinary book knowledge and knows how to use it.”

As a collection, *A Sense of the Whole* leans toward an academic rather than a general audience, which makes sense, given its origins. To that end, it will help both scholars and more

serious readers grasp the various layers of the poem, deepening their reading experience and perhaps encouraging them to bring the work outward to their various communities. If the collection aids, even in an indirect way, in the dispersal of *Mountains and Rivers Without End* to a wider audience, this is a good thing,

especially as we enter what some are calling the anthropocene, the epoch when humans are having a geological effect on the Earth. “What [the poem] teaches and indeed insists upon is the fluency of the world and therefore the pervasiveness of human influence and the moral problem of that influence,” com-

ments Berry. Snyder envisioned the poem as a song of healing, and these essays make clear that this healing happens through a deeper awareness of the interdependence of all beings.

—Justin Wadland

A SOLEMN PLEASURE

To Imagine, Witness, and Write

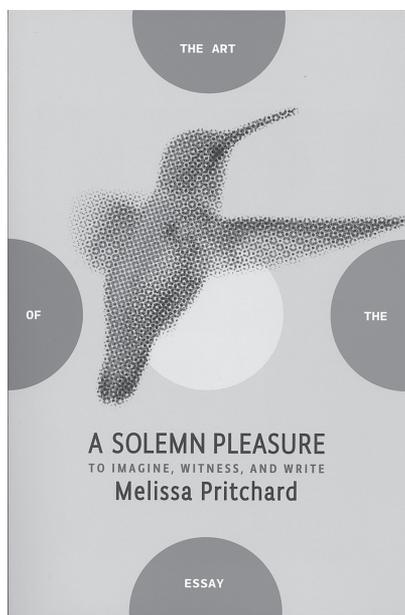
Melissa Pritchard

Bellevue Literary Press (\$16.95)

Melissa Pritchard’s first essay collection, *A Solemn Pleasure*, covers a range of subject matter, solemn and otherwise. A highly regarded novelist and short story writer, Pritchard here stitches together and lavishly embroiders fifteen nonfiction pieces, using sentences that invite underlining, re-reading, and reading aloud.

The book opens with “A Room in London,” a brief sketch of two months abroad in a small, rented studio. The essay establishes Pritchard as a beautifully descriptive stylist and deeply committed artist, retreating with pen and paper to her “anchorite’s cell, overlooking a sharp haze of London.” Later, in an essay about doing research in the British Library, she writes of feeling “part of some great congregation of worshippers—readers, scholars, and writers with common-held faith in printed, bound knowledge.”

The topics of spirituality and the writing life weave throughout the collection. “Spirit and Vision,” the only essay not previously published, addresses the role of the writer in the world, ascribing a spiritual power to words and a shaman-like responsibility to writers: “What you have chosen is a profound



vocation of healing, and your stories and poems are as sacraments, as visible blessings.” Similar themes are explored at greater length in the deeply philosophical “Time and Biology: On the Threshold of the Sacred.” Only one essay, “Elephant in the Dark,” directly offers writing advice, on point of view in fiction. “A Graven Space” is a stronger piece, a call for women, especially, to “get on with it” as artists.

Three essays address global issues of war and injustice. “Finding Ashton” recounts Pritchard’s two weeks embedded as a journalist in Afghanistan, interviewing female soldiers. “‘Still, God Helps You,’: Memories of a Sudanese Child Slave,” is the story of Manyol Mawein, his kidnapping at the age of six, his eventual escape, and his adult life in the United States, where Pritchard becomes his mentor and mother figure. “Circle of Friends” describes a trip through Ethiopia with two photographers whose mission is

to create a record of traditional ceremonies across the African continent.

These essays are important and at times emotionally devastating, fulfilling the promise of the book’s epigraph from Nadine Gordimer: “To be a writer is to enter into public life.” Pritchard’s voice as an artist, however, comes through most vividly in the work focused on her interior life, such as the process of grieving her mother’s death. The elegiac prose of the collection’s title essay follows Pritchard from her mother’s deathbed to a writers’ retreat in Scotland, “beneath a childhood sky of bright enameled blue,” where she begins to heal emotionally but is always aware that “we walk carelessly upon the dead, the world a rounded grave.”

“Doxology,” a long essay about Pritchard’s beloved miniature dachshund, Simon, provides a humorous respite. Originally published in *The Gettysburg Review* and excerpted in *O, The Oprah Magazine*, even this circles back to the topic of writing. Of her generally well-behaved dog’s unbreakable habit of “indoor watering,” Pritchard notes, “Perhaps because I am a writer, he imitates, scribbling his own minute, foreign communiqués. Perhaps his tiny liquid expressions are a rebel art form, like graffiti. And after the act, if not in hiding, he will solemnly study, read with his long nose, the runes of his pee.”

Replete with so many strengths, *A Solemn Pleasure* is not only a great way for readers to meet Melissa Pritchard, but an excellent choice to mark the launch of Bellevue Literary Press’s new series, *The Art of the Essay*, which the publisher promises will deliver “compelling, creative nonfiction from accomplished writers of fiction.”

—Tina Karelson