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Both Sides Now: On Gary Snyder's *This Present Moment*

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To finish the moment, to find the journey's end in every step of the road, to live the greatest number of good hours is wisdom. ... Since our office is with moments, let us husband them. —Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience" (1844)

In *This Present Moment: New Poems* (hereafter cited as *TPM*), Gary Snyder circles back to and corrals many of the basic themes that have defined his long life as an activist (activist artist): the Wild, reinhabitation, work, play, myth, ritual, poetics, epistemology, ethics, impermanence, connoisseurship, and the endless work of cultural transmission and translation. *Glacial Erratic*, the Tom Killion woodblock print reproduced on the cover, picks up another major theme: the interplay of mountains and rivers through attention to rock and snow. This collection of mostly wintry poems concludes on the back cover with a black-and-white photograph of the author framed by cherry blossoms at Kitkitdizze, Snyder's homestead in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains of northern California, where he has been an inhabitant since 1969. The reader's transition from winter to spring and back is a subtle reminder of the ever-changing ways in which circumstance shapes moment.

To peruse this slim, elegant volume of sixty-six numbered pages is to remember another dimension: Snyder's lifelong commitment to simplicity (voluntary, mostly) in his life and art. In recommending that we "front only the essential facts" as a way into more noble lives, Thoreau's *Walden* brought into American philosophical literature an experiment in the cultivation of those virtues that are the fruit of monastic practices worldwide (90). As is well known, Snyder began in 1955 to conduct a similar experiment in Kyoto while a scholar and lay Buddhist monk. This was arranged with help from Ruth Fuller Sasaki, the mother-in-law of Alan Watts, who established a research library at Ryosen-an, a subtemple at Daitoku-ji (Stirling). Here the young poet translated Zen texts while seated among scholars such as Philip Yampolsky, Yokoi (later Yanagida) Seizan, and Burton Watson. At the same time, Snyder entered into *kōan* practice with his teacher, Oda Sessō Rōshi, and lived a householder life with poet Joanne Kyger, whom he married in 1960 upon her arrival in Japan (she returned stateside upon their separation in 1964). This tripartite training in translation, domestic economy, and monastic self-cultivation was as important to Snyder's personal development as was his "planetary normal" childhood on ancient Pacific Northwest forest floors.¹ With this in body and mind, he became an exemplar of the Thoreauvian virtue of living lightly on planet earth.

By the time Duane Elgin published *Voluntary Simplicity* in 1981, Snyder had already, for more than a decade, enjoyed a spartan backcountry existence "on the western edge of Turtle Island /in Shasta Nation" (*TPM* 36) with his wife, Masa Uehara, and young sons Gen and Kai.² Just downhill from his hand-built home is Ring of Bone Zendo, the practice place of a rural American Buddhist community founded in 1974. This sangha and its way of life, celebrated especially in the "Locals" section of *This Present Moment* (part II), are sustained by the kind of self-reliance, neighborliness, and parsimony that typically define rural American life: "Which means /we must think with the help of the whole /neighborhood, bullshit detectors in place but /cleanly and clearly forgiving" (*TPM* 26). As Elgin makes clear at the start of his discussion, a life that is "Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich"

(his subtitle) is not a call to poverty but an invitation to discern and possess what is most needful. As the saying goes, “You have succeeded in life when all you want is only what you really need.” Here and throughout Snyder’s corpus, one finds respect for a kind of folk wisdom shared by peoples attuned to the rhythms of a more-than-human world as in, for example, “Inupiaq values” (TPM 55). Those of us immersed (involuntarily, mostly) in an aberrant postmodern technocratic scheme that often obscures the planetary normal cannot help but notice that the knowledge and skill Snyder conveys through his craft is a consequence of the deliberate effort applauded by T. S. Eliot when he observes that we moderns live in a time when “[t]radition . . . cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labor” (49). Snyder has worked diligently to understand, remain true to, and express “the old ways” he values (Snyder, *The Old Ways*).

Thus *This Present Moment* is in large part a monument to Snyder’s lifelong effort to recognize and realize the essential facts that typically shape our species even in “the Homo sapiens year 50,000” (TPM 36; see also Snyder, “Entering”). Perhaps most consequential is our awareness of impermanence, including the permanent mark of impermanence that is our death (see Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski). Reminders of this basic fact are distributed throughout this collection. This, for example, is from “Anger, Cattle, and Achilles” near the end of part I (“Outriders”): “I met the other lately in the far back of a bar, /musicians playing near the window and he /sweetly told me ‘listen to that music. / / /The self we hold so dear will soon be gone” (TPM 11). Or consider “Michael de Tombe at the edge of the Canyon the Killigrew Place” in part II (“Locals”): “Mad Michael a genius, a leader, a visionary English-Dutch- /Turtle Island Elder /here in this room where he lay with his cancer, /his friends and his *mala*, /calming them, easing them, utterly sane / / /Utterly sane, and then slipped away” (TPM 23). Or see “Otzi Crosses Over” in part III (“Ancestors”), a speculative prose poem that deduces the fate of a Copper Age Iceman who met his death some 4,000 years ago on the Alpine border between present-day Austria and Italy, where a number of good hours enjoyed by Snyder are shared in “Seven Brief Poems from Italia” (TPM 56–59).

These intimations of mortality lead up to “Go Now,” the title of part IV and the first of two poetic statements contained therein. The first begins with italicized urgency: “*You don’t want to read this, / reader, /be warned, turn back /from the darkness, /go now*” (TPM 63). In eleven irregular verses, the poet proceeds to parse with penetrating precision the end-of-life care, death, and cremation of Carole Lynn Koda, his lover, muse, traveling companion, birding partner (see “How to Know Birds” [TPM 25]; “Morning Songs, Goose Lake” [TPM 31]; and “From the Sky” [TPM 37]), and wife of fifteen years, who died at Kitkitdizze at the end of June 2006 after a long and painful bout with stomach cancer.³ Opposite the final black-ink-on-white-paper verse of “Go Now,” the reader finds a black page with white ink that says: “This present moment /that lives on / / /to become / / / long ago” (TPM n.p.).⁴

White alphabetic cracks in inky darkness serve as a visual reminder of various contrasts and oppositions at play in many of the thirty-nine poems that lead up to this moment: wild and domestic, pleasures and pains, Tuscany and California, the Sabbath, democratic ideals and slavery, original and derivative, the raw and the cooked, then and now. In poems that play with the yin and yang of existence, Snyder deftly draws on the various linguistic, literary, and anthropological studies that inform so much of what he writes. And this always with an eye toward showing how such learning illuminates the Dharma studies always at the base of his perceptions.

Take, for example, “Here,” the poem at the end of part II, where a man observes the night sky and notes, “It’s been years since I thought, / / /Why are we here?” (TPM 38). Indeed! The important matter is simply *that* we are here, now, and know with ever greater clarity the karma inherent in our cultures of mass consumption that Snyder and other historical and scientifically literate thinkers have warned us about. In so many ways, the poet’s work is an antidote to an age that commenced when the United States committed a deep violation of the code of civilization with bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki: “What got to me about the Bomb was *too much power*. /And then temptation there to be . . .the first. /The first to be ‘The Emperor of the World.’ /Yet to be done. So change our course around, or there we head” (TPM 29–30). This was penned in 2009. And do

Americans now find themselves heading further into a perpetual imperial presidency, endless warfare, and the whirlwinds of climate change? Again, “*You don’t want to read this, /reader, /be warned, turn back /from the darkness, go now*” (TPM 63).

But where shall we go? In part III, “Ancestors,” we become privy to observations from pilgrimages to places of art, craft, and healing: Paris (TPM 41); the Kalahari (TPM 42); Hai-en Temple, South Korea (TPM 44); Florence (TPM 45); Praha, Slovakia (TPM 48); and ruins of the shrine at Delphi where the artist makes “an offering from Turtle Island: a large quartz crystal, a *panaka* feather, a black-bear claw, a Bodhi-tree bead; and native tobacco. And chant the *Daihishu*” (TPM 49). This *dharani*, a form where sounds carry more weight than meaning, is intended to arouse the mind of Great Compassion. What better place to call for compassion than near the Omphalos of Delphi?

While hearing his old poems read aloud by “a lovely young poet” that same evening, the author recalls “my poems for you” from 1960 and “an apple orchard, /us making love in the shadow of leaves /curled up together, happy, green /I knew even then /I’d never feel quite like that /with anyone, /ever again” (TPM 49–50). Ultimately, Snyder contends such moments offer refuge from the “cold, hunger, stupid mistakes, bitterness, delusions, loneliness” (TPM 60), and other troubles that beset human existence. Snyder’s confidence in our ability to find and take refuge in spite of such difficulties is an essential *This Present Moment* fact.

As mentioned above, the white-on-black statement that is *This present moment* (italicized as such in the Table of Contents) concludes a section titled “Go Now.” This can be read both as a warning to “go away” and as an invitation to “go on in.” As invitation, we are encouraged to enter into what Paul Tillich, who crossed paths with Snyder while delivering a lecture at Kyoto University in 1960, calls “the eternal now” in his best-known sermon. This prospect of entering into a “perpetual present” is, after all, one outcome of an effort to front essential facts with a mind turned over and over in the labor of meditation, “composted,” as Snyder says in “On Top,” a poem in *Axe Handles* (11).⁵

Snyder writes eloquently about this work in “Buddhism and the Coming Revolution,” a 1961 essay later published in *Earth House Hold*:

Wisdom is intuitive knowledge of the mind of love and clarity that lies beneath one’s ego-driven anxieties and aggressions. *Meditation is going into that mind to see this for yourself—over and over again, until it becomes the mind you live in.* Morality is bringing it back out in the way you live, through personal example and responsible action, ultimately toward the true community (sangha) of “all beings.” (92, emphasis added)

The promise is that if you find your way into this clear light mind, the dark world of samsara becomes also a place of light and life.

Hence the poems in *This Present Moment* serve both as warnings (lest we undermine our survival as a species) and invitations to enjoy the beauty always available (as Emerson declares in this essay’s epigraph) “in every step of the road” (253). In fact, one might approach each poem in this collection as a record of steps toward and into an open-road life more filled with gratitude and love than anxiety and fear. Be here now, and experience a shift toward emotions more positive than negative, as the new Western Buddhist psychologists like to say. “Sometimes,” Snyder states in *Earth House Hold*, “it is possible to cut crosswise the time-stream of rebirths—the grand plans and dances, eschatologies and evolutions; and be *now*: the ‘marvelous emptiness’ in all possibilities and directions” (134).

With this shift in mind, we may loop back into our text and see how *This Present Moment* celebrates the good earth, the good life, and fruitful practice of this citizen-lover-poet. Whether he is celebrating “The Earth’s Wild Places” (TPM 4), tripping in “Siberian Outpost meadow” (TPM 5), “Walking the Long and Shady Elwha” (TPM 6–7) from its perennial snowfield source, or scrolling through “the landscape of the world” at the Freer (TPM 8), Snyder brings the reader’s attention to life’s simple pleasures. Consider this from David Padwa:

I never knew anyone who could live as richly, as elegantly, on so little money. To visit Kitkitdizze was to attend the home palace of a forest king. Nothing of real worth was lacking; there was a bottomless inventory of high-

level objects and activities that most of us could not imagine. ... This oxymoronic picture of spartan luxury has a simple explanation. We sat on the ground watching the moon. "The fact is, Gary," I said, "this is really an extreme form of elitism." He replied with a thin smile: "Shhh!" (309)

A way into this open secret is revealed at the end of part III in "Askesis, Praxis, Theôria of the Wild" (TPM 60). This poem brings us to what Snyder calls "the shining way of the wild," an echo of Thoreau's image of what it means to get real: "If you stand right fronting and face to face to a fact, you will see the sun glimmer on both its surfaces, as if it were a cimeter, and feel its sweet edge dividing you through the heart and marrow, and so you will happily conclude your mortal career. Be it life or death, we crave only reality" (98). While we know much about the Wild in theory ("the world is unrelenting, brief, and often painful") and may view our own suffering as a kind of training (*askesis*), the practice is to remain forever on the alert for those epiphanic flashes of realization adequate only to gestural, paradoxical, and poetic forms of expression: "to find the *praxis* is to /hang in, work it out, watch for the moment, /coiled and gazing, / / / /the shining way of the wild" (TPM 60).⁶

In the end, we may find ourselves face to face with *This Present Moment* in the contemplative manner described in "Mu Ch'i's Persimmons" (TPM 46–47), a poem of thirteen short stanzas published first in the *New Yorker* in the seasonally appropriate month of October 2008. Again, we are at Kitkitdizze: "On a back wall down the hall / / /lit by a side glass door / / /is the scroll of Mu Ch'i's great /*sumi* painting, 'persimmons.'" The poem in its verticality drops like a scroll, "The wind-weights hanging from the /axes hold it still." We learn the connoisseur purchased this reproduction of this Sung dynasty painting at Benrido, a Kyoto concern specializing in high-quality art reproductions since 1887: "The original's in Kyoto at a /lovely Rinzai temple where they /show it once a year." It is "the best in the world ... /of persimmons" and a "Perfect statement of emptiness /no other than form." As an occasion for meditation, Mu Ch'i's painting provides an opportunity to front the simple Buddhist fact of an impermanent, open-ended, often surprising reality that makes creative freedom (be it in poetry or in politics) possible. As in *Mountains and Rivers Without End*—where Snyder also invites us to meditate on the place of "a painted rice-cake" (the epigraph from Dôgen there provides the postscript for this poem)—our human station is always to inhabit "a chaotic universe where everything is in place" (153).⁷

The Mu Ch'i poem concludes with attention to another kind of persimmon experience: "And now, to these over-ripe persimmons /from Mike and Barbara's orchard. /Napkin in hand, /I bend over the sink /suck the sweet orange goop /that's how I like it /gripping a little twig / / /those painted persimmons / / /sure cure hunger" (TPM 46–47). We end, then, with a reminder of that dialectic between the art of this present moment and the good life outside the frame that has made *This Present Moment* possible.

Notes

1. "I grew up in terms of planetary normal, which is to say growing up in close contact with the fabric of nature, rather than removed from it. I had a normal childhood" (Snyder in O'Connell 308).
2. Kai was born in Kyoto in 1968, Gen on Turtle Island in 1969. Snyder married Masa Uehara in Japan in 1967. See "Burning Island," an epithalamion published by Snyder in *Regarding Wave* in 1970 (23–24). On this marriage poem and *Regarding Wave*, see Murphy 96–107. "Turtle Island" is, as Snyder writes, "the old/new name for the continent, based on many creation myths of the people who have been living here for millennia, and reapplied by some of them to 'North America' in recent years" (*Turtle Island*, n.p.).
3. On the poem "Go Now," see Schelling.
4. *The Gary Snyder Reader* comes to the same epigrammatic conclusion, though in black ink on white paper and punctuated as follows: "This present moment: / / /That lives on, / / /To become / / / /Long ago" (608).
5. Snyder writes of a "perpetual present" found in "a way of life attuned to the slower and steadier processes of nature" in *The Practice of the Wild* (14). He goes on in the same book to discuss this endless gift in these terms: "One should not dwell in the specialness of the extraordinary experience nor hope to leave the political quagga [*sic*] behind to enter a perpetual state of heightened insight. The best purpose of such studies and hikes is to be able to come back to the lowlands and see all the land about us, agricultural, suburban, urban, as part of the

same territory—never totally ruined, never completely unnatural. It can be restored, and humans could live in considerable numbers on much of it. Great Brown Bear is walking with us, Salmon swimming upstream with us, as we stroll a city street” (94). For Snyder’s poetic expression of this idea, see “Walking the New York Bedrock Alive in the Sea of Information” in *Mountains and Rivers Without End* (97–102). And see the commentary on this by Anthony Hunt in *Genesis Structure and Meaning in Gary Snyder’s Mountains and Rivers Without End* (182–88).

6. In a conversation with Dom Aelred Graham in 1967, Snyder makes the following observation: “I have a hunch now that the beginning of Zazen and all yogic practice is hunting. Agricultural magic and agricultural life produce ritual. Look at what happens when you switch over from hunting to agriculture. It’s a completely different exercise of the intelligence. The hunter has to learn samadhi; he has to practice identification with his quarry. As somebody said, the only way you ever get into the mind of another creature is by wanting to make love to it or wanting to kill it. The two are very close. The hunter learns to know his quarry like a lover. Hunting magic is, as an Indian friend of mine explained, not going out and hunting the animal, but making the animal want to come to you to be killed. A real hunter goes out and he sings his song and he picks his place and then the deer comes, and he shoots it. Anyone who has ever hunted knows that what you have to do is still your mind and sit still. Hunters have to be able to sit still for hours. They have to go out for weeks at a time sometimes. There is a whole practice of mind and body, which belongs to the late paleolithic period” (77–78).
7. Compare William James: “The great point is to notice that the oneness and the manyness are absolutely co-ordinate here. Neither is primordial or more essential or excellent than the other” (68).

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