

Gary Snyder's Descent to Turtle Island: Searching for Fossil Love

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Gary Snyder's Descent to Turtle Island: Searching for Fossil Love

*I pose you your question:
Shall you uncover honey /where maggots are?
I hunt among stones*

—Charles Olson, “The Kingfishers”¹

“Hunting among stones” — the poetics of archeology, the search for lost origins — has been a growing obsession in America’s contemporary literature. The concern, more and more, is with *descent*, not the classical/theological tradition of descent to a mythical underworld, but a distinctly American tradition of descent to the *land*: an attempt to get in touch with the continent at some point before the white man began to write his history upon it. This desire marks, in fact, a vital shift in the direction of the American imagination; before the twentieth century, our literature and our energies tended to look west and to the future; now they move *down* and toward the past. Instead of looking west, as Whitman did, to perceive a blank wilderness (“A boundless field to fill!”) onto which America, “the greatest poem,” could be written (“our republic is,” said Whitman, “really enacting today the grandest arts, poems, etc.,

¹Charles Olson, *The Distances* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), p. 11.

by beating up the wilderness into fertile farms. . . .”), twentieth century American poets have been engaging in imaginative descents down through the various layers of what America is and has been, back to the aboriginal land itself.²

Among contemporary poets, no one has led us further back than Gary Snyder. His poetic quests thus include the reversal of popular (mis)conceptions of primitive people: “All the evidence we have indicates that imagination, intuition, intellect, wit, decision, speed, skill, was fully developed forty thousand years ago. In fact, it may be that we were a little smarter forty thousand years ago since brain size has somewhat declined on the average from that high point of Cro-Magnon.” “We may be the slight degeneration of what was really a fine form.”³

Humans of the distant past, then — uncontaminated by progressive society, unaddicted to fossil fuel and the industrial/technological complex that was fed by it — are the ones who hold the wisdom, the techniques and attitudes that would allow us to live and to continue to live, over long periods, on the earth. “The last eighty years have been like an explosion,” says Snyder: “We live in a totally anomalous time.” So, to re-attach ourselves to sustaining traditions, to proven ways to exist and co-exist, we must reject present (aberrant) solutions, and instead descend and dig up “The Old Ways” (the phrase serves as the title of Snyder’s most recent book of essays). “The cave tradition of painting, which runs from 35,000 to 10,000 years ago, is,” Snyder reminds us, “the world’s largest single art tradition. . . . In that perspective, civilization is like a tiny thing that occurs very late.”⁴

This urge to get in touch with the virgin soil again, to intimately “know the ground you’re on,” is not original with Snyder, of course. It is

²Walt Whitman, *Prose Works 1892*, ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: New York University Press, 1964), II: 404, 434, 369.

³Gary Snyder, *The Old Ways* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1977), p. 16; Peter Barry Chowka, “The Original Mind of Gary Snyder,” *East West Journal*, 7 (June, 1977), p. 35. Chowka’s three-part interview with Snyder appears in the June, July, and August, 1977, issues of *East West Journal*. This interview is the most intensive and informative of the recorded conversations with Snyder, and it appears in a journal that is not found in many academic libraries. *East West* describes itself as “explor[ing] the dynamic equilibrium that unifies apparently opposite values: Oriental and Occidental, traditional and modern, religious and technological, communal and individual, visionary and practical.” It’s often found for sale in health-food stores. Future references to Chowka’s interview will indicate the month that particular part of the interview appeared in *East West*.

⁴Chowka, June, pp. 36, 35.

did he make the radical descent, far below what America is, to what — long ago — it was.

Snyder, in his life and in his poetry, is the culmination of many essential American myths; he re-cycles us to our origins. He re-energizes, for example, both sides of the Christopher Columbus myth/quest: he has fulfilled Columbus' frustrated search for the mysteries of Cathay, and simultaneously he has sought to regain Columbus' initial vision of the New World, to re-envision and maintain that first glimpse of a green world of possibility, unencumbered by European history. Snyder, then, is the twentieth century extension and fulfillment of Columbus' dream; he merges East and West by bringing his Oriental insight to bear on the wilderness beneath present-day America. Snyder thus refers to himself as a "shaman/healer," for "shaman" is a term that applies both to North American Indian medicine men and to eastern Asian priests, and Snyder emphasizes the similarity in beliefs and attitudes, even in origin, of native Americans and Orientals: "There's something where, say, the American Indians and the Japanese are right on the same spot. . . . Oh, it's all one teaching. There is an ancient teaching, which we have American Indian expressions of, and Chinese, Tibetan, Japanese, Indian, Buddhist expressions of."⁷

The Oriental influence on his work has been the subject of much previous criticism about Snyder.⁸ I would like to focus here instead on the other major element in Snyder's work: the element that roots him firmly in the soil of this continent. Snyder, in his journeys to the Far East, learned ways to transcend, but his most recent poetry, and especially *Turtle Island*, demonstrates that his powers of transcendence end up in the service of descent, of digging into this land.

⁷Chowka, August, p. 19, and see also p. 30; Paul Geneson, "An Interview with Gary Snyder," *The Ohio Review*, 18, No. 3 (1977), p. 84. Cf. Abraham Rothberg, "A Passage to More than India: The Poetry of Gary Snyder," *Southwest Review*, 61 (1976), 26-38; Rothberg sees Snyder and his compatriots taking "that next — and giant — step from California, Oregon, and Washington across the ocean, . . . which is both an affirmation of American 'manifest destiny' and a simultaneous denial of it . . ." (p. 29).

⁸See especially Bob Steuding, *Gary Snyder* (Boston: Twayne, 1976).

I

In *In the American Grain*, William Carlos Williams writes: “The primitive destiny of the land is obscure, but it has been obscured further by a field of unrelated culture stuccoed upon it that has made that destiny more difficult than ever to determine.” Snyder in *Turtle Island*: “The ‘U.S.A.’ and its states and counties are arbitrary and inaccurate impositions on what is really here. . . . The land . . . is also a living being — at another pace.” Just as Williams tells us to dig and steal some authenticity from the dead Indians, Snyder knows that “civilization has something to learn from the primitive.” “[T]here is,” Snyder says, “something to be learned from the native American people about where we are. It can’t be learned from anybody else. We have a western white history of a hundred and fifty years; but when we look at a little bit of American Indian folklore, myth, read a tale, we’re catching just the tip of an iceberg of forty or fifty thousand years of human experience, on this continent, in this place.”⁹

The image becomes clear; we are part of an immense palimpsest; the U.S.A. is but a superficial layer, the most recent (and damaging) inscription over a series of earlier texts. Whitman may have found “The United States themselves” to be “essentially the greatest poem,” but post-Whitman poets have found them to be a poem that was violently scratched over earlier poems, imposed on and obliterating native texts, native ways, natives themselves. To descend in the palimpsest, then, to learn what meanings lie preserved in the lower layers, to rediscover ways of existing *on* the land without destroying it: this is the basis for the American poet’s desire for descent. But the descents become increasingly difficult, for our layer — the text of the American present — has been a violent inscription, one that continues to tear into the continental tablet itself: “Something is always eating at the American heart like acid,” Snyder says, “it is the knowledge of what we have done to our continent, and to the American Indian.” It is difficult, therefore, to get beneath the

⁹Williams, *Grain*, p. 212; Snyder, “Introductory Note,” *Turtle Island* (New York: New Directions, 1974), p. xi (all future references to *Turtle Island* will be followed by the page number in parentheses); Snyder, *Earth House Hold* (New York: New Directions, 1969), p. 120; Snyder, *Old Ways*, p. 80.

text of America, for we have destroyed most signs of the texts that preceded us, destroyed so much of the very page we are written on. Intent on designing our present, we have made barren much of our past.¹⁰

So, to begin, Snyder must find that the Indians are not only buried in the actual ground below us, they are also buried in our imaginations, in the ground of the American psyche; to use a favorite figure (and euphemism) of Whitman's, the natives were "absorbed" by Americans as America expanded into and assimilated the continent. Often unknowingly, we ingested some of their ways, their names, their beliefs, at the very same time we thought we were ridding ourselves of them. The problem becomes one of how to get *at* them, at their *resource*, how to descend through dead layers to what was here before us. "It takes a great effort of the imagination to enter into that, to draw from it" admits Snyder, "but there is something powerfully there."¹¹

Snyder's way is to seek out the "back country," and in doing so he performs a history-defying feat, for he crosses the frontier from civilization into wilderness nearly a century after the frontier and wilderness in America had been pronounced dead; it was in 1893, after all, that Frederick Jackson Turner composed the epitaph for the frontier, informed us that, coast to coast, the continent was now settled. The page of America, he said, was written, filled in. But Snyder defies this closure by descending; if the Indians are no longer to be found across a geographical frontier, Snyder will seek them out across a psychic frontier, make an imaginative descent rather than a physical journey. So he retreats across the (supposedly nonexistent) frontier, away from civilization, and squeezes himself into the last vestiges of western wilderness where he writes, for the first time since Turner told us that the frontier was gone, the poetry of the virgin land. "[N]o one since Thoreau," notes Sherman Paul, "has so thoroughly espoused the wild as Gary Snyder. . . . His is not 'white man's poetry' but the 'Indian's report.'" Snyder would return us to native ways of seeing the land, and he begins by renaming things:

¹⁰Whitman, *Prose*, II: 434; Snyder, *Earth*, p. 119.

¹¹See, for example, Whitman's "Song of the Redwood Tree," where the natural wonders of the continent are "absorb'd, assimilated" into the "superber race" of the white man; Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley, eds., *Leaves of Grass* (New York: New York University Press, 1965), p. 207; Snyder, *Old Ways*, p. 50. On the relation of Snyder and Whitman, cf. Rothberg's article, cited above, and Robert Kern, "Recipes, Catalogues, Open Form Poetics: Gary Snyder's Archetypal Voice," *Contemporary Literature*, 18 (1977), 173-97; Kern compares and contrasts Snyder's and Whitman's open forms. See also Snyder's own comments on Whitman in Geneson, pp. 94-96.

“the first step in real seeing is to throw out a European name and take a creative North American name. And the second step is to erase arbitrary and non-existent political boundaries from your mind and look at what the land really is, with mountain ridges, and rivers and tree-zones, and just keep . . . following those implications.”¹²

Snyder’s major accomplishment, then, is a rediscovery and reaffirmation of wilderness, a clear rejection of Turner’s (and America’s) closure of the frontier. Snyder announces the opening of the frontier again and attempts to push it eastward, to reverse America’s historical process, to urge the wilderness to grow back into civilization, to release the stored energy from layers below us. For perhaps the first time in American poetry, we have a white poet writing from the “savage” side of the frontier (Turner defined the frontier as the “meeting point between savagery and civilization”), a poet looking back over it at his (fellow) Americans, and speaking to them from the perspective of *She* (the virgin land, whom Snyder identifies with Gaia, “the original earth-goddess”) and her guardians/protectors, the natives.¹³

But the problem, of course, is how to get there — down, under, back in time. In *Earth House Hold* Snyder searches for models, techniques, *ways*; he looks to Wovoka’s Ghost Dance religion, with its belief that “the Buffalo would rise from the ground, trample the white men to death in their dreams, and all the dead game would return; America would be returned to the Indians. . . .” But the Ghost Dance seems lost now, beyond recall, so he considers peyote (and other drug) cults that might allow illusory but illuminating descents through the palimpsest to a regenerative past: “Peyote and acid have a curious way of tuning some people in to the local soil . . . the human history of Indians on this continent. Older powers become evident. . . .” Yet he finds that even drugs are not needed for descents to the past:

¹²Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” *Annual Report of the American Historical Society for the Year 1893*, pp. 199-227; Paul, “From Lookout to Ashram: The Way of Gary Snyder,” *The Iowa Review*, 1 (1970), 76, 80; Geneson, p. 87.

¹³Snyder sees the closing of the frontier as the major problem in America: “I’ll say this real clearly, because it seems it has to be said over and over again. There is no place to flee to in the U.S. There is no ‘country’ that you can go and lay back in. . . . The surveyors are there with their orange plastic tape, the bulldozers are down the road warming up their engines, the real estate developers have got it all on the wall with pins on it. . . .” (Chowka, June, p. 37); Snyder, *Old Ways*, p. 39.

For many, the invisible presence of the Indian, and the heart-breaking beauty of America work without fasting or herbs. We make these contacts simply by walking the Sierra or Mohave, learning the old edibles, singing and watching.

And finally Snyder discovers the way back is through poetry, through imaginative descent, for only in the imagination can he effectively tap the lost resources, the stored imagination of those who were here before us. Snyder knows that the Indian is buried somewhere in our psyche, still breathing; the "American Indian is the vengeful ghost lurking in the back of the troubled American mind," he says, and goes on to recognize that the American wilderness has its counterpart in our imaginations:

To transcend the ego is to go beyond society as well. "Beyond" there lies, inwardly, the unconscious. Outwardly, the equivalent of the unconscious is the wilderness: both of these terms meet, one step even farther on, as *one*.

His hope is that a new tribe of "White Indians" (the successful descendents; those who have gone down, under, back, and who have united with the ghost remnants they [re]discovered) can resurrect the native ways: "When this has happened, citizens of the USA will at last begin to be Americans, truly at home on the continent, in love with their land." "The Way West," as the title of the second poem in *Turtle Island* tells us, is now "Underground"; below the new violent country is the old way, "Painted in caves,/ Underground" (p. 5). Preserved, it waits for our descent to it.¹⁴

II

Snyder's stance: West, near the ocean; in the past, near the Indian and the wilderness "She." There he takes his stand. He (re)named that place, finally, "Turtle Island": "the old/new name for the continent, based on many creation myths of the people who have been living here for millenia, and reapplied by some of them to 'North America' in recent

¹⁴Snyder, *Earth*, pp. 107-108, 122, 110, 112; see also Geneson, pp. 100-101.

years" (p. xi). *Turtle Island* is Snyder's true poem of America, but it is written from the perspective of a *continent* (Turtle Island, the virgin She) that rests uneasily beneath the imposition of America on top of it:

North America, Turtle Island, taken by invaders
 who wage war around the world.
 May ants, may abalone, otters, wolves and elks
 Rise! and pull away their giving
 from the robot nations. (p. 48)

The operative word is "Rise!" While Williams and Crane implored Americans to "descend" to their prehistory, to the wilderness and its natives that America had covered over, Snyder implores the wilderness and its natives to *rise*, to take possession again. Once again, Snyder speaks from the far side of the frontier; he is there, across the line, recruiting the remnants of the wilderness for an ascent through the American palimpsest, toward a new birth of Turtle Island ("the old/new name").

When asked if "the poet is essentially a pioneer," Snyder was quick to cut himself off from America's westward movement: "No, I wouldn't say a pioneer. A pioneer clear-cuts an ecosystem and sets the succession phase back to zero again." One thinks of Whitman's "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" with their "sharp-edged axes": "We primeval forests felling,/ . . . we the virgin soil upheaving. . . ." Snyder is, instead, an anti-pioneer, trying to undo or go beneath the pioneers' work, discarding the dangerous elements of the American past, recycling the good elements: "Poets are more like mushrooms, or fungus — they can digest the symbol detritus." This is the poet's role: to live off the cultural detritus, and rise again.¹⁵

But Snyder's rising, unlike Roethke's, stops short of transcendence; while Roethke retreats from industrial sounds to "The Far Field," escaping the encroaching mower to find his rose in the sea wind, Snyder faces technology and stands firm:

A Bulldozer grinding and slobbering
 Sideslipping and belching on top of
 The skinned-up bodies of still-live bushes
 . . .
 Behind is a forest that goes to the Arctic
 And a desert that still belongs to the Piute

¹⁵Geneson, p. 91; Whitman, *Leaves*, p. 230; Geneson, p. 91.

And here we must draw
Our line. (p. 18)

The title of the poem is "Front Lines," and the battle imagery is appropriate; there is anger in these poems. Snyder is the protecting voice of the continental She, who, because of mistreatment by Euro-Americans, is in danger of death; he descends to her and speaks her language: "She is sacred territory. To hear her voice is to give up the European word 'America' and accept the new-old name for the continent, 'Turtle Island.'" (p. 104)

"She" is Turtle Island, and she has been raped and ravaged by the American "He"; his appendages still push into her last wildernesses and continue the assault:

Sunday the 4-wheel jeep of the
Realty Company brings in
Landseekers, lookers, they say
To the land,
Spread your legs. (p. 18)

Later in *Turtle Island* Snyder adds resonance to this image by tying it to the Eastern mythology he acquired during his passage to India. After parodying a Whitman catalogue by listing all the non-natural things that now "flood over us," the chemically created continental garbage ("Aluminum beer cans, plastic spoons, / plywood veneer, PVC pipe, vinyl seat covers" that "don't exactly burn, don't quite rot"), Snyder warns that we are at the "end of days," in the "Kali-yuga," the Hindu age of degeneration where men value what is degraded, consume voraciously, huddle in cities. American technology becomes Kali herself, the black anti-earth-mother who gluttonously devours everything, the negative shadow of the wilderness She. While Whitman, in his persona as the American He, had ecstatically "plunged his seminal muscle" into the continent, now, for Snyder in the twentieth century, the destructive rape seems in its last, grotesque stages: "Kali dances on the dead stiff cock" (p. 67).¹⁶

The American He has aged quickly and obscenely. Frederick Jackson Turner had imaged the westward movement of America as an awakening body, the East pumping its healthy blood (the blood of civilization) to the West through an expanding circulatory system (roads,

¹⁶Whitman, *Leaves*, p. 344.

railroads, rivers; lines of commerce). Snyder perceives America still pushing its blood westward, but the health is long gone: "Every pulse of the rot at the heart/ In the sick fat veins of Amerika/ Pushes the edge up closer —" (p. 18).

That "edge" is the frontier, the meeting point of He and She. But the American He, Snyder indicates, carries disease; worse, he *is* disease, a cancer eating away at the land. The American cancer is a central image in the book: "The Edge of the cancer/ Swells against the hill . . ." (p. 18). The hill is the breast of She (in Native American mythology, as in other mythologies, hills are often perceived to be the breasts of the Earth Mother); the wilderness She, in other words, has breast cancer.¹⁷ America is the very disease that destroys its own source of nurture; like a cancer, it will destroy the body it lives in, then die for lack of sustenance. In "Plain Talk" Snyder makes the image unmistakable: "The cancer is eating away at the breast of Mother Earth in the form of strip mining" (p. 104). "Fed by fossil fuel," says Snyder, western man's religio-economic view has become a cancer: uncontrollable growth" (p. 103). The imagery of this continent as the bountiful breasts of a loving mother, an image that extends from Native American mythology to F. Scott Fitzgerald's "fresh green breast of the new world," reaches a terrifying culmination with the image in *Turtle Island* of a continental breast cancer. It is clear, then, why Snyder urges us to learn to be "in the service of the wilderness/ of life/ of death/ of the Mother's breasts!" (p. 77). We must learn "How to live on the continent as though our children, and on down, for many ages, will still be here. . . . Loving and protecting this soil, these trees, these wolves" (p. 105). We must descend, touch the submerged and suffering She, and learn to love her gently, to protect her, to nurse her as she has nursed us, to join her as "Natives of Turtle Island" (p. 105).

Civilization, after all, may well be "on the verge of post-civilization," says Snyder, and so the descent to find how the "primitives" lived is an urgent re-crossing of a frontier already declared vanished, a crossing over the "line . . . drawn between primitive peoples and civilized peoples" so we can "take account of the primitive worldview which has

¹⁷Whitman, remarkably, uses the same image in "Thou Mother with Thy Equal Brood" (*Leaves*, p. 460) to describe the Civil War and America's troubles: "The livid cancer spread its hideous claws, clinging upon thy breasts, seeking to strike thee deep within, / Consumption of the worst, moral consumption, shall rouge thy face with hectic, / But thou shalt face thy fortunes, thy diseases, and surmount them all. . . ."

... tried to open and keep open lines of communication with the forces of nature" (p. 107).

Snyder's work is the logical progression of Williams' search to "re-name the things seen, now lost in chaos of borrowed title"; Snyder seeks the true thing lost under a borrowed name. "It could be beautiful, Cincinatti could," Snyder once said; but "to get to know Cincinatti . . . means, first of all, you have to get rid of the name *Cincinatti* . . . because after all it's the Ohio River Valley, really, that you're looking at. And *Ohio* means *beautiful* in Shawnee. And there you go, you start going back. . . ." ¹⁸

III

The Process: Go back, get under, dig, descend: through the palimpsest of this continent with its accreted layers of varied culture, beneath the artificial, superficial, forcefully imposed top layer, "The 'U.S.A.' and its states and counties" which are "inaccurate impositions on what is really here" (p. xi). So *Turtle Island* opens with Snyder chanting himself down though the palimpsest, away from the present, into the dim reaches of pre-history on the continent:

Anasazi
Anasazi

tucked up in clefts on the cliffs . . . (p. 3)

He descends further than any other poet — further than Williams with his glimpses of the virgin land just before Red Eric's people and Columbus touched it; further than Crane to Pocahontas; further certainly than Roethke to the Iroquois. Snyder often judges poets by the depths of their descent: "Pound was never able to get back to — you know, he could get back to the Early Bronze Age and his imagination couldn't go back any further than that. Olson at least gets to the Neolithic." To get

¹⁸Geneson, pp. 75-76. Snyder's comments on Cincinatti echo Whitman who also found "the strange charm of aboriginal names," urged their re-adoption, and noted, "Among names to be revolutionized: that of the city of 'Baltimore.'" (See *An American Primer*, ed. Horace Traubel [1904; rpt. San Francisco: City Lights, 1970], p. 30).

back that far is the essential imaginative act for poets: "I mean their imagination [must be] able to encompass it, . . . [and] feel comradeship in connection with it. . . ." ¹⁹

And so Snyder invokes the Anasazi: the aboriginal, pretribal natives, the cliff-dwellers, and evokes the sensation of being one of them: "the smell of bats/ the flavor of sandstone/ grit on the tongue." Indeed, the poem imitates, in the visual form of its lines, a cave painting — the cliff with its indented clefts, from which hangs the thin word-ladder, with the "trickling streams in hidden canyons" in a long-flowing line at the bottom.

Snyder enters his book at a genesis-point far before any other American poet. And toward the end of *Turtle Island*, in "What Happened Here Before," he descends even further, digging far into the pre-human past of the continent: back 300,000,000 years, he sees "First a sea: soft sands, muds, and marls . . ."; he then rises to 80,000,000 years ago, when there were "warm quiet centuries of rain," and 3,000,000 years in the past when the river gorges were cut, and

Ponderosa pine, manzanita, black oak, mountain yew,
 deer, coyote, bluejay, gray squirrel,
 ground squirrel, fox, blacktail hare,
 ringtail, bobcat, bear,
 all came to live here.

40,000 years ago came "human people" and the first "songs and stories in the smoky dark." On this immense palimpsest, a mere 125 years ago, suddenly "came the white man: tossed up trees and/ boulders with big hoses,/ going after that old gravel and the gold." And arriving back at the present — "now" — from a journey through eons of time, the poet and his sons sit in the last vestiges of the back country wilderness, and "my sons ask, who are we?" But their questions are drowned out by "military jets head[ing] northeast, roaring, every dawn." The poem ends, ominously yet hopefully, with a bluejay screeching: "WE SHALL SEE/ WHO KNOWS/ HOW TO BE" (pp. 78-81). The bluejay, native of Turtle Island for thousands of years, *knows* how to survive, while the recently-arrived white man flies his machines of destruction, quickly burning up the last of the fossil fuels that have come to sustain his life. Like W. S. Merwin in *The Lice*, Snyder approaches a vision of a world where man is gone, but where life goes on; where man, especially tech-

¹⁹Geneson, p. 72.

nological man, is seen finally as a short but dangerous aberration in the vast layered history of earth.

Images of the brutal imposition of white man's culture on the continental palimpsest — a culture that, for whatever enriching layers it added, also tore into, mutilated, earlier layers and the very page itself — are ubiquitous in Snyder's book: "The dead by the side of the road" are native animal-people, each a potential "pouch for magic tools," lying now "all stiff and dry," run over by "trucks run on fossil fuel" which traverse not "our ancient sisters' trails" but rather the new imposed concrete layer, "the roads . . . laid across [which] kill them" (p. 8). Snyder occasionally emerges from the past into and onto the layer of the American present — he can even enjoy it now and then, as in "I Went Into the Maverick Bar": "America — your stupidity./ I could almost love you again" — but he always re-descends, leaving the freeway of the present:

We left — onto the freeway shoulders —
 under the tough old stars —
 In the shadow of bluffs
 I came back to myself
 To the real work (p. 9)

Back in the shadows of the bluffs (cliffs) of Turtle Island, he escapes the bluffs (false, alluring fronts) of American culture, sees through them to his real self, his true nativity.

We see some of America's false fronts — the neon steak houses — in "Steak," where Snyder plays on the growing separation between our food and ourselves. Lulled by "a smiling disney cow on the sign," we eat the "bloody sliced muscle" served us, forgetting that we are what we eat, and what we eat are overweight cows, stupid and "bred heavy" (in contrast to the vanished strong and active buffalo); on the "ripped-off land" grain is now grown to stuff the "long-lashed, slowly thinking cow" that becomes us (p. 10).

So Snyder digs, down and away from all this, sinks deep, retreats far back in time to a rooted place where the changing cultures of man are but momentary fletings in earth-time:

To be in
 to the land
 where the croppt-out rock

can hardly see
the swiftly passing trees

Where he descends to, deep in the land, back to Turtle Island, he can say, "I hear no news"; it is "like no Spaniard ever came"; he is back and down, in touch with continent before any non-natives touched it, and he can be sustained by the same energies that trees are sustained by. As the trees find "tiny sources" of light even in the darkest nights, so Snyder, marooned in the twentieth century, can still gather energy from the "tiny sources" of the past that are, through imagination, retrievable, recoverable; not lost, even if dimmed:

the tree leaves catch
some extra tiny source
all the wide night

Up here
out back
drink deep
that black light. (p. 26)

Snyder agrees with Williams that Americans need to find the true ground of their being: "I would like to see *people* 'grounded'. . . . Get the people grounded and the poetry'll take care of itself."²⁰

IV

The vision: Imposing itself over the natural wilderness, America may at first have appeared victorious, but now begins to fade, to lose power, and Turtle Island, magically, rising through the palimpsest, appears again in the place of fading America:

The USA slowly lost its mandate
in the middle and later twentieth century
it never gave the mountains and rivers,
trees and animals
a vote.
all the people turned away from it
myths die; even continents are impermanent
Turtle Island returned.

²⁰Geneson, p. 93.

In contrast to Merwin who envisions America's (and man's) future as dead, crumbling into silence, Snyder's new natives of Turtle Island "look to the future with pleasure/ we need no fossil fuel/ get power within/ grow strong on less." (p. 77)

Is this vision practical, usable, or only a romance, a sentimental fiction? Charles Altieri: ". . . Snyder's images of an ideal society remain mere fictions that do not address themselves to the immediate and varied problems of our society Conscience doth not make woodsmen of us all." Alan Williamson: "It is a dark saying, but in some ways I have more hope for Snyder as a source of cultural continuity and human worth after the world has been changed against its will, than as a voice persuasive enough to prevent disaster." Snyder himself: "[O]ne is not going to quit just because one knows one's going to lose. And we don't even *know* we're going to lose." "We've just got to stay on the raft and go through the rapids anyhow." So: the vision is a fiction, a psychic model, a structure and set of values that will not change the world, but will change *minds*, will readjust mind-sets. Snyder's vision "speaks for a revolution in awareness," Sherman Paul says; "It is to repossess a new world by dispossessing ourselves of an old dream." The sense in *Turtle Island* is of reality becoming nightmare, of recaptured dream becoming reality — if only in the mind, if only to spur a first subtle shift in attitude, in stance, to help us in "riding the times through."²¹

Snyder, seeking the revolution in awareness, advocates the destruction of America — "I won't let him live. The 'American' / I'll destroy" — and, like an Indian warrior, he will make murderous raids on the white man within himself: "As I kill the white man/ the 'American' / in me/ And bring out the ghost dance:/ To bring back America, the grass and the streams." He even writes a new Pledge of Allegiance for the continent rising from beneath America

I pledge allegiance to
the soil
of Turtle Island
and to the beings who

²¹Charles Altieri, "Gary Snyder's *Turtle Island*: The Problem of Reconciling the Roles of Seer and Prophet," *Boundary 2*, 4 (1976), 774; Alan Williamson, "Gary Snyder: An Appreciation," *The New Republic*, 173, No. 18 (1975), 28; Chowka, August, p. 23; Geneson, p. 90; Sherman Paul, "Noble and Simple," *Parnassus*, 3 (1975), 221; Geneson, p. 90.

Hereon dwell
 one ecosystem
 in diversity
 under the sun
 with joyful interpenetration for all.

And in *Turtle Island* he occasionally shares Roethke's longing (in "North American Sequence") for the "blast of dynamite" that would rid the rubbish from the streams, or the apocalypse of Merwin's "The Last One" where the American creation is systematically obliterated. But Snyder knows that nature is tough, life is obstinate and things that have existed for 80,000,000 years can survive conflagrations that will destroy the superficial layer of white culture on this continent:

Fire is an old story.
 I would like,
 with a sense of helpful order,
 with respect for laws
 of nature
 to help my land
 with a burn. a hot clean
 burn.

(manzanita seeds will only open after
 a fire passes over) (p. 19)²²

The first section of *Turtle Island* is entitled "Manzanita," and it consists of poems for and about the white Indians and other avatars of She who will open up and thrive after the superimposed American culture on the continent is destroyed. The seeds that open only after conflagration are among Snyder's most hopeful images; the lodgepole pine is celebrated in *Myths & Texts* for the same power: "the wonderful reproductive/ power of this species . . . is dependent upon/ the ability of the closed cones to endure a fire/ which kills the tree without injuring its seed./ After fire, the cones open and shed their seeds/ on the bared ground and a new growth springs up."²³ Life will endure through massive destruction; the current manifestations of life can be destroyed, but the potentiality of new manifestations will remain. Ideas, too, will endure the demise of civilization, their seeds protected in the unconscious:

²²Snyder, "A Curse on the Men in Washington, Pentagon," in Leslie Fielder, *The Return of the Vanishing American* (New York: Stein and Day, 1969), p. 87; Chowka, July, p. 39.

²³Snyder, *Myths & Texts* (New York: Totem Press, 1960), p. 5.

The traditional cultures are in any case doomed, and rather than cling to their good aspects hopelessly it should be remembered that whatever is or ever was in any other culture can be reconstructed from the unconscious, through meditation. In fact, it is my own view that the coming revolution will close the circle and link us in many ways with the most creative aspects of our archaic past.²⁴

Much of *Turtle Island*, then, is a preparing of seeds: guides to what mushrooms to eat, how to prepare a bird for eating — “Taste all, and hand the knowledge down” (p. 51). Snyder echoes Thoreau’s advice to simplify, simplify: “stay together/ learn the flowers/ go light” (p. 86). Those who become tough, suggests Snyder, will, like the manzanita seed, endure and thus preserve possibilities for post-civilization: “In the next century/ or the one beyond that,/ they say,/ are valleys, pastures,/ we can meet there in peace/ if we make it.” (p. 86)

So while Snyder seeks to protect what is left of She — “Virgin/ . . . many-/Breasted” (p. 82) — he also seeks to store energy, to “get power within/ grow strong on less” (p. 77), to put resources into the lower strata of the wilderness within. He seeks a “fossil love,” a deep affection that he can draw on, use wisely, and live by: “That deep-buried sweetness brought to conscious thought” (p. 114). The American has dug up the resources of this continent, laid waste to the stored energy of eons of time; he is “addicted to heavy energy use, great gulps and injections of fossil fuel.” And the Americans, like heroin addicts, will do anything for their fix: “As fossil-fuel reserves go down, they will take dangerous gambles with the future health of the biosphere . . . to keep up their habit” (p. 103). And fossil fuel is the stored energy of ancient sunlight; it is not replaced except by slow geological change over countless centuries. “Our primary source of food is the sun,” Snyder reminds us (p. 31), and he refers to fuel, food, and thought; we transfer the sun’s energy from one part of nature to another by eating, burning fuel, talking, writing poetry.

In other words, Snyder seeks to store the energy, the food, of his native thought, his Oriental thought, his Indian religion, in a place where it is accessible to all; that place is *Turtle Island*, the poem. These poems are the new fossil fuel — “Fossil love” — being stored for future use, “For the Children.” While America digs up and destroys the earth’s

²⁴Snyder, *Earth*, pp. 92-93.

fossil fuel, Snyder works to store fossil love, to replant lost ideas, to restore lost energies. This “power within” is an inexhaustible resource, and, says Snyder,

. . . the more you give, the more you have to give — [it] will still be our source when coal and oil are long gone, and atoms are left to spin in peace. (p. 114)

Those are the final words of *Turtle Island*, concluding the section called “Plain Talk” — angry bursts of explanatory prose, baldly stating the ideas contained in the poetry. Like Whitman in *Democratic Vistas*, Snyder angrily turns to prose when he feels that few will listen to poetry. But it is in poetry where we can “stop and think. draw on the mind’s/ stored richness” (p. 84). And, warns Snyder, we must replenish those stores of wilderness in our mind, prepare for descents to “the silence/ of nature/ within” (p. 6).

Turner’s westering America was drawn into the wilderness across ever-shifting frontiers by what Turner called “love of wilderness freedom.” Snyder’s twentieth century counterpart to this process is a descent into the mind, to the past, to the wilderness freedom that was lost under America, the arduous lover; he is drawn there by “fossil love,” an affection that pulls him to the lowest layers of the continental palimpsest as he becomes (finds in his own mind) the stored energy of the native continent and captures that stored energy in his poem of *Turtle Island*. The poem embodies the poet who becomes the place, all uniting in their devotion to the archetypal American person: the Virgin She, continental avatar of Gaia, the cosmological She. It is fitting that Snyder should follow *Turtle Island* with *Songs for Gaia*, new poems addressed to “Mother Gaia” and “Father Sun”; these poems are intent on literally putting man in his place:

As the crickets’ soft autumn hum
is to man,
so is man, to the trees²⁵

²⁵Snyder, *Songs for Gaia* (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 1979), n. pag.