The Ethics of Translation:
Gary Snyder and Chinese Literature
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This article examines the impact of ancient Chinese ways of thinking and modes of poetics on the American poet Gary Snyder's own discourse on eco-poetics. First, I discuss Snyder's notion of an emergent, transcultural and "larger" humanism, perhaps a "post-humanism," a term to which I will return, along with the vital role played in his environmental poetics by the idea of a cross-cultural "translation"—an interrelationship which allows the ancient, other-centered, earth-centered East to educate the postmodern, rational-technological, ego-centric West. I then analyze the impact of an earlier American poetic tradition on Snyder and his works. This tradition is one that was already East-Asianized to a certain degree and included Emerson, Thoreau, and especially Pound, as well as the counter-cultural Beat movement of the 1950s, out of which Snyder himself emerged. The major portion of the article is devoted to a close reading of ancient Chinese poetic texts, themselves influenced by Confucianism, Taoism and/or Buddhism. My aim is to show how Snyder's West-instructing praxis of cultural translation is at work here, as well as his transcultural ethic of *ahimsa* or "non-harming" [in Sanskrit *a* = not; *himsa* = harm] as it applies to the earth as "other." Attention is given to specific instances of Snyder's translation of Chinese texts that seem critical to this eco-poet's larger project.

According to Richard H. Seager, historically in America there have been two major waves of interest in Eastern religions (34). The first came with the American Romantics and transcendentalists of the nineteenth century, who tended to look to the East for cultural and creative inspiration. Thus we have Emerson's claim that we do not need a Europeanized Christian view of the universe, but rather can have "an original relation to the universe …. and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs" [the Europeans][1] (Porte 27). Critiquing

Eurocentric modes of thought, Thoreau too states that "[i]n wildness is the preservation of the world"; too, we have Thoreau's desire "to front only the essential facts of life" and to "Simplify, simplify" (Thoreau 62). The second wave came with the poets and writers of the Beat generation (Seager 34), salient images and texts including Ginsberg's resounding "Howl" in the face of a Mammon-like American military-industrial establishment and Kerouac's *Dharma Bums*.

The young Gary Snyder was much influenced by—indeed, was really a part of— the Beat generation and countercultural movement of the fifties and sixties, which closely linked anti-establishment politics with non-Western (especially Asian) religions and modes of thought. Snyder attempts to sensitize us to the constant disruptions of our environment by rationalized, capitalist and essentially Western technology. From having at first thought that "it was only capitalism that went wrong" (*Practice* 94), Snyder came to understand that "Capitalism plus big government [that is, the philosophy of both major political parties in the US] looks like welfare for the rich" (*Practice* 143). Realizing that "maybe it was all of Western culture that was off the track and not just capitalism—that there were certain self-destructive tendencies in our cultural tradition" he began searching for alter-*native* worldviews and "got into American Indian studies" (*Practice* 94). Thus Snyder alerts the reader to heterogeneous and divergent, sometimes conflicting but generally more tolerant, non-Western worldviews—especially that of Asian and Native American perspectives.

Poet and translator as well as radical ecologist, anarchist-pacifist and Native American mythographer, Snyder was also a disciple of Confucianism, Daoism and Zen Buddhism. These cross-fertilizing influences form the basis of Snyder's eco-poetics. If we look at his literary output over a span of fifty years, since the release of his first published book of poetry, *Riprap*, in 1958, we find that Snyder's translation of Chinese literature, in particular poetry and Buddhist scriptures, has been instrumental in (re)shaping his imagination of the local and the global. In the face of a narcissistic mono-culturalism that privileges culture over nature, Snyder's interest in Asian texts and philosophies has been a crucial element in his expression of a transcultural, post-civilizational, post-

human "culture of wildness."[2] Indeed, we might say that the poet's real praxis is one of "cultural translation" that draws its force from a deep knowledge of the experience of nature in several different cultures.

In this article, I introduce the possibilities of a more earth-oriented, less Anglo-Eurocentric post-humanism that is arguably now emerging. I go on to discuss the "post-humanizing" function of East-to-West (and, to a degree, classical-to-contemporary) cultural translation in light of our current world environmental crisis, of which the even-more current world economic crisis can be seen as one aspect or "effect." From there, I explore in greater breadth and depth Snyder's own classical-East-to-contemporary-West cultural translation through a close reading of his translations of several (usually classical) Chinese texts. In this context the nature of Snyder's eco-poetics can, I suggest, be more clearly specified; it can also be tied to his understanding of *ahimsa*, which means "non-harming," "non-injury," or "non-violence" to living beings, an environmental ethic that permeates his poetry, prose and interviews.

I. Post-humanism and Cultural Translation

In Snyder's view, Western discourse of the human and social sciences has been uncritical of the centrality it has historically accorded to culture, civilization and man. Like the exploitation of nature by a narcissistic Western culture that unreflectingly assumed the superiority of its civilization, described by the poet's second book, *Myths & Texts*, this nature-destroying praxis had to be radically critiqued. A way to undermine it is set forth in *Myths & Texts*: we must fuse "history and the wilderness in mind" (xx; Kern 250). Snyder's eco-critical project aimed from the outset to "develop a much larger perspective on the historical human experience…. This is the new, larger humanism …" (*Real Work* 113, 136). Snyder's later depiction of a "larger humanism" as "post-humanism" (*Practice* 68) suggests a way of widening our horizon of expectations, to move us beyond the limitations of being purely human.

In fact, Snyder's usage of "post-humanism" is similar to Ulrich Beck's notion of "second modernity": both thinkers want to deal directly with our increasingly chaotic ecological situation. For Snyder, traditional humanism ignores non-human others, while for Beck "first modernity" is

not sufficiently self-reflexive to solve the environmental problems it has created. In his *Ecological Enlightenment*, Beck laments:

> It is not the extinction of species that draws our attention to the extinction of species; protest against extinction is essentially also an echo of its showcasing in the major magazines and on the evening television screen. Only if nature is brought into people's everyday images, into the stories they tell, can its beauty and its suffering be seen and focused on…. Seeing is cultural seeing, attention is narration. Our culture, and therefore we ourselves, see and hear in symbols, in which what is invisible or forgotten stands out and lives figuratively. (14)

Here Beck argues that "first nature" seems to give way to either "second nature" (narration and cultural representation) or "third nature" (when "protest against extinction is essentially also an echo of its showcasing in the major magazines and on the evening television screen").[3] Like Snyder, Beck suggests that ecological enlightenment can be achieved through linguistic representation, but the two take different positions on the "ecological literacy" that they both feel is central. Beck, a sociologist, emphasizes that ecological issues are social problems; Snyder, an eco-poet, theorizes ecological disorder and disruption through an environmental imagination, one that is based on his understanding of ecosystems. Thus Snyder is eco-centric in his belief that humans are part of nature, whereas Beck is more anthropocentric: he believes that ecological problems must be worked out in and through the social order (7). Closely related to this difference is the fact that Beck bases his critical apparatus on modernity, while Snyder's poetic enterprise includes the pre-modern as well as postmodern or post-human.

Thus Snyder acknowledges the crucial role of human cultures, and especially the importance of the "other" non-Western cultures. Most obviously in the case of "aboriginal" cultures, these may seem analogues to the "otherness" of nature and of the earth itself. For Snyder, the praxis of radically changing our thinking about the environment is closely related to dramatically changing how we conceptualize, imagine, and express our views of very different cultures, and also our own. In other words,

to fuse "history and the wilderness in mind" (*Myths and Texts* xx; Kern 250) we need a cultural translation that can purify our (self-centered) cultural thinking. As Michel Serres points out, in the hyper-rational-technological West, we suffer not just from environmental pollution, but from the "cultural pollution" that caused it, and "[i]f we don't struggle against the second, we will lose the fight against the first" (31).[4]

A very important "Other-culture" for Snyder is ancient China. In addition to its Daoist-Buddhist spiritual values, which recognize the vital importance and centrality of the earth in a way that the Western or Middle Eastern monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) do not, Chinese civilization has a very old writing system that includes historical, religious-philosophical and literary texts. This means that the rich ancient culture of China is readily "translatable." Snyder's literary and cultural translation of traditional Chinese literature, mostly classical poetry and Zen-Buddhist texts, helps Western readers to see that their horizon of expectations is too narrow and that they need a much wider and more encompassing cultural-environmental imagination.

II. Snyder's Poetic Modernist and Beat Influence as Cultural Translation

In his "Displacement, Transformation, Hybridization: Translation and Chinese Modernity," Shaobo Xie argues that "Modernity in China began and evolved with translation" (61). Here he refers, of course, to the Westernization (modernization) of China that "derives its criteria or parameters from translating Western theories of modernity." As a means of implementing a new cultural paradigm, translation also brought the East to the West, though here it was not so clearly a case of "modernizing," and in some respects might be seen on the contrary as "classicizing." In fact, to appreciate the full meaning of Snyder's poetics of cultural translation, we need to first briefly note the impact of Indian and East Asian philosophy on the American transcendentalists, imagists and Beat poets.[5] After all, this is the literary scene—one with a distinct Asian edge—from which Snyder as a writer and poet emerged.

Snyder readily admits the enduring creative influence of Chinese landscape [*san-shui*] paintings on his imagination that began with a visit to

the Seattle Art Museum. These paintings "blew his mind" (Smith 10), he said, because he "was struck more by Chinese landscape paintings" than anything he had seen before. He further comments on the experience:

> That *seed* lodged in my store-house-consciousness to be watered when I first read Arthur Waley's translations of Chinese poetry and then Ezra Pound's. I thought, there is a high civilization that has managed to keep in tune with nature. The philosophical and religious writings I later read from Chinese seemed to back this up…. (McLeod 177, my emphasis)

For Snyder, this shock of recognition would not fade. It stayed with him through his college years at Reed and graduate studies in California. In an interview, Snyder recalled the spring of 1952, when he "quit graduate school in linguistics and anthropology at Indiana University and hitchhiked back to Berkeley to enroll in the Oriental languages department" (*Real Work* 95). This change of studies enriched his knowledge of Chinese literature and paved his way to Asia (*Real Work* 95). Dan McLeod believes Snyder began to use Asian materials well before his study of Buddhism in Japan: "What links the Asian figure in works as diverse as those of Whitman, Pound, and Snyder is that in each instance their use of Asian sources advanced their development of authentic personal or native American themes in directions clearly discernible before they turned to Asia" (166).

According to Robert Kern, Snyder as a belated modernist poet translates Chinese poetry to generate an alternative Orientalized modernism. In a similar vein, Patrick D. Murphy claims that Snyder's discovery of Chinese poetry in English translation in 1949 was motivated by a keen interest in Asia and Buddhism (3). He adds that while Snyder studied at Reed, he looked to Ezra Pound "for technical guidance" (4). In the *East-West* interview with Peter B. Chowka, Snyder expounds the propinquity between Chinese literature and himself:

> … I was also studying Far Eastern culture at Reed College. I read Ezra Pound's and Arthur Waley's translations of Chinese poetry, a translation of the *Tao Te Ching*, and some texts of

Confucius. Within a year or so I went through the *Upanishads*, *Vedas*, *Bhagavad-Gita*, and most of the classics of Chinese and Indian Buddhist literature. The convergence that I found really exciting was the Mahayana Buddhist wisdom-oriented line as it developed in China and assimilated the older Taoist tradition. It was that very precise cultural meeting that also coincided with the highest period of Chinese poetry—the early and middle T'ang Dynasty Zen masters and the poets who were their contemporaries and in many cases friends—that was fascinating. (*Reader* 93)

Timothy Gray observes that both Pound and Williams were "among the first in the West to incorporate Asian rhythms in their own verse" (51). For Snyder, both were instrumental in his aspiration to become a poet: Williams's 1950 lecture tour at Reed gave three would-be new American poets—Snyder and his friends, Lew Welch and Philip Whalen—a chance to meet the poet in person (Gray 51), and Pound is considered a prime mover for the "Asian-inflected poetics." When Snyder was at Berkeley in 1953, he met Kenneth Rexroth, another promulgator of Asian poetics and aesthetics. Later, the two became good friends, discussing poetics more often than not. Snyder then departed for Japan to learn Zen-Buddhism in 1956 (Kern 241).

At this point I will venture an interpretation of Snyder's cultural translation of Chinese thinking by examining the ways he sets Confucianist, Taoist, and Zen-Buddhist thoughts and images in a current American-English idiom, in a manner perhaps that sought to penetrate the hearts and souls of Western (American) readers.

III. Snyder's Eco-Poetics as East-to-West Cultural Translation

Snyder's concept of "nature" was at least in part derived from the ancient Chinese *Shih Ching* or *Book of Songs*, known traditionally as the "mother of poems." In these ancient poems—some likely to have been sung by village people early in the Chou dynasty (1050–256 BC), though the book was not compiled until later by Confucius—we often see "people going about their daily life in nature, working in the fields and orchards,

loving and courting, and occasionally celebrating and feasting" (*Back on the Fire* 27). We also sometimes see references to the communal ritual practices of sacrifice and augury. The *Shih Ching* was canonized as an important classic in the Han dynasty, and became an authorized text-book for the study of Chinese ethics and politics. The ancient Chinese social-communal-ritualized life portrayed (or, more correctly, "sung") in the *Songs*, was a life lived in harmony with nature, and has a sort of social and ethical function in Confucianism that renders it paradigmatic for Chinese culture.

Snyder is also very fond of other Chinese classics, including the Confucian *Lun Yü* (*The Analects*), *Lao Tzu*, *Chuang Tzu* and some Buddhist texts. In *Axe Handles*, the poem "He Shot Arrows, But Not at Birds Perching" even alludes to the *Lun Yü* 7.26 to convey a Confucian ethic or "etiquette" of hunting. A similar reference is made in *Myths & Texts*, when the deer "dance[s] on all the mountains / On five moun-tains, I [the deer] have a dancing place / When they shoot at me I run / To my five mountains" (26). Snyder's *The Practice of the Wild*, an im-portant collection of essays that systematically examine the meaning and "nature" of nature from an East-West comparative perspective, cautions the reader that

> [i]t is not enough just to 'love nature' or to want to 'be in har-mony with Gaia.' Our relationship to the natural world takes place in a *place*, and it must be grounded in information and experience. For example: 'real people' have an easy familiarity with the local plants.… Many contemporary Americans don't even know that they don't 'know the plants,' which is indeed a measure of alienation. (39)

In Book Seventeen of the *Analects*, Confucius observes that "the *Songs* will help you to incite people's emotions, to observe their feelings, to keep you company, to express your grievances.… Moreover, they will widen your acquaintance with the names of birds, beasts, plants and trees" (*The Analects* 233). In *The Old Ways*, a book about how the usable past can function in and for the sustainable future, Snyder makes a similar observation: "To know the place well means, first and fore-

most, I think, to know plants, and it means developing a sensitivity, an openness, an awareness of all kinds of weather patterns and patterns in nature" (79). Here, Snyder's citation of the *Lun Yü* is a response to Confucius's *demand* for an "[e]tiquette in regard to nature as well as human society" (*Back* 67), and this may have been an important "cultural paradigm" for the poet's dual ecological/social focus. Snyder, like Thoreau (see note 5) and Pound (McLeod 163), finds that Confucian ethics provide the egocentric and anthropocentric West with an alternative eco-ethical perspective.

Snyder is also well-versed in Taoism, though his references to Chuang Tzu are few. One example is found in *The Practice of the Wild*, where Snyder demonstrates two different mentalities—the old ways and the new ways—by introducing the story of Cook Ting: "The occidental approach to the arts … is to downplay the aspect of accomplishment and push everyone to be continually doing something new" while the Cook Ting seems able to "bridge the spiritual and the practical," teasing us "with an image of how totally accomplished one might become if one gave one's whole life up to a work" (147). In "Coyote Man, Mr. President, & the Gunfighters" Snyder parodies Chapter 30 of *Chuang Tzu*'s "Discoursing on Swords" to criticize his government's bellicosity and environmental racism. In the original poem, Chuang Tzu was invited by Prince K'uei to persuade King Wen of Chao not to be obsessed with fighting. Following Chuang Tzu's plot line, Snyder only swaps the characters' names: King Wen of Chao = Mr. President; the swordsmen = the Gunfighters; and Chuang Tzu = Coyote Man. Snyder is faithful to the original because both Snyder and Chuang Tzu criticize the unwittingness of government militarism (Murphy 142).

Lao Tzu, however, plays a more important role in Snyder's thinking. In his essay "The Etiquette of Freedom," which is not only "a revisionary updating of Emerson's *Nature*" (Kern 221), but also a rewriting of Thoreau's famous motto "In wildness is the preservation of the world," Snyder writes:

> Thoreau says "give me a wildness no civilization can endure."
> That's clearly not difficult to find. It is harder to imagine a civi-

lization that wildness can endure, yet this is just what we must try to do. Wildness is not just the "preservation of the world," it *is* the world. Civilizations east and west have long been on a collision course with wild nature, and now the developed nations in particular have the witless power to destroy not only individual creatures but whole species, whole processes, of the earth. We need a civilization that can live fully and creatively together with wildness. We must start growing it right here, in the New World. (*Practice* 6)

Snyder is directly attacking that monomaniacal love of "civilization" that comes at the cost of nature: "Wildness is the world" and yet it is no longer able to survive the civilization that encompasses, imprisons and gradually (or quickly) destroys it. For Snyder, Western civilization has something like what Foucault would call the "rules of exclusion" of discourse (in "Discourse on Language"): it will always exclude itself-as-Other, that part of itself which becomes Other-to (for)-it, in this case the very nature out of which civilization built itself. And yet, following the Poundian imagist conception-and-translation of Chinese culture, Snyder also speaks of "a civilization that can live fully and creatively together with wildness" by dismantling "the civilized [i.e., false] definition of nature as the opposite of culture" (Kern 221). Here again the project becomes one of translating the "language of nature," as we find it in classical Chinese literature, into a more universal "language of culture."

Thus Snyder sees fit to provide an etymological definition of the closely related Chinese notions of "wild" (*ye*) and "nature" (*zi-ran*):

> Although *nature* is a term that is not of itself threatening, the idea of the "wild" … is often associated with unruliness, disorder, and violence. The Chinese word for nature, *zi-ran* … means "self-thus." … The word for wild in Chinese, *ye* (Japanese *ya*)… basically means "open country." … In an interesting case, *ye-man zi-yu* ("open-country southern-tribal-person-freedom") means "wild license." … In a way *ye* is taken to mean "nature at its worst." Although the Chinese and Japanese have long given

lip service to nature, only the early Daoists might have thought
that wisdom could come of wildness. (*Practice* 5–6)

For this poet, "chaos" is a human invention, while the "wild" is a source
of "power." Indeed, he provides a whole gallery of definitions of "nature"
terms in Taoism.[6] Though nature is "wild" and "self-thus," full of "un-
ruliness, disorder, and violence," the earth-lore in it might "open life to
a more livable future" (*The Real Work* xiii), endowing it with sustainable
potentialities. This explains why the poet, as lore-bearer, is fascinated
by "the Useless": a realm that includes the concepts of "dark ecology,"
"compost" and "useless lands." Snyder writes:

> Daoist philosophers tell us that surprise and subtle instruction
> might come forth from the Useless. So it was with the waste-
> lands of the American West—inaccessible, inhospitable, arid,
> and forbidding to the eyes of most early Euro-Americans. The
> Useless Lands became the dreaming place of a few nineteenth-
> and early-twentieth-century men and women … who went out
> into the space and loneliness and returned from their quests
> … to criticize the policies and assumptions of the expanding
> United States.… (*Practice* 126–27)

Like Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, Snyder argues that the useless can be
rendered useful. He also articulates the importance of "tiny energies"
in those poems that are closely associated with ecological signs of trans-
formation. For Snyder, even the smallest energy flow in nature can be
highly productive. In *Left Out in the Rain*, Snyder uses Lao Tzu's words
to express an *interpassive* attitude toward self and other: "To forget what
you knew is best. / That's what I want: / To get these sights down, /
Clear, right to the place / Where they fade / Back into the mind of my
times. / The same old circuitry / But some paths color-coded / *Empty* /
And we're free to go" (130).

   Interestingly, Snyder also contrasts the abstract sense of "nature" with
the more concrete notion of "the environment":

> What we refer to as nature or the "environment" or the wild
> world is our endangered habitat and home, and we are its

problem species. Living in it well with each other and with all the other beings is our ancient challenge. In this time of New World Disorder, we need to find the trick of weaving civilized culture and wild nature into the fabric of the future. This will take both art and science. (*Back* 25)

In his early works, Snyder rarely talks about the "environment." In later works, however, such as *Back on the Fire*, he expands on the notion of "environment" to show how, like "nature," it means a "place": "'Nature' and 'environment' are words that basically refer to 'that which is' …. Nature, and environment, as terms, feel like 'places'" (*Back* 30). The poet's concern here is how to "create a deeply grounded contemporary literature of nature":

> What is the literature which gives expression to Nature? He would be a poet who could impress the winds and streams into his service, to speak for him; who nailed words to their primitive senses, as farmers drive down stakes in the spring, which the frost has heaved; who derived his words as often as he used them,—transplanted them to his page with earth adhering to their roots; whose words were so true and fresh and natural that they would appear to expand like the buds at the approach of spring, though they lay half smothered between two musty leaves in a library,—aye, to bloom and bear fruit there, after their kind, annually, for the faithful reader, in sympathy with surrounding Nature. (*Back* 167)

With respect to these lines Snyder appears Thoreauvian, not only because both poets regard nature as an "other," but because both perceive nature as an agent with its own voice. In *Back on the Fire,* Snyder writes that "[t]he remarkably coherent and persistent cultures of East Asia have yielded a literature (in Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and China) that is unmatched in the matter of *representing nature* in art and writing" (27, my emphasis).

Snyder's translation of the Tang and Sung poems further reveals his understanding of the relationship between man and nature. In his

translation of Tu Fu's "Spring View," Snyder has it that "[t]he nation is ruined, but mountains and rivers remain. / This spring the city is deep in weeds and brush. / Touched by the times even flowers weep tears, / Fearing leaving the birds tangled hearts…" (*Reader* 542). In this poem, Tu Fu muses over the seizing of Chang-An by An Lu-Shan in the Tang Dynasty in 757 AD. In Snyder's interpretation, the landscape of Chang-An, the capital city of the Tang Dynasty, drastically changes after the fall: "The mountains and rivers are destroyed, but the State survives" (*The Practice* 175).[7] Snyder seems to care more about the ecological disorder caused by the civil war and its irreversible loss of species (176), thus bringing us again to the importance of *ahimsa* in his poetry, a concept that I will discuss more fully in the following section.

Snyder began thinking about how to compose *Mountains and Rivers without End* on April 4, 1956, during a long talk with Japanese artist Hasegawa Saburo (Weinberger 88; Smith 11). Five years later, he published *Six Sections from Mountains and Rivers without End*. In 1979, he included an additional poem, "The Blue Sky," and changed the title to *Six Sections from Mountains and Rivers without End Plus One*. However, the complete version of *Mountains and Rivers without End* did not appear until 1996, forty years after the initial conception of his plan to write a long poem. This *magnum opus* contains thirty-nine individual poems; each is designed to be brought into dialogue with all the others, so that all the poems fit together organically into a larger whole.[8]

For the critic Eric Todd Smith, the heart of this long poem is the Chinese notion of "k'ung/emptiness/sky/space/the void" (50). Perhaps as a function of k'ung-voidness, the virtual and real also seem to be interconnected in *Mountains and Rivers without End*. The first poem, "Endless Streams and Mountains," also known as "Ch'i Shan Wu Chin," is the gateway to the rest of the work:[9]

> Clearing the mind and slide in
>   To that created space,
> a web of waters streaming over rocks,
> air misty but not raining,
>   seeing this land from a boat on a lake

> or a broad slow river,
> coasting by. (*Mountains and Rivers* 5)

"Ch'i Shan Wu Chin" is, in effect, a Chinese landscape painting. Perhaps Snyder composed the poem to acknowledge his debt to this genre, with which he became familiar on his first visit to the Seattle Art Museum. The opening line "clearing the mind" is a preparation for reading the poem/painting, and appears also as homage; the phrase "slide in" is a loophole, a threshold between the real and the virtual, that invites readers to enter the created painting-like space of the poem. Using this space, the reader can shuttle to and fro between real time and dream time. Snyder, like Dōgen, here employs Chinese landscape painting as a means to achieve "enlightenment": "Unsurpassed enlightenment is a painting. The entire phenomenal universe and the empty are nothing but a painting" (*Mountains* v).

Unlike "Ch'i Shan Wu Chin," which invites us to approach the real (phenomenal world) through the virtual (painting), "The Canyon Wren" demonstrates that the loss of a "real" river can only be retrieved through memory and imagination (the virtual) due to the ever-changing nature of the world that creates the ruin. Originally included in *Axe Handles*, this poem describes how a river will be dammed. The Chinese quote from Su Tung P'o's (1036–1101) "Hundred Pace Rapids" (1078) records the enlightened experience brought about by a gleam of light shining forth in the moment that the transient and the eternal meet in a dialectical stillness:

> Shooting the Hundred-Pace Rapids
> Su Tung P'o saw, for a moment,
> it all stand still.
> "I stare at the water:
> It moves with unspeakable slowness." (*Mountains and Rivers* 90)

For Su Tung P'o, his life "banished" by the Emperor now is like the "shooting" of the Hundrel-Pace Rapids, but a ray of inner light dawns with which he can perceive "stillness" or "unspeakable slowness" in the evanescent present. Another sublime experience occurs on the slopes

of Mountain Lu, where he finds himself able to listen to non-sentient beings (e.g., "the stream") expounding the dharma:

> The stream with its sounds   is a long broad tongue
> The looming mountain   is a wide-awake body
> Throughout the night   song after song
> How can I   speak at dawn. (*Mountains and Rivers* 138)

The "stream" here compares to Buddha's "long broad tongue" preaching to those who are enlightened (Hunt 169). Dōgen comments on Su's poem with a rhetorical question, in response to the line "The looming mountain is a wide awake body": "Was it Su who woke / or was it the mountains and streams?" (*Mountains and Rivers* 138). I would add that Su Tung P'o's enlightenment experience echoes that of Snyder when he received both Oda Sesso's approval of his study of koans, and a Buddhist name: "I got a Buddhist name from Roshi; he decided to call me Chofu/ Ting Feng/Listen wind/ which he picked from Han Shan poem …" (Yamazato 90).

   In "The Hump-backed Flute Player," Snyder juxtaposes two figures: Hsüan Tsang and Kokop'ele. The former is a Chinese monk, the latter a mythic figure in southwestern (Hopi) Native American literature; both carry buckets of "seeds" on their backs:

> Hsüan Tsang / went to India 629 AD / returned to China 645 / with 657 sūtras, images, mandalas, / and fifty relics— / a curved frame pack with a parasol, / embroidery, carving, / incense censer swinging as he walked / the Pamir / the Tarim / Turfan / the Punjab / the doab / of Ganga and Yamuna, / … / he carried / "emptiness" / He carried / "mind only" / *Vijnaptimātra* / The hump-backed flute player / Kokop'ele / His hump is a pack." (79)

Here Snyder tells the saga of the seventh-century Chinese monk Hsüan Tsang in eighteen highly condensed lines. Born in the province of Henan and ordained as a monk at the age of twenty, Hsüan Tsang left China secretly at night in 629 AD and, after nineteen years of journeying, studying and lecturing in India, returned in 645 AD with triumph

and glory. In Snyder's hands, Hsüan Tsang and Kokop'ele are bringers of new ideas, appearing multifariously as culture "carriers" or translators, journeyers and tricksters. Unlike Hsüan Tsang, who is more of an ascetic, Kokop'ele is a bringer of sun and rain for good crops and a fertility god.

"Macaques in the Sky" is one of Snyder's poems that is set in southern Taiwan, written while the poet was on a trip to Nanren Lake. In this poem, Snyder offers a Buddhist interpretation of macaques floating in the sky: "faces among the leaves, / being ears and eyes of trees / soft hands and haunches pressed on boughs and vines / Then—*wha!*—she leaps out in the air / the baby dangling from her belly, / they float there, / —she fetches up along another limb— / and settles in" (114). In this poem, Snyder regards "the mother monkey" (a "she") as a Buddha-Mother figure ("mother of heavens") and the word "*wha*" implies the moment of *being* enlightened at the sight of a mother monkey swinging from one branch to another, a gesture analogous to *prajinaparamita*—the ability to "go beyond."[10]

In *Mountains and Rivers without End*, Snyder's cultural translation of Chinese literature, art and painting—in poems like "Ch'i Shan Wu Chin," "The Canyon Wren," "The Hump-backed Flute Player," and "Macaques in the Sky"—resonates with Chinese motifs that help us to experience non-duality. For in these eco-poetic figures, symbols, emblems or motifs, the real and virtual, profane and sacred, eye and gaze are juxtaposed in such a way that the polar ends are brought together into what Snyder likens to a Möbius strip: "Actually something like the Möbius strip moves in and out of two dimensions" (Faas 134). His translation of nature from the original Chinese texts expresses an insight that is both immanent and transcendent. Nature here is not naïve or romantic but dialectical, as the phrase "No Nature" suggests.[11] Yet this also transcends or modifies the logical-dialectical insofar as the "no" also means "know" and "noh" (as in the stylized, ritualistic Japanese Noh drama). The Möbius strip generates an interconnectedness between binary oppositions, which lies at the heart of Snyder's "eco-poetics," as does the "*dia*-critical" aspect of his nonduality and bipolarity: "embracing the other as oneself and stepping across the line—not 'becoming

one' or mixing things up but holding the sameness and difference delicately in mind" (*Practice* 180).

IV. The Ethics of Translation

Snyder learned from Tibetan Buddhist Milarepa that "[t]he notion of emptiness engenders compassion."[12] As a poet, he likes to speak of and for the other, based on his experience translating Chinese, Japanese and other Asian texts. His training in Ch'an/Zen-Buddhism helps him de-emphasize "individual entities" and focus "instead on relationships" (Smith 15). In an interview with Nicholas O'Connell, Snyder noted that "the Ch'an tradition's course of study on how to empty the self" was emancipatory for his "writ[ing] about a pine tree as a pine tree" (314).[13]

Being a Neo-Platonist dedicated to the art of poetry, and averse to the Platonic ideal of expelling all poets from the Republic, Snyder follows Confucius in suggesting that we bring "poets into government and [let] them run it" (Gram 55). Poetry, despite Plato's accusation to the contrary, can be at once social, moral and ecological: "[For Confucius] the study of poetry teaches you the names of flowers and trees and animals, then it gives you a proper sense of decorum, and thirdly it trains your character, so that people who know poetry can be good governors" (56).[14] In *Back on the Fire*, Snyder summarizes the three directions of his poetic project as: embracing environmental imagination/poetics; delineating environmental aesthetics and eco-philosophy; and rejecting environmental racism:

> We study the great writings of the Asian past so that we might surpass them today. We hope to create *a deeply grounded contemporary literature of nature* that celebrates the wonder of our natural world, that draws on and makes *beauty of the incredibly rich knowledge* gained from science, and that confronts *the terrible damage* being done today in the name of progress and the world economy. (*Back* 30, my emphasis)

Snyder's poetry is highly ethical, suggesting that environmental racism be avoided, encouraging instead the cultivation and study of environmental aesthetics, poetics and literature. These three recurrent themes

are germane to the eco-critical discussion of Snyder's poetry, prose and interviews, especially in Chinese contexts, but also in Native American ones—two cultural contexts whose views of nature and self Snyder basically equates (see note 2). In other words, Snyder speaks his ecological mind through Chinese cultures and civilizations; these are his central concerns, inter-causal and interconnected.[15] When asked about the relationship between Native American peoples and the Eastern cultures, Snyder's response is full of Taoist and Zen-Buddhist self-reflexive wisdom:

> 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 …. But there is a body of paths which do come to the same goal—some with a more earthly stress, some with a more spiritual stress. But what they share in common is the exploration of consciousness itself: self-understanding, transcendence of self. (*Real Work* 67–68)

One might regard Snyder's comment that "Oh, it's all *one* teaching" as too simplistic, too close to conflating or homogenizing *other* heterogeneous cultures. But the implication here is rather that, for the poet, there exists a transcultural common denominator, a key feature of which is due respect for nature, the land, and other life forms. Cultural translation is of course by definition transcultural: translating any one of the other cultures for the West means, in effect, translating from all of them. We must remember here that the indigenous peoples of the Americas originally came from northeast Asia. Translation of the "Asian" idea that Nature is *dao* ["the right path"] encompasses an understanding that this *dao* is present in the Native American landscape of consciousness and the Buddhist *dharma*:

> When we talk about a "norm" or a "Dharma," we're talking about the grain of things in the larger picture. Living close to the earth, living more simply, living more responsibly, are all quite literally in the grain of things. It's coming back to us one way or another, like it or not—when the excessive energy sup-

plies are gone. I will stress, and keep stressing, these things, because one of the messages I feel I have to convey—not as a preaching but as a demonstration hidden within poetry—is of deeper harmonies and deeper simplicities, which are essentially sanities, even though they appear irrelevant, impossible, behind us, ahead of us, or right now. (*Real* 112)

Snyder's reading of the linkage between Eastern thoughts and Native American concepts of nature reveals his transcultural imaginary. Equally important, I think, is his effort to maintain Thoreauvian notions of simplicity and "wildness." However, though Snyder inherited both Emerson's and Thoreau's concepts of nature, he also incorporates Eastern theories of nature derived from Confucianism, Taoism and Zen-Buddhism, to supplement the Emersonian and Thoreauvian influences. Moreover, he *lives* the Eastern cultures, practicing them and dispersing them so that East and West come into *real* contact, an effort that goes beyond that of Thoreau.

Both Chinese literature and Native American literature contributed much to Snyder's understanding of a healing, restorative, place-based environmental imagination. He notes that

> [s]ome American Indian cultures have 'mature' characteristics: protection as against production, stability as against growth, quality as against quantity. In Pueblo societies a kind of ultimate democracy is practiced. Plants and animals are also people, and, through certain rituals and dances, are given a place and a voice in the political discussions of the humans. They are 'represented.' (*Turtle Island* 104)

In "The Uses of Light," Snyder offers a good poetic example in which both sentient and non-sentient beings are depicted as agents with their own voices:

> It warms my bones / says the stones / I take it into me and grow / Says the trees / Leaves above / Roots below / A vast vague white / Draws me out of the night / Says the moth in his flight— / Some things I smell / Some things I hear / And I

see things move / Says the deer— / A high tower / On a wide plain. / If you climb up / One floor / You'll see a thousand miles more. (*Turtle Island* 39)

For Snyder, both Chinese and Native American literatures are nature-oriented and place-based. Therefore, in his works, Snyder addresses the importance of "talking about administering things for human affairs in consonance with their natural regions so that human affairs may be non-harming to natural affairs" (O'Connell 318).

Throughout his *oeuvre*, Snyder looks for "a religious view that embraces nature" (*Back on the Fire* 70), one that might be called *ahimsa* or "non-harming." This Indian Buddhist ethic embodies the sentiments of "humility, cooperation, sharing, and respect for nature" (*Practice* 58). Historically, the philosophy of *ahimsa* is associated not only with Jainism and Buddhism, but also with world religions that teach the practice of non-harm regarding any beings *on* the earth, as well as the earth (earth-being) itself: "All things breathing, all things existing, all things living, all beings whatever, should not be slain or treated with violence, or insulted, or tortured, or driven away" (Bothara xv-xvi). The term *ahimsa* does not appear in old Vedic texts; one "finds its first mention in the *Chāndogyopanishad*" (Bothara 4), which maintains the following: do no *himsa* (harm) to "*man*" (mind), "*Vachan*" (speech), or "*Kaya*" (body); do "not kill, get killing done, or approve any killing"; reject physical possession, owing to the intimate connection between possession and violence (Bothara xvii).

In *Myths & Texts*, *Riprap*, *The Practice of the Wild* and *Back on the Fire*, Snyder reiterates the positive connotations of *ahimsa*: "In terms of environmentalism, the Buddhist ethical teaching that we should 'avoid harm to all beings' as far as reasonably possible, which is the Buddhist teaching of *ahimsa* or nonharming/nonviolence or *fusessho*, has had a profound effect" (*Back* 29–39). In "Writer and the War against Nature," Snyder upholds the Buddhist tradition of "nonviolence toward all of nature" through an analogy to the biblical concept of "Thou shalt not kill"; this is also a lesson from his rōshi, who instructs him that "[o]f all the precepts, the first precept is most important and contains the others:

ahimsa, nonharming, 'Cause the least possible harm'" (*Reader* 67). Thus *ahimsa* can be regarded as an environmental ethics in an age of violence or terrorism against nature and the web of beings.[16]

V. Conclusion

In "Axe Handle," Snyder describes the April afternoon he spent showing his son Kai how to repair a hatchet with a broken-off handle. This event reminds him of the interconnected, intertextual webs of literary and artistic interdependence. Two lines from an ancient Chinese text—"When making an axe handle / the pattern is not far off"—trigger Snyder's creative imagination, and he links himself with his precursors (Ezra Pound, Lu Ji, Shih-hsiang Chen) through this composite image of the "Axe Handle" that combines the actual tool with the virtual craft. More importantly, the poem describes the relationship between father and son, strong and weak poets, and the maintenance of tradition: "Pound *was* an axe / Chen *was* an axe, I *am* an axe / and my son *is* a handle, soon / To be shaping again, model / And tool" (my emphasis). Pound translated *The Confucian Odes* in 1954,[17] but the reference ("The pattern is not far off"—Shih-hsiang Chen's translation) to the American poet (as strong father-poet) is also a reference to Pound's poem "A Pact," which expresses a debt of gratitude to Whitman:

> I make a pact with you, Walt Whitman— / I have detested you long enough. / I come to you as a grown child / Who has had a pig-headed father; / I am old enough now to make friends. / It was you that broke the new wood, / Now is a time for carving. / We have one sap and one root—Let there be commerce between us.

Pound's (Chinese-influenced) imagist technique will "carve" the rough, new, free-wheeling epic force of "modern American poetry" that he discovered in Whitman into finer, more delicate pieces and images.

The motif of the "axe handle" first appears in *The Book of Song*s, published in 1937: "How does one cut an axe-handle? / Without an axe it is impossible. / How does one take a wife? / Without a matchmaker she cannot be got" (Waley, *The Book of Songs* 68). Snyder's translation reads:

"How do you shape an axe-handle? / Without an axe it can't be done. / How do you take a wife? / Without a go-between you can't get one." The "go-between" catches the image of a pattern made by connecting two parts. There is, however, an intertextual paraphrase of the original poem at the end of the Preface to Lu Ji's *Essay on Literature*, which seems to rewrite the original to mean a potential *gap* between language and experience: "Perhaps some other day the secret of this most intricate art may be entirely mastered. In making an axe handle by cutting wood with an axe, the model is indeed near at hand. But the adaptability of the hand to the ever-changing circumstances and impulses in the process of creation is such that words can hardly explain" (Lu 204). Inspired by Pound, Snyder as mediator between culture and nature is instrumental in bringing language closer to experience through, for example, privileging orality over written words.

Through this event of "making an axe-handle," literary as well as real, Snyder brings together past, present and future into a discordant harmony, creating a nodal moment of epiphany—the awakening to a dedication to art and life:

> … [T]he phrase
> First learned from Ezra Pound
> Rings in my ears!
> "When making an axe handle
>   The pattern is not far off."
> … And I hear it again:
> It's in Lu Ji's *Wen Fu*, fourth century
> A.D. "Essay on Literature"—in the
> Preface: "In making the handle
> Of an axe
> By cutting wood with an axe
> The model is indeed near at hand." (*Axe Handles* 5)

This poem is instructive, emphasizing the Chinese influence on Pound, on Snyder through Pound, and then through Snyder on his own son. Thus we have individual artistic talent and transcultural continuity, a fusion of the personal, social and artistic levels of meaning. Snyder's

poetic fathers seem to him like axes, providing a sustainable future for belated poets or (Bloomian) "latecomers." To a certain degree, Pound also had nineteenth-century American poet-fathers who were influenced by Asian thought—Emerson by Hinduism, Thoreau by Confucianism. The direct Asian influence on Whitman's *Song of Myself* is less clear, but the "thinking" manifested in the poem is sometimes compared to Buddhism, to which it is obviously much closer than it is to Christianity. Snyder, for his part, brings *real* contact between the East and the "wood" cut created by his American predecessors.

Notes

1 This can be read as a nod to Native American culture, with its "aboriginal" relation to the universe.

2 Snyder has always tended to see Native American cultures as being essentially or "originally" Asian, and thus as having something in common with the cultures of China, Japan, India, and Tibet.

3 Wark coined the term "third nature" to mean "infoscape" in an age of globalization. For Wark, second nature knows itself "locally" and will come "increasingly to depend on the space of third nature" (199), while "[t]hird nature, with its endless series of economic indices and electronic transactions, is the consciousness of second nature as a whole" (197). Moreover, third nature "facilitated the reorganization of the global space of productive second nature as a space of flows rather than a space of places" (197).

4 For Serres, environmental pollution belongs to the "infrastructure" and cultural pollution to the "superstructure."

5 As for the transcendentalists, Emerson has a clear Hindu influence—in "Nature" his little self/soul/ego is the "atman" and big self/soul/ego ("cosmic consciousness") the Atman. Emerson's writing shows that he gave a certain priority to American aboriginal culture, as I have pointed out. Thoreau too is obviously living a sort of "native" life at Walden, and he quotes from Confucius (but interestingly not from Buddhism or Daoism), as well as from Plato, more than once in *Walden*.

6 Snyder says: "The English word 'nature' is from Latin *natura*, 'birth, constitution, character, course of things'—initially from *nasci*, to be born. The root *nat*, connected with birth, also gives rise to the words nation, natal, and native. The Chinese word for nature is *zi-ran* (in Japanese *shizen*) meaning 'self-thus'" (*Back on Fire* 25).

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7 Snyder's translation of the same poem in *The Practice* is slightly different from the one included in *Gary Snyder Reader*.

8 We are also reminded here of Leibniz's *Monadology*, and Deleuze's interpretation of it in *The Fold*.

9 According to Smith, the Chinese characters for "Mountains and Rivers without End" are *Ch'i Shan Wu Chin*, as the first poem indicates (5).

10 The disruption—to/of the listener's and/or reader's mind as well as ears—of the sudden and unexpected "*wha*!" also follows the tradition of Japanese poet Bassho's Zen-enlightenment poems. Perhaps the best-known example in Bassho is the "plop!" of the frog that suddenly jumps into the pond … just as Snyder's monkey "leaps out in the air." (Of course, Snyder may also be thinking that we too are monkeys, watching from below.)

11 For a more detailed analysis of this poem, see Tsai. Moreover, when asked about Buddhism, Snyder says that "it's ideal for anybody who wants to be both planetary and local at the same time, to have roots in a place and still have a sense of planetary cosmopolitanism" (O'Connell 315). This, for me, is called "glocalized eco-cosmopolitanism." See also Wang (35–48).

12 This quote is an epigram from *Mountains and Rivers*, and in the last poem, "Finding the Space in the Heart," Snyder writes: "The / awareness of emptiness / brings forth a heart of compassion!" (149). Snyder also alludes to Milarepa in "Cross-Legg'd" that he has found his path after building the same tower of stone four times (128).

13 Snyder says in an interview that "[W]e are not just a single self—we are a number of selves … but an array of possible faces, possible angles, possible takes on the world …. The acknowledgement that we reflect a number of selves, all of which, of course, are illusory anyway, and which resolve into a non-self …" (Smith 15).

14 For Snyder, there is no senator who speaks for wilderness; therefore, he "wish[es] to bring a voice from wilderness," which is his "constituency" (*Turtle Island* 106).

15 Snyder claims two reasons for his travel to the Far East: "The intellectual reason was an ongoing interest and concern for the possibilities of a civilized society operating in harmony with nature. My reading of Taoist text, Chinese and Japanese poetry, and my experience of Chinese landscape paints, led me to think that the Far East had been a high civilization that had somehow done this…. This intellectual and aesthetic interest in the Far East came to me initially in a visit to the Seattle Art Museum …" (O'Connell 313–14).

16 Moreover, *ahimsa* also displays five attitudes toward a proper code of conduct: (1) *Irya-Samiti*, "the attitude toward careful movement"; (2) *Mano-Gupti*, "the attitude of pure thoughts"; (3) *Eshna-Samiti*, "the attitude of doing no harm to self or others"; (4) *Aadan-Nikshep-Samiti*, "the attitude of being careful before acquiring or giving a thing"; (5) *Alokitapana-Bhojan*, "the attitude of proper examination of eatables" (Bothara 38).

17 In *Confucian Odes,* Pound translated this poem as "Who hacks /holds a haft. / To take a wife /properly / one gets a notary. / To hack an axe-haft / an axe / hacks; / the pattern's near" (78–79).

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