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(ATTENTION EDITORS This column ends with the words “But I can say well, okay, they got to them first; they must have enjoyed them.” If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact media@poetryfoundation.org for the correct version.)

NATURE POEMS IN A POST-NATURAL AGE

Poet Gary Snyder thinks the landscape of contemporary poetry should include wildflowers . . . and highway fast food joints.

By John Felstiner

Poetry Foundation Media Services

One of the original voices of the Beat Generation, Gary Snyder has been publishing poems for over 50 years. In addition to writing poems, Snyder has had a firm commitment to sustainability, a concern that is echoed in both his poems and essays.

John Felstiner: Do you remember some moment in your recent or remote past when you got the connection between poetry and environmental consciousness, where you felt it as a kind of absolute truth?

Gary Snyder: I grew up with it. Beginning when I was four years old, five years old, in the countryside, in a wooded landscape north of Seattle, back in the days when kids weren't programmed. We just ran loose around the family dairy farm and went through the gap in the fence and right back into the woods. I felt as welcome and as much at home in the forest, second-growth forest growing back, as I did anyplace else, and I was comforted by it. I was always easy being alone. And if I went with a friend, that was fine too.

JF: How would one distinguish an environmental poem from what is sometimes called an ecological poem?

GS: Look at the words. “Environment” means the surroundings. The surroundings can include an oil refinery, can include all of Los Angeles and the I-5 strip. That's the environment too, whatever surrounds us.

JF: So there's an "us" in "environment."

GS: Everything surrounds everything else. Yes. What is "ecological"? Etymologically, the "household of nature" is what's being called up. "Ecological" refers to the systems of biological nature, which include energy, and mineral and chemical transformations and pathways. "The environment" is used more commonly to also include human and technological productions. And it's not an absolute, hard and fast separation. . . .

JF: Have you written poems that could be qualified as one way or the other, or as both together—environmental and ecological?

GS: The best example is in this little book right here, *Danger on Peaks*.

"In the Santa Clarita Valley": That is the first valley north of the San Fernando Valley on Interstate 5. There's a little river there, and it has become almost entirely suburban development now. Here's the poem:

Like skinny wildweed flowers sticking up
hexagonal "Denny's" sign
starry "Carl's"
loopy "McDonald's"
eight-petaled yellow "Shell"
blue-and-white "Mobil" with a big red "O"

growing in the asphalt riparian zone
by the soft roar of the flow
of Interstate 5.

This is playing with the possibility that we might look at the human, physical, made environment as if it were natural environment.

JF: So we move from "Mobil" into a "riparian zone."

GS: Yeah.

JF: And hear that word "flow" for the highway.

GS: Right, it's ironic. I comment when I read this in meetings, that this is to help prepare us for a postnatural age. For writing nature poems in a postnatural age.

JF: We were speaking of (William Carlos) Williams' "It is difficult / to get the news from poems / yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there." In 1950 or so he took his Western tour, and he came to Reed, where you were with your poet friends. Is there anything specific you remember about that event?

GS: What stayed with me was how he said ultimately the poet, the artist, brings to society and to the world "conviviality." That surprised me and stayed with me: conviviality.

He said art is about conviviality. I saw instantly that this goes past the idea of the solitary, romantic, lonely artist suffering for his art, which I never trusted. And the

acknowledgment that artists have a role in society, which is to contribute to the community — to the heart of the community.

Take Williams' statement that people "die for lack of what is found there," I think this means lack of open-heartedness, lack of sweetness and tenderness to each other. But then a little later I saw that meaning also as ecological, that openness not just for the human community but for the natural community; it's for our immediate neighborhood of all the other species, all of us passing through time. I get angered when the bears eat my apples right off the tree. But I can say well, okay, they got to them first; they must have enjoyed them.

John Felstiner's translations and critical work have been widely published and awarded. He teaches at Stanford. John's newest book, So Much Depends, dealing with poetry and environmental urgency, will be published by Yale University Press in 2008.

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