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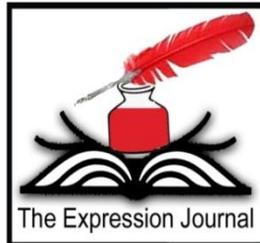
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‘POETIC ACTIVITY’ AND ‘MANUAL LABOUR’ AS IDENTICAL TERMS IN THE POETIC REALM OF GARY SNYDER: A BRIEF ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Gary Snyder, the American poet is gifted with a unique glow of rush and impetuosity and is marked with the romantic view of subject and object union. His poetry hums with the zeal and liveliness of the working class community and it also reflects the rhythm of physical labour. Gary Snyder was born on May 8, 1930 in San Francisco, California. He was the elder of the two children born to Herold and Lois Snyders. He grew up in the Pacific Northwest where his father had a dairy farm, two acres in pasture surrounded by woods. His was an industrious working-class family. This article is an indepth analysis of Snyder’s ecological awareness and sensibility. His lyrical narrative has the eloquent economy which evokes delight and the poet has coloured his poems with the hues of transcendentalism and Orientalism. This article also analyses Snyders spontaneity of utterance and it also states that he is the poet who draws his inspiration from a source within.

Key-Words

Gary Snyder, Poetic Activity, Manual Labour, Identical Terms, Poetic Craft, Ecological Awareness and Sensibility.

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Gary Snyder occupied a remarkable place in American Literature especially in American poetic field, for his poetry does probably constitute a landmark in the evolution of human thought. It is out and out natural that the American heritage is evident in his poetry. Yet he is preoccupied with a wide range which includes the traditions of Romanticism, Transcendentalism and Orientalism. At first his poetic concept shows a new way of outlook. The close relation between poetic endeavour and manual labour manifested in daily life is visualised as a distinguishing feature of his poetry. The second point lies in the close interpenetration of subject and object. The link between man and nature is also aimed at. His poetic theory is closely bound up with the romantic view of subject and object union. At this stage, brief biographical information is essential for true understanding of his poetic experience and poetic expression.

Gary Snyder was born on May 8, 1930 in San Francisco, California. He was the elder of the two children born to Herold and Lois Snyders. He grew up in the Pacific Northwest where his father had a dairy farm, two acres in pasture surrounded by woods. His was an industrious working-class family. Between 1932 and 1942, he was raised on small farms, first in Washington and later in Oregon. As a boy, his interest was to explore the forests around Portland, Oregon. Hence his early intimacy with nature later emerged as one of his major themes of his early years, he said,

“As early as I was allowed, at age nine or ten
I went off and slept in the woods at night alone.
I had a secret Camp back in the woods that
Nobody knew about; I had hidden the trail to it.
As soon as my father figured, I knew how to put
Out a campfire he let me go off and cook for myself
and stay a day or two” (Real Work 93).

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Being a voracious reader of books, he had an early acquaintance with the works of Edgar Allan Poe, D.H. Lawrence, Blake, Pound, Thoreau and Ernest Thompson Seton. A profound reading of the natural history books by Ernest Thompson Seton and living with his parents at Oregon in his high school days enabled him rather neatly to understand more about life and nature. Thus, "Snyder developed his attachment to nature and learned self-reliance, discipline, and the rugged ways of the American West, which sustain him to the day, and which frequently appear as the subject matter of his poetry" (Bob Steuding 17). Shunning the walls of Academics and Universities, Snyder roamed about the forests and mountains around Washington accompanied by Philip Whalen, a Zen Buddhist poet. After his service as a lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley for a year, he developed a taste for both writing poems and studying Zen Buddhism. He has to his credit publications of such poetry collections as 1. *Riprap* (1959) 2. *Myths and Texts* (1960) 3. *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems* 4. *Six Sections from Mountains and Rivers without Poems* (1965) 5. *A Range of Poems* (1966) 7. *The Back Country* (1967). He was honoured with grants and awards like 'Bolligen Foundation Research Grant for Buddhist Studies', 'Suggenheim Fellowship', 'Frank O'Hara Prize' and 'Levinson Prize' for his poetical works.

Snyder's allegiance to Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams shows the demand for a language of precision and objective realism, aiming at a concrete use of details. He believes in direct experience of reality and his poetic language is brought very close to reality. Language is made fluid and flexible in order to represent reality as it exists. Above all, Snyder regards poetry as healing. His primary concern is to lessen the over-whelming importance of the rational dimension and give a due treatment to the sub-rational elements in man. Healing is a technique by which the entire human consciousness is integrated, for 'healing' means 'integrating' Snyder's poetry makes a profound plea for synthesizing all layers of human consciousness. Some of his works are nothing but "the product of his disciplined proficiency in Oriental Studies, both religious and linguistic, his life in Japanese Zen monasteries, his scholarly detailed knowledge of the several varieties of Buddhism. Underlying all these or rather interpenetrating them is his quest for the poetic measure that will release the major forms of experience in all their implication" (Parkinson 448).

Snyder is "not an ideologue but it is still true that among distinguished contemporary writers, he is one whose attitudes are his subjects" says one modern critic Thomas Parkinson in his article "The Theory and Practice of Gary Snyder". In so far as the poetry involves struggle and tension, ---- it is the struggle to create a mind purified of the lusts and greeds of history. This restoration of the primitive being would permit the inclusion of ritual that gives ratio to the ecstatic, the passionate, the physical. Snyder's main argument, in social terms and his spiritual vocation is to offer measure that can be taken by the soul to create a world that 'matters' and has texture and specific gravity and joy. Underlying all this, as *Earth House Hold* bears witness, is a discipline of senses and of intelligence. The result in the realm of poetics is a theory curiously Miltonic-simple, sensuous, passionate and even neo-classical.

Snyder's concept of poetry is in tune with the spirit of human labour and enterprise. In "A Stone Garden", Snyder describes the glory of Japan by calling it a 'Stone Garden'. There is always a

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distinction between a 'Rose Garden' and a 'Stone Garden'. He implies that a Stone Garden is built with great human labour and hardship. It does indicate the wonderful temperament and disposition of the Japanese people who display their enthusiasm and energy in building up things from the lowest levels. Hard labour combined with inspiration and belief in rejuvenating things, untiring effort, deep perseverance govern the Japanese human psyche and this did stimulate poetic spirit and inspiration in Snyder. Japan adopted minimum industrialization. This is known when Snyder uses a particular line,

Echoes of hoes and weeding

Japan believed rather strongly in country side labour and Snyder was very much attached by that. The old Japan, in his opinion, is like a bee hive where everyone made his contribution to building up of a unified society. There are references made to "Stone-Cutters chisel and whangling saw". This means that Japan tried to improve things with human endeavour and labour. Manual labour for Snyder is an embodiment of creativity and human energy. The woods are cut by the axe and the sound of the axe disturbs the meditative mood of Snyder:

"Japan a great stonegarden in the sea
Echoes of hoes and weeding
Centuries of leading hill-creeks down
To ditch and pool in fragile knee-deep fields,
Stone-Cutters chisel and a Whangling saw
Leafy sunshine rustling on a man
Chipping a foot square rough hinokibeam
I thought I heard an axe chop in the woods (RP 21).

A Stone Garden is more true to the spirit of life and it contains the story of human life with its ups and downs. Without hard work and human labour, human life will lose its charm. Japan was built like a Stone Garden with hard labour. The word 'Stone' refers to resolution, energy and strong stirrings of man. Snyder's reflection on the stone Garden is only a representation of his attitude towards life. That manual labour is valuable is seen and realized by Snyder in the life of Japan.

Snyder held many manual jobs and he never treated them as a source of boredom. In this respect, he bears a close resemblance to George Eliot in his notion of manual labour. Work is a source of discovering one's own inner being. Without work, the growth of human personality gets stunned. Work and human labour bring out changes in human consciousness. Therefore, Snyder argues that manual labour should be treated with respect and reverence. Bob Steuding rightly remarked:

"Snyder held many manual jobs before his first poems on the themes of youth and nature were shown to a Reed College Professor" (P.17).

Snyder comes very close to the ideal of Mahatma Gandhi who spoke of the dignity of manual labour. The dignity of labour has considerable attraction for Snyder, because he was raised on small farms, first in Washington and later in Oregon and held jobs as a logger, seaman,

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fire lookout and United States Forest Service trail crew worker. His poetic mission becomes most probably one with his physical labour. Labour is not something new. It is as old as humanity itself. Adam tilled and Eve span from the very beginning of human existence on Earth. The point is that even in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve had to do some labour, for they thought that hard work is next to God. In the past life of this Earth, every member of the family worked hard to increase the revenue of the family. The thirty first chapter of the book of proverbs in the Holy Bible bears evidence to this showing the work of a good house wife:

“She seeks wool and flax
and works with willing hands
she makes herself coverings
her clothing is fine linen and purple” (The Proverbs 31).

This passage clearly shows that every living creature is destined to do some work or other. “In the sweat of thy face, thou shalt earn thy bread” was the Divine judgement on the fallen man. Since then, man has been labouring hard to keep himself alive. He digs, drives, and drags, tills the soil, works at the mill and does a lot of other things to keep his body and soul active. He may find it hard and unpleasant but there was no escape from it; it was something universal and inevitable. Even while the world was flourishing in many branches of knowledge, due importance was given to agricultural labour and manual labour was not at all looked down upon. K.M. Saran attests evidence to this fact rather clearly by stating as:

“While the contributions were being made in the field of spiritualism and various branches of knowledge like philosophy, ethics, economics, medicine, arts and literature, the materialistic side was not ignored. The ancient Indians had also excelled in agriculture, industry, trade and commerce” (P9).

Writers with a sense of social commitment have greater role to play in these areas of social injustice. With their viewless wings of poesy, poets have been able to picture the lot of the workers and to vehemently plead for their betterment. In English Literature, Thomas Gray’s “Elegy written in a Country Churchyard” is an example for portraying the sad lot of the poor village folk. Burns appeals to his motherland to invoke her “hardy sons of rustic toil/Be blessed with health and peace and sweet content ... princes and lords are but the breath of kings/an honest man’s the noble work of God” (Kinsley 121). Jennyson’s ‘Lotos Eaters’ laments that any long voyage in the sea would be long labour unto aged breath” (Young 125) But his ‘Ulysses’ proclaims that old age has its work and honour and our endeavour should always be to strive, to seek, to find and not to yield” (Narasimhan 42). In American Literature, the poets like Robert Frost have given rent to the importance of work/ labour in their writings and frost’s ‘The Death of the Hired Man’ is one such poem in which the nature of the hired workman, the hard line of the employer and the sympathy of the employer’s wife for the poor man are well brought out.

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Snyder comes in the line of such great writers understanding and sympathizing with human labour and working class community. He lays stress on the dignity of labour. He evidently states:

“I feel very close to the rhythms of work
and the rhythms of whatever my work is
which is sometimes – I do a lot of work
with my hands. Sometimes it’s carpentry,
sometimes it’s gardening, sometimes it’s
logging, sometimes it’s firewood cutting,
sometimes it’s trucking, sometimes it’s
working on cars – a lot of variety” (Packard 277).

The different poetic impulses spring up from his first hand experience in doing such physical labour. Ronald Hayman holds:

“All Snyder’s poems have the air of
impromptu living” (P 78)

What he means here is that all the poems of Snyder spring from direct experience and immediate understanding of things especially in terms of hard labour for living. For Snyder, ‘living with working’ becomes a primary act and ‘writing’ becomes a secondary endeavour. There is an integral relation between physical experience and poetic expression. The poem “Milton by Firelight” makes a reference to the sense of vitality in man, which is necessary for human labour. Man, according to Snyder, becomes worthy in the process of hard work:

“Working with an old
singlejack miner, who can sense
The vein and cleavage
In the very guts of rock, can
Blast granite, build
Switchbacks that last for years
Under the beat of snow, thaw, mule-hooves” (RP 7)

In the opinion of Gary Snyder, manual labour expresses a particular form of life which engages the whole being of man. He takes pride in labour and does not even think to detach poetic activity from labour for the latter is an intense expression of life.

A rich poetic vision is there in his poetry. But the expression of this vision takes a concrete channel unobscured by abstractions. Snyder regards poetry as Sadhana, masonry and as an extension of physical labour. Snyder believed in Pound’s doctrine that art must offer some equations for human emotions. It is on this basis Snyder treated poetry as masonry. Sustained skill is necessary for producing and composing poems. In this respect, poetry resembles Sadhana which means intense concentration without diversions. But there are deeper reasons for Snyder regarding poetry as an extension of physical labour, for his poetry hums with the zeal and liveliness of the working class community. His poetic rhythms also reflect the rhythm of physical labour.

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working class. The aristocratic class suffers from many constraints and inhibitions. The charm of life evaporates from the aristocratic class with their labours and affectations. The aristocratic class suppresses many valuable aspects of life on account of decency and decorum while the working class gives expression to all forms of life. Moreover, the working class is nearer the truth of life in being more open and receptive to all events.

Snyder makes a distinction between intellectual information and growth in consciousness. Men of knowledge who live withdrawn from the concerns of life display no maturity in their behaviour. His abiding belief is that it is work which shapes the inner being and makes the mind free and matured. In this regard, he gave special importance to the value of work. The awareness of life comes through the process of work. Emerson spoke the same thing when he said that wisdom could be gathered from the workyard. In a sense, Snyder is a mystic with a kind of ecological awareness and sensibility. As a sincere and laborious poet-worker, he is responsive to 'tools' used for performing work. Many of his poems contain references to the tools he used: the saw, rake and single jack hammer. In "The Late Snow and Lumber Strike of the summer of Fifty four" may be cited as one example.

Snyder's power of observation is something that deserves deep study. He describes the life of the horses and casual routine work in which they are engaged. In the poem, "Hay for the Horses" Snyder is concerned with the description of people engaged in using horses for the purpose of carrying loads of hay. Long distance, crooked ways and dangerous mountain roads seem to be a challenge to the horses.

Snyder wants to say that life carries a heavy assignment for everyone. The picture of the horses moving through dangerous mountain roads inspires him to reflect on life realistically. The horses have travelled a good deal of distance and finished their work. All hay-stocks are arranged and kept in a tidy night

"He had driven half the night
From far down San Joaquin
Through Mariposa, up the
Dangerous mountain roads
And pulled in at eight aim

With his big truck load of hay behind the barn (Riprap 13).

The tools of physical labour remaining unemployed indicate to Snyder that life has reached a state of nullity. His reverence for work is so great that he does not tolerate any breakdown of work. All aspects of life shine with splendour and significance. This is known as sacramental attitude to nature and life. It is total awareness of life that leads him to respect all forms of life in its multiple manifestations. The high-brow classical attitude is to treat physical labour with contempt. Snyder is free from this blemish and looks upon labour as an integral part of 'human life' and 'poetic activity'.

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"I feel very close to the rhythms of work and the rhythms of whatever my work is which is sometimes – I do a lot of work with my hands. Sometimes it's carpentry, sometimes it's gardening, sometimes it's logging, sometimes it's firewood cutting, sometimes it's trucking, sometimes it's working on cars – a lot of variety" (Packard 277).

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Thus, in his poetic universe, Snyder brings to light many such features as the close relation between poetic endeavour and manual labour, the close interpenetration of subject and object, the unbreakable link between man and nature, a perfect fusion between poetic experience and poetic expression, his allegiance to Pound and Japanese haiku poetic form for a language of precision and spontaneity and above all, he regards poetry as 'healing' and 'extension of labour'.

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