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S I M P L I F Y !

by Janet I. Embry

Senior Thesis

Honors Program

Approved:

S I M P L I F Y !

Still we live meanly, like ants; though the fable tells us that we were long ago changed into men; . . . it is error upon error. . . Our life is frittered away by detail.¹

Centuries of technological advancements have contributed to a propensity for Western man to judge the quality of his life on a quantitative scale: bigger or faster or more has been interpreted to mean better. The inhabitants of the Western world are usually so caught up in the struggle for material goods, they have neither the time nor the inclination to see beyond that immediate concern. There have often, if not always, been poets and philosophers to point out the weaknesses in such a system but they have had little visible impact. A Gary Snyder writing in the middle of the twentieth century sounds the same alarm that Henry David Thoreau did in the nineteenth. The struggle has not changed; it may have intensified.

The ways in which men make their living, that is, live, are mere makeshifts and a shirking of the real business of life--chiefly because they do not know, but partly because they do not mean any better.²

¹Henry David Thoreau, Walden, (Carl Bode, ed., The Portable Thoreau, New York: The Viking Press, 1964), p. 344.

²Ibid., "Life Without Principle," p. 638.

If people continue to shirk the real business of life, it should be because they do not mean any better, not because they are unaware of it. Gary Snyder and Henry David Thoreau seem to be concerned with defining the "real business of life" and they write about it in strikingly similar terms.

Although Thoreau's major works are in prose and Snyder's in free verse, their techniques are much the same. Both use puns very effectively (the humor kind of creeps up on the reader); both use inverted word order to create double or triple meanings in simple statements; both are terse, compact and ironic. It is probably not a coincidence that this similarity exists. (Snyder alludes to Thoreau in several of his works.)³ Thoreau, however, seems to concentrate on developing his theories explicitly while Snyder has (at least until Earth House Hold) created word pictures from which any theory must be derived individually.

Style, however important, is only a tool. This paper will concentrate on what is said rather than how it is said. Thoreau and Snyder will be compared primarily in their thoughts on: (1) the technological world, (2) theory of work and its rewards, (3) nature, (4) the function and sources of poetry and (5) the search for ultimate values.

³Snyder alludes to Thoreau by name in his poem "Stone Garden," and claims Walden as a source of inspiration for living in another. There is a definite reference to "Civil Disobedience" in "Buddhism and the Coming Revolution" in which Snyder moves from Thoreau's position in "Civil Disobedience" to his position as an activist in support of John Brown's violence in one paragraph. These references plus the fact that Eastern mysticism is a source of inspiration to both of them cause their images to be very similar in my opinion.

A farmer dug a well and was using the water for irrigating his farm. He used an ordinary bucket to draw water from the well, as must primitive people do. A passer-by, seeing this, asked the farmer why he did not use a shadoof for the purpose; it is a labor saving device and can do more work than the primitive method. The farmer said, "I know it is labor-saving and it is for this very reason that I do not use the device. What I am afraid of is the use of such a contrivance makes one machine-minded. Machine-mindedness⁴ leads one to the habit of indolence and laziness."

Technological advances tend to breed even more technological innovations, snowballing so rapidly that the machines become the focus of the whole activity. This tendency is extremely dangerous for the survival of a sane, well-integrated man. As the machinery becomes more complex, the tasks preformed by the human become more simple. Aside from the fact that this makes men lazy and indolent, it devalues their intrinsic worth. The human who operates the machinery is an extension, and an inefficient one at that, of the machinery.

As efficiency becomes a more important goal, technological man has discovered that if the task is broken down into its component parts, and each part given to a different person, the whole operation becomes more efficient (measured in units produced per given time). Western technology is based on such a division of labor. The worker does only his job and does not think about the shape of the product that is being created. Thoreau points out one of the risks in such a division of effort:

⁴Chaung-tze (as quoted in) D. T. Suzuki, "Lectures on Zen Buddhism," (Eric Fromm, ed., Zen Buddhism & Psychoanalysis, New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1960), p. 7.

Where is this division of labor to end? and what object does it finally serve? No doubt another may also think for me; but it is not therefore desirable that he should go so to the exclusion of my thinking for myself.⁵

When division of labor has caused men to stop thinking for themselves (at least as far as their "jobs" are concerned), it creates the kind of situation that Gary Snyder describes in these seemingly unrelated pictures:

.
a noseless, shiny,
mouth-twisted middle aged man.

bluejeans, check shirt, silver buckle
J. Robert Oppenheimer:
twenty years ago
watching the bulldozers
tearing down pines
at Lost Alamos.⁷

Division of labor, however, is only a means to an end.
The most important thing for the Western culture is GROWTH.

Leaven, which some deem the soul of bread, the spiritus which fills its cellular tissue. . . some precious bottleful, I suppose, first brought over in the Mayflower, did the business for America, and its influence is still rising, swelling, spreading in cereal billows over the land.⁸

Thoreau meant this only as a description of yeast, but the leaven becomes an excellent symbol for the attitudes which

⁵Thoreau, Walden, op. cit., p. 301.

⁶J. Robert Oppenheimer directed the Los Alamos Lab which was set up to produce the first atomic weapons. Although Oppenheimer, himself, had humanistic tendencies, they did not interfere with his doing much of the work on the most inhuman weapon ever designed.

⁷Gary Snyder, "A Volcano in Kyushu," The Back Country, (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1968), p. 42.

⁸Thoreau, Walden, op. cit., p. 317.

the Pilgrims also carried to America. The spiritus of America is growth. And just as the housewives told Thoreau that his unleavened bread might not be "safe and healthful," so economists tell us that a high growth rate (ever increasing Gross National Product) is the only reliable sign of a healthy economy (and thus, a good life). Growth must continue.

Ah, that's America;
the flowery glistening oil blossom
 spreading on water--
it was so tiny, nothing, now it keeps expanding.⁹

This expansion, essential for the continuance of the Western life style, depends primarily on the natural resources (both material and human) the society is able to exploit. It is, therefore, especially significant that Snyder uses "oil" as his image of expansion. American growth in this (his) century has been based on it. Man, however, is continually exploited: first in providing the energy (in part) that allows for growth and, again, when he is forced to buy the goods that he has produced in order to maintain both his life and that of the economy.

Most men, even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious care and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them. . . . actually the laboring man has not leisure for a true integrity day by day; he cannot afford to sustain the manliest relations to men; his labor would be depreciated in the market. He has no time to be anything but a machine.¹⁰

⁹Snyder, "For the West," Back Country, op. cit., p. 102.

¹⁰Thoreau, Walden, op. cit., p. 261.

As the machines and division of labor continue to encroach on man's ability to provide for himself the things that he needs, the tendency to view his occupation apart from his life increases. As the separation becomes more pronounced, the emphasis on a "job well done" shifts to "getting the job done."

Down in the bilges
or up out of sight on the bulkheads
time after time
year after year
we paint right over the dirt.

The first engineer
he knows.
but what can he say?
the company says
save time.¹¹

With all the time that is saved by the eight-hour day and the five-day work week for the leisure society, Western man should be able to accept any good from machine production and still have enough time to spend some of his "moral" development. But having accepted the value system of the society in which he is living along with its material goods, he finds that the focus remains on the job. After work, he marks time waiting to go back.

Americans are splendid while working--attentive, cooperative with dignity and sureness--but the same ones seen later at home or bar are sloppy, bored and silly.¹²

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go into the desperate country and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats. A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed

¹¹Snyder, "The Wiper's Secret," The Back Country, op. cit., p. 261.

¹²Cary Snyder, Earth House Hold, (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1969), p. 67.

even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind. There is no play in them, for this comes after work.¹³

Man sells his life to gain a living. Often as he nears the end of it, he is hardly aware that he has lived. He has wasted his time in unpleasant and largely unprofitable pursuits.

"I'm sixty-eight" he said,
"I first bucked hay when I was seventeen
I thought, that day I started,
I sure would hate to do this all my life
And dammit, that's just what
I've gone and done."¹⁴

Retirement age may be too late to try and do something about the waste. After years of "producing" and conforming he may find that:

. . . few and fewer thought visit . . . from
year to year, for the grove in our minds is laid
waste--sold to feed unnecessary fires of ambition
or sent to mill--and there is scarcely a twig left
for them to perch on.¹⁵

When the mind can no longer provide a satisfactory set of values, one is forced to look elsewhere for his reason to live. In a world where Good is measured in goods, possessions become the obvious answer. The result of this is a curious inversion of the whole structure. Both Thoreau and Snyder have captured this in almost humorous images:

¹³Thoreau, Walden, op. cit., p. 263.

¹⁴Gary Snyder, "Hay for the Horses," A Range of Poems, (London: Fulcrum Press, 1967), p. 16.

¹⁵Thoreau, "Life Without Principle," op. cit., p. 627.

. . . it may be the house that has got him.¹⁶

. . . --thousands
and thousands of cars¹⁷
driving men to work.

With consummate skill he has set his trap with a hair
spring to catch comfort and independence and¹⁸ then,
as he turned away, got his own leg into it.

Men have, in short, become the "tools of their tools."¹⁹

They have been caught in a cycle from which there is no easy
escape: men working at meaningless occupations to get possessions
and then having to continue to work to care for them. All of
this tends to isolate man from the essentials of life; techno-
logy has even lessened the impact of failure. Failing in a
technological society may cause some embarrassment, but it is
not fatal.

Bankruptcy and repudiation are the springboards from
which much of our civilization vaults and turns its
somersets, but the savage stands on the unelastic
plank of famine.²⁰

The extent of the buffer allowed (in fact, demanded) by
the society can be clearly illustrated by Western man's resolu-
tion of the problem of shelter.

Many a man is harassed to death to pay the rent of
a larger and more luxurious box who would not have
frozen to death in such a box as this. . . A comfort-
able house for a rude and hardy race, that lived mostly
out of doors, was once made here almost entirely of
such materials as Nature furnished ready to their
hand.²¹

¹⁶Ibid., Walden, p. 288.

¹⁷Snyder, "Marin-an," The Back Country, op. cit., p. 16.

¹⁸Thoreau, Walden, op. cit., p. 292.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 263.

²⁰Ibid., p. 288.

²¹Ibid., p. 284.

The image of the harassed man's house as a box is not accidental. Later in the same section, Thoreau adds:

. . . but the spirit having departed out of the tenant,²² it is of a piece with constructing his own coffin--the architecture of the grave, and the "carpenter" is but another name for "coffin-maker."²³

Gary Snyder has had the "advantage" of seeing suburban development tract houses and can appreciate the aptness of the "box" description even better.

The maddening shapes will start and fade
Each morning when commuters wake--
Joined boards hung on frames,
a box to catch the biped in.²⁴

In a world where work is meaningless, where life can be sustained without being lived, where the problem seems "to be how to smooth down all individual protuberances or idiosyncrasies, and make a thousand men move as one man,"²⁵ where man's biggest contribution to the system appears to be his capacity to consume (thus driving up the GNP); man has speeded up his life style so that there will not be time to think about the quality of it.

In Thoreau's day, the railroad was the epitome of human achievement for doing just that. The RAILROAD, like possessions,

²²It is important to note that when the spirit is left in the house (such as those built by the savages in the previous passage), it is not referred to as a box or tenant but as a house.

²³Ibid., p. 302.

²⁴Snyder, The Back Country, op. cit., p. 13

²⁵Thoreau, "A Yankee in Canada," op. cit., p. 255.

lends meaning to human life. Watching the trade that is carried on by it, the links that it makes to other cities, knowing that it is an achievement of MAN gives a kind of vicarious meaning to men's lives.

Have not men improved somewhat in punctuality since the railroad was invented? Do they not talk and think faster in the depot than they did in the stage-office? There is something²⁶ electrifying in the atmosphere of the former place.

If transportation has made progress (measured in speed and distance) since Thoreau's time, Snyder still finds the railway station an apt image for the Western growth fetish.

. . . Everything
crowding in and out of it like a railway
terminal and isn't that nice?
all those people going on trips.²⁷

As in many other things, however, faster or farther does not necessarily mean better. Thoreau finds that walking is a more suitable mode of transportation because it forces the individual into a personal commitment and effort.

The cheapest way to travel and the way to travel the farthest in the shortest distance is to go afoot. . . True and sincere traveling is no pastime, but it is as serious as the grave or any part of the human journey. . . I do not speak of those that travel sitting, the sedentary travelers whose legs hang dangling the while, mere idle symbols of the fact. . .²⁸

²⁶Thoreau, Walden, op. cit., p. 369.

²⁷Snyder, "To Hell With Your Fertility Cult," The Back Country, op. cit., p. 67.

²⁸Thoreau, "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers," op. cit., pp. 188-189.

It is not the breadth of experience that is important, it is the depth.

In spite of their opposition to the kind of jobs offered in Western society, neither Thoreau nor Snyder is adverse to work. The only condition is that the work must have some relation to the essential business of life.

The student who secures his coveted leisure and retirement by systematically shirking any labor necessary to man obtains but an ignoble and unprofitable leisure, defrauding himself of the experience which alone can make leisure fruitful. . . . Even the poor student studies and is taught only political economy, while the economy of living which is synonymous with philosophy²⁹ is not even sincerely professed in our colleges.

. . . . pleasure isn't as simple as some folks think--to heave and sweat and strain (ah, forcing to the edge of limits³⁰, of endurance) makes a kind of pleasure.

Both Snyder and Thoreau have attempted to find the kind of meaningful existence that can be had by living at a subsistence level of material goods produced by oneself. Thoreau retired to Walden Pond in an attempt to live life stripped to the essentials; Snyder went to the Banyan Ashram. Snyder possibly summed up the experience for both of them: "A lot of it is simply being aware of clouds and wind."³¹

To be aware of clouds and wind, one must become absorbed in nature. If life in the present society is as intolerable as it has been painted thus far, then a return to nature becomes

²⁹Thoreau, Walden, op. cit., pp. 305-306.

³⁰Snyder, "Glacier Peak Wilderness Area," Earth House Hold, op. cit., p. 94.

³¹Ibid., "Suwa-no-Se Island and the Banyan Ashram," p. 143.

even more necessary. Perhaps it can provide some internal values: Snyder and Thoreau seem to think it will if it can be saved from the grasping, exploitive instincts that have made "civilized life" so intolerable. Time may be running out.

The mission of men. . . seems to be, like so many busy demons, to drive all the forest out of the country, from every solitary beaver swamp and mountain-side, as soon as possible.³²

But ye shall destroy their altars,
break their images, and cut down their groves.

Exodus 34:13

The ancient forest of China logged
and the hills slipped into the Yellow Sea.
Squared beams, log dogs,
on a tamped-earth sill,
San Francisco 2 x 4s
were the woods around Seattle:
Someone killed and someone built, a house,
a forest, wrecked or raised
All America hung on a hook
& burned by men in their own praise.

.

"Pines grasp the clouds with iron claws
like dragons rising from sleep"
250,000 board feet a day
If both Cats keep working
& nobody gets hurt.³³

With the advent of the "ecology consciousness," Americans have suddenly become interested in saving a part of the woodlands and wildernesses. The catchword is "conservation," but this is equally, if more subtly, exploitive:

The Philosophy of the Forest Service: Optimistic view of nature--democratic, utilitarian. "Nature is rational." Equals, treat it right and it will

³²Thoreau, "The Wilds of the Penobscot," op. cit., p. 79.

³³Snyder, Range of Poems, op. cit., p. 46.

make a billion board feet a year. Paradox suppressed. What wd an Aristocratic F.S. be like? Man traps?

Forest equals crop/Scenery equals recreation/
Public equals money. :: The shopkeeper's view
of nature.³⁴

Viewed as only another resource to "develop," wilderness becomes only an "escape from the desperate city to the desperate country."³⁵ However, if one approaches the wild with an attitude of belonging and maybe a little bit of "savage" mysticism, it may provide the alternative to "development" and "civilization."

Celebration of wild nature is so much a part of both Snyder and Thoreau and their images are so clear (and similar), a catalogue of some of them might be the most effective way to present the alternative as they see it.

Thoreau

In society you will not
find health, but in
nature. . . Society is
always diseased, and the
best is the most so.³⁶

Men tire me when I am not
constantly greeted and re-
freshed as by the flux of
sparkling streams.³⁸

Snyder

O Karl would it were true
I'd put my saw to work for you
& the wicked social tree would fall
right down.³⁷

Today I'm back at Cold Mountain
I'll sleep by the creek and purify
my ears.³⁹

³⁴Snyder, "Sourdough," Earth House Hold, op. cit., p. 12.

³⁵Thoreau, Walden, op. cit., p. 263.

³⁶Thoreau, "A Natural History of Massachusetts," op. cit., p. 33.

³⁷Snyder, A Range of Poems, op. cit., p. 49.

³⁸Thoreau, "A Natural History. . ." op. cit., p. 34.

³⁹Snyder, A Range of Poems, op. cit., p. 38.

It will be Grass-ground
River as long as grass
grows and water runs here;⁴⁰

The only thing that can be relied on
Is the Snow on Kurakake Mountain.⁴¹

. . . it did not seem to be
putting this bird to its
right use to pluck off its
feathers, and extract its
entrails and broil its car-
cass on the coals; . . .

The same regard for Nature
which excited our sympathy
for her creatures nerved
our hands to carry through
what we had begun. For we
would be honorable.⁴² . we
would fulfill fate.

.
I'll trail you with dogs
And crush you in my mouth."
--not that we're cruel--
But a man's got to eat.⁴³

Deer don't want to die for me.
I'll drink sea-water
Sleep on beach pebbles in the rain
Until the deer come down to die⁴⁴
in pity for my pain.

In these wild scenes, men
stand about in the scenery
or move deliberately and
heavily. . . He does not
make the scenery less wild,
more than the jays and musk-
rats, but stands⁴⁵ there as a
part of it. . .

Inhuman Altair--that "inhuman" talk;
the eye that sees all space
is socketed in this one human skull
.

I will not cry Inhuman & think that
makes us small and nature
great, we are, enough, and⁴⁶ as we
are

Our village life would stag-
nate if it were not for the
unexplored forest and mea-
dows which surround it. We
need⁴⁷ the tonic of wilder-
ness.

.
In this burning, muddy, lying
blood drenched world
that quiet meeting in the mountains
cool and gentle as the muzzles⁴⁸ of
three elk, helps keep me sane.

⁴⁰Thoreau, "A Week. . .," op. cit., p. 139.

⁴¹Snyder, A Range of Poems, op. cit., p. 38.

⁴²Thoreau, "A Week . . .," op. cit., p. 180.

⁴³Snyder, A Range of Poems, op. cit., p. 60.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 67.

⁴⁵Thoreau, "A Winter Walk," op. cit., p. 72.

⁴⁶Snyder, A Range of Poems, op. cit., p. 27.

⁴⁷Thoreau, Walden, op. cit., p. 557.

⁴⁸Snyder, The Back Country, op. cit., p. 34.

. . . so now we took a draft of the water with our evening meal to propitiate the river gods and whet our vision for the sights it was to behold.⁴⁹

He was always to be seen in the serene afternoon haunting the river. . . so many sunny hours in an old man's life, entrapping silly fish. . . His fishing was not a sport, nor solely a means of subsistence, but a sort of solemn sacrament and withdrawal from the world, just as the ancients read their Bibles.

We offered our respects and gratitude to the Sea Gods daily, and ate them with real love admiring their extraordinarily beautiful, perfect little bodies.⁵⁰

Farthest cave up was nicely fixed. . . Pleasant old fellow a former college professor speaking aslow but elegant English. He had made the ancient choice of spending old age in the woods.⁵²

From these it is apparent that both Snyder and Thoreau find that life is more real in the woods. There is a closeness with creation that is distinctly supernatural and religious. The religion that is found there cannot be Christianity because Christianity is "man-centered," has become institutionalized and, moreover, has come from a land which has long since lost its wildernesses.

The good Hebrew Revelation takes no cognizance of this cheerful snow. Is there no religion for the temperate and frigid zones? We know of no scripture which records the benignity of the gods on a New England winter night. . . the best scripture, after all, records but a meager faith. . . Let a brave, devout man spend the year in the woods of Maine or Labrador, and see if the Hebrew Scriptures speak adequately to his condition.⁵³

⁴⁹Thoreau, "A Week. . .," op. cit., p. 161.

⁵⁰Snyder, Earth House Hold, op. cit., p. 139.

⁵¹Thoreau, "A Week. . .," op. cit., p. 152.

⁵²Snyder, Earth House Hold, op. cit., p. 88.

⁵³Thoreau, "Winter Walk," op. cit., p. 75.

Men who hire men to cut groves
Kill snakes, build cities, pave fields,
Believe in god, but can't
believe in their own senses. . . 54

Institutionalized religion cannot offer a substitute for the experience of living life stripped to its essentials (i.e., in nature). Organized religion tends to support the status quo and those people already in power⁵⁵ and to ignore the needs of the individual. Indeed, no religion can help the individual come to terms with his world, because each man's relation to that world is unique. "Individuals must accept their fate and live according to it."⁵⁶ Since "salvation" is such an individual thing, the supreme sacrifice in Christianity becomes an impedence (because it purports to offer a supplement) to the individual search.

Your hanging face I know, I know your tree.
You can't hide under Hebrew
 & I don't pity you
.....
Savior of Man!
 -----who put the hell to be harrowed?

The bruised snake coils in the grass
He is wise:
 there are trees in high places;
Keep your blood off the crotch of our tree.⁵⁷

⁵⁴Snyder, A Range of Poems, op. cit., p. 57.

⁵⁵This proclivity is not limited to Christianity, Snyder discusses the same phenonoma in regard to Buddhism in the Far East in Earth House Hold, op. cit., p. 90.

⁵⁶Thoreau, Journal, op. cit., p. 530.

⁵⁷Snyder, The Back Country, op. cit., p. 78.

By now it is becoming obvious that there is very little in the Western life style that can help man resolve his search for meaning. His technology prevents him from discovering what is real and useful in work, his government asks only that he consume enough to maintain the political economy, his religion provides a rationalization for his technology and life style and offers him an easy answer to his existence. Existing in such an environment should be easy. It is not. Man may be "hooked on garbage"⁵⁸ but the little bit of wildness that has not been bred out of him will not allow him to sleep easily.

. . . The dog
Turns and turns about, stops and sleeps.⁵⁹

The poet/philosopher should be expected to provide some insights into life; to develop some way to wake the "dog" permanently. He must be much more than a creative rationalizer of Western man's condition. Since the "best philosophy [is] untrue that aims to console man for his grievances,"⁶⁰ the "three-fourths of philosophy and literature [that] is the talk of people trying to convince themselves that they really like the cage they were tricked into entering"⁶¹ is as useless as organized religion.

The poet should make people aware of the kind of life that can be lived meaningfully. Thoreau described it:

We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 70.

⁵⁹ Snyder, A Range of Poems, op. cit., p. 19.

⁶⁰ Thoreau, "A Natural History. . .," op. cit., p. 32.

⁶¹ Snyder, Earth House Hold, op. cit., p. 118.

sleep. . . it is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere. . . through which we look. . .⁶²

Thoreau and Snyder attribute poetry to almost the same sources. Snyder says:

Poetry must sing or speak from authentic experience. . . . Poets, as few others, must live close to the world that primitive men are in: the world, in its nakedness, which is fundamental for all of us-- birth, love, death; the sheer fact of being alive.⁶³

Similarly, Thoreau claims that since poetry and survival are so closely related one must be close to the business of survival if one expects to be a poet.

Who knows but if men constructed their dwellings with their own hands, and provided food for themselves and families simply and honestly enough, the poetic faculty would be universally developed, as birds universally sing when they are so engaged.⁶⁴

Poetry comes "through" rather than from the poet. Both Snyder and Thoreau speak of the Muse's influence in their work.

Poems that spring out fully armed; and those that are the result of artisan care. The contrived poem, workmanship; a sense of achievement and pride of craft; but the pure inspiration flow leaves one with a sense of gratitude and wonder and no sense of "I did it"--only the Muse. That level of mind. . . This is just the clear spring--it reflects all things and feeds all things but is of itself transparent. . . one can see where it goes: to all things and in all things.⁶⁵

This image of the Muse as a clear deep pond is highly reminiscent of Thoreau's description of Walden Pond and, again, emphasizes the need for the wild in poetry.

⁶²Thoreau, Walden, op. cit., p. 343.

⁶³Snyder, Earth House Hold, op. cit., p. 118.

⁶⁴Thoreau, Walden, op. cit., p. 300.

⁶⁵Snyder, Earth House Hold, op. cit., pp. 56-57.

My Muse may be excused if she is silent henceforth. How can you expect⁶⁶ the birds to sing if their groves are cut down.

We cannot escape the impression that the Muse has stooped a little in her flight, when we come to the literature of the civilized eras.⁶⁷

Even if the poet has been able to capture some of the wild and transfer it to paper for the rest of the world, it may have little value for that world. As has been pointed out, people tend to ignore, if they even understand, the warnings of their poets. Thoreau attributes this to a lack of experience: "The works of the great poets have never yet been read by mankind, for only great poets can read them."⁶⁸ The great poet may nudge mankind from sleep, but the individual must simplify his own life and live in expectation of the dawn if his own poetic faculty is to be developed enough for him to understand fully.

What are the values that the poet would have adopted so that he might be understood? They are relatively simple: solitude, identification with nature, the ability to live in the present, and an ability to accept what is good from the past.

A man should stir himself with poetry
Stand firm in ritual
Complete himself in music⁶⁹
lun yi

Thoreau's values are extremely personal. He is one alone without any desire or need to connect himself to society. Solitude is essential because it forces him to examine his own nature

⁶⁶Thoreau, Walden, op. cit., p. 441.

⁶⁷Thoreau, "A Week. . .," op. cit., p. 220.

⁶⁸Thoreau, Walden, op. cit., p. 356.

⁶⁹Snyder, Earth House Hold, op. cit., p. 5.

and to find the values that will serve him. The rest of mankind is superfluous.

I have never felt lonesome, or in the least oppressed by solitude, but once, . . . for an hour, I doubted if the near neighborhood of man was not essential to a serene and healthy life. To be alone was something unpleasant. But I was at the same time conscious of a slight insanity⁷⁰ in my mood, and seemed to foresee my recovery.

Because Thoreau attempts to find the essence of life alone, he "denies" a part of the natural world that he celebrates. Still caught (at least somewhat) by his work-oriented, "subdue nature," Puritan background, he can claim that "Nature is hard to overcome, but she must be overcome,"⁷¹ and that a denial of sex will help bring him into sharper focus with reality.⁷²

Chastity is the flowering of man; and what are called Genius, Heroism, Holiness and the like, are but various fruits which succeed it. Man flows⁷³ at once to God when the channel of purity is open.

Though he defines Goodness differently from the rest of his society, he continues to maintain a separation between good and evil in his mind.

Our whole life is startlingly moral. There is never an instant's truce between virtue and vice.⁷⁴ Goodness is the only investment that never fails.

⁷⁰Thoreau, Walden, op. cit., pp. 332-383.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 467.

⁷²It would be inaccurate to attribute this denial of sex solely to a Puritan upbringing. Hindu philosophy also considers it debilitating according to Arthur Doester, The Lotus and the Robot, p. 25.

⁷³Thoreau, Walden, op. cit., p. 466.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 465.

While Snyder concedes the importance of solitude at some stages of development, he considers it only a part of the total picture. One of the problems in the Western world, he feels, has been the erosion of the "family" or "tribe" which should have transmitted the archaic values which have been lost to it. He places a premium on participating in the development of a better world.⁷⁵ His world view is more eclectic than Thoreau's, however, and would almost surely include it.

It means affirming the widest possible spectrum of non-harmful individual behavior-- . . . Worlds of behavior long banned by the Judaeo-Capitalist-Christian-Marxist West. It means respecting intelligence and learning, but not as greed or means to personal power. Working on one's own responsibility, but willing to work with a group. "Forming a new society within the shell of the old."⁷⁶

Snyder's view could even be seen as a logical extension of Thoreau's. One must find a real value in one's self (possibly through solitary examination) before one can bring anything of value to a relationship within a group. But whether one chooses to work within the group or to progress alone, some of the priorities of living remain the same.

In any weather, at any hour of the day or night,
I have been anxious to improve the nick of time,
and notch it on my stick too; to stand on the
meeting of two eternities, the past and the future,
which is precisely the present moment; to toe
that line.

⁷⁵This can be illustrated by their choice of withdrawal-- Thoreau went alone to Walden; Snyder with a group to Suwa-nose Island.

⁷⁶Snyder, Earth House Hold, op. cit., p. 92.

⁷⁷Thoreau, Walden, op. cit.,

Above all we cannot afford not to live in the present. He is blessed over all mortals who loses no moment of the passing life in remembering the past.⁷⁸

The present moment is the only meaningful time. If one can live always at the "noon" of life, there is less chance of being caught by the Western world view (which is based on past invention and future consumption). The primitive societies have been able to explore and develop in directions that the Western cultures have not because they live in the present.

Having fewer tools, no concern with history a living oral tradition rather than an accumulated library, no overriding social goals, and considerable freedom of sexual and inner life, such people live vastly in the present. . . . To live in the "mythological present" in close relation to nature and basic but disciplined body/mind states suggest a wider-ranging imagination and a closer subjective knowledge of one's own physical properties than is usually available to men. . . .

Freedom does not mean a lack of restraints. Discipline is an extremely important concept. If one does not consciously strive to maintain a reasonable level of awareness, the awareness will not be maintained. The major difference between the poet and the hermit that Thoreau describes in "Brute Neighbors" is largely the difference in their ability to maintain a "disciplined body/mind state." The hermit is not a poet, even though he has retreated to nature, because he is not able to maintain a smooth flow of thought while engaging in a physical activity (for example).

⁷⁸Thoreau, "Walking," op. cit., p. 628.

⁷⁹Snyder, Earth House Hold, op. cit., p. 117.

My thoughts have left no track, and I cannot find the path again. What was it that I was thinking of? . . . there is never but one opportunity of a kind.⁸⁰

Snyder and Thoreau have both found possible hope for the Western culture in myths.

The West is preparing to add its fables to those of the East. The valleys of the Ganges, the Nile, and the Rhine having yielded their crop, it remains to be seen what the valleys of the Amazon, the Platte, the Orinoco, the St. Lawrence, and the Mississippi will produce. Perchance, when, in the course of ages, American liberty has become a fiction of the past. . . the poets of the world will be inspired by American mythology.⁸¹

Snyder sees those myths about to be written in an emerging culture that has incorporated the best of the Western cultures into a new appreciation of ancient values.

For several centuries now Western Man has been ponderously preparing himself for a new look at the inner world and spiritual realms. . . My own opinion is that we are now experiencing a surfacing (in a specifically "American" incarnation) of the Great Subculture which goes back as far perhaps as the late Paleolithic.⁸²

As the literature and life style of the West decays to provide the "soil" for the development of new values, it may be possible to combine the two in a more meaningful synthesis: "Decorous passionate music of Old Europe out. . . ~~of~~ Zen fingers."⁸³

⁸⁰Thoreau, Walden, op. cit., p. 471.

⁸¹Thoreau, "Walking," op. cit., p. 617.

⁸²Snyder, Earth House Hold, op. cit., p. 104.

⁸³Ibid., p. 37.

The new awareness of the spiritual may have come too late.
"Unused capacities go sour,"⁸⁴ and there have not been any
spiritual LEADERS in the West for a very long time.

We live--we live--and all our lives
Have lead to this, this city,
Which is soon the world, this
Hopelessness where love of man
Or hate of man could matter
None, love if you will or
Contemplate or write or teach
But know in your human marrow you
Who read, that all you tread
Is earthquake rot and matter mental
Trembling, freedom is a void,
Peace war religion revolution
Will not help.⁸⁵

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 118.

⁸⁵Snyder, The Back Country, op. cit., pp. 74-75. (it should, perhaps be pointed out that this is NOT Snyder's last word on the subject. It is mine.)

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