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Response to "Gary Snyder, Dôgen, and 'The Canyon Wren'"*

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Gary Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers Without End* (1996) is a collection of poems which combines an interest in Zen with a commitment to the exploration of the significance of nature for the human. This can be illustrated with reference to "The Canyon Wren," a 35-line poem from Section III. The following extract provides an opportunity for an engagement with the precise accomplishment of Snyder's enterprise, and with a larger interpretive issue concerning the role of ideas in philosophy:

> A single female mallard flies upstream—
> 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."
> Dôgen, writing at midnight,
> "mountains flow
> water is the palace of the dragon
> it does not flow away." (Whalen-Bridge 121)

John Whalen-Bridge's essay on the poem begins by making a claim on behalf of Snyder that "the poems of *Mountains and Rivers without End* are about how we talk to the world, and how the world talks to itself" (112). In the course of the essay, the claim narrows down to the role played by the wren in "The Canyon Wren." It is claimed that the bird's song communicates to the human, on behalf of nature, something that the human would not otherwise perceive about itself and its relation to nature:

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*Reference: John Whalen-Bridge, "Gary Snyder, Dôgen, and 'The Canyon Wren,'" *Connotations* 8.1 (1998/99): 112-24.

"The wren in this poem is singing the river, catching the ever-downward motion of the water, and has directed the poet's attention to the ways in which our language and thoughts are formed by the shapes and forces of our world" (121). To me, the conduct of the argument, as illustrated in the interpretive movement of the sentence quoted above, seems to gloss over two rather different though related kinds of claim, which I shall distinguish as a "strong" or "hard" sense of what could be claimed on behalf of bird and poem, and a "weak" or "soft" sense. One can live well enough with the poeticism of the wren "singing the river" without going into what is entailed in "singing a self" (except as expressing that self through its singing). One can also accept the collocation of river flowing down a canyon and song floating down the canyon walls, without asking how the two downward movements really correspond to a "catching" except as an agreement between gravity and the turn of phrase. But that, I think, only gives us a "soft" reading.

What I mean by "soft" is that any experience, such as sailing down a rapids, or hearing bird song, can communicate an hitherto unrecognized significance which amounts to nature communicating *to* the human. The poem can be read as witness to the injunction: listen to nature, don't impose yourself on it, and don't stand separate from the oneness it offers. One can treat that as the ideological bent of the poem, and of Snyder's poetics as a whole. One could even read the poem as offering a "counter-tradition" (114) to the kind of anthropocentric humanism exemplified by the jar placed on a hill in Tennessee, in Wallace Stevens's well-known poem, to represent "the focusing mind as the active principle in a passive landscape" (113). I am not unsympathetic to this interpretive impulse, although I can see a line of argument in which the bird is just as susceptible to appropriation by human needs as the hill in Tennessee, and hence just as passive before the human mind, despite the activity represented by its song.

But what a "strong" or "hard" sense would need is more, and different: the exemplification of communication *between* nature and the human, and I do not think that the poem provides sufficient grounds for that, although the argument of the essay sometimes gives indications of a belief that it does. It follows Snyder's interest in Mahayana Buddhism to create a useful

context of ideas in which the ideal striven for could be expressed along the lines of Dôgen, in his *Shôbôgenzô*:

> To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things. To be enlightened by all things is to remove the barriers between one's self and others.

I think the essay embodies a will-to-belief, which wants to find the poem adequate to such non-dualism. Without wanting to get into a debate about non-dualism, I think that the poem does not do enough to exemplify or communicate a non-dualistic experience. I think that the poem achieves an exhortatory effect, which urges us to a less self-driven sense of participation in nature's capacity to alter our sense of being-in-the-world. A reader could well go along with that part of the essay that offers this interpretation. But that would be to stop at a "soft" claim on behalf of the poem. Whalen-Bridge, however, would have us read more into it, and that, in effect, forecloses meaning in a specific way. For instance, the poem speaks of purifying our ears, and the essay asks, *kôan* fashion, "Purify our ears of what?" and answers: "Of the illusion of separation" (123). But one could just as well say, "purify our ears of the memory of other sounds." The poem weaves Dôgen into its intertextuality, and that might well create a context of conformity with Dôgen's advice that "If you become utterly free you will be as the water where the dragon dwells." But we have to be careful not to allow allusion and invocation to claim more for the telling than is actually shown by the poem. I would interpret the crucial lines that refer to the perception of mountains flowing and water that does not flow away (121) as addressed to revising our fixed notions about natural identities. Dialectically speaking, water flows but it does not flow away in the sense that its movement suggests transience, but the degree to which transience is a condition of existence, it stays, and never goes away. Contrariwise, mountains might appear emblems of fixity, but in a world where nothing stays unchanged, their slow progressive alteration is like a flowing away. The resolution of the two paradoxes weaves a double shuttle into a *gestalt* in which the transitoriness and permanence of nature, or the permanence of transitoriness and the transitoriness of the seemingly permanent—the world as *Maya* (semblance, or *Schein*)— counter-balance, neutralize, and dissolve one another. But that is still to dissolve our

impermeable boundaries, not the boundaries *between nature and us*. The synæsthesia of perception works only through transposed effects. One can add that to a person sailing down a rapids, the disorienting experience of moving with the water might, relativistically speaking, alter the sense of what is moving in relation to what is stationary. One has simply to have been sitting in a train watching other trains at a railway platform, and for movement to happen, for one's orientation of what is moving and what is not to be shaken. In other words, the kind of experience depicted in the poem is certainly capable of transforming our human awareness of nature. That much we can readily grant the poem, and it goes with what Dôgen said. But that is not the same thing as dissolving the barrier between the self that perceives and the objects that it perceives. Dôgen's aim of "a casting off of the dualistic separation of subject and object" (122-23) would need, specifically, an interpenetration of the human and the natural. There are indeed poems where that is accomplished. Here, for example, is one from late Stevens. In its case, however, what it takes for the boundaries between self and the world of nature to dissolve is not Zen but mere (or sheer) old age. The irony might have pleased Dôgen.

An Old Man Asleep

The two worlds are asleep, are sleeping, now.
A dumb sense possesses them in a kind of solemnity.

The self and the earth—your thoughts, your feelings,
Your beliefs and disbeliefs, your whole peculiar plot;

The redness of your reddish chestnut trees,
The river motion, the drowsy motion of the river R. (Stevens 427)

The larger issue of interest raised by the essay is the possibility of the dissolution—not between human and natural selves, but—between our literal and our figural senses. Transpositions of the kind represented by synæsthesia are familiar to the history of poetry as anthropomorphism, the ability in the human to transpose animal and bird life and inanimate nature, through *prosopopœia*, to a personified self, which communicates to the human, in terms meant specifically for the human. For this

communication to be accomplished, the resistance to be overcome is the separation of the human from the part of nature that is non-human. In other words, personification, and the figurative realm within which it operates (in which we lend our fictions the contingent belief that we ordinarily reserve for the literal) are based on the assumption that the human is separate from the non-human. In a sense, then, a wren could indeed talk *to* the human, if we interpret "talking to" as communicating some—any—form of significance. But the question is, does the wren talk *with* the human? For this form of the claim to apply, the distinction between human and non-human would have to dissolve. In other words, for the "hard" sense of the poem to work successfully, the dualism that the poem would have to break down would be the barriers between the literal and the figurative. Put slightly differently, for the non-dualism to work, it would have to work *as language*, and as language it would have to make literal references indistinguishable from metaphorical ones. I am not sure if a line such as the following manages that, but at least it points the direction:

> Often the moon and I sit together all night . . . (*Three Zen Masters* 115)

In any such poem, there would be hardly any need for the figurative if the literal claim were a commonplace. To say that a mountain speaks has impact as a figure of speech because we ordinarily believe that mountains do not speak in any sense that conforms to our ordinary sense of speech. I labor the point in order to emphasize the recognition that personifications of nature—including Ruskin's "pathetic fallacy"—are based on an implicit assumption of a divide between the human and a sense of nature as the non-human (including rivers, mountains, and birds). Analogy works because the realms it links through resemblance differ in most other respects:

> The Buddha proclaimed countless teachings,
> Each one revealing the purest way.
> Just as each breeze and every drop of rain
> Refreshes the forest. (*Three Zen Masters* 129)

If such a separation were non-existent, as in the ideal enshrined in the Dôgen system, the poem would have to present not a human extraction of significance from the natural, but a genuinely intercommunicative conversation between birds, mountains, and humans. Furthermore, such communion would have to be presented not as a manner of speaking but as the plain truth. It would have to be a literal claim, not a figure of speech. That much is entailed if a poem is to embody non-dualism. So the apparently "hard" claim made by Whalen-Bridge on behalf of the Snyder poem, at the start of his essay, that nature talks to the human, manifests itself in the argument of his essay, and in the cited text, as a pathetic fallacy, with the added nuance that we are urged to treat it as more than a pathetic fallacy. The outdoors as nature is treated by the poem in elegiac celebration and exhortation. In it the human voice of the poet speaks, through nature, to human beings. We have no hard evidence in the poem of the human talking to nature; it is nature that talks to us, but only as *prosopopœia*. The purpose of laboring the point is to insist that personification and the pathetic fallacy are literary devices through which we human beings use language to talk to ourselves, using the fiction of talking to nature (or of nature talking to itself, or to us) as a means to an end. The "hard" sense requires that we drop the fiction and stake the claim for talking *with* nature, and for nature to be talking with itself, or *with* us, literally. In view of what the poem offers, I think that one needs to make a more modest claim on its behalf. While it wears its Zen on its sleeve, the affiliation that it cannot conceal is part of a long and time-honored Romantic tradition of using nature to call to the human, urging it not to lose touch with its truer self. That might well be a laudable aim. It can also be contextualized within the history of modern Orientalist appropriations of the East for specifically Occidental needs, whether as in Whistler or van Gogh, or as in Yeats, Eliot, Pound, and Co. But that does not suffice to make it either non-dualist or even specifically Buddhist, except as intentionality.

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