

My Poet is Better than Your Poet: A Response to Rajeev Patke*

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I am, shall I say, slightly saddened. I wrote an essay about poet Gary Snyder explaining how we human beings can sit down and have a nice chat with rocks and trees (mainly by writing poems in which we do not privilege the human-centered concerns absolutely) and, lo and behold, a human being has completely misunderstood me. Rajeev Patke's response says that I am guilty of committing the pathetic fallacy when I claim that the poetry of Gary Snyder helps us communicate better with the world, and then the response goes on to show how Wallace Stevens is philosophically wiser than Gary Snyder. Part of me wants to ask, in the mode of mock-angst I now enjoy, *Why must it always come to that?*

Snyder quotes a Zen story that asks this question in his book-length essay *The Practice of the Wild*:

One time when the Master was washing his bowls, he saw two birds contending over a frog. A monk, who also saw this, asked, "Why does it come to that?" The Master replied, "It's only for your benefit." (Dong-Shan, *PW*, 175)

If Professor Patke were considering this story, he might accuse the Master of the pathetic fallacy, but such a comment would be about as far from the point as possible. The Master (which really means anyone who has a correct, working understanding of a situation as opposed to a self-interested distortion) certainly has not said that two birds woke up in their feather-beds one morning, stretched, and said one to the other, "hey, let's

*Reference: John Whalen-Bridge, "Gary Snyder, Dōgen, and 'The Canyon Wren,'" *Connotations* 8.1 (1998/99): 112-24; Rajeev S. Patke, "Response to 'Gary Snyder, Dōgen, and 'The Canyon Wren,'" *Connotations* 8.2 (1998/99): 261-67.

you and me go contend over a frog so that some bald-headed monk can learn a little bit about impermanence." Such would be the "hard reading" that Patke sets up as an impossible requirement. Patke is saying something like "for Whalen-Bridge's claims to stand up, we can only talk to the world if fables are regarded as literally true." I never said in my essay that fables were literally true, nor is the Master in Dong-Shan's account saying that the birds are serving a human need in any direct, intentional way. The Master *is* saying that the birds and the frog answer to a human need for drama. The Master is saying that the monk's own surprise and sympathy are themselves a matter of pathetic fallacy, and that the young, inexperienced monk only perceives the bird-frog carnage as "other" because he is implicated: the monk's hunger to see himself as pure and harmless cause him to frame the scene as he does. When the younger man tries to flatter himself by saying to the Master, and I paraphrase freely here, "Isn't it nice that you and I are not savage killers like those little beasties over there," the Master corrects the monk by saying "don't kid yourself: you paid to enter the show, and thus you are very much part of it." That is to say, we are intersubjectively related to the world around us. Our choice, it could be said, is not whether or not to communicate with the world, but whether or not we should do it *well*.

Perhaps picking up on my comment about Harold Bloom's sense of "strong readings" (which are formative, constructive misreadings that take a tradition in new and interesting directions), Patke divides strong-and-hard from weak-and-soft readings in order to argue that my essay "Gary Snyder, Dôgen, and 'The Canyon Wren'" is a weak-and-soft reading that sentimentally indulges in pathetic fallacy in order to pretend that the world talks back to us humans *as a human would*. The last idea, which I have emphasized, is Patke's projection, and it has been specifically ruled out in my essay. When Dôgen says that we do not experience water as a dragon does, he is using non-literal and fully figurative language to cure us of our erroneous belief that all beings experience the world in the same way and through the same vocabulary. I should put "vocabulary" in quotation marks here just to show that the word is being used figuratively. I should not hope to inspire any readers to squat next to a tree or put ear to ground

to hear what words these inanimate items actually use. I plead, forsooth: please read my essay or just about anything by Dôgen with more attention to what these texts actually “say” to better appreciate what is meant by a phrase such as “the speech of the world.” And words do come out of the world. Snyder relishes a notion from an aboriginal Australian person at one point in his text: man is nature dreaming. Our words, as well as bird peeps, *are* the speech of the world. Like Harold Bloom’s reader, who better understands herself through the experience of poetry, the world comes to know itself through various languages and other information networks. Philosophers such as Dôgen and poets such as Snyder do not question whether Japanese and English are limited to *homo sapiens*, but they vigorously question the idea that Being is bound by the epidermis.

Yes, I know Richard Rorty will tell us that truth only exists in human sentences. Most academic philosophers, critical theorists, and everyday people will insist that the human way of speaking is the only way of speaking. Consequently, most human societies are barely on “speaking terms” with the natural world any more.

In his final paragraph Dr. Patke brings in Orientalist appropriation, which strikes me as a knee-jerk reading. Casual phrasing such as “Zen on his sleeve” and the imputation that Gary Snyder’s references to Dôgen are somehow part and parcel of the Western imperial domination of Asia—this questionable move causes me to stand up like a Zen master and give my sleeves a hard shake for an answer, but as a special kindness to *Connotations* readers I translate my ineffable gesture into verbal form: I write this from Asia, where it is, today, Friday the 13th. But in America, on the other side of the International Date Line, it is Columbus Day, and Columbus is a famous historical example of just the sort of appropriation that Patke accuses me of—and practices himself. Columbus came to the New World and began by misnaming the people he found there. He did not ask who they were—he told them who they were. He did not listen very well. He renamed the rivers. He did not ask what the names of the rivers were—he went back to Europe and reported his own set of names. Columbus might have said, in his own defense, that the humanoid creatures he met in the New World were not really people since they do not speak “our” language.

Their information-exchange simply did not count to Columbus. Consequently, Columbus is considered by many, nowadays, to be a bad guy. He is yet one of two persons in America who have a national holiday named after them (the other being Martin Luther King, Jr.), but I would not be surprised if this situation were to change in the next decade or so.

Practicing this (or a similar) kind of appropriation, Patke distorts my meaning when he transforms this statement from my essay: "The Canyon Wren' is not just about how we express ourselves in the world: it is a public record of the world speaking back to us" (Whalen-Bridge 113). "Public record," the reader is reminded, is the exact translation of the Japanese word *kôan*. It is the public record of a moment between two or more speakers when one speaker or the other has slashed through the conceptual shortcomings of the words we use to communicate; a student within the Zen tradition might spend years trying to understand what that strange conversation is about. Patke, misunderstanding what a *kôan* actually is, finds my reading comes up short: "I think the poem does not do enough to exemplify or communicate a non-dualistic experience" (Patke 262). A *kôan*, however, does not *represent* nonduality—nonduality cannot be represented.¹ It is a primary point in Zen discourse that the finger pointing to the moon is not the moon, but in his essay Patke is criticizing the finger for failing to be the moon. My essay does not claim to present a Polaroid snapshot of the Void, nor does Snyder's poem. The poem *does* point to the ways in which the world (the bird, the river, the historical remains of other people along the bank) aids and abets moments of self-forgetting. It points to those moments, but it cannot *be* those moments, and to demand that a poem or essay capture all of the permutations of Buddhist selflessness is to ask for the world, rather than a textual redaction of it.

Why does it come to that? Perhaps it is only for your benefit. I'm not merely mocking when I write this: I'm truly grateful for Patke's resistance to my essay and for the ego-driven clamor of minds that allows us to say (more and more skillfully, I hope) what we want to say. In a sense, we are two birds contending over a frog, and "it is only for your benefit."²

But who are "you"? The Harold Bloom idea I referred to in my essay, that poetry teaches us to talk not to others but to ourselves, was probably

not explored sufficiently. The Zen Buddhist critique of self never says that there is no “you” walking around in your body—only that “you” are not limited to the arbitrary dividing lines between yourself and other that you (and I) necessarily work with to exist in the world. We say of a beloved spouse “my better half” and we are *not* just being figurative. A neuroscientist will explain in convincing detail that, when the marriage fails, each party will be in serious pain until a certain set of brain cells actually die off. To be deeply implicated with the Other is, as Freud notes early in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, to risk great pain. Likewise, we are, in our various ways, implicated with the world. Mainly we *practice* this implication through poetry and storytelling. To attempt to satisfy any demand for a thoroughly non-figurative way of talking about this implication would be a fool’s errand.

To say that “we talk to nature” or “the mountains have a voice” means only that we may try to listen in ways that are not *absolutely* self-interested. The reward is that we may hear more accurately and usefully if we give up the fantasy that humanity is the only form of existence that matters, that warrants care. Our language, our human way of speaking and writing and listening, is one mode of information transfer, but language thus is a subset of other kinds of information transfer. Chuang Tzu, a Taoist philosopher from the 4th century B.C., has put the question that may lead to this insight this way:

Words are not just wind. Words have something to say. But if what they have to say is not fixed, do they really say something? Or do they say nothing? People suppose that words are different from the peeps of baby birds, but is there any difference, or isn’t there? (Watson 32)

We are, needless to say, not the same as birds in all respects, and birds have yet to come out with a *Norton Anthology of Bird-Peeps*, but this acknowledgment of differences need not lead us to deny all commonality with birds. If we literally demand that the world speaks to us in “our” language, then we are defining ourselves as radically different from the world at the outset. Why is the peep of a bird or the patter of raindrops not “my language”? Of course, I cannot pretend to be too surprised by this sentiment. The

discounting of all information that is not directly related to and useful to Myself is in fact what human beings in cosmopolitan societies generally do. We do not usually, except in an odd private poem or sentiment, regard ourselves as being part of the earth's body. And, with global warming on the rise, we are soon to live with the consequences of this view.

There are environmental matters at stake, to be sure, but there is also at stake our understanding of literature itself. Wallace Stevens has presented, in a poem, the claim that poetry is the supreme fiction. We vary from his way when we fail to see that all parts of our lives, whether we call them fantasy or reality, figurative or literal, are parts of a vast poem. Sure, I can hear Professor Patke saying, that is a quaint Romantic sentiment. But there is also a huge development within literary studies currently taking literature's institutions to task for unquestioningly privileging the "homocentric" imagination over the "ecocentric." For a possible next stage in the present conversation I would suggest reading Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination*, which discusses Thoreau's *Walden* and other environmental texts to show how we might use literature to talk to the world without looking like we have lost our minds.³

May this conversation—and many another warm, witty, and vigorous debate—continue in Halberstadt, where conversations may happen between you, I, rocks and trees, birds, and poets both living and dead.

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NOTES

¹Ineffability is a notoriously hard subject to discuss, but efforts have been made. See David Loy's *Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy* (originally published by Yale UP; republished by Amherst, New York: Humanity Books, 1998). Subsequent references to this text will be cited parenthetically as "Loy." Nonduality, simply put, is the "nondifference of subject and object" (Loy 25), an experience of a "self" that has shifted dramatically beyond our skin-bound sense of self. Loy quotes the following sentence from Dōgen: "I came to realize clearly that mind is not other than mountains, rivers, and the great wide earth, the sun and the moon and the stars" (Loy 25).

²If I may mention a third bird, I would also like to make up for a previous omission and thank Dr. Barnard Turner for catching the typographical error in first editions of "The Canyon Wren" in which "cool in the dark" erroneously substitutes for "cook in the dark." Dr. Turner's sort of bird has unusually sharp eyes.

³In his introduction to *The Environmental Imagination* Buell defines "environmental" literature as a mode of writing composed of those texts suggesting 1) that human history is implicated in natural history; 2) that human interest is not the only legitimate interest; 3) that human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation; and 4) that physical environments are better seen as processes rather than static "givens" (6-8).

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