



LOOK OUT: A SELECTION OF WRITINGS



BY

GARY SNYDER

Craft Interview

The New York Quarterly "Craft Interview" belongs to an extensive series of interviews about the art of writing conducted by the journal. It was given in 1973 in an office building labyrinth somewhere in Manhattan.

NYQ: As most of your poems look on the printed page—they're staggered left, right, or indented or something, spaces here and there—are you after visual effect, musical effect, or both?

SNYDER: Well, I consider this very elemental. Most poets I know, most of my colleagues, who follow that open form structuring of the line on the page, do it with full intention as a scoring—as Charles Olson pointed out some years ago in his essay on projective verse.

The placement of the line on the page, the horizontal white spaces and the vertical white spaces are all scoring for how it is to be read and how it is to be timed. Space means time. The marginal indentations are more an indication of voice emphasis, breath emphasis—and, as Pound might have called it, *logopoeia*, some of the dances of the ideas that are working within your syntactic structures.

NYQ: Do you have the poem pretty much complete inside you before you start to put it down to the paper, or is it that you hear this *tala* and that gets you into the poem, but then you are interacting with the paper—or do you use paper—do you use a tape recorder or something?

SNYDER: No, I write by hand when I write. But before I write I do it in my mind many times.

Almost the whole thing. The first step is the rhythmic measure, the second step is a set of preverbal visual images which move to the rhythmic measure, and the third step is embodying it in words—and I have learned as a discipline over the years to avoid writing until I have to. I don't put it on the page until it's ripe—because otherwise you simply have to revise on the page. So I let it ripen until it's fully formed and then try to speak the poem out, and as a rule it falls right into place and completes itself by itself, requiring only the smallest of minor readjustments and tunings to be just right to my mind.

NYQ: Do you keep a notebook?

SNYDER: I keep many notebooks—many notebooks and many useful files.

NYQ: With an idea of these visual images?

SNYDER: Visual, and also working phrases, working images as written out, even individual words, some of the words that I have since been working with. This is the way that I am working on *Mountains and Rivers Without End*.

NYQ: Do you think of one line of poetry, then, as the melody, another part as the accompaniment?

SNYDER: Only metaphorically. That leads into another area which is more structural, structural in regard to imagery over syntax. In that sense metaphorically there are some idea or image lines that are equivalent to the melody line, and some idea or image lines which are like a recurrent chorus or a recurrent subtheme, or repetitions that revolve in various ways, bringing different facets to light in the unfolding of the poem.

NYQ: Do you rewrite?

SNYDER: No. I tune, I make adjustments, I tamper with it just a little bit—

NYQ: So that once you have the poem down and you put your name at the end of it, that's it?

SNYDER: Well, once in a while a poem will come out half-

formed, and what I'll do with that is put it aside totally for several months and then refer back to it again and then revisualize it all. I'll replay the whole experience again in my mind. I'll forget all about what's on the page and get in contact with the preverbal level behind it, and then by an effort of re-experiencing, recall, visualization, revisualization, I'll live through the whole thing again and try to see it more clearly.

NYQ: Well, this is a kind of information retrieval, almost—you were talking about notebooks and files before, and this is almost an index type of question—Do you keep those in some sort of order, or do you have cross-references?

SNYDER: Yes, they're all organized, but their only function is as mnemonic aids, like signals to open up the inner world. The inner world is too large to ever put down; it's a sea, it's an ocean; and guides and notes and things like that just help me—they're like trail-markers. It's like finding your way back to the beginning of the right path that you were on before, then you can go into it again.

NYQ: Can we talk a minute about the way you go into it—do you use meditation as a way to get into it? Is meditation a way of . . .

SNYDER: Curiously, I don't "use" meditation in this way, but it serves me well. I'm a practicing Buddhist, or Buddhist-shamanist, perhaps; and every day I meditate. I do zazen as a daily practice. Which does not mean that my daily meditations are poetic or necessarily profound, but I do them, and in actual fact the inception of the poem generally seems to take its beginnings more while working, rather than while sitting. But the exercise, the practice, of sitting gives me unquestionably an ease of access to the territories of my mind—and a capacity for re-experience—for recalling and revisualizing things with almost living accuracy; and I attribute that to a lot of practice of meditation; although, strictly speaking, that is not the best use of meditation.

NYQ: There's a book around called *Zen in the Art of Archery*

by Eugen Herrigel which says that through a kind of disciplined inattention the archer and the target become one. The artist and the creation become one. Do you find that meditation had worked this way for you?

SNYDER: Well, yes, because, like I say, I never try to use meditation deliberately—for the reason that, as anyone who has done much meditation knows, what you aim at is never what you hit. What you consciously aim at is never what you get. Your conscious mind can't do it for you. So you do have to practice a kind of detached and careful but really relaxed inattention, which lets the unconscious do its own thing of rising and manifesting itself. But the moment you reach out—it's like peripheral vision, almost—the moment you reach out to grab it, it slips back. It's like hunting—it's like still hunting.

Still hunting is when you take a stand in the brush or some place and then become motionless, and then things begin to become alive, and pretty soon you begin to see the squirrels and sparrows and raccoons and rabbits that were there all the time but just, you know, duck out of the way when you look at them too closely. Meditation is like that. You sit down and shut up and don't move, and then the things in your mind begin to come out of their holes and start doing their running around and singing and so forth, and if you just let that happen, you make contact with it.

NYQ: Is that something like what Buddhism calls the *erasure of the self*?

SNYDER: That's one kind of erasure of the self. That's the simplest kind, where the conscious mind temporarily relinquishes its self-importance, its sense of self-importance, of direct focus and decision making and lets peripheral and lower and in some sense deeper aspects of the mind begin to manifest themselves.

What I'm describing I think is common to the creative process for all kinds of people, and all kinds of arts, and they

arrive at it not necessarily by formal practice of meditation, but by practice of an intuitive capacity to open the mind and to not cling to too rigid a sense of the conscious self.

NYQ: You have any number of poems—specifically, say, "Shark Meat"—which seem to pull everything together; in fact the very ending of "Shark Meat" speculates that this shark has crisscrossed and has been here before and has now come back to be with us. Is that something like a healing process? Is that what you had in mind in that poem?

SNYDER: In that poem, yes, on not so intense a level. I find it always exciting to me, beautiful, to experience the interdependencies of things, the complex webs and networks by which everything moves, which I think are the most beautiful awarenesses that we can have of ourselves and of our planet. Let me quote something:

The Buddha once said, bhikshus, if you can understand this blade of rice, you can understand the laws of interdependence and origination. If you can understand the laws of interdependence and origination, you can understand the Dharma. If you understand the Dharma, you know the Buddha.

And again, that's one of the worlds that poetry has taken, is these networks, these laws of interdependence—which are not exactly the laws that science points out. They are—although they are related—but imagination, intuition, vision clarify them, manifest them in certain ways—and to be able to transmit that to others is to transmit a certain quality of truth about the world.

NYQ: There are times when what you've been writing has been what would obviously be called *poetry*, and other times you convey that in what would ordinarily be called *prose*—would you try to explore the border between poetry and prose in your expression, or would you regard those as two separate things?

SNYDER: You are thinking of the essays in *Earth House Hold*?

NYQ: *Earth House Hold* and *The Back Country*. "Why Tribe," for example, is something like that.

SNYDER: Well, *Back Country*, I guess, is really all poetry, to my notion, and *Earth House Hold* is all prose, to my notion. But it's a thin line sometimes. The first difference is that (this is me speaking of my own sense of my own prose) that what I call prose does not have the musical phrase or the rhythm behind it. Nor does it have the content density or the complexity, although the complexity of some of the writing in *Earth House Hold* is fairly—it is fairly complex sometimes. I don't really think of them as different so much as—I adopt whatever structure seems to be necessary to the communication in mind. And I try to keep a clear line between, say, notebook journals, journal jottings and poems—and again, the real line is in the music and the density—although again, to be fair, not all my poems are necessarily that dense in terms of content analysis, but have maybe a musical density sometimes.

What I might add to that is this: I seem to write very different poems. All of the poems that are most interesting to me are different from each other, almost all of them. And I see them almost as different, each one a different form and a different strategy for dealing with a different impulse, and different communication.

There's another level—in the longer loop—we've been talking about short loops now—but in the longer loop I have some concerns that I'm continually investigating that tie together biology, mysticism, prehistory, general systems theory, and my investigations in these things cause me to hit different new centers in interrelationships, different interstices in those networks of ideas and feelings, and when I hit those interstices, sometimes a poem comes out of there, and that's a different place. Each one of them is a different face, many-faceted, of whatever it is I'm trying to work around.

NYQ: The ones you've just described seem to be intellectual, as opposed to emotional concerns.

SNYDER: Yes. Those are emotional-intellectual concerns! Again, they shade off. Like, it's the sanctity or the sacredness of all sentient beings as an emotional concern. The richness and the diversity of all sentient beings and the necessity for the survival of the gene pool for this to continue to be interesting is a biological concern. They shade over into each other.

NYQ: You were talking a couple of minutes ago about activities like logging and pole-skinning—well, you have come to the NYQ office by subway. You're giving a poetry reading at the 92nd Street Y tonight. How can you reconcile—how do you manage to put this all together—staying close to what presumably are the sources of your inspiration, like the back country, like these activities, with what a poet has got to do, giving readings and bothering with publishers and being interviewed like this?

SNYDER: Well, I don't find it particularly contradictory, but then contradictions don't bother me. Giving poetry readings is part of my work, because the poem lives in the voice, and I do it not just for the money, although that certainly is a consideration, but because I feel this is where I get to try my poems out and I get to share a little bit of what my sense of the music of them is with others. And I wouldn't feel right if I didn't do that. The poem has to be sung once in a while. To travel around the country is a pleasant luxury, which may not be possible much longer as the whole transportation system will get increasingly expensive and nervous, but as long as it's possible, I'll indulge myself in it and what I gain from that is keeping in touch with the whole amazing network of American intellectual life and seeing many levels of things happening all the time, which I have no objection to seeing, you know. That's part of one's education and keeping one's level of awareness up. Living in the country for me is not a retreat, it's simply placing myself at a dif-

ferent point in the net, a different place in the network, which does not mean that I'm any less interested in the totality of the network, it's simply that's where I center myself.

NYQ: If you lived in the city, do you think you would write very differently from the way you write?

SNYDER: Probably not too differently, especially as I'm learning to see cities as natural objects. I'm getting better able to see what is natural and what is musical.

NYQ: You're stressing finding your own voice, your own identity. Does it help? Has it helped you? Would you recommend that others study with other poets?

SNYDER: Yes. I feel very strongly that poetry also exists as part of a tradition, and is not simply a matter of only private and personal vision, although sometimes something very remarkable comes out of that kind of spontaneous and sort of untutored singing. There are several things that are more universal that we must tap into before personal utterances can become truly poems. One level is the very level of the language and its tradition of songs. We are immediately tied into a tradition by the very fact that we are dealing with the language, and the language is something with an enormous amount of history embedded in it—cultural history.

I feel that one should learn everything about poetry, that he should read everything that he can get his hands on, first from his own tradition and then from every other tradition that he has access to, to know *what* has been done, and to see *how* it has been done. That in a sense is true craft: that one learns by seeing what the techniques of construction were from the past and saves himself the trouble of having to repeat things that others have done that need not be done again. And then also he knows when he writes a poem that has never been written before.

I like to extend it out into other traditions for the very reason that we now are becoming totally cosmopolitan—we might as well do it. For me it's the Chinese tradition and the

tradition of Indian vernacular poetry, and also classical Sanskrit poetry of India that I learned most from.

What parallels that is the inner level of universality which is in a sense the collective unconscious that belongs to more than your private self. When you touch on those deeply archetypal things in yourself and at the same time are in touch with what the generations before you have done with the same kind of impulses and the same depths of the mind, then you're able to steer a course with your own voice that will be a new creation, it seems to me. Without that drawing the cross between the personal unconscious to the collective unconscious and one's personal use of language into the collective use of language, you remain simply private. And poetry to be poetry has to speak from a deeper place than the private individual.

NYQ: One thing you've done is translation. *Cold Mountain Poems*. Would you suggest to poets that they get into a fair amount of translating that way?

SNYDER: I'm not sure I would. Translation is too tempting, and I think as an exercise it's good, but it takes you away from yourself finally, from your own work. I think that too many poets take up translating—well, I shouldn't say this. *Some* poets take up translating because they seem to have run out of water in their own well. And maybe they should just keep digging at their own well instead of going over and borrowing it from somebody else's, which is what it seems to be.

Now the way I did the Han-shan translations was very much like what I described earlier. I stumbled on it, you know, that you could read what the Chinese said and then visualize what the Chinese, what the poem was, what the, quote, "*poem*" was, as Robert Duncan would say, the poem that's back there, and see that clear enough to then write down the poem in English directly, then look at the English and check it again against the Chinese and—to make sure that they really weren't too out of line.

NYQ: Do you make it a practice to meet with other poets, poets who have either an affinity for the kind of content, or the kind of resource—like Jerome Rothenberg, for example—do you make it a point to meet with a lot of people that way?

SNYDER: No, I don't make a point of it. One needs a lot of solitude, a lot of silence, to work. I met a lot of poets in the fifties, and we nourished each other in a grand way. We needed each other and we became a small, quote, "culture," warm and moist and nourishing—and we grew out of that, and I—

That was a particularly deep culture of San Francisco for me at that time, and my contact with, first of all, Kenneth Rexroth, my teacher of Chinese poetry Ch'en Shih-hsiang, Philip Whalen, Lew Welch, Michael McClure, Philip Laman-tia, Robert Duncan, and other poets of that time—

NYQ: No women?

SNYDER: Not right then. There weren't any that were part of the quote, "culture," that was nourishing itself—not as writers, not that I can recollect. Diane Wakoski a little later, a year or two later. Diane was a very young barefoot girl in San Francisco then, and she began writing, and a little bit later Joanne Kyger came into that, and she's still writing poetry. She and I were married for a while.

But I'm thinking of that initial period. There was indeed a great need for each other, and I have much gratitude for that. *Now*, to the contrary, I think that poets perhaps place too much importance—and writers in general—on seeing each other, meeting each other, talking with each other, going to one person's house, going back to the other's house, and then saying, "When shall I see you again," "Well, let's meet again Wednesday," and then doing it again on Wednesday and—

Poetry is not a social life. Nor is it a career. It's a vocation. To be a careerist and to make a social life out of poetry is to waste the best of your opportunities, probably, for doing your work.

NYQ: You don't teach?

SNYDER: No, I have taught. I taught a year once. And I like to teach.

NYQ: You did like it?

SNYDER: Oh yes, except you have to talk too much! It's such a verbal activity, teaching at universities; it depends so much on language, just speech. Although it's getting better now. People feel forward enough to have silence in class sometimes, and undertake nonverbal or only semiverbal ways of teaching sometimes—experiential ways of teaching. There's something very good that's happening.

NYQ: Do you ever use words purely for the sound, the music, independent of the meaning of the word?

SNYDER: No. I like to think there is a merger of the sound and the meaning in some of the poems I have written. I try to steer a middle path in that.

NYQ: How about rhyme?

SNYDER: I use internal rhyme fairly frequently.

NYQ: Would you say that it just happens?

SNYDER: It just happens, yes.

NYQ: We got a note a few months ago from Charles Bukowski, who said that craft interviews remind him of people polishing mahogany. Do you have some response to that?

SNYDER: I like to polish mahogany! I like to sharpen my chain saw. I like to keep all my knives sharp. I like to change oil in the truck.

Creativity and maintenance go hand in hand. And in a mature ecosystem as much energy goes to maintenance as goes to creativity. Maturity, sanity, and diversity go together, and with that goes stability. I would wish that we could in time emerge from traumatized social situations and have six or seven hundred years of relative stability and peace. Then look at the kind of poetry we could write! Creativity is not at its best when it's a by-product of turbulence.

The great Zen masters, the great Chinese poets, some of the great landscape painters, and some of the great Buddhist

philosophers, were all contemporaries over just a few centuries in the T'ang Dynasty. The whole power that comes out of that is the power of men who have achieved sanity of a working sort in a society which has a working peace, and then have said, "Now where do we go from here?" When we get to the top of the hundred-foot pole, keep going!

There are some equivalent things you can see in India, although India has a more turbulent history than China, I think. And finally, I intuit it as being the case, dialectically the case, so to speak.

NYQ: Would you say that a religious outlook is indispensable for the poet, for poetic creativity?

SNYDER: Not as such. I would say more, but the religious outlook would take us into a lot of tedious definitions. Spiritual curiosity, yes. Spiritual and psychological and personal curiosity. Curiosity about the world—yes, of course. Curiosity about consciousness, primarily, which is what you begin to be able to do when you sing.

NYQ: Do you think of your audience when you write?

SNYDER: Sure, I think of it more as my friends, family, community, my face-to-face social network. I don't abstract my audience outside of what I see face to face. Now that comes to include many people around America whom I've seen face to face. I have a sense of who they are and—yes, I write to them. Sometimes at them, sometimes slightly over, but at least with them in mind.

NYQ: You said at one point that you felt you needed a great deal of solitude to write—

SNYDER: Not just to write, to live.

NYQ: Are you a seasonal poet? Do you write more in the fall than in the spring?

SNYDER: Well, the way I live right now, I guess I probably write more in the winter. Because in the spring I go out in the desert for a while, and I give a few readings, and then when I get back it's time to turn the ground over and start spring

planting, and then right after that's done it's time to do the building that has to be done, and then when that's done, it's time to start cutting firewood, and then when the firewood's done, it's just about time to start picking apples and drying them, and that takes a couple of weeks to get as many apples as possible and dry them, and then at the end of the apple season I begin to harvest the garden, and a lot of canning and drying is done maybe, and then when that season passes, to chestnuts and picking up the wild grapes, and then I've got to put the firewood in, and as soon as I get the firewood in, hunting season starts—and that winds up about the end of October with Halloween festivities, and then I go East for a month to read. So December, January and February is my time of total isolation, writing: and I don't see anybody in those months.

NYQ: When you say solitude, do you mean literally alone?

SNYDER: Well, no my family is with me, and there are neighbors to walk to. It's also during those months that we're most cut off, no electricity anywhere, no phone; the roads get snowed in and you can't get to my place. So the actual reading and writing is part of a seasonal process for me now. Although, of course, if you can get a poem going any time of the year, you'll do it—but to concentrate on that deeply, to get a lot of reading done, is a winter three-month chance.

NYQ: At the time you lived in Japan, did you have a similar cycle?

SNYDER: It was geared entirely to the cycle of the nearby Zen monastery. They have an annual cycle; it's like a farmer's cycle, that's all.

There's something about craft that we haven't touched on—I can't throw any light on it, really; I'd just like to suggest it as something to keep in mind, and that is: How do you go about—what kind of criteria do you employ—in feeling that a poem is well crafted? How do I feel when I feel a poem is well crafted? It's an extremely subtle thing, but part of it can be described in no other way than *taste*. There is an intuitive aes-

thetic judgment that you can make that in part spots phonic-ness, spots excess, spots the overblown, or the undersaid, the unripe, or the overripe, and feels its way out to what seems just right, and that balance is what I work for, just the right tone, just the right balance, for the poem to do just what I wanted it to do. Or I shouldn't phrase it that way—for the poem to be just what *it* wanted to be. Then it takes on a life of its own, and it loses no energy in the process.

NYQ: How is your work evolving now? Where is it going?

SNYDER: I'm still working, as I have for the last fifteen years, on one central long interconnected work in progress, with small poems being written peripheral to that.

NYQ: *Mountains and Rivers Without End*?

SNYDER: Right. Which is not an endless poem, it has an intention of being ended. But there's a lot of still relatively intractable material that I'm wrestling with, trying to punch it all up and drive it into the corral, and it takes time, because they keep sneaking back and I miss one—

What to Tell, Still

Reading the galley pages of Laughlin's *Collected Poems*
with an eye to writing a comment,
how warmly J. speaks of Pound,
I think back to—

At twenty-three I sat in a Lookout cabin in gray whipping wind
at the north end of the northern Cascades,
high above rocks and ice, wondering
if I should go visit Pound at St. Elizabeths.

And studied Chinese in Berkeley, went to Japan, instead.

J. puts his love for women
his love for love, his devotion, his pain, his causing-of-pain,
right out there.

I'm 63 now, & I'm on my way to pick up my ten year old step-
daughter and drive the car pool;
I just finished a five page letter to the County Supervisors
dealing with a former supervisor,
now a paid lobbyist,
who has twisted the facts, and gets paid for his lies. Do I
have to deal with this creep? I do.

James Laughlin's manuscript sitting on my desk.
Late last night reading his clear poems—

and Burt Watson's volume of translations of Su Shih,
next in line for a comment on the back.

September heat.

The Watershed Institute meets,
 planning more work with the B.L.M.
And we have visitors from China, Forestry guys,
 who want to see how us locals are doing with our plan.
Editorials in the paper are against us,
 a botanist is looking at the rare plants in the marsh.

I think of how J. writes stories of his lovers in his poems—
 puts in a lot,
 it touches me,

So recklessly bold—foolish—?
to write so much about your lovers
when you're a long-time married man. Then I think,
what do I know?

 About what to say
 or not to say, what to tell, or not, to whom,
 or when,

still.

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