

A Sense of the Whole



Gary Snyder's library on his Kitkitdizze homestead in the Sierra Nevada foothills.

A SENSE *of the* WHOLE

Reading Gary Snyder's
Mountains and Rivers Without End

Edited by MARK GONNERMAN

COUNTERPOINT
BERKELEY

Copyright © Mark Gonnerman 2015

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission from the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGUING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

A sense of the whole : reading Gary Snyder's Mountains and rivers without end / edited by Mark Gonnerman.

pages cm

ISBN 978-1-61902-456-4 (hardback)

1. Snyder, Gary, 1930– Mountains and rivers without end. I. Gonnerman, Mark, editor.

PS3569.N88M6237 2015

811'.54—dc3

2014036209

Interior design by VJB/Scribe

COUNTERPOINT

2560 Ninth Street, Suite 318, Berkeley, CA 94710

www.counterpointpress.com

Distributed by Publishers Group West

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Christopher
and
Whole Earth Inhabitants — Past, Present, and Future

CONTENTS

Introduction

Cultivating a Sense of the Whole: Gary Snyder's *Mountains
and Rivers Without End*

MARK GONNERMAN 3

1. Opening Conversation

GARY SNYDER & JACK SHOEMAKER 33

Hearing Native Voices

2. The Other's Voice: Cultural Imperialism and Poetic
Impersonality in Gary Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers
Without End*

TIM DEAN 45

3. Dharma Shoot-out at the OK Dairy: Some Angles and
Aspects of Imagination in Gary Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers
Without End*

JIM DODGE 81

4. Gary Snyder and the Renewal of Oral Culture

DAVID ABRAM 93

Making Pacific Rim Connections

5. *Mountains and Rivers Without End* and Japanese Nō Theater:
A Quest for a New Humanity

KATSUNORI YAMAZATO 111

6. *Mountains and Rivers* and Japan

NANAO SAKAKI 125

Exploring Poetic Roots

7. Some Interim Thoughts about Gary Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers Without End*
WENDELL BERRY 137
8. Proceeding by Clues: Reading *Mountains and Rivers Without End*
ROBERT HASS 143
9. Thoughts on *Mountains and Rivers Without End*
MICHAEL MCCLURE 203

Engaging Buddhist Perspectives

10. Buddhism in *Mountains and Rivers Without End*
CARL BIELEFELDT 215
11. Heart to Heart: Instructions in Nonduality
STEPHANIE KAZA 241

Interview

12. "The Space Goes On": A Conversation about *Mountains and Rivers Without End*
GARY SNYDER WITH ERIC TODD SMITH 261

Appendices

1. Maha Prajñā Pāramitā Hṛdaya Sūtra
Heart of the “Gone-Beyond-Wisdom Sūtra” 283
 2. *Mountains and Rivers Without End: Notes for Some of
the Poems*
GARY SNYDER 285
 3. Fieldwork: Gary Snyder, Libraries, and Book Learning
MARK GONNERMAN 291
- Bibliography of References Cited in Text and Notes* 316
- Contributors* 327
- Index* 331
- Note of Appreciation* 343

HEARING NATIVE VOICES



There are tens of millions of people in North America who were physically born here but who are not actually living here intellectually, imaginatively, or morally. Native Americans to be sure have a prior claim to the term native. But as they love this land they will welcome the conversion of the millions of immigrant psyches into fellow “Native Americans.” For the non-Native American to become at home on this continent, he or she must be *born again* in this hemisphere, on this continent, properly called Turtle Island.

— Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (1990)

The Other's Voice

Cultural Imperialism and Poetic Impersonality in Gary Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers Without End*

TIM DEAN

[H]ow do we encourage and develop an ethic that goes beyond intrahuman obligations and includes nonhuman nature?

— Gary Snyder, "A Village Council of all Beings" (1992)

In 1996, Gary Snyder published a long poem cycle that he had been working on for forty years. Comprising thirty-nine interlinked poems, *Mountains and Rivers Without End* is hugely ambitious; far more than a national epic, the book is conceived on a planetary scale. Among other things, it weaves together geology, ecological concerns, East Asian landscape painting and Nō drama, Native American mythology, and ethical reflection. Yet any such summary cannot do this book justice. It represents the culmination of Snyder's career.¹

In my account of *Mountains and Rivers Without End* I want to argue that since it harmonizes a vast range of disparate utterances into a collective voice, the poem's voice should be understood as impersonal — that is, as something other than Snyder's individual voice or the expression of his personal sentiments. My sense of poetic impersonality derives from modernist theories of this kind of voicing found in Yeats, Joyce, Pound, Eliot, and others; but my account of impersonality extends beyond their theories to accommodate Snyder's practice in a way that I hope will become clear as this essay progresses. Snyder himself has remarked that the individual poems in this book always held a different status: "Poems for *Mountains and Rivers* kept showing up at the rate of about one a year. I was writing other poems at

the same time, but in a different and more lyrical mode” (M&R 156). These poems are less lyrical, less personal, even when they appear autobiographical and intimate.

Although in the wake of its publication Gary Snyder has given many stirring performances of his poem, I propose that a more thorough understanding of *Mountains and Rivers Without End* may be achieved if we bear in mind that it is not composed or spoken in his voice. In this paper I want to show how the poem’s creation of an impersonal voice enables the work of art to engage ethical questions concerning nonhuman nature and our relations with it. I shall argue that only through a fully impersonal voice can art apprehend the otherness of nonhuman nature without transforming nature into something that merely serves human ends. Snyder’s ethical commitment to beneficently engaging the natural world draws on the resources that poetry offers for generating or accessing impersonal voice; thus by means of impersonal modes of communication we can develop relationships with nature that aren’t strictly human. There are resources within poetic traditions of both the East and the West that provide techniques for this kind of impersonal voicing — and hence relating. To that reservoir of poetic resources we can add now *Mountains and Rivers Without End*.



Working on Snyder’s poem in the Stanford University workshop was a very different experience from working on his poetry alone, as I did a decade ago when writing a book on Snyder. *Mountains and Rivers Without End* demands a collective response, and I’m not sure I could have written about it by myself. The poem and the workshop have refined my thinking about Snyder’s poetry in a way that teaches me something substantial about the poem itself. I first wrote about Snyder’s work in terms of a cultural unconscious, a transindividual dynamic that conditions what it means to be a United States subject — to be American and say “I.” In *Gary Snyder and the American Unconscious* I wanted to show how Snyder fit into — or, rather, departed from — a long tradition of figuring the North American landscape and its native inhabitants in distinctly insidious ways. I argued that becoming a U.S. subject entails disavowing the history of the landscape and its

expropriation from the Indians: to be American involves a commitment to ignorance concerning one's relationship with the land. It isn't simply a matter of not knowing about the landscape, but of actively wishing not to know. Psychoanalysis calls this wishing-not-to-know *the unconscious* — a negative motivation that, in terms of U.S. history and culture, renders voices from the land marginal to mainstream consciousness. In this way, the voice of the landscape becomes “other.”

Poetry has always involved gaining access to other voices — or, perhaps, to a realm of otherness that we tend to humanize in terms of voice. In his essay on “The Other Voice,” Mexican poet Octavio Paz describes this strange phenomenon:

All poets in the moments, long or short, of poetry, if they are really poets, hear the *other* voice. It is their own, someone else's, no one else's, no one's, and everyone's. Nothing distinguishes a poet from other men and women but those moments — rare yet frequent — in which, being themselves, they are other.²

This access to the other voice, which for Paz defines the experience of poetry, can be understood psychoanalytically in terms of the unconscious (“the unconscious is the discourse of the Other”) or philosophically in terms of impersonality.³ The voice that is “no one's and everyone's” is an impersonal voice, a transindividual voice, in much the same way that the cultural unconscious names a transindividual dynamic.

The other voice to which Snyder's work provides access is that of the landscape: his poetry voices a different relation to the land, one silenced and obscured by the cultural engines of Americanization. In this respect, Snyder's impersonalist poetic ambition accords with that of Yeats, who, in a different postcolonial context, “tried to speak out of a people to a people.”⁴ Like Snyder, Yeats believed that the key to this collective poetic utterance lay in reimagining the landscape and its aboriginal myths. *Mountains and Rivers Without End* shows that the process of reimagining the landscape involves listening to the voices of nonhuman nature; it therefore entails a more expansive conception of “the people,” as well as perhaps an extended conception of what counts as voice.

This effort to reimagine the landscape — or, more accurately, to

reimagine our relationship to it — also leads Snyder to draw on cultural traditions of the East, as well as of the West. Hence his enlarged conception of “the people” necessarily entails a more expansive understanding of cultural tradition too. For instance, the title *Mountains and Rivers Without End* alludes to lines from the Chinese poet Tu Fu: “The country is ruined: yet / mountains and rivers remain” (quoted in Snyder, *APIS* 103).⁵ These lines are so well known in China, according to Snyder, that they’ve reached proverbial status: words that belong to no one and thus to everyone. While I will have more to say later about Snyder’s allusions to and borrowings from other cultural traditions, I would like to register here that words belonging to everyone can hardly be appropriated or stolen from their rightful owner. Having entered a transnational tradition of poetic utterance, such words and images exist as part of the resource for poetry. They form part of that “other voice” of poetry.

Though the nation is lost, the mountains and rivers remain: the continuity of mountains and rivers in the face of socio-political changes represents a deep theme informing all of Snyder’s work. His poetic intention isn’t simply to demonstrate the presence of the landscape as the ground of the nation (a ground conventionally repressed in the North American context), but rather to actively articulate a new set of relationships to the land in order to create a different mode of social organization. We see this process at work in, for example, “The Hump-backed Flute Player,” a poem that appears at the very center of *Mountains and Rivers Without End* and takes as its subject the transformative power of poetry itself. The flute player, known as Kokop’ele, is a figure for the wandering poet, the music-maker who traverses the landscape.⁶ In this poem’s fourth section the poet summons ghosts of native animals for the purpose of transforming human relations with the landscape and, in so doing, transforming national identity:

Ghost bison, ghost bears, ghost bighorns, ghost lynx, ghost
pronghorns, ghost panthers, ghost marmots, ghost owls: swirling
and gathering, sweeping down,

Then the white man will be gone.
butterflies on slopes of grass and aspen —

thunderheads the deep blue of Krishna
 rise on rainbows
 and falling shining rain
 each drop —
 tiny people gliding slanting down:
 a little buddha seated in each pearl —
 and join the million waving grass-seed-buddhas
 on the ground. (M&R 80–81)

In an impersonal, shamanistic mode, the speaker calls on the spirits of the dead, analogously to how more conventional Western poets call upon the muse. I describe this mode as impersonal because the speaker implicitly summons the power of “voices” other than his own to effect the desired transformation.

The incantatory tone generated by alliteration in this passage — “Ghost bison, ghost bears, ghost bighorns” — suggests that transformation involves an ongoing process, a sense that is reinforced by the preponderance of gerunds (“swirling,” “gathering,” “sweeping,” “falling,” “shining,” “gliding,” “slanting,” “waving”). Given these present-tense participial constructions, it seems significant that the end result of this process is figured in the future tense — “Then the white man will be gone.” In his note on the poem, Snyder offers the following comment: “‘White man’ here is not a racial designation, but a name for a certain set of mind. When we all become born-again natives of Turtle Island, then the ‘white man’ will be gone” (M&R 161). This note supports my previous argument that our relation to the landscape is a function of consciousness or, more specifically, of the unconscious — “a certain set of mind.” Hence “white man” designates the U.S. subject whose peculiar relationship to the landscape and its history is maintained through disavowal. It’s this relationship, stemming from a distinctive mental state, that Snyder’s work aspires to transform.

The transformation of consciousness evoked in “The Hump-backed Flute Player” is framed in characteristically spiritual, even religious terms. However, there is some tension between the Buddhist imagery in the poem (“a little buddha seated in each pearl”) and the Fundamentalist rhetoric of being “born again” in the note (“When we all become born-again natives of

Turtle Island”). Given that it was Christian missionary zeal that propelled the colonization of North America in the first place, another conversion narrative for the continent’s population seems rather misguided, in that it risks simply replicating the original problem. Yet “The Hump-backed Flute Player” implies an alternative religious framework for understanding Snyder’s project, one that is neither Buddhist nor Christian. As both a religious and a poetic practice, shamanism offers a particularly useful model for grasping the relationship between Snyder’s spiritual and aesthetic commitments. From my perspective, shamanism also provides an excellent framework for appreciating the idea of poetic impersonality.⁷



In the cultures in which he appears, the shaman works to heal both individuals and the community through ritualized song. Indeed, in some instances an individual becomes a shaman by first healing himself through song. In the classic account of shamanism as a religious practice, Mircea Eliade reports the following:

Often when the shaman’s or medicine man’s vocation is revealed through an illness or an epileptoid attack, the initiation of the candidate is equivalent to a cure. The famous Yakut shaman Tüspüt (that is, “fallen from the sky”) had been ill at the age of twenty; *he began to sing, and felt better.*⁸

Eliade adds that this shaman’s good health remained contingent upon his continuing to sing: “if he went for a long time without doing so, he did not feel well.”⁹ Shamanic initiation involves a primordial encounter with the effectiveness of song—what in contemporary parlance we might call the performative power of ritualized utterances. A performative utterance is one whose words don’t merely describe an existing state of affairs, but actually usher it into being. Speech act theorist J. L. Austin’s classic example of a performative is the phrase “I do,” spoken in the marriage ceremony to bring a new symbolic relationship into existence.¹⁰ Performative utterances gain their power from the context in which they are enunciated: they draw on

and manifest a social relationship between the speaker and his community. It is for this reason that performatives always require witnesses, community representatives who play a symbolic role by standing in for the world in which the performative achieves its intelligibility. Hence witnesses fulfill essentially the same role at a marriage ceremony as they do at a shamanic one. And since it is the context that confers upon performatives their power, this context must be created on successive occasions through ritual. Poetry can function as both a ritualistic element in the creation of context and a performative outcome of this creation.

Contemporary literary theory has devoted considerable attention to performative utterances, though much more has been said about how words can do harm — for example, in hate speech — than about how words can do good or can heal.¹¹ Our most sophisticated accounts of the performative concern injury; by contrast Snyder's poetry, like shamanism, draws on words' restorative potential, their rarer power to make whole. Indeed, Snyder always has treated poetry as performative and shamanic in this way. For example, in "The Blue Sky" he elaborates a series of etymological and mythological connections among the color blue, medicine, and song. These connections between poetry and healing crystallize in the set-off line "Medicine, measure, 'Maya' —" (M&R 43), in which Maya refers to, among other things, the power of a Hindu god to transform an idea into an element of the sensible world. "Maya" designates performative power, a capacity to actualize in the material realm something nonmaterial or spiritual.

These three words — "Medicine, measure, 'Maya'" — are connected not only alliteratively but also metonymically, as substitutable, and therefore they're linked conceptually too. An earlier version of the poem, published in *Six Sections from Mountains and Rivers Without End, Plus One* (1970), suggests that these terms also are linked etymologically, that they are related within the history of language itself. The three-word line we find in the poem's 1996 version has been condensed from the following passage:

<i>Medicine.</i>	medēri	Indo European	me —
	"to measure"		
"MAYA"	Goddess	illusion-wisdom	fishing net
			(SSPO 42)

Here we see that *measure* has been derived from *medicine* via its Indo-European root, and that *Maya* is the name of a goddess, part of whose role involves measurement, fitting, or enclosure, as the poem's subsequent imagery makes clear. In the poem's later version these connotations have been subordinated such that *measure* is one in a series of nouns, rather than standing as a verb. This shift in emphasis subtly elevates the poetic meaning of *measure*, in which the term functions as a synonym for meter, the pattern of accented or alliterated words and syllables in poetry. Since meter may be considered what primarily distinguishes poetry from other verbal forms, *measure* represents a synecdoche for poetry as such. Hence the line "Medicine, measure, 'Maya'" constitutes a metonymic chain paraphrasable as *healing—poetry—performative realization*. And, in this regard we might note that although Snyder's poetry is unmetred—he tends to avoid closed poetic forms in favor of *vers libre*—it is not unmeasured. His work has always focused on patterns of relationship, proportion, interpenetration, and balance—features that, in formal terms, concern measure and, in terms of content, concern ecology, social justice, and environmental ethics.

Both poetry and shamanism involve restoring balance in this broad sense, and it is noteworthy that Kokop'ele, the wandering poet figure, punctuates Snyder's earlier version of "The Blue Sky" eight times. His previous appearance in "The Blue Sky," which now ends the first section of *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, connects this poem with "The Hump-Backed Flute Player," which ends the book's second section. This connection reinforces the link between poetic and shamanic vocation, since for Snyder both are associated with the healing power of song. Indeed, the shaman's vocational scene—which, as I have said, entails encountering the performative power of song—closely resembles that of poetic vocation. In his helpful meditation on the four-part structure of vocation, poet Allen Grossman notes that "[t]he story about vocation is one part of a whole master-story: the story of the maintenance of the intelligibility of the human world by symbols."¹² By this Grossman means simply that our world makes sense to us because it is mediated by representation, and that the quadripartite narrative of vocation is bound up with this sense-making function of representation. Grossman continues:

In the story, the symbols that effect the maintenance of intelligibility obtain their stability in history because they are grounded in an axiomatically nonhuman “first” reality. The master story about vocation says that nonhuman reality continually calls certain persons, alienating them to its purposes, burdening the world with the recognition (poetic knowledge) that identity requires memory of transcendental relationship.¹³

I will return to Grossman’s description shortly; but for now I want to note simply that it indicates how poetic vocation corresponds to the structure and significance of shamanic vocation. We may grasp his claim that “nonhuman reality continually calls certain persons, alienating them to its purposes” in terms of how the would-be shaman is lifted from the human realm into that of the sacred, so that in time he may become a conduit between the social community and the nonhuman world.

Eliade argues that this summoning of “certain persons” actually constitutes the sacred, since at its most basic level the sacred comes into being by way of singularization — that is, by the simple demarcation and separating out of a person, place, or object:

[S]ingularization as such depends upon the very dialectic of the sacred. The most elementary hierophanies, that is, are nothing but a radical ontological separation of some object from the surrounding cosmic zone; some tree, some stone, some place, by the mere fact that *it reveals that it is sacred*, that it has been, as it were, “chosen” as the receptacle for a manifestation of the sacred, is thereby ontologically separated from all other stones, trees, places, and occupies a different, a supernatural plane . . . What it is important to note now is the parallel between the singularization of objects, beings, and sacred signs, and the singularization by “election,” by “choice,” of those who experience the sacred with greater intensity than the rest of the community — those who, as it were, incarnate the sacred, because they live it abundantly, or rather “are lived” by the religious “form” that has chosen them (gods, spirits, ancestors, etc.).¹⁴

Singularization and sacralization thus can be seen as two sides of the same coin, in that the very fact of singularization creates a heterogeneous domain of existence — what, in the passage above, Grossman refers to as the transcendental.

It may be possible, however, to describe this phenomenon in less metaphysical terms once we recognize that the singularization of poetic and shamanic vocation entails a depersonalization — even a dehumanization — of the person who is called. Not only does the initiatory call of vocation hail from a point that cannot be identified with any individual person, but the response to this call likewise entails some forfeiture of personhood by the respondent. Eliade characterizes this double-bind thus: “the desire to enter into contact with the sacred is counteracted by the fear of being obliged to renounce the simple human condition and become a more or less pliant instrument for some manifestation of the sacred (gods, spirits, ancestors, etc.)”¹⁵ This is a more extreme situation than initially may be apparent, since the individual selected for a shamanic vocation is *lived by* the religious form (gods, spirits, ancestors) that has chosen him. Just as sacralization requires a radical ontological separation of the object or place deemed sacred, so shamanism entails a radical ontological transformation of the person concerned. It is almost as if the shaman is reduced to a mere host of the virtually parasitical force of otherness. The would-be shaman must give up his own personal life in favor of the life that comes to possess him. And, indeed, the metaphor of possession is far from idle in this context; it indicates the extremity of self-loss entailed in any authentic response to this vocational call.¹⁶

Eliade’s characterization of the would-be shaman’s dilemma is uncannily similar to T. S. Eliot’s characterization of the modern poet, who must surrender his individual personality in favor of ancestral voices, words from the dead — must, in other words, become a more or less pliant instrument for “the other voice.” In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” his critique of poetic originality, Eliot famously observes that “we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of [the poet’s] work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously.”¹⁷ Poetry for Eliot thus involves forms of *speaking through* or *being spoken by* one’s ancestors, rather than more conventional forms of

self-expression. The way in which Eliot's model of the impersonalist poet conforms to a shamanistic paradigm complicates received wisdom concerning his religious orthodoxy. Eliot's proto-shamanism also illuminates his conception of the poet's cultural role, since the modern poet, like the premodern shaman, is at once socially marginal — having renounced or forfeited “the simple human condition” that would make him a regular member of the community — and culturally central, in that he aspires to speak on behalf of the whole community.¹⁸



Any attempt to speak on behalf of others raises a host of ethical issues concerning cultural imperialism and appropriation. These issues have dogged Snyder on and off throughout his career, in terms both of his use of Native American and East Asian materials — ostensibly an appropriation of others' words — and his shamanistic effort to speak in his poetry not only for himself but also for a community. It would be plausible to interpret this attempt to speak on others' behalf as an illegitimate bid for power, an unwarranted form of self-aggrandizement on the poet's or shaman's part. Conversely, however, we could interpret speaking for the community as entailing a dramatic subordination to collective well-being of the poet's or shaman's individuality — a form of self-dispossession rather than self-aggrandizement. The degree to which the poet is obliged to become “a more or less pliant instrument” for “the other voice” suggests that we should not assent too readily to the interpretation that views a poet's speaking for others as a misuse of his power. Instead, we might regard the truly shamanistic poet as one who is used — even abused — by a power greater than himself. This is a crucial yet difficult issue for any impersonalist aesthetic, and it cannot be resolved easily. I intend to illuminate this question by reconsidering the four stages in the narrative of vocation.

As indicated above, the initial call in the quadrature of vocation involves a summons from the world beyond to an individual in the here-and-now — a summons that cannot be ignored or refused.¹⁹ A god or spirit may call the individual selected to be shaman in various ways: by illness or another

physical sign, or through a dream or vision. This intervention of the non-human in the human world disrupts quotidian reality, disordering human consciousness through fevers, fugues, hallucinations, dreams. There is something of this consciousness-altering shift at the very beginning of “Endless Streams and Mountains,” the opening poem of Snyder’s book — “Clearing the mind and sliding in / to that created space” (M&R 5) — as well as in more explicitly hallucinatory dream-poems in the book’s first section, such as “The Elwha River,” a poem that, dating from 1958, was one of the first to be composed of *Mountains and Rivers Without End*. It is this impersonal summons that Paz is referring to when he speaks of “the *other* voice,” a voice whose call initiates poetic and shamanic vocation alike.

The radical otherness of this voice is dramatized especially well in “The Hump-backed Flute Player,” where the speaker receives messages across enormous distances of time and space. This poem’s representing the origin of voice in prose form indicates Snyder’s awareness of the ordering of poetic vocation:

In Canyon de Chelley on the north wall up by a cave is the
hump-backed flute player lying on his back, playing his flute.
Across the flat sandy canyon wash, wading a stream and breaking
through the ice, on the south wall, the pecked-out pictures of
some mountain sheep with curling horns. They stood in the icy
shadow of the south wall two hundred feet away; I sat with my
shirt off in the sun facing south, with the hump-backed flute
player just above my head. They whispered. I whispered. Back
and forth across the canyon, clearly heard. (M&R 80)

Here the speaker is summoned to be a poet — a flute-player — by the symbolic power of the sheep carved into the canyon wall (these sheep reappear in the poem “Arctic Midnight Twilight” [M&R 92-95]). The vocational call is impersonal, coming not from a person or even a personified figure but from a nonhuman form. This call’s origin in “the pecked-out pictures of some mountain sheep” seems to me doubly significant, since it points to both the animal realm and the realm of art: both the petroglyphs of sheep and the ancient Chinese painting that initiates the poem “Endless Streams and Mountains” represent other artworks as the origin of vocation. This

suggests that our relations to the natural realm and to art may take precedence over interpersonal relations. In an aesthetic where the vocational summons hails from ancient petroglyphs of sheep, we can see the coordinates for what Snyder describes as “an ethic that goes beyond intrahuman obligations and includes nonhuman nature” (APIS 77). With vocation comes a new kind of ethical relationality.

The vocational scene of “The Hump-backed Flute Player” imagines the poet’s summoning in the form of a whisper, which suggests that considerable attentiveness is necessary to hear the call of poetic vocation, since it usually comes impersonally, from the nonhuman world — from the sea, from a bird, or from sheep. A mere whisper from the nonhuman realm requires substantial reorientation of one’s listening in order to catch; it requires an openness to voices other than the human and therefore entails an enlarged conception of voice, an expanded sense of who or what might have something significant to say. This kind of openness to the nonhuman or impersonal represents a first stage in transforming human relations with the world around us.

Snyder’s imagery of whispering recalls Whitman’s great poem of vocation, “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” where the poet’s mission is conveyed also by a “whisper,” this time from the sea. In his response to the call of poetic vocation, Whitman gives us some of the most powerful lines in American poetry, lines that illuminate the distinct call-and-response patterns of *Mountains and Rivers Without End*:

For I, that was a child, my tongue’s use sleeping, now I have
heard you,
Now in a moment I know what I am for, I awake,
And already a thousand singers, a thousand songs, clearer, louder
and more sorrowful than yours,
A thousand warbling echoes have started to life within me, never
to die.²⁰

Whitman’s speaker makes clear that the second vector of vocation’s quadripartite structure involves the solicited individual’s calling back to the power that singled him out — “now I have heard you, / Now in a moment I know what I am for.” Recognizing that the inarticulate sounds he has heard

constitute a summons, he sings antiphonally, back to the mysterious source. This singing or whispering back to an impersonal realm is the decisive act that transforms the individual from an ordinary member of the human community into a poet or shaman — recall Eliade’s report on shaman Tüspüt’s initiation, “he began to sing, and felt better.”

Whitman’s characterization of his response to vocation is particularly striking in its picturing all the speaker’s poetry as “warbling echoes” of that original call. If all his poems come into being as echoes of a voice other than the individual poet’s, then even his most personal lyrics retain a fundamental impersonality. Furthermore, this “other voice” inscribes the narrative of vocation into every poem. Snyder’s speaker whispering “[b]ack and forth across the canyon” offers an image of this poetic principle in action, as well as a model of the structure of his book as a whole, since *Mountains and Rivers Without End* comprises a complex set of calls and responses between different voices, cultures, and nonhuman beings.

It is crucial to register heterogeneous vectors of this call-and-response structure, because the poem’s polyphony of antiphonal voices depends on the authorizing whispers of nonhuman beings — the pictographs of sheep and ancient bristlecone pine, in “The Hump-backed Flute Player,” and the Mountain Spirit, in the poem of that title (M&R 140–47). In my account of Snyder, I avoid critically fashionable explanations of this verbal phenomenon, such as those deriving from Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism, because such explanations typically fail to distinguish horizontal from vertical vectors of call and response. By contrast, Grossman’s account of vocation argues that its third and fourth vectors repeat on the horizontal, secular level the vertical dialogue of vocation and invocation previously described. Having been summoned by nonhuman reality (vocation — vector 1) and tacitly accepted this summons by responding to it (invocation — vector 2), the poet calls out to the people, to human reality (vector 3), and receives from them a commission (or not) by way of reply (vector 4).

Likewise, the shaman sings first of his encounters with spirits and his journey to the world of the dead (vocation and invocation); then he sings to the human community and, specifically, to human souls. The narratives of shamanism’s and poetry’s origins are thus homologous; and, indeed, Eliade views the shaman’s descent into the underworld as cognate with the

Orpheus myth, that prototype of poetic origins in the Western world.²¹ In “The Mountain Spirit,” his book’s climactic poem, Snyder follows this pattern in that his dialogue directly engages the spirit world — though the explicitly supernatural status of his interlocutor isn’t revealed immediately. Having traveled to a certain elevation at the western edge of the Great Basin to find ancient bristlecone pine trees, the poem’s speaker is confronted by a voice in the wilderness:

A voice says

“You had a bit of fame once in the city
for poems of mountains,
here it’s real.”

What?

“Yes. Like the lines

*Walking on walking
under foot earth turns*

But what do you know of minerals and stone.
For a creature to speak of all that scale of time — what for?
Still, I’d like to hear that poem.”

I answer back,
“ — Tonight is the night of the shooting stars,
Mirfak the brilliant star of Perseus
crosses the ridge at midnight

I’ll read it then.”

Who am I talking to? I think,
walk back to camp.

(M&R 141–42)

Here the mysterious voice quotes back to the poet his own lines in the form of a challenge — “what do you know of minerals and stone . . . ?” Urged thus into singing, the speaker reproduces a poem called “The Mountain Spirit,” which appears typographically set off by different fonts in the larger poem of that title (M&R 143–46). Immediately following the interpolated poem, we read:

The Mountain Spirit whispers back:

“All art and song
is sacred to the real.
As such.”

Bristlecone pines live long
on the taste of carbonate,
dolomite,

spiraled standing coiling
dead wood with the living,
four thousand years of mineral glimmer
spaced out growing in the icy airy sky
white bones under summer stars.

(M&R 146–47)

The reply to the speaker’s poem comes in the form of a whisper, which confirms, among other things, the significance of whispering in the earlier vocational scene at Canyon de Chelley. Furthermore, this reply comes from the Mountain Spirit herself, as if the poem had conjured her into being analogously to how the unidentified voice provoked the interpolated poem’s recitation. And this exchange of voices takes place in the neighborhood of the bristlecone pines, whose great age (some of them are over four thousand years old) makes them representatives of natural immortality. While in “The Hump-backed Flute Player” the bristlecone pines “whisper” like supernatural beings, in “The Mountain Spirit” they stand as venerable witnesses to whispering by a more overtly supernatural agent.

The words spoken by the Mountain Spirit constitute a kind of aphorism,

riddle, or kōan marking judgment on shamanic practice: “All art and song / is sacred to the real. / As such.” By specifying art and song together, these lines emphasize the performative dimension of aesthetic practices over their merely representative functions. And by designating *all* such art as sacred, the Mountain Spirit generously sanctifies — and thus authorizes — a vast sphere of performance quite independently of any hierarchy of aesthetic or cultural forms. If, following Eliade, sacralization depends upon singularization, then the Mountain Spirit’s announcement multiplies singularization in the paradoxical guise of a distinctly nonsecular pluralism. The paradox of this inclusive sacralization is only intensified by the second half of the kōan: not only is all art sacred, but it is so “to the real. / As such.” Rather than the sacred and the real being mutually exclusive, they appear as mutually supporting and, indeed, thoroughly imbricated. In this view, the sacred is not metaphysical but materially present in the physical world; therefore, the Mountain Spirit implies, it would be pointless to try to transcend the material in search of the spiritual. The sacred isn’t even concealed within physical phenomena — as in a pantheistic conception of the universe — so much as it is coterminous with physical phenomena, once we approach the natural world with the right attitude.

This antidualistic perspective characterizes Snyder’s treatment of the bristlecone pines, which, as the oldest living beings, he regards as sacred. Though an organic life form, these trees appear immortal, godlike, by virtue of their great age — “four thousand years of mineral glimmer” — which locates them in a planetary rather than human timeframe. Nevertheless, these trees’ sacred status does not exist somewhere beyond or apart from their tangible existence; rather it lies in their very materiality — “spiraled standing coiling / dead wood with the living.” This image of intertwining “dead wood with the living” resonates with the notion of the sacred and the real imbricated on a single ontological plane. It also provides an image of the deep continuity — between all living beings, as well as across generations — that represents such an important theme in *Mountains and Rivers Without End*.



The bristlecone pine appears also in “The Hump-backed Flute Player” to show the crucial role that vocation plays in sustaining this kind of deep continuity — what Grossman calls the “master-story . . . of the maintenance of the intelligibility of the human world by symbols.” Reprising the whispering motif from earlier in the poem, the final section of “The Hump-backed Flute Player” reads:

Up in the mountains that edge the Great Basin

it was whispered to me
by the oldest of trees.

By the Oldest of Beings
the Oldest of Trees

Bristlecone Pine.

And all night long sung on
by a young throng

of Pinyon Pine.

(M&R 82)

In this passage we can distinguish different vectors of antiphony, different directions of call and response, since unlike earlier in the poem we are not presented with a scene of whispering “back and forth” between the nonhuman world and the speaker. Instead, the poem’s speaker is here simply a relay point between other voices. Hence we do not learn what was whispered, only that “it was whispered to me”: we are told the vector, not the content, of this communication.

Correlative to the speaker’s registering these sounds as a message is his emphasizing the trees’ venerable status by capitalizing “Oldest of Trees” the second time around, so that this phrase becomes not merely descriptive but honorific, a title. These lines mimic the phenomenon they describe, in that the repetition of “the oldest of trees. // By the Oldest of Beings / the Oldest of Trees” creates an echo akin to the echo of whispering throughout the

night that the poem relates. Furthermore, the intensified sonic qualities that characterize these closing lines — the alliteration, as well as the internal rhymes and echoes set ringing by the monosyllabic “[a]nd all night long sung on / by a young throng” — generate a sense of the pinyon pines’ song. It is the trees rather than the poet who sings, even though he functions as a vector of their song.

The significance of the call-and-response arrangement’s involving more than two parties — bristlecone pine, pinyon pine, and poetic speaker — lies in how this multiplication of vectors enables the dissemination outward of a certain knowledge, beyond the self-enclosed mirroring relation of self and other. Since what is whispered comes from “the oldest of trees” and is “sung on / by a young throng,” we have here an image of transmission across generations, in which the human speaker is only tangentially the agent of transmission. In this instance the call-and-response structure is far from intersubjective or dialogic: it concerns not the speaker’s relationally constructed identity, but the counter-recognition that nonhuman forms exist in responsive relation to each other independently of human intervention. Hence the speaker’s role in this relational web entails not so much creating responses as scrupulously noticing “calls” and witnessing others’ responses to them.

This modified version of antiphony provides the structural principle for Snyder’s book as a whole, since *Mountains and Rivers Without End* can be read as a series of responses — “warbling echoes,” in Whitman’s words — to the original mute call of the twelfth-century Chinese scroll painting that initiates the book. The poet’s work consists in making apparant — by taking other people’s words, framing and juxtaposing them — how certain ideas, images, and utterances *are* responses. This compositional principle explains Snyder’s commitment to quoting the colophons on the Chinese scroll, following his ekphrastic meditation on the painting itself. The painting, titled *Streams and Mountains Without End*, has accumulated a series of responses, some of them poems, which Snyder quotes in his book’s proem:

At the end of the painting the scroll continues on with seals and poems. It tells a further tale:

“ — Wang Wen-wei saw this at the mayor’s house in Ho-tung

town, year 1205. Wrote at the end of it,
 ‘The Fashioner of Things
 has no original intentions
 Mountains and rivers
 are spirit, condensed.’

‘... Who has come up with
 these miraculous forests and springs?
 Pale ink
 on fine white silk.’ (M&R 7)

This colophon provides the identity of its author and the location of its inscription, conscious of how these identifying details contrast with the essentially anonymous provenance of the original painting—“Who has come up with / these miraculous forests and springs?” Snyder’s note on the poem observes that “[a] hand scroll by this name showed up in Shansi province, central China, in the thirteenth century. Even then the painter was unknown, ‘a person of the Sung Dynasty’” (M&R 9). Since in the model of vocation I’ve outlined the inaugural call originates anonymously and hence impersonally, it seems fitting that we know who responds to the painting but not who made it in the first place.

In the collectivist aesthetic tradition from which the painting derives, the poems that follow it are understood to be *part of* the painting. According to Snyder, “the painting is not fully realized until several centuries of poems have been added” (M&R 159). Structured antiphonally, the impersonalist work of art calls out for responses, and *Mountains and Rivers Without End* itself constitutes a fully measured response, almost half a century’s worth of meditation on the continuing significance of this artwork for a very different historical, geographical, and cultural context. Snyder takes his cue from Wang Wen-wei, a poet in the classical Chinese tradition, who contributes not only a poetic response, but one that is itself structured antiphonally, as a sort of poetic Q & A:

‘... Who has come up with
 these miraculous forests and springs?’

Pale ink
 on fine white silk.’

Raising then deflecting the question of origins, this poem ingeniously points by way of answer to an image at once of writing and of painting. The haiku-like phrase “Pale ink / on fine white silk” provides an image of calligraphy that underscores the artifactual status of “these miraculous forests and springs” — the fact that they are a product of representation. Not only this, but the saying so in an antiphonal poem that itself responds to the painting emphasizes how the continuity or endlessness of streams and mountains depends in part on representational continuity — or, in other words, on cultural transmission.

This image of transmission between generations is cognate with that scene in “The Hump-backed Flute Player” where the speaker witnesses the bristlecone pine whispering something “sung on / by a young throng // of Pinyon Pine.” In these images of continuity between generations, the poet functions merely as a placeholder, a link in the chain connecting nonhuman forms. The human speaker’s place in each instance suggests that, strangely enough, the nonsubjective forms of art and of nonhuman nature occupy comparable — though not identical — ontological status. Furthermore, this process of transmission impersonalizes its human witness, minimizing his personal individuality in favor of a nonanthropocentric web of relations. We might say that the speaker is de-egoized, an outcome that corresponds to one strand of high modernist aesthetic practice, as well as to the spiritual discipline of Zen Buddhism.

Along with the human speaker’s de-egoization, it is striking how nonhuman forms in these poems resist personification — though there remains a hint of anthropomorphism in attributing to trees activities such as whispering and singing. Of course, we speak of birds singing without thereby necessarily personifying them; and *whispering* is a semantically capacious verb that can describe literally the sounds made by non-sentient beings, as well as by humans. My hesitation on this question stems from a reluctance to adjudicate too quickly whether the attribution of voice is necessarily anthropomorphizing. This is a persistent issue in Snyder’s work, since his attempts to give nonhuman nature dignity, parity, and full consideration continually come

up against the challenge of how this may be accomplished without humanizing the natural world in the manner of, say, Romantic poetry.

Part of the difficulty here lies in the idiomatic assumption that according any entity a share in political processes is tantamount to giving that entity “a voice.” Yet the larger difficulty involves an anthropocentric presumption that only personifiable entities warrant human consideration in the first place. Snyder addressed these challenges directly in a 1976 interview:

When [Whitman] says there should be more democracy, I go along with that. We all see what more democracy means, too. It means that the Navajo should get their own nation, that Rosebud and Pine Ridge maybe should be a separate nation, that the Indians of Puget Sound have fishing rights, that trees and rocks should be able to vote in Congress, that whales should be able to vote — that’s democracy. (TRW 74)

The startling idea that political enfranchisement be extended to the natural world is one outcome of the desire to give nonhuman forms a voice. At this point in the interview Snyder’s interlocutor, Paul Geneson, quite reasonably asks, “But who votes for them? How do they vote?” In response Snyder considers two intriguing possibilities, one juridical, the other poetic:

Well, Christopher Stone, in his essay “Should Trees Have Standing?” said legalistically it’s very simple — the court appoints someone to be their representative. Like someone to be the spokesman for the yellow pine-black oak communities of Northern California and Southern Oregon. That’s a possibility. Legally, this is not out of line: it would be analogous to the court appointing someone, a lawyer, to speak for a minor. . . .

Actually, that’s not so interesting. We can see it has been one of the jobs of poetry to speak for these things, to carry their voice into the human realm. That it *is* in poetry and in song and in ritual and in certain kinds of dance drama that the nonhuman realms have been able to speak to the human society. There are large numbers of people who don’t have an ear for that anymore, although once we all had an ear for it. (TRW 74)

Here again the implicit model of poetry is shamanistic and comports with the notion that a poet-shaman functions as intermediary between nonhuman nature and the human community. In this model of poetry it is not so much a matter of self-expression as it is of opening channels of communication and articulating the otherness of nonhuman nature. Rather than self-expression, we would have something akin to other-expression. Giving voice to the other rather than to oneself need not be anthropomorphizing, so long as otherness is conceived outside an intersubjective perspective — so long, that is, as the other is not conceived as another person. From Snyder's point of view, we need to learn how to treat nonhuman nature as an equal participant in our world without having to personify it. His poetry facilitates our seeing from a nonanthropocentric perspective and exploits impersonalist poetic techniques in pursuit of this ethical goal.

Poetry remains central rather than incidental to this project for at least two reasons. First, as suggested, poetry involves accessing “the other voice.” Second, poems provide models of attentiveness by dramatizing the process of attending to one's surroundings. The practice of reading poems carefully, line by line, also dramatizes the process of paying acute attention to a web of relations between voices and their verbal environment. In this respect, the activity of reading a Snyder poem shares much in common with the activity of making that poem, since Snyder's elliptical, paratactic, quietly allusive style compels his readers to discern relations and make hitherto unseen connections between entities in the poem. Reading Snyder we begin to inhabit a point of view in which neither the author nor any other human figure is necessarily central. Ecological consciousness can thus be understood as profoundly impersonal.



Yet the line of argument I'm pursuing here fails to resolve fully the issue of speaking on behalf of others. Far from being a new problem, this feature of poetic practice nevertheless has been viewed with growing suspicion in recent decades. “[T]he poet is representative,” declared Emerson in his mid-nineteenth-century idealist meditation on the nature of the poetic function:

He stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the commonwealth. . . . The poet is the person in whom these powers are in balance, the man without impediment, who sees and handles that which others dream of, traverses the whole scale of experience, and is representative of man, in virtue of being the largest power to receive and to impart.²²

Emerson, like Snyder, conceived the poet's representative function in explicitly sociopolitical terms. Though he never went so far as to recommend giving the vote to animals, rocks, and trees, Emerson did view the poet's cultural role as inherently political. But what in the nineteenth century Emerson considered poetry's chief political advantage, in the twentieth century we have grown increasingly to mistrust. The claim that the poet speaks on behalf of the rest of us sounds dubious to postmodern ears, because it appears riven with potential for abuses of power. We see the white, heterosexual, male poet and wonder how he could possibly speak for constituencies other than his own. Contrary to Snyder's point, in the interview quoted above, concerning an expansion of democracy, this idea that the poet speaks for us seems exclusionary and therefore decidedly undemocratic. Unfortunately, insisting on the good faith and unimpeachable character of this or that particular poet is largely irrelevant to the problem, just as the personal deficiencies and noxious politics of modernism's greatest poetic innovators also remain ultimately irrelevant to this issue.

The problem is not individual, but structural. It is a question not of personalities — honorable or deplorable — but, precisely, of impersonality. I've tried to suggest that the value of shamanism as a model for understanding impersonalist poetics lies in its emphasis on the structural feature of *speaking through*, instead of the more conventional enunciative structure of self-expression. A shamanist or impersonalist conception of poetic utterance involves finding "the other voice" rather than one's own. Hence it is not so much a question of speaking *on behalf of* the other as it is of opening a conduit through which the other — including the otherness of nonhuman nature — may speak. This distinction helps explain why, in some cultures, shamans have access to far greater verbal and symbolic resources than other

members of the population. Eliade notes that “[t]he poetic vocabulary of a Yakut shaman contains 12,000 words, whereas the ordinary language — the only language known to the rest of the community — has only 4,000.”²³ The shaman utters things that other people are incapable of saying, and hence, in his dramatically enlarged poetic capacity, the Yakut shaman embodies Emerson’s ideal poet.²⁴

We may get a sense of how this structural distinction between *speaking on behalf of* and *speaking through* plays out in Snyder’s work by observing that more than one third of the poems in *Mountains and Rivers Without End* close with somebody else’s voice. Sometimes this is indicated explicitly by means of quotation marks — for example, the line “Your Bubbs Creek haircut, boy” (M&R 38) that ends the early poem “Bubbs Creek Haircut” — and sometimes it remains implicit. In some cases, the whole poem is cast in another’s voice, whether in the form of a persona — for example, the girl who speaks “The Elwha River” (M&R 32) — or in the form of a “found poem” such as “Mā” (M&R 57–60), which takes the guise of a letter and begins “Hello Boy —,” thus counterpointing the ending of “Bubbs Creek Haircut.” In these and other instances, it appears that one aspect of Snyder’s poetic impersonality consists in the ethical imperative to let somebody else have the last word.

Nevertheless, this conception of poetry remains open to the charge that incorporating within a poem voices other than the author’s own constitutes misappropriation or cultural thievery. This objection seems especially plausible when the relation between the poet’s and others’ voices is characterized by an imbalance of power — when, for example, the other voices that a white male poet includes in his work are those of Native Americans and East Asians. In such a case, it can be hard to distinguish between an ethically salutary commitment to letting others *speak through* the poetry, on one hand, and an ethically troubling tendency to *appropriate* nonwhite cultural traditions, on the other.

Here the impersonalist aesthetic verges on the issue of cultural imperialism, a form of aggression that could be understood, in the U.S. context, as repeating on a verbal and symbolic plane the geographical and economic expansionism that propelled North America’s colonization in the first place. From this point of view, the impulse to regard poetry in shamanist terms

would be just one more instance of cultural imperialism, an extension of the ethnological project of “collecting” (read: misappropriating) artifacts and knowledge from indigenous cultures. As Native American critic Geary Hobson put it when attacking “white shamanism” in the 1970s, “[t]he current fad in some small magazines of poets calling themselves ‘poet-shamans’ or even ‘shamans’ is another counterpart of the Indian craft exploiters, the imperious anthropologists, and the buffalo hunters.”²⁵ Furthermore, the very model of shamanism I’ve used in my account thus far is often guilty of colonialist assumptions vis-à-vis the “primitive” cultural practices it purports to explain. We might even say that the discipline that teaches us about shamanism is inextricably bound up with the history and ideologies of colonialism, and that Western ways of knowing this material are irrevocably contaminated. Disparities of power between whites and the indigenous populations they investigate inevitably compromise the epistemological models generated by such investigations, be they anthropological, ethnological, literary, or artistic. According to this perspective, any interest in “the primitive” is suspect.²⁶

Versions of this critique have been leveled, albeit often clumsily, at Snyder and his work. There has been more discussion of his use of Native American materials than of his East Asian commitments, though Hobson charges that the two often go together — that when one encounters white shamanism, the additional menace of Orientalism isn’t far behind: “the contemporary writers, especially the ‘white shamans,’ too often perceive Indian cultures through not only the rose-colored glasses of a white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant viewpoint, but the day-glo spectacles of a hastily assumed Oriental (Buddhist, Taoist, etc.) outlook” (103). In other words, the attraction to Native American and to East Asian cultures usually stems from the same exoticist impulse: a drive to romanticize other, more “primitive” cultures and to use mystified images of them in consolidating one’s own Westernized identity, rather than attempting to understand the mundane reality of other cultures in their own terms.²⁷

Now the fact that Snyder spent a decade in Japan training in a Zen Buddhist temple renders him immune from the charge of having “hastily assumed” his Buddhist outlook. And, indeed, Hobson largely exempts Snyder from his fierce polemic, suggesting that even though it spawned the

problem of white shamanism, Snyder's work should not be understood as part of that problem:

The "white shaman" fad seems to have begun inadvertently with Gary Snyder in his "Shaman Songs" sections of *Myths and Texts*, in which the poet speaks through the persona of an Indian shaman, and his words become calls to power, of a sort, which in and of itself is innocuous enough, since poetry of this kind does seek to transcend the mundane in such a way that people's lives are revived. The poems contain great vitality and are, I believe, sincere efforts on Snyder's behalf to incorporate an essential part of American Indian philosophy into his work. Importantly, nowhere does Snyder refer to himself as a "shaman." But, along came the bastard children of Snyder who began to imitate him, especially in the Shaman Songs section, and not being content with that, began to call themselves shamans — which, as I understand it, Snyder still refuses to do.²⁸

Snyder's sincerity on this issue can hardly be in doubt. He began experimenting with shamanism as a model for poetry early in the 1950s, over a decade before the white shamanism fashion emerged, and he's pursued this poetic mode for almost half a century, long after it ceased to be in vogue. However, Snyder's indubitable good faith doesn't resolve the broader questions raised by Hobson's critique. Along with Leslie Marmon Silko, whose "Old-Time Indian Attack" singled out Snyder's *Turtle Island* shortly after it won the Pulitzer Prize, Hobson claims that only Native Americans can write legitimately about Native American matters, and that white writers should stick to exploring their own cultural heritages and their own Caucasian identities.

Though she refrains from discussing shamanism, Silko's critique is particularly germane to my account of impersonalist ethics and aesthetics. She connects Snyder's poetic allusions to Native American myths with turn-of-the-century white ethnologists' collecting verbal artifacts from Native American tribes, and she points out the racist assumptions at work in those ethnographic collection projects. "Fifty years later," Silko claims, "this racist assumption is thriving; it flourishes among white poets and writers who

romanticize their ‘power’ as writers to inhabit souls and consciousness far beyond the realms of their own knowledge or experience.”²⁹ Here the very basis of aesthetic impersonality is dismissed as racist — though impersonality demands not that its practitioners inhabit but that they be inhabited, even possessed, by other “souls and consciousness far beyond realms of their own knowledge and experience.” This distinction aside, Silko’s charge of racism makes clear what’s at stake in both her critique and Hobson’s: the authority of experience, the idea that one can speak and write authoritatively only of things that have befallen him or her — and, by extension, befallen the community or tribe to which he or she most immediately belongs. It isn’t hard to see why disenfranchised groups have recourse to this argument when they see their cultures being described with greater authority — though often less knowledge — by “outsiders,” and when, adding insult to injury, they see their own “insider” accounts disparaged for failing to confirm the images promoted by “outsider” accounts. As Michael Castro observes, “[c]ultural arrogance, neo-romanticism, literary careerism, and a failure to recognize and respect the Indian’s contemporary reality have been part and parcel of American writers’ interest in the Indian throughout the century.”³⁰

Having acknowledged the validity of such critiques, I nevertheless cannot fail to register the absurdity of their implications, since if one were to adhere to the stricture of writing primarily from experience, all literature would be reduced to an autobiographical function, and nobody would be able to write authoritatively about temporally distant cultures.³¹ This kind of ethnic essentialism — which we see in a comparatively crude form in Hobson’s and Silko’s essays from the 1970s, but which is widespread in more sophisticated forms today — views literature as a vehicle for self-expression and thereby denies the possibility of any encounter with otherness in poetry. To argue in the face of these critiques that Snyder has extensive experience with Zen Buddhism and is steeped in Native American mythology completely misses the point, since this way of arguing doesn’t challenge the basic assumption that poetry is simply a heightened form of self-expression and therefore is necessarily composed from its author’s experience. According to this way of thinking, writing and reading literature are exercises in self-exploration and can be understood as cultural practices that consolidate one’s individual or group identity. This view of literature is found in not

only marginal and disenfranchised populations, but is so pervasive today as to qualify as hegemonic.

By contrast, aesthetic impersonality entails a quite different view of the literary, one in which the author's individual or group identity is subordinated in favor of opening the self to others — and, more broadly, to realms of otherness, including nonhuman nature, that have no function whatsoever in shoring up one's self-identity. I find this contrasting view ethically preferable because it treats the literary as a realm in which otherness is given air-time — in which nonhuman nature gains a voice — rather than as a realm in which my own voice, identity, and self are fortified.³² Impersonalist aesthetic practice is not about incorporating, romanticizing, or otherwise appropriating otherness in order to constitute the self. Indeed, an authentic encounter with otherness may well prove thoroughly inimical to the project of identity-construction. Hence Silko drastically misconstrues the purpose of Snyder's impersonalist poetics when she concludes that “[t]he writing of imitation ‘Indian’ poems[,] then, is pathetic evidence that in more than two hundred years, Anglo-Americans have failed to create a satisfactory identity for themselves.”³³ Snyder is not remotely interested in identity, and his work makes little sense in terms of the proliferating theories of identity currently popular in both academia and the wider culture. Unlike a lot of contemporary literature, his writing is not about selfhood.

Instead, Snyder's work exhibits a deep concern with forms of continuity among living beings, and it treats even the nonsentient natural world as part of a web of interdependence that connects human beings to nonhuman nature. Preoccupied with continuity and connection, Snyder does not see the world in terms of bounded — or even mobile — identities. Rather than the enhanced self-definition that comes with personal and cultural identity, his poetry encourages a kind of self-dispossession that comes with opening the self to otherness, particularly the radical otherness of the nonhuman. This self-dispossession should not be understood in terms of a postmodernist dissolution of the Cartesian subject among the simulacra of cultural forms. Rather, what I'm calling self-dispossession represents simply the precondition for transforming human relationships with nonhuman nature. Snyder is interested in transforming not only particular relationships — for example, land management in the Pacific Northwest — but relationality as

such. He wants us to see our place in the world completely differently than we usually do.

Equivocally instrumental though it may be, poetry remains central to this transformative project, because poems entail accessing otherness — or what Paz characterizes as “the other voice.” Snyder pushes this dimension of poetic practice further than most contemporary poets, because he tries to access voices of not only other persons but also nonhuman forms too. Speaking of Japanese epic literature, Snyder has referred to this practice as “interspecies communication,” a term that suggests just how radically he aspires to transform relationality. “In the tales of the Ainu, who were the indigenous people of Japan and who still live in the north, gods and animals speak in the first person as well as human beings, and the several worlds of sense experience and imagination are knit together” (APIS 95). When nonhuman forms speak in the first person — not *like* humans, but *as well as* us — human perspectives on nature alter drastically and, consequently, our relationships with the world around us shift seismically too.

Far-reaching as this nonanthropocentric notion of interspecies communication is, Snyder has proposed an even more radical transformation of relationality in his idea of “trans-species erotics”:

The worldwide myths of animal-human marriage, or supernatural-human marriage, are evidence of the fascination our ancestors had for the possibility of full membership in a biotic erotic universe. I suspect that many of the problems within the human community — racism and sexism, to name two — reflect back from confusion about our relation to nature. Ignorance and hostility toward wild nature set us up for objectifying and exploiting fellow humans. (APIS 210–11)

Snyder’s suggestion regarding trans-species erotics intuits that to exchange sexual love and intimacy with nonhuman forms would be to admit nature to full participation in our world. We see particularly striking examples of bodily intimacy between humans and animals in the poems “Under the Hills Near the Morava River” and “The Bear Mother” (M&R 96 and 113). If the idea of trans-species erotics sounds outrageous or risible, then such responses indicate just how far we are from treating nonhuman nature with equality.

The notion of trans-species erotics furnishes us with an image of what fully impersonal relationality would look like, and it suggests a mode of connecting with the nonhuman based not on meaning — with its lingering potential for personifying the natural world — but on being. It's not by humanizing nature or personalizing our relationships with it that we treat nonhuman nature ethically, but, on the contrary, by impersonalizing our relationships with it and thus effectively dehumanizing (or “de-egoizing”) ourselves. The idea of trans-species erotics conjures up a form of relationality that is simultaneously impersonal — since it involves relating to something that isn't a person — and yet fully intimate.³⁴

Although Snyder's explanation of racism and sexism, in the passage quoted above, appears superficial, it nevertheless carries the profound implication that our ethical relation to other persons is predicated on our ethical relation to an impersonal realm — in this case, nature — rather than the reverse. Snyder's commitment to aesthetic impersonality is, at bottom, ethical. In *Mountains and Rivers Without End* we encounter an aesthetic mode, that of poetic impersonality, put into the service of negotiating the kind of ethical questions that religious philosopher Emmanuel Levinas wrestled with — namely, how to accord full respect to the other without humanizing it, without making the other just like me. This is why Snyder's de-anthropomorphizing perspective remains so valuable, since his long poem exemplifies the principle that one accords respect to others not because they're other persons, just like him- or herself, but precisely because they're not.

NOTES

1. I am grateful to the Stanford Humanities Center, and its director, Keith Baker, for the residential fellowship supporting my research, and for sponsoring the Mountains & Rivers Workshop. The participants in that workshop, especially its convenor, Mark Gonnerman, formed an ideal community in which to study the poem and its multiple contexts.
2. Octavio Paz, *The Other Voice: Essays on Modern Poetry*, trans. Helen Lane (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991), 151.
3. “The unconscious is the discourse of the Other” is one of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's best known axioms, his formula for redefining the Freudian unconscious in terms of language.
4. William Butler Yeats, “A General Introduction for My Work” (1937) in *Essays and*

Introductions (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 501. Here we should recall that Yeats, like Snyder, was influenced significantly by Nō theater, particularly the use of masks, whose function lies partly in emphasizing that the words spoken by the actor or poet are not his own. This fact is obvious in theater, if not in poetry; so perhaps we should stress that the mask functions to remind the audience that, more fundamentally, the actor's or poet's *voice* is not his own. The mask represents both a vocal technology and a material sign differentiating the actor's body and voice from the voice and words that, by means of the mask, speak through him. In his notes on the poem, Snyder connects Nō theater to shamanism and to his own poetic technique: "Nō is a gritty but totally refined high-culture art that is in the lineage of shamanistic performance, a drama that by means of voice and dance calls forth the spirit realms. I began to envision *Mountains and Rivers* through the dramatic strategies of Nō" (M&R 155).

5. Snyder quotes this line differently elsewhere: "Though the nation is lost, the mountains and rivers remain" (TRW 74).
6. Snyder's long note on Kokop'ele provides a good deal of useful information without making the figure's connection to poetry explicit: "Ancient rock art — petroglyphs — of a walking flute-playing figure, sometimes with a hump on his back, are found widely in the Southwest and into Mexico. These images are several thousand years old. There is a Hopi secret society that takes the Flute-player as its emblem" (M&R 160). This information suggests just how widespread, ancient, and resonant the figure is. Like the shaman, Kokop'ele fulfills a range of functions and thus represents the expanded sense of poetic role that Snyder derives from premodern cultural traditions. In those traditions and in Snyder's poem Kokop'ele is iconic, and Snyder has punctuated *Mountains and Rivers Without End* with pictographs of this figure, his own version of the petroglyph.
7. Snyder's work has been discussed in terms of shamanism appreciatively by Tom Henighan, "Shamans, Tribes, and the Sorcerer's Apprentices: Notes on the Discovery of the Primitive in Modern Poetry," *Dalhousie Review* 59/4 (1980): 605–20, and critically by Geary Hobson, "The Rise of White Shamanism as a New Version of Cultural Imperialism," in Hobson, ed., *The Remembered Earth: An Anthology of Contemporary Native American Literature* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981), 100–08 and Leslie Marmon Silko, "An Old-Time Indian Attack Conducted in Two Parts," in Hobson, ed., *The Remembered Earth*, 211–16. I engage these critiques toward the end of this paper. Neither those who praise nor those who blame Snyder for his ostensible shamanism consider the issue of poetic impersonality.
8. Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Bollingen, 1964), 27 (emphasis added).

9. Eliade, *Shamanism*, 28. See also Claude Lévi-Strauss on the medical efficacy of singing in shamanic cultures in “The Effectiveness of Symbols,” *Structural Anthropology*, Vol. 1, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963), 186–205.
10. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962).
11. On the injurious power of words, see, for example, Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997) and Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
12. Allen Grossman, “My *Caedmon*: Thinking about Poetic Vocation,” in *The Long Schoolroom: Lessons in the Bitter Logic of the Poetic Principle* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 7.
13. Grossman, “My *Caedmon*,” 7–8.
14. Eliade, *Shamanism*, 32.
15. Eliade, *Shamanism*, 23.
16. In a related account of English lyric poetry, Susan Stewart shows how poems may be said to be possessed or haunted by the metrical forms of their predecessors. Though her interpretive model is psychoanalytic (deriving from Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok’s theories of psychical encryption) rather than anthropological, Stewart’s brilliant account of formal possession illuminates the problem of shamanic singing as well as that of singing in the Western ballad tradition. See her essay, “Lyric Possession,” *Critical Inquiry* 22/1 (1995): 34–63.
17. T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), 38.
18. Although the issue of Eliot’s proto-shamanism is too complex to pursue further here, I have explored it at length in “T. S. Eliot, Famous Clairvoyante,” in *T. S. Eliot: Essays on Gender, Sexuality, Desire*, ed. Cassandra Laity and Nancy N. Gish (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 43–65. Among the many unexpected affinities existing between Eliot and Snyder, I would note also how Eliot’s axiom, in his primer on impersonality, that “art never improves” (“Tradition and the Individual Talent,” 39), is repeated by Snyder in his meditation on prehistoric cave art, “Entering the Fiftieth Millennium,” in *The Gary Snyder Reader: Prose, Poetry and Translations, 1952–1998* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint Press, 1999), 393.
19. “A shamanic vocation is obligatory; one cannot refuse it” (Eliade, *Shamanism*, 18).
20. Walt Whitman, “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” (1859), in *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1982), 392.
21. Eliade, *Shamanism*, 391.

22. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet" (1844), in *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), 448.
23. Eliade, *Shamanism*, 30.
24. It bears mentioning that while his account of the poet is idealist in the philosophical, neo-Platonic sense, Emerson also is picturing an ideal in the colloquial sense: he's describing an ideal type rather than any particular poet, himself included. "I look in vain for the poet whom I describe," he laments toward the close of his essay (p. 465), having not had the historical opportunity to consider shamanic phenomena.
25. Hobson, "The Rise of White Shamanism," 101. In a related critique, Leslie Marmon Silko puts this point in even stronger terms: "The second implicit racist assumption still abounding is that the prayers, chants, and stories weaseled out by the early white ethnographers, which are now collected in ethnological journals, are public property. Presently, a number of Native American communities are attempting to recover religious objects and other property taken from them in the early 1900s that are now placed in museums. Certainly, the songs and stories which were taken by ethnographers are no different. But, among white poets — Rothenberg and Snyder, to mention the most prominent, the idea that these materials should be left to those tribes and their descendants is unthinkable. White poets cash in on the generosity which many tribes have and still practice; white poets delight in saying 'Indians believe in sharing,' and so they go on 'sharing,' collecting book royalties on plagiarized materials" (Silko, "An Old-Time Indian Attack," 212).
26. For representative critiques that conform to this way of thinking, see Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) and Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).
27. The standard account of this impulse is given in Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978).
28. Hobson, "The Rise of White Shamanism," 105.
29. Silko, "An Old-Time Indian Attack," 211.
30. Michael Castro, *Interpreting the Indian: Twentieth-Century Poets and the Native American* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983), 162.
31. The classic critique of the authority of experience may be found in Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Questions of Evidence: Proof, Practice, and Persuasion across the Disciplines*, ed. James Chandler, Arnold I. Davidson, and Harry Harootunian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 363–87. On the issue of how identity-based accounts of literary writing tend to reduce literature to autobiography, see John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), chapter 1.

32. While it is not possible to develop the connection here, I should note that my alternative conception of literary purpose derives from the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. For a helpful introduction to this terrain, see Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
33. Silko, "An Old-Time Indian Attack," 213.
34. My thinking along these lines has been influenced by the theory of impersonal relationality developed in Leo Bersani and Ulysee Dutoit, where relationality is conceived in terms not of the communication of meaning, but the communication of being. See *Caravaggio's Secrets* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998).