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Gary Snyder

The Yogin and the Philosopher

We live in a universe, “one turn” in which, it is widely felt, all is one and at the same time all is many. The extra rooster and I were subject and object until one evening we became one. As the discriminating, self-centered awareness of civilized man has increasingly improved his material survival potential, it has correspondingly moved him farther and farther from a spontaneous feeling of being part of the natural world. It often takes, ironically, an analytical and rational presentation of man’s interdependence with other life forms from the biological sciences to move modern people toward questioning their own role as major planetary exploiter. This brings us to the use of terms like “Rights of Non-human Nature” or questions such as, “do trees have standing?” From the standpoint of “all is one” the question need never arise. The Chinese Buddhist philosopher-monk Chan-jan argued that even inanimate things possess the Buddha-nature as follows: “The man who is of all-round perfection knows from beginning to end that no objects exist apart from Mind. Who then is ‘animate’ and who ‘inanimate?’ Within the Assembly of the Lotus, all are present without division.”

From the standpoint of the 70’s and 80’s it serves us well to examine the way we relate to these objects we take to be outside ourselves — non-human, non-intelligent, or whatever. If we are to treat the world (and ourselves) better, we must first ask, how can we know what the non-human realm is truly like? And second, if one gets a glimmer of an answer from there — how can it be translated, communicated, to the realm of mankind with his courts, congresses, and zoning laws? How do we listen? How do we speak?

The Cahuilla Indians who lived in the Palm Springs desert and the mountains above gathered plants from valley floor to mountain peak with precise knowledge. They said not everybody will do it, but almost anybody can, if he pays enough attention and is patient, hear a little voice from plants. The Papago of southern Arizona said that a man who was humble and brave and persistent, would some night hear a song in his dream, brought by the birds that fly in from the Gulf of California; or a hawk, a cloud, the wind, or the red rain spider; and that song would be his — would add to his knowledge and power.

What of this attention and patience; or the hearing of songs in dreams? The philosopher speaks the language of reason, which is the language of public discourse, with the intention of being intelligible to anyone, without putting special demands on them apart from basic intelligence and education. Then there is religious discourse, involving acceptance of certain beliefs. There is also a third key style: the yogin. The yogin is an experimenter. He experiments on himself. Yoga, from the root *Yuj* (related to the English “yoke”) means to be at work, engaged. In India the distinction between philosopher and yogin was clearly and usefully made — even though sometimes the same individual might be both. The yogin has specific exercises, disciplines, by which he hopes to penetrate deeper in understanding than the purely rational function will allow. Practices, such as breathing, meditation, chanting, and so forth, are open to anyone to follow if he so wishes; and the yogic traditions have long asserted that various people who followed through a given course of practice usually came up with similar results. The yogins hold, then, that certain concepts of an apparently philosophical nature cannot actually be grasped except by proceeding through a set of disciplines. Thus the literature of the yogic tradition diverges from true philosophical writing in that it makes special requirements of its readers. Note the difference between Plato, and the school of Pythagoras. The latter was much closer to the schools of India — ashrams, with special rules and dietary prohibitions. The alchemical, occult, neoplatonic, and various sorts of Gnostic traditions of what might be called occidental counter-philosophy are strongly yogic in this way. Gnosticism took as its patroness Sophia, Wisdom, a goddess known in India under various names and in Buddhism under the name of Tara, “She who Saves” or leads across to the opposite shore. Witchcraft, a folk tradition going back to the paleolithic, has its own associations of magic, feminine powers, and plant-knowledge. As Robert Graves points out in *The White Goddess* the convergence of many ancient religions and shamanistic lines produces the western lore of the Muse. Some sorts of poetry are the mode of expression of certain yogic-type schools of practice. In fact, song, singing, comes very close to

being a sort of meditation in its own right — some recent research holds that song is a “right hemisphere of the brain” function — drawing on the intuitive, creative, non-verbal side of man’s consciousness. Since speech is a left hemisphere function, poetry (word and song together) is surely a marriage of the two halves.

The philosopher, poet, and yogin all three have standing not too far behind them the shaman; with his or her pelt and antlers, or various other guises; songs going back to the Pleistocene and before. The shaman speaks for wild animals, the spirits of plants, the spirits of mountains, of watersheds. He or she sings for them. They sing through him. This capacity has often been achieved via special disciplines. In the shaman’s world, wilderness and the unconscious become analogous: he who knows and is at ease in one, will be at home in the other.

The elaborate, yearly, cyclical production of grand ritual dramas in the societies of Pueblo Indians of North America (for one example) can be seen as a process by which the whole society consults the non-human (in-human, inner-human?) powers and allows some individuals to step totally out of their human roles to put on the mask, costume, and *mind* of Bison, Bear, Squash, Corn, or Pleiades; to re-enter the human circle in that form and by song, mime, and

dance, convey a greeting from the other realm. Thus, a speech on the floor of congress from a whale.

The long “pagan” battle of western poetry against state and church, the survival of the Muse down to modern times, shows that in a sense poetry has been a long and not particularly successful defending action. Defending “the groves” — sacred to the Goddess — and logged, so to speak, under orders from Exodus 34:13 “you shall destroy their images and cut down their groves.”

The evidence of anthropology is that countless men and women, through history and pre-history, have experienced a deep sense of communion and communication with nature and with specific non-human beings. Moreover, they often experienced this communication with a being they customarily ate. Men of goodwill who cannot see a *reasonable* mode of either listening to, or speaking for, nature, except by analytical and scientific means, must surely learn to take this complex, profound, moving, and in many ways highly appropriate, world view of the yogins, shamans, and ultimately all our ancestors, into account. One of the few modes of speech that gives us access to that other yogic or shamanistic view (in which all is one and all is many, and the many are all precious) is poetry or song.

Everybody has a song
 which is no song at all :
 it is a process of singing ,
 and when you sing ,
 you are where you are .

—John Cage

