

Wirth, "Mountains, Rivers, and the Great Earth: Reading Gary Snyder and Dōgen in an Age of Ecological Crisis"

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Book Review

Wirth, Jason M. *Mountains, Rivers, and the Great Earth: Reading Gary Snyder and Dōgen in an Age of Ecological Crisis*. State University of New York Press, 2017.

Mountains, Rivers, and the Great Earth is personal for Jason Wirth. He describes its publication as his own “unrepentant defiance” of the voraciously capitalist, xenophobic, and climate-science denying American president who came into power just as the book was being finished (Wirth 2017, xv).

This book is also personal for the author by representing a departure from typical or traditional academic writing: Wirth, who is a philosopher, an ordained priest in the Soto Zen lineage, and Professor of Philosophy at Seattle University, “does not want to hide behind the ruse of academic jargon or the alienation of academic distance”; rather, this book is meant to be “its own intimate practice” (Wirth 2017, xxiii). Wirth seeks to resist, as much as possible, what he calls the “monoculture of isolated disciplinary territories” in academia. While he admits that as a philosopher, he brings his own perspectives to the subject, he also recognizes that “this is no excuse to forgo becoming conversant [...] with science, the arts, anthropology, politics, [I]ndigenous issues, and other relevant modes of disclosure” (xxiv). Wirth strives not only to be interdisciplinary, but to engage honestly and passionately with the Great Earth—in other words, to do what the contemporary American poet and environmental philosopher Gary Snyder calls “the real work.” (I’m grateful for this reminder to get back into my Snyder books).

Mountains, Rivers, and the Great Earth is intended to be a “meditation and philosophical engagement that seeks to read, think, and practice” alongside Snyder, and the 13th century Japanese Zen Master Eihei Dōgen, who is one of Snyder’s primary philosophical and aesthetic influences. Furthermore, Wirth suggests this reading, thinking, and practicing should be done “in a manner that is mindful of the place from where one reads them today,” that is, within our present context of ecological crisis, and our society’s “rapidly accelerating and explosive war against the Great Earth” (Wirth 2017, xiii).

This book follows three interlocking paths: first, an exploration of what Dōgen calls the Great Earth (and what Snyder calls the Wild), “comprised of the play of waters and mountains, emptiness and form.” Dōgen’s Great Earth also brings to mind what Snyder has called “the deep world”: the “thousand-million-year-old world of rock, soil, water, air, and all living things” (Snyder 2007, 34). Wirth’s second path is a consideration of the West Coast of North America, or Turtle Island, where this book was written; his third, is a discussion of the mutual implication of the Great Earth and Turtle Island, which includes the sacred ecology of “earth democracy,” a “place-based sense of communion where all beings are interconnected” (Wirth 2017, xxii-xxiii).

The first of the three paths investigates the profound influence that Eastern art and philosophy, and Buddhism in particular, have had on Snyder's thinking and writing. Readers acquainted with Snyder's work will know that as a young man he spent ten years in Japan, studying the language, teaching English, and living as a lay monk in a Zen monastery. Most of his early writing was based on this and other experiences living and traveling in Asia, from his first book *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems* (1959), which includes translations of the legendary Chinese hermit-poet Han Shan, to *The Back Country* (1967), with its details of Snyder's life in Japan and its Japanese themes and poetic forms.

Six Sections from Mountains and Rivers Without End (1965), another early publication, was the foundation of what would later become one of Snyder's most significant works: *Mountains and Rivers Without End* (1996). Written over four decades, this multiple-award-winning long poem is considered by many to be a masterpiece, and the pinnacle of Snyder's career. Called an "epic of geology, prehistory, and mythology" (from the back-cover notes), the book draws together many of the threads of Snyder's thinking, including Japanese theater, deep ecology, and Indigenous North American art and storytelling traditions. It also holds special significance for Wirth's investigation, because it contains the keys to some of Snyder's earliest and (arguably) most important literary and philosophical influences, which I describe in the following paragraphs.

One major inspiration, especially for *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, is the aforementioned Zen Master Dōgen, and his *Mountains and Waters Sutra* (written in 1240). Snyder's work includes frequent Dōgen quotations and allusions, including a lengthy passage in the opening pages of *Mountains and Rivers Without End*; Snyder might be considered a distant apprentice to Dōgen, and an inheritor of his teachings. Wirth points out, for example, that Dōgen's 13th century description of mountains closely parallels what Snyder calls "the back country": they both "literally mark the edge of civilization and agriculture," in Dōgen's work as well as Snyder's (Wirth 2017, 30). Mountains have always been prominent in Snyder's life and writing, and he has returned to this edge zone, this liminal boundary—and to the questions about the human place within it—throughout his writing career.

A second inspiration is the *shan-shui* ("mountain-water") tradition of Chinese landscape painting. In *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, Snyder describes his discovery of these paintings in art museums at an early age and the great impact they had on his thinking, along with the physical activity of mountain-climbing. One particular 12th century scroll painting, called *Ch'i Shan Wu Chin* (*Endless Streams and Mountains*), fascinated him, and would later inspire his long poem (Snyder 1996, 155). The painting's importance is evident in the fact that *Mountains and Rivers Without End* begins with a multi-page reproduction, complete with viewing instructions.

Wirth's study of Snyder does not dwell on this publication (or this painting) alone. *Mountains, Rivers, and the Great Earth* includes references and quotations from Snyder's entire *oeuvre*, as well as a wide assortment of other thinkers, artists, Vandana Shiva, and ecologists including: Wassily Kandinsky, Herman Melville, Pope Francis (specifically, his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'*), among many others.

A fascinating section of the book, in Wirth's second "interlocking path" (the one that leads into Turtle Island), is about encounters with bears. This includes Snyder's "Smokey the Bear Sutra", which imagines the appearance of a great Buddha in our era, who will appear in the form of a bear: "Round-bellied to show his kind nature and that the great Earth has food enough for everyone who loves her" and "Trampling underfoot wasteful freeways and needless suburbs, smashing the worms of capitalism and totalitarianism" (Snyder 1995, 26-27). The Bear, according to Wirth, can be an "indicator species of a spiritual ecology" (Wirth 2017, 75).

Wirth also lists some of the many references to non-anthropomorphized bears in Snyder's work. "The human relationship to the bear," he points out, "is among the oldest tropes in Snyder's poetry," beginning with the poem "A Berry Feast," which was performed at the legendary Six Gallery poetry reading in 1955, an event credited with launching the San Francisco Renaissance (Wirth 2017, 71), and Snyder's anthropological study of the globally widespread story of the woman who married a bear (80-84). Wirth also briefly discusses the history of the human relationship with bears, with references to key texts like Hallowell's *Bear Ceremonialism in the Northern Hemisphere* and Pastoureau's *The Bear: History of a Fallen King*; the latter posits that the process of "civilization", from its earliest beginnings, has actually been a long process of demonizing and dethroning the bear (Wirth 2017, 75). This anthropocentric undertaking has continued, and indeed accelerated, in our own present context of habitat loss and species endangerment.

The book's third path describes the Great Earth as "the Big Potlatch"—also referred to as the "Dharma Potlatch" and the "Earth Potlatch"—and the ways in which our society's rampant "consumerism and self-aggrandizement" continually separate us from it. Snyder's image of the potlatch, the "grand communion of all life," is a tangible way of looking at ecology as a form of gift economy (Wirth 2017, 88). It includes all the elements and energies of the Great Earth, and all the flying, swimming, and terrestrial creatures and plants, and even the myriad species of bacteria that live in our own bodies. This problematizes any notion we might have of singular "bodies" and "selves." Thus, a certain degree of humility is in order. "We are living in the midst of a great potluck," according to Snyder (2007), "in which we are all invited guests. And we are also eventually the meal" (34). These themes of interconnectedness and energy-exchange are prominent in Snyder's work, and so it is fitting that Wirth devotes a significant amount of time to them.

Snyder identifies the Great Potlatch with the Mahayana Buddhist Gathering of the Assembly, or Assembly of all Buddhas, and suggests that it is opposed to the exploitative capitalism and consumerism that define so much of our society (Wirth 2017, 98-99). Again, readers familiar with Snyder will recognize this comparative, or syncretic, approach to Eastern and Western Indigenous traditions. Another example is the “Buddha-shaman”, which Wirth describes as a combination of “something archaic and something brand new”, whose primary function in a society is healing, specifically the healing and detoxifying of place, which must first begin with the healing of ourselves (Wirth 2017, 104). Snyder’s earth democracy is also something of a hybrid concept, drawing from multiple sources and philosophies. In his 1995 essay collection *A Place in Space*, for example, he modified Joanna Macy and John Seed’s “Council of All Beings”, suggesting instead a “Village Council of All Beings”, intended to provide a voice and space for all beings but on a more local, bioregional scale. Citing the poem “For All” from Snyder’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *Turtle Island* (1974), Wirth concludes that we belong to “one ecosystem / in diversity / under the sun / with joyful interpenetration for all” (Wirth 2017, 115-116).

It is not easy for me to find anything to criticize in this book. Some readers might find themselves a little lost in the sections that cover Dōgen’s philosophy—perhaps more pages could have been devoted to explanation. And some readers may not be satisfied with Wirth’s handling of the issue of cultural appropriation in Snyder’s work (Wirth 2017, 93-96). Personally, I would have liked to see more (and longer) excerpts of Snyder’s poetry, or even a comparative study of Snyder’s poetry with Dōgen’s, but I recognize that would have been outside the scope of Wirth’s project.

Readers who are interested in learning more about Snyder’s ecological thinking and his Buddhist (and various other) influences will find this book a useful exposition. And hopefully, a springboard into his other works. Those already well-versed in Snyder’s writing will also find much to appreciate here, as Wirth has compiled quotations and notes from decades of material, including some of Snyder’s lesser-known publications, into a slim and accessible volume. The bibliography alone is impressive, an indispensable starting point for anyone interested in the philosophical and literary roots of deep ecology.

In this era of atrocities, including “deforestation and habitat loss, the decimation of biodiversity, global warming, the catastrophic earth-wide compromise of ecosystems, [and] the extinction of native cultures and their ways” (Wirth 2017, 105), we need voices like Snyder’s more than ever. I’m grateful to Jason Wirth for sharing his practice with us.

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