

Julia Fiedorczuk

Can Poetry Save the Earth? An Interview with Gary Snyder

Gary Snyder is a poet and essayist as well as a social and environmental activist. He began his career in the 1950s as a member of the Beat Generation (Japhy Ryder, one of the characters in Jack Kerouac's novel *The Dharma Bums*, is inspired by Snyder). Since early childhood he has been deeply interested in wild nature, and as a young man he took up snow-peak mountaineering. Simultaneously, he started studying oriental languages and anthropology, in between his studies working as a lumberjack, a trail maker and a firewatcher. In the years 1956–1969 he lived mostly in Japan, practicing Zen and reading books about ecology. His first published books were *Riprap* (1959) and *Myths and Texts* (1960). The collection of poems *Turtle Island* (1974) brought him the Pulitzer Prize. After returning to the United States, Snyder built his own house—along the Yuba River in the northern Sierra Nevada Mountains—where he has lived since. His writing and activism are intimately connected with his Buddhist practice and the knowledge of the bioregion (northern California). His Buddhist name is Chofu, meaning “Hear the wind.” The interview was conducted in May 2013 in Kraków where Gary Snyder was a guest of the Miłosz Festival and parts of it were published in Polish in *Dwutygodnik* (109/2013).

JULIA FIEDORCZUK: *The Slovenian philosopher Slavoy Žižek has famously said: “ecology is the new opium for the masses” as it diverts our attention from the real problems, which are social problems. Do you have a way of responding to this?*

GARY SNYDER: Of course I feel absolutely the opposite way. I feel that social problems is the opium for the masses so that they don't have to deal with what's happening to the planet. A few days ago I was asked a similar question during an interview. I've been talking about ecological problems and the interviewer asked me: “But what about the social problems?” My answer is: when we begin to talk about ecological problems we already have finished the discussion of social problems, we know they are there. That is taken for granted, that's a given. The ecological problems are the problems that increasingly now impact the third

world and that's what you have to look at. Or I could simply say: Slavoy Žižek is the opium for the exhausted Marxists.

Perhaps there really is no conflict between social and ecological engagement?

No, there isn't. Ecology is simply the expansion of your moral universe to include the non-humans. Whereas if you talk about the social problems your moral universe is focused only on human beings. That is outmoded now.

Some people associate ecology with a kind of fashion, or a lifestyle, a middle-class craze...

It is presented that way sometimes in advertising, as consumer economy tries to tap into it. But let us remember what the word "ecology" means and where it comes from. It comes from the biological sciences. *Oikos* in Greek means the whole economy of the planet. We're talking about the planetary system that supports all of life. We're not talking about the middle class.

In the wake of deconstruction, much of late-twentieth-century philosophy was emphasizing the constructedness of the universe humans have access to, including whatever we might mean when we talk about nature. You said once that treating nature as a construction constitutes its ultimate commodification. Can you comment on this thought a bit more?

Yes. Nature as a construction becomes an intellectual commodity. You put it on the shelf in your library and you don't have to think about it anymore. It's a way to avoid the problem.

Many people avoid even using the word "nature..."

I have my own definition of it, I formulated it in *The Practice of the Wild*. In the first chapter of this book I give my understanding of "nature" and "the wild." "Nature" is the physical universe. It is what science studies. The only thing that is other than "nature" is the supernatural. Now, "wild" is all of the physical universe without the agency of human beings. "Wild" is the process by which the universe has created and taken care of itself. Humanity's place in this universe is only very tiny, although at the moment it looks so big, it has been blown out of proportions. But it's only at the moment.

Couldn't we say that everything that the humans are doing is also nature? After all, what we have at our disposal is only the natural resources?

That can be said, yes, it's true. But for the time being, for the temporary situation it is good to make a distinction, between human actions and the wild, especially if you are going to talk about timber management, grazing, soil management and oceans. To make an argument that because we're part of nature anything we do is OK can have very dangerous consequences at the moment. You know who makes that argument? The Chinese government. It's actually quite impressive, the Chinese are very consistent, only they haven't opened their eyes yet to what is happening. China became deforested 400 years ago but they still haven't noticed.

Isn't that a more general problem—the fact that we do not realize what is happening? Perhaps it is our imagination that fails us. Some people even say that humans are perhaps not wired to perceive large-scale phenomena, such as the global warming.

That's why we need poetry!

There is a book by John Felstiner called: *Can Poetry Save the Earth?* My first reaction to the title was: "That's crazy." But then I thought about it for a while and I concluded—but, if not poetry, what else?

Felstiner looks at the English language tradition of poetry going back to very early times and he shows how poet after poet had a wonderful observant eye for nature, though they didn't make a big deal out of it. They didn't have to. They were conscious and aware and present in their poetry in the natural world. Now we think that kind of awareness is something very special. But through most of human history it was just part of being alive and sensitive. The artists have always been engaged in the natural world more than we realize now.

I believe that poetry is really always pagan. All of the arts are really pagan. When you go to the Prado in Madrid you see a strange split: half the paintings are of crosses and Madonnas, and the other half are of naked ladies in the woods. That is our wonderful European schizophrenia. We just have to hope that the naked ladies in the woods win out.

Since we're talking about naked ladies, there's another problem I'd like to mention. In a conservative country like Poland, the term "nature" has very negative associations for people involved in emancipatory movements because it is often used by the right wing as a normative concept. For instance, some forms of sexuality will be considered as contrary to "human nature."

But that's history. Let's use the terms correctly, nature is the phenomenal universe, not the world of metaphysics or religion. "Nature" as in "human nature" is another word. English has some equivalents for this other meaning of the word

nature, for instance: the character or the quality of things. We shouldn't confuse these meanings.

It is true that nature has sometimes served as a right wing icon. That actually goes back to the Nazis, the fact which is very well known. The association of nature with the right wing did not exist before that. If you go back to the eighteenth century, for instance, and look at the rhetoric of talking about nature, you discover something else: it is the rhetoric of literate people. And literate people, people who can read, are the privileged class at the time. If you want to know what ordinary people thought about nature you must turn to folk culture. And of course what you find in folk culture is that animals are also people, they can talk to each other. Folk cultures are pagan, which is one of the reasons why poetry is also pagan.

Do you believe that the old tribal cultures were more environmentally friendly or more responsible than we are?

They had to be. They didn't have the chemistry or the technology not to be. There are cases of course when even the pre-modern cultures overstepped their limits a bit, but on the whole they didn't do much damage. The world was almost intact until about a hundred and fifty years ago. It was the expansion of the money economy that began the crisis.

I don't want to say that ancient peoples were always naturally ecological: it's just that they were more radically a part of nature, so they had no choice. As a result, they also developed some very intelligent practices, basing them on practical observations. For instance, West Coast Indians in America would practice setting fire to the forests, which they did because of their insight that that kept the population of deer higher. When you study the history of forest fires in California you begin to understand why it was important. Now there hasn't been a fire for many years. When the next one comes, there is a danger that it will be really big because of all the undergrowth which has accumulated.

This brings us to the idea of bioregionalism.

Bioregionalism is the practical application of ecological sensitivity in a community.

What would be your advice to people who live in cities but would still like to practice bioregionalism? For instance, I live in Warsaw.

What river is Warsaw on, is it the Vistula?

Yes.

The Vistula is not just the Vistula. The Vistula is all the streams and tributaries that run into it. We're talking about the whole watershed. If you live in the city one of the big questions is: how is your water, where does your water come from? Another question is—where does your waste go? How is your trash dealt with? How is it burned or buried or recycled? Become aware of what is wild in the city. The cities are full of insects, weeds, birds—people don't even see them. Nature does not avoid the city, it adapts to the city. There are many species that like the cities: crows, coyotes, mice, rats—don't hate rats! Understand that they all have a place. Enjoy their presence. Of course, if they become a real problem you can also trap and kill them. But understand that they are real people.

In a country like Poland one of the problems is that a lot of people remember real poverty and living in very bad conditions. So to a lot of them the fact that Poland has made economic progress and that the standard of living is slightly higher now feels like such an achievement, that they don't really want to talk about simplifying—let alone making friends with rats.

It's just like China, though perhaps it's not as intense here. That's understandable. And it's also true that with a slightly higher standard of living people will look around and say: oh yes, it's nice to have parks. It's nice to have bicycle ways, to be able to walk in the city. The problem with some cities—especially in the United States—is that you can't walk in them, you have to drive a car. There is a whole discussion of proper urban design and many cities are moving towards good modern design which includes having more routes to walk and ride bicycles as well as public transportation. Tokyo is really good in this respect. You could say these are middle-class values: yes, these are middle-class values but they make cities livable.

For everybody.

For everybody. One problem many countries are facing is the necessity of expanding good healthcare to all people. But people are going to be healthier if they live in a clean city.

Also the world of big capital sometimes makes ecological arguments, but they get caught up where we all get caught up, since the main problem now is the problem of energy. At the moment we only have two sources of energy in the world that count. Fossil fuels and nuclear energy. That is the issue. The Japanese are caught in it right now. A lot of their population wants to give up nuclear

energy but they have no fossil fuels. If they went the way the green movement would like to go, they would have to become a small agrarian nation again. So it's very tricky. Part of what human beings will have to do is to re-examine what their goals are and scale back, towards—yes, voluntary simplicity, there is no other way.

You have said in one of your books: “we must recognize that the unknown evolutionary destinies of other life-forms are to be respected.” Why? Why should we care?

It's just good manners. It's the question of etiquette.

Do you care for your neighbors? Why do you care for your neighbors? You could say you care because you're human together. With other beings—you're sharing the same planet together, you're living creatures together. We don't know who those guys are and where they are going just as they don't know who we are and where we're going. We have to respect each other. It's a Buddhist position. And that is why I became a Buddhist when I was fifteen, precisely because Buddhism demanded respect for the non-humans.

If the task of the philosophers and artists is to speak out the value of the non-human, how can it be done?

It is entirely up to you how you do it. But it is crucial to have the insight, to arrive at the position of appreciating the etiquette of the non-human, of letting your mind expand to include the non-human, to stop seeing the human world as the only world that counts. It isn't the only world. I'd say this is the true job of the artists but of course the artists have to realize that it is their job. Nobody can force them. My advice is always this: try meditating and see what your mind will tell you. Or: go for walks. See what's out there. In some cases that's enough. Sometimes people ask me—what can we do to become more environmentally aware? And I answer—go for nature walks. Find somebody who will show you birds and plants, have a good time, put on good shoes, don't worry about the weather.

But art is made of something. In the case of poetry, the material is words. Many people believe that language is an anthropomorphic construction, and that it has nothing to do with the material reality, that there is an absence at the core of words, that words only refer to other words, without any direct reference to extra-linguistic reality.

As I say in *The Practice of the Wild*, language, too, is a wild phenomenon. Language comes to us without going to school, simply by being alive and listening to

brothers and sisters and fathers and mothers. It is a natural learning process, it belongs to our wild side, much like our digestion, breathing, or blood circulation. We learn language and we master syntax before we ever go to school. Then of course society begins to impose certain standards on how you use language, so it gets more complicated, more levels of meaning are added—but what's central is the syntax, the organizing system in the brain that is inherent, and that allows us to acquire language in the first place. Language is a biological thing.

Apparently, mice can sing songs when they are in love...

Whales, too, sing beautiful songs. The point is, we have to expand our knowledge. It is not enough to expand our knowledge about the humans, we need to become nature-literate as well. We must become literate about other beings. We're just ignorant of them, that's all. Most people ignorantly assume that animals are dumber than they are. They also ignorantly assume that animals don't communicate. They do, but they do it in slightly different ways than we do. Smells, dances, body language, these are all ways to communicate.

This is the problem with humanistic intellectuals: the traditional humanistic intellectual is in a very narrow box. It is important to try to create a larger-scale model of knowledge that is a responsibility of any educated person. We're responsible for knowing what is happening outside of the human space and for thinking back through the human space to the times before history, to include pre-history. These processes are already taking place, there are books about these things, and ecocriticism is one of the fields which works towards the creation of a larger-scale model.

Ecocriticism is very interested in poetry and poetics. Do you use the term ecopoetry to refer to the kinds of writing that enlarge the space of our ethical responsibility? Do you have your own definition of it? I know in the United States this term is very widely used.

Frankly, I don't even like the word very much, as I don't like other portmanteau terms, such as ecophilosophy, ecopoetics, etc. I like the word *oikos*, which is also the word in "economics." I would say ecopoetry is nothing special, it is only focusing on something that poetry has always been doing anyway. Every artist who is a true artist has a very broad spectrum of vision and is sensitive to all kinds of things other than the immediate ego and human needs, looking to the edges or the margins all the time. I like the term "posthumanism," though. It has come with the postmodernists who are now looking for the next thing to be. (laughter)

But there is also a cyborg side to post-humanism.

Yes, yes, I know Donna Haraway, well, good luck. The question, again, is this: where does the energy come from? Being a human being is much cheaper than being a cyborg. Think about how much it would cost to make a cyborg cow: it really is much easier to just breed a cow.

Coming back to ecopoetics, of course it is used all the time now, I joke about it with Jonathan Skinner, whom you also know, and who advocates it. My granddaughter, who is fifteen now, was given an assignment from one of her teachers in a poetry class to explain the difference between ecopoetics and nature poetics. She wrote: ecopoetics is when you are thinking about correcting ecological mistakes with poetry. Nature poetry is just writing about nature. (*laughter*)

I think Jonathan Skinner is making a good point when he says that eco- or environmental poetry, whatever it is, does not end on the page.

The Chinese poet Yen Yu said: we use words to write poetry but there is poetry without words. And the haiku poet Buson, speaking about good haiku said: “the words stop but the meaning keeps going.” In a sense that is what Jonathan is saying. I think what he means is that our moral, human artistic obligations to look at these questions and be aware of them continue outside the work of art.

In Poland the idea of the autonomy of the art object is still very important to many artists and writers. The idea that art could be politically or ethically engaged is perceived almost as a betrayal of the true character of the art of poetry.

But that was some twenty five years ago, and you still have it?

I’m not against people who practice art for art’s sake. If they want to do it, they can try, there is absolutely nothing wrong with art for art’s sake. The only question is: does it have an audience? Is anybody paying any attention? You can also ask: does it address in any way the moral issues that we all know we’re facing? What good is the autonomy of the art if the Nazis are coming?

Or if the energy is running out...

Exactly. I just think it is more interesting to be engaged with what is really happening. If somebody likes playing around with form, practicing art for the sake of art—that is OK. For instance, I love Brancusi.

But Brancusi’s objects are very real...

Yes, they are! Perhaps, ultimately there is no art for art's sake. There cannot be.

My very last question is one that Laurie Anderson once asked of John Cage: "do you think things are getting better or are they getting worse?"

I clearly must answer this, taking into account all I've said so far about the condition of the planet and the non-human world, saying that things are getting terribly worse.

Selected populations about the globe are being bought off with slight increments of consumer improvement—the Chinese public looks forward to each owning their own car when once it was a bicycle—the proliferation of smart phones and social media are a kind of contemporary Circus—so that people by the millions here and there can imagine their fate is improving. At the same time a giant chunk of global population lives in genuine poverty. The two great conundrums are Climate Change and Energy. It may well be that it's already far too late to have any effect on the progress of climate change and its effect on ecosystems and human populations. Although alternative energy resources work in specific cases and places, they cannot stand in for the energy demands that will keep the global economy from making more nuclear plants, drilling for more oil and gas, and mining for more coal. I commented on my last day in Kraków that there was a panel in progress speaking on "In the Shadow of Empire"—they were reflecting on an Empire (the Soviet) that is well into decline. Truth is, we all live right now under the shadow of a much greater intractable empire, the Global Economy—capitalism with no roots or grounding anywhere, dedicated to making profits until it all collapses.

Yet, still, every day, I feel gratitude to this world that is. Issa's haiku goes: "This dewdrop world is but a dewdrop world... and yet..." ("Tsuyu no yo wa tsuyu no yo nagara... sarinagara...").