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“Myths” as Rich Records of Ancient Human Behaviour and “Texts” as Present Human Predicaments as Pictured by Gary Snyder in his Myths & Texts: An Analysis

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Abstract:

This article, at the outset, introduces the most admired American writer Gary Snyder, who pleads for the value of myths and its healing touch for the modern man. His writing emerge as a sweeping force whenever he pours out his poetical thoughts and he is the poet who, is imaginative, frank and sensible. His work reveals an ancient mode of life based on joy, primal sympathy and deep participation in the midst of natural surroundings and it also calls for attention to the situations prevailing in the present world and can be roughly described as reality or other words “texts”. This article concludes by stating, Gary Snyder’s brilliant work Myths & Texts can be described as a rich flowering of mature forms of wisdom and the poet’s exploration of different possibilities of gaming wisdom.

Keywords: value of myths, imagination, rational consciousness, intuitive awareness, human predicament.

All imaginative modes of consciousness have not received due recognition in modern days owing to overwhelming materialism and mere scientific and external pursuit of things. It is in this context that Gary Snyder pleads for the value of myths and its healing touch for the modern man. Human sensibility becomes dismal without the aid of imagination. What is suppressed by scientific materialism is ‘imagination’. What is required to purify this tragic condition is the store house of ancient myths in which the richness of imagination is embodied.

Myths, according to Snyder, represent the primordial consciousness of the primitive people. There is no division between rational consciousness and intuitive awareness in them. In modern days, rational consciousness is emphasized at the cost of imaginative mode of awareness. Therefore, myths have a function to invoke a pre-logical or non-logical modes of awareness in apprehending things as parts of an integrated whole. The modern man without the knowledge of myths is placing himself in a sahara desert according to Snyder.

Snyder's *Myths & Texts*, though published after his first poetic creation, *Riprap* was his first completed work. The very title of this work was taken from the anthropologist John's. Swanton's "Tlingit Myths and Texts" (pxxxix) and Snyder himself stated this in his bachelor's thesis entitled "The Dimensions of a myth" which was written in 1950-51 at Reed College. According to Bob Steuding, *Myths & Texts* is not a group of casual poems collected under an interesting title; it is an imaginative application of anthropological materials" (P68). In Snyder's explanation of the creation of *Myths & Texts*, he states that the book "grew between 1952 and 1956. Its several rhythms are based on long days of quiet in lookout cabins; setting chokers for the Warm Springs Lumber Company (looping cables on logs and hooking them to D8 caterpillars-dragging and rumbling through the brush) and the songs and dances of Great Basin Indian tribes. I used to hang around" (Donald Allen 421). This statement shows that the wilderness experience awakened Snyder to the original structure of the psyche of ancient man. He saw people engaged in sizing the unshaped timber from Cabins. His living experience amidst the songs and dances of Great Basin Indian tribes deepened his knowledge of human nature. They were people living in close harmony with the natural surroundings and treating labour as a way of life that secured whole-eyed vision of life for them.

The ancient lives followed certain basic patterns. Later on, Jung called them archetypes. There were precious life-motifs in the ancient way of life and so Snyder makes use of myths in his poetry. Myth is after all a name applied to a particular type of ancient human behaviour. Myths therefore refer to conceptions of ancient human behaviour creates a basis for a myth and a subsequent archetype. Modern life is devoid of myths are, therefore, rich records of past human behaviour and texts are present predicaments. More specifically, the title, as Snyder writes, "also means the two sources of human knowledge-symbols and sense-impressions" (Allen 421).

To Snyder, "Myths" are the constructs through which man perceive and understand the "texts", the physical world, or what they call reality. Thus, "Myths" relate to "man's conceptions" and "texts" relate to their physical environment" (Lisel 255). Snyder's life in the woods is a symbolic withdrawal from an over systematised industrial culture. He is often found in the woods, in certain areas where life prevails in a wholesome sense. Therefore, life in the woods presents a parallel to the ancient life grounded in wholeness. This helps him to recollect the past myths and relate them to the present life. There is a positive juxtaposition of the past mythical life with the present life of wholeness found in the woods. This is a comparison invoked by Snyder in order to glorify the present tribes living in the forests.

For Snyder, life in the city presents a contrast to life in the past. The present "texts" are the present problems and situations that appear in frightening proportions. All the degenerating aspects of life like corruption in sensibility, wretchedness in human behaviour, too much interest in money and materialism, according to Snyder, from the "texts" leading to mechanisation of mind and feeling. This is the present text or record of human degeneration. Snyder's poetic mission lies in making an enquiry into the origin of all problems. The suppression of the imaginative mode of consciousness is responsible for the present degradation. A corrective to this corrupt text is to be sought in ancient myths.

A casual glance at the present situation with the rich consciousness of the past myths will create a new awareness of the existing crisis. This act itself is a wholesome one. Snyder in the spirit of a Romantic poet has understood man in terms of nature and nature in terms of man. Nature has a transforming influence on man. Imagination in man helps him to project into objects of nature. This vital link between man and nature creates a great bond of affinity and depth. Perhaps Snyder sees such depth and affinity in ancient lives. This may be one reason why his interest in myths gets a new significance.

Myths, according to Snyder, embody a vital link between man and nature. Bob Steuding states that “the central themes of *Myths and Texts* are the result of Snyder’s studies at Reed College and his observations of and meditations upon the relationship between man and nature” (P66). In other words, Snyder’s work *Myths and Texts* reveals an ancient mode of life based on joy, primal sympathy and deep participation amidst natural surroundings. It is very clear from the given passage that man loves living in close harmony with nature:

“Green comes out of the ground
Birds squabble
Young girls run mad with the pink bough” (MT 3)

The picture of ‘birds hum and squabble’ and ‘girls run mad with the pine bough’ evokes the very origin of human emotions which are found in a state of rhythm and harmony. This is the reason why Snyder takes a journey to explore and discover the deeper sources of wisdom revealed in such a simple way of life.

Myths & Texts has three sections namely “logging” “Hunting” and “Burning”. It is quite possible that Snyder was deeply distressed by the dehumanizing process of mechanisation. The complexity in modern life is directly traceable to the overwhelming importance given to reason. Snyder wants to provide a balance to the human psyche which is now under the spell and orientation of reason. The point to be noted here is that when the machine-oriented civilization becomes very dominant, naturally man is dead and nature loses its charm and vitality. The human psyche looks for relief. The poet undertakes this predicament of the human mind and believes that man has to separate himself from these soul-killing surroundings and undertakes a quest for wisdom. Thus, “logging” deals with man’s separation from the primal sources of human consciousness, “hunting” with the discovery of the deeper psyche through journey and “burning” with the return to social life with a newly gained wisdom.

The very first section “Logging” of *Myths & Texts* portrays the actual depressing state of affairs in life. Snyder has great skill in contrasting modern gloomy life with the joyous mode of ancient life. Before the advent of machine age, life, according to him, was real and interesting. This is shown in the lines that follow:

“Each dawn is clear
Cold air bites the throat
Thick frost on the pine bough
Leaps from the tree
Snapped by the diesel” (Poem-8 P-10)

In the past, man communed with Nature and Nature Communed with man in return. Life was expressed in a very exalted spirit. The poet is pained to note that the spirit of life is gripped by the D8 Caterpillars. The groom in modern life is portrayed clearly in these lines:

“ground by steel tracks
In the frozen grass
Wild horses stand
Beyond a row of pines
The D8 tears through piss-fir
Scrapes the seed-pine
Chipmunks flee” (P10)

In the opinion of Snyder, a deep co-operation between man and nature makes man’s life sublime and gay. But the D8 Caterpillars strikes at the very basis of this co-operation and separates man from nature and the animal world. This is the modern “text” – man’s separation from nature namely man’s spiritual disorientation which needs to be healed by a meaningful exposure to the study of myths.

Poem-8 of “Hunting” section of *Myths & Texts* brings out Snyder’s attitude to life much more comprehensively. Usually myths & symbols express a rich mode of imagination and thereby portray the sub-conscious level of man. For example, Poem-8 expresses the poet’s relation to creatures. Man becomes one with birds and animals more at a subconscious level. A casual description of a deer dancing on the mountain in Poem-8 of “Hunting” put the poet in a state of ecstasy. This picture essentially describes the deeper level of man which longs for some kind of fulfilling. It is clear from a study of anthropology and depth psychology that the sub-conscious life of man may be invoked and revitalised only with the renewal and revival of myths and symbols. This spirit gets vividly reflected in the following lines:

“Deer on the autumn mountain
Howling like a wise man (MT 27)

Deer don’t want to die for me
I’ll drink sea-water
Sleep on beach pebbles in the rain
Until the deer come down to die
In pity for my pain (Myths & Texts 28)

The meaning of this passage shows the deep interaction between man and deer. The man is capable of establishing a sub-conscious level of communion with the deer. In the “Hunting” section of *Myths & Texts*, Snyder does not mean ‘hunting’ as an aggressive activity. He makes an appeal to the deer that he is going to kill it. The deer responds to the poet’s pathetic state of remorse in such a manner that it wishes to die as a mark of pity for the poet’s sensibility. All these things clearly express the language of myths and symbols. The deer wishing to die for the poet indicates the depth of response that an animal is capable of making towards man. The point is that man was more at home with the animal world. This harmony between man and beasts is based upon an imaginative level of consciousness. Any imaginative mode of thinking or living is indirectly known as a kind of mythic consciousness or symbolic recognition of things.

Generally speaking, academic training follows a rational line and therefore hampers the development of sensibility. In Snyder’s case, it proved to be a blessing in disguise. Bob Steuding rightly remarks in his book *Gary Snyder* as:

“A Reed, Snyder took the opportunity to use his imagination as well as the academic analytical abilities which he was taught to develop clearly, formal education had an important effect on the mind of Gary Snyder and is evident in *Myths & Texts*. Although the poems are grounded in actual experience, *Myths & Texts* is a scholarly and in a certain case, academic work. The idea for these poems was probable conceived before his lookout and trail crew experiences and *Myths and Texts* bears the clear impression of Snyder’s studies at Reed College, as well as the imprint of his extracurricular interests” (P67).

Perhaps Snyder’s case illustrates the thesis that a mature understanding of the modern crisis requires a profound historical wisdom and scholarship.

Snyder owes a deep sense of debt to Pound, Jung and Eliot in his understanding of myths. It was Pound who broke the cobwebs of cultural narrowness and exclusiveness and introduced Snyder to cross-cultural experiments. The western psyche contains many diseases. This psychic neurosis springs from lack of depth in human consciousness. It is reason which predominantly orders the inner language of man and so human personality is improperly integrated. The due balance and moderation which the human mind can receive from imagination is entirely absent. Snyder therefore believed that the western scheme carried certain defects in their vision. The only way to remedy the defects lies in the revival of myths which indirectly involves interest in cross-cultural consciousness. It was Pound who showed the way for Snyder. Though *Myths & Texts* evidences many influences, a consideration of three important influences seems imperative. First and most obvious, as critics have pointed out, is the influence of Ezra Pound. Pound’s use of the ellipsis, his juxta positioning of quotations, his loose thematic linking of sections, and his use of exoteric, non-western materials is evident. Second, in the conception of the work, Snyder seems to have been significantly influenced by the theories or more

specifically, by the admonitions of psychologist Carl Gustav Jung, as interpreted by Joseph Campbell. And third, is the example offered by the work of T.S.Eliot. In many respects, *Myths & Texts* is strikingly similar to Eliot’s *The Wasteland*, one of the basic models for contemporary mythic literature” (Bob Steuding 67).

Snyder’s deep concern with myths and symbols begins with his profound interest in Eliot’s *Waste Land* which explores the tragic conditions of the modern world and lays emphasis upon the renewal of mythical mind. Eliot saw that the ancients had developed a mode of knowledge for more healthier than the moderns, for their life was rooted in mythical sensibility. Snyder took the clue from Eliot and developed his interest in myths and symbols on a much larger scale. With obvious modesty, Snyder acknowledges his own debt to Eliot.

There is a close resemblance between T.S.Eliot and Gary Snyder in the use of the mythical method. Eliot looked at primitive cave paintings and wrote “Tradition and the Individual Talent”. Possibly, Eliot’s response, his feelings of awe, reverence, and admiration for the art treasures of the Palaeolithic past indicate the point at which these seemingly disparate poets touch” (Bob 70). There is a need to know the past as the present is nothing but an extension of the past. Eliot holds the view that the past contains many health-giving forces for the rejuvenation of the present. As modern civilization is built mainly on the support of reason, it has led to imbalance, dehumanization and mechanization of life and human race cannot live with these shallow and empty equipments for long. Eliot’s mythical method is based upon the realization of the tragic conditions of modern life and Snyder is at home with it. Imaginative modes of consciousness, happy kinship with nature, freedom of giving value to the past are to be recovered. Eliot and Snyder have the genius to hit upon the right cure. To live inward with the past needs historical consciousness. A man imbued with historical sensibility sees the past and present interacting at one place.

In the terms outlined by Eliot, Snyder’s perception is ‘historical’. In *Myths & Texts* and in *Mountains and Rivers without End* the richness of archaic culture underlies the images of the destruction and decadence of the present era. Radicalism is total destruction of the past and complete adherence to the present. The new mythical concept of historical sensibility acts as a via media between the two extremes. The idea of ‘historical sense’ is a living awareness of the eternal element in the past. According to Eliot, regeneration of modern life is impossible without the life enhancing myths of the past. Snyder wholeheartedly owes his literary alliance to Eliot in the matter of treating myth as a transforming force on the modern mind.

A corrupt civilization creates the picture of a spiritual wasteland in both Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and Snyder’s *Myths & Texts*. Snyder follows the same spirit of Eliot’s work. The basic ground plan of Snyder’s work is undoubtedly fertilized by Eliot. As Ernest Hemingway once said and Robert O. Stephens paraphrases in an article on the influence of Steudha on Hemingway, “--- indebtedness is a challenge. One borrows materials or models to surpass, not to equal or to imitate” (P271). Possibly, this explains why *Myths & Texts* seems at times to parody *The Waste Land*. In design, outward structure and operational method of myth, Snyder is on par with Eliot. There is similarity in their

campaign against the modern conditions of life. Both move to the roots of ancient wisdom in order to correct the defect in the present. Both works delight in the use of classical allusions. Eliot's reference in lines 196-98 of *The Waste Land* to Greek mythology-to Diana Caught naked by Actaeon-deserves special mention. Actoeon saw Diana nakedly in bath. Actaeon in turn became a deer pursued by Diana in the form of a hound. Eliot believes that the ancient incident carries classical grace and dignity. Snyder makes use of the same classical myth with a slight change in his purpose:

“Actaeon saw Diana in the spring
 It was nothing special
 Misty rain on Mt. Baker
 Neach Bay at low tide”

In Eliot, there is a specific Christian commitment whereas in Snyder there is a universal response to things. By making a reference to a classical myth in the manner of Eliot, Snyder writes that there is nothing special about the classical event. The memory of a rich way of life lived in the past is what appears to be important. In this respect myths are a rich deposit of the past ways of life. All situations which prevail in the present world can be roughly described as reality or physical surrounding or in other words “texts”. The implication is that Snyder's *Myths & Texts* make a simultaneous comparison of the past with the present, the personal with the universal and the mythical with the textual. Lisel Mueller's words bear evidence and make this point clear: “In *Myths & Texts*, Snyder moves from past to present, from nature experienced to history imagined, from the personal to the universal and from the textual to the mythic” (P255).

Eliot and Snyder take up the question of burning and treat it in somewhat similar ways. In the fifth section “What the Thunder said” in *The Waste Land*, Eliot writes,

“of thunder of spring over distant mountains

 Here is no water but only rock

 dry sterile thunder without rain (Lines 327-42).

These lines picture a dry thunder with no sign of coming rain. This is to indicate the spiritual sterility of the modern age which cannot be changed. In short, Eliot's *The Waste Land* with a pessimistic note whereas Snyder's *Myths & Texts* does not end with a note of despair. He strikes a position note at the end of the “Burning” section in *Myths & Texts*. This is seen evidently in the poem “the text”:

“Toward morning it rained
 We slept in mud and ashes
 Woke up at dawn, the fire was out,
 the sky was clear, we saw
 The last glimmer of the morning star” (Poem-17 P53)

Snyder develops faith and hope in the revival and renewal of things. This feature makes him somewhat different from Eliot. Eliot’s classical leanings give a specific mood and create a melancholy frame of mind and so he writes, “no water but only rock ----- thunder without rain”. Snyder’s philosophy of life is based upon a happy combination of romanticism and classicism. The phrase, “the last glimmer of the morning star” indicates not a note of despair but the sign of hope. Snyder’s basic faith that an imaginative mode of mind creates new perception of things and adds freshness and charmless to normal things makes him look upon life with a good deal of zest and joy. The normal rhythm of life is portrayed in the poem, “the myth”:

Fire up Thunder creek and the mountain – troys burning!
The clouds mutters
The mountains are your mind
The woods bristle there
Dogs barking and children shrieking
Rise from below” (Poem-17 P53).

Snyder is apocalyptic in a human and normal way while Eliot is so in an extraordinary and classical. The basic condition of both the writers are the same but the ways in which they set about to achieve their ends are different. Snyder’s commitment is personal in that he believes in the destiny of the human race whereas Eliot’s commitment is impersonal in that as a classicist he believes in the building of civilization. Even though the tone of the two poems and the sensibilities of each poet differ to some extent, nobody can deny the statement of Bob Steuding with regard to the theme of both the works. He writes:

“Both works are apocalyptic, for they deal with the destruction of the world as man once knew it. In Eliot’s case, the world is that of “civilized man” before World War.I; in Snyder’s, the world of primitive man before the coming of “Civilization”. Both poems are concerned with the change in values, the loss of faith and the lack of reverence for life. And finally, both poets draw on many cultures, archaic and contemporary, in an effort to create a mythology through which culture may redirect its energies in more spiritually productive ways. In other words, Eliot and Snyder are moralists. They attempt to reorient and save modern man from himself. Both poets are, in the highest sense, religious poets” (P74).

Myths & Texts is, thus, a perfectly constructed work. The terms ‘logging’, ‘hunting’ and ‘burning’ carry deep implications “Logging” means to Snyder “the mindless rapaciousness of society and the destruction which has occurred due to man’s manipulation and exploitation of his environment” (Bob 74). The aggressive, rational, mechanistic and competitive society is hidden in the picture of logging. Men become victims of materialistic manipulation in logging. “Hunting” is antithesis of logging and it

emphasizes the non-materialistic value of fellowship and communion. It is an act of worship for Snyder. If undertaken with knowledge and reverence, the hunt in contrast to logging represents the communion of all life forms and the participation of man in his eco-system”(Bob 75). The concept of ‘burning’ is little complicated unnecessary forest fire brings damage and so it should be stamped out. ‘Burning’ in Buddhist terminology is a symbol of purification. Destruction sets the stage for construction. Burning in Snyder’s work is ‘a cleansing force’. Through “a hot clean/burn”, (Manzanita 22), trash is eliminated and energy released. A negative act is carried out here with a positive vision.

Snyder believes in the view that a pure and clean environment will pave the way for the flowing of pure and clean sensibility. In this respect, his call for burning has an ecological implication. Many writers have made observations on ecological crisis. Snyder had an intuitive awareness of this problem and responded to it positively. The scientific idea lies in the mastery, conquest and exploitation of Nature but Snyder treats this as a very aggressive rational attitude. As Lynn White, Jr., has put it in “The Historical Roots of the Ecologic Crisis”, man has acted under the false impression that nature was his to exploit in any way he in shed” (P1207). *Myths & Texts*, written in the early 1950’s was one of the first poetic works to respond to such thinking. According to Snyder, *Myths & Texts* is his “most ordered and complete work”, while to Thomas Parkinson, the book is “a sacred text” (P625).

To conclude, Snyder’s prime motive in *Myths & Texts* is to recreate the wholeness of human sensibility by presenting the primitive’s mythological apprehension of reality. This state of consciousness is what the poet seeks to assume in his role as ‘mythmaker and text giver’ and subsequently to develop in the reader. This works *Myths & Texts*, in other words, can be described as a rich flowering of mature forms of wisdom and the poet’s exploration of different possibilities of gaining wisdom.

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