
The path which goes beyond: *Danger on Peaks* responds to suffering

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Now well into his eighties, Gary Snyder continues to pursue lifetime habits of engagement and detachment in which the activities of literary work, spiritual practice, environmental activism, and family life are mutually informing. This leads, in the poetry, to an instructive response to personal suffering and to the suffering embodied in our present eco-social dilemmas. When asked in the 1996 *Paris Review* interview why, for all his environmental involvements, his writing is “surprisingly without disasters,” Snyder countered that “there are several poems that have very bad news in them” (Snyder and Weinberger 335). But then he went on to critique the efficacy of promoting “doom scenarios” and to describe the inclination of his own interventions in terms of humor and love:

the condition of our social and ecological life is so serious that we'd better have a sense of humor. That it's too serious just to be angry and despairing [...] The first step, I think, and that's why it's in my poetry, is to make us love the world rather than to make us fear for the end of the world. (Snyder and Weinberger 335)

In the twenty years since this interview was recorded, Snyder's poetry and prose has faced personal, ecological, and social pain increasingly directly, but it continues to foreground lightness and tenderness. This makes for a form of engagement that involves two main strategies that recall the Buddha's first and fourth Noble Truths: the Truth of Suffering and Truth of the Path. First, there is an ongoing and unflinching representation of the unarguable pain of global and personal suffering, both human and nonhuman. Simultaneously, the work articulates the reality of the path that goes beyond suffering, what the final poem from *Danger on Peaks* (2005) identifies as “great wisdom of the path that goes beyond” (107). This path is a way of healing, understood through a lifetime of Buddhist (and, more specifically, Rinzai Zen) practice that is informed by bioregional activism and radical politics.

The astonishing poem “Go Now,” about his wife Carole's death (from *This Present Moment* [2015]), offers what is surely Snyder's hardest, most acute, and most direct response to suffering yet, but it is *Danger on Peaks* that presents the most extended and consistent engagement with the pervasiveness of eco-social and personal pain. The first section faces Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the last is a response to the annihilation of the Buddhas of Bamiyan and the destruction of the World Trade Center. Here, and in poems

that witness the ongoing violent impact of industrial civilization, Snyder expresses sustained and measured outrage at what he calls “woman-and-nature-denying authoritarian worldviews that go back much farther than Abraham” (101). Infused into this forceful response are an equally strong evocation of personal pain and the personal experience of impermanence: the death of a friend, Carole’s cancer prognosis, his own mortality. This personal dimension is, in turn, situated with regard to further experiences of loss and immense destruction that are not about people, and not of human origin: the eruption of Mount St. Helens in 1980, the fall of an old almond tree, a forest riddled with beetles, and so on.

In responding to these very difficult conditions, Snyder’s radical interpretation of Buddhist practice is made particularly explicit. Yet one of the most powerful moments in the book ostensibly challenges the principles of nonviolence and nondualism that have shaped this tradition. In the opening section, the fifteen-year-old Snyder (who in August 1945 had just climbed Mount St. Helens for the first time) returns to the base camp, where he reads the newspaper reports of the atomic explosions in Japan on the camp noticeboard. Horrified and angry, he makes a fierce vow: “By the purity and beauty and permanence of Mt. St. Helens, I will fight against this cruel destructive power and those who would seek to use it, for all my life” (9).

This is a strong vow, and, by including it in this collection sixty years later, Snyder offers a moving perspective on the motivation of a life’s work. When I asked him about the vow soon after the publication of the book, he laughed a bit: “I could say, ‘Well I tried. And it didn’t work, did it? I’ve been living my life by this and I guess it didn’t come to anything—in fact it’s worse than ever!’” (*Nobody Home* 56). Then he went on to talk about how living with this original intention over the years has led to questions that have continued to shape his work:

How did we get here? How can I not contribute to more war? And why is it, how is it, that so many fellow human beings on earth are apparently comfortable with it? I realized that there is also a war against nature. The biosphere itself is subject to a huger explosion by far than anything nuclear—the half-million-year long slow explosion of human impact. (56)

How then to “fight” against these forms of destruction without contributing to more war? One aspect of Snyder’s response involves direct participation in civil society organizations, where he continues to play an activist role with regard to the environment.

As regards his literary oeuvre, which is the concern of this essay, since the 1950s his poetry and prose have worked to present a clear and prescient critique of the ecological and social costs of modernity, authoritarian power, and so-called civilization and to witness their personal, spiritual, and interpersonal dimensions. Here, instead of meeting the opponent head-on, the writing tends to identify the particular instance of the problem, and then respond to it by shifting the point of view away from direct confrontation: disempowering the “enemy” by situating its agency in a different context, witnessing that

which exists “beyond” the reach of its force. The effect of this is never complacency or quietism. Instead, like the gesture of the earth-touching Buddha whose hand is always in contact with the soil, it is a reminder of that continuous nondual ground of being from which awareness and compassionate action arise. Another way of putting it would be to say that instead of being centrally focused on the problem or disease (of suffering), Snyder’s strategies of resistance to pain, tyranny, and delusion characteristically involve affirming those values or attitudes of mind that make for sanity, clarity, and health.

Danger on Peaks is organized so as to convey this affirmation. While the book is inevitably made up of an assemblage of words and names, the collection is framed by pieces that paradoxically point outside the dualistic grid that language imposes on the real. This approach resonates with the sort of ju-jitsu move that energizes traditional Zen poetry: language is employed in order to evoke an awareness that exists outside language.

In the opening pages, Snyder’s love of climbing mountains and walking in the wild is represented as a way of inhabiting a point of view that sees beyond the narrow reach of the habitual, deluded mind and its recent accretion of civilization. The prose piece “The Climb” articulates core metaphors of danger and transcendence in a recollection of the teenage Snyder’s first ascent of Mount St. Helens and of the ecstatic perspective from the summit. In this instance, climbing the snow peak presents, quite literally, a point of view that goes beyond our ordinary world:

If you want to get a view of the world you live in, climb a little rocky mountain with a neat small peak. But the big snowpeaks pierce the realm of clouds and cranes, rest in the zone of five-coloured banners and writhing crackling dragons in veils of ragged mist and frost-crystals, into a pure transparency of blue. (7)

These lines gesture toward that realm of spacious awareness that Snyder has elsewhere called the land of “OLD MAN MEDICINE BUDDHA // where the eagle / that flies out of sight /// flies” (*Mountains and Rivers Without End* 44). Shamanic, spiritual, transcendent: this imagined “realm” is an extremely powerful locus of healing, and its evocation here suggests an order of experience that lies beyond the narrow dualisms that characterize the life of “the world you live in.” In *Danger on Peaks*, the speaker remembers his younger self at the summit of Mount St. Helens, looking over to the earth below, and seeing that it is empty: “there was nothing there” (8).

In the last poem, the Buddhist view of nondualism and transformation that is incipient in this remembered teenage moment is made explicit in a text that reaches out of poetry into prayer or ritual utterance, and moves from particularity into vastness. In “A Turning Verse for the Billions of Beings” (107), the elder Snyder begins by unobtrusively invoking the great Prajñāpāramitā Sutra, “the spell that purifies the world,” and goes on to hail the throngs of beings in all the realms. If the bodhisattva vows to save “all beings,” this poem, which reaches into the future, bows to these unfathomable multitudes, bearing witness to their capacity for groundedness and awakening, and to the path of wisdom and compassion that makes it

possible for the speaker-practitioner to wake up, too. His concluding lines are a heartfelt salutation: “hail all noble woke-up big-heart beings; / hail—great wisdom of the path that goes beyond // Mahāprajñāpāramitā” (107). This final utterance completes the frame of *Danger on Peaks* by not completing it: by gesturing toward the unframeable. In the body of the collection, within this unbounded, open-ended frame, a range of different points of view arise.

The capacity to inhabit different viewpoints (and to shift between them) is one of Snyder’s recurrent interests throughout his work, where it is often used as a strategy to negotiate a path through dualistic thought. So in *Danger on Peaks*, when he visits the blast zone after the volcanic eruption of Mount St. Helens and sees the mountain he climbed battered down and the trees all lying flat, the speaker recalls Dōgen, the thirteenth-century Zen ancestor who is always present somewhere in the later work. How to make sense of the place as it is now? From what perspective may it be interpreted? “Do not be tricked by human-centred views,’ says Dōgen” (20).

In this context, the practice of walking the “path which goes beyond” engages what Mahayana Buddhism has traditionally called the Two Truths—that is, the simultaneous reality of both Absolute and Relative points of view. Both are said to be true at the same time: the (relative) impression that things are real, solid, individual entities, *and* the (absolute) nondual perspective that is unattached to such essences or to the oppositional world of selves and others that they materialize. In representing the simultaneity of these “two” truths, Snyder’s writing evokes, in fact, not two, but an impression of multiple viewpoints or focal settings, the possibility of a sort of cosmic zoom. Again, Dōgen’s understanding of things is an informing presence. In the extraordinary key text for Snyder, “Mountains and Waters Sutra,” he shows that, depending on how you look at them, mountains may be hard and everlasting as stone, or they may flow like water. Water itself may be empty and transparent, or full of a world of sentient beings. And so on. (Dōgen’s sutra is explored by Snyder in imaginative detail in the essay “Blue Mountains Constantly Walking,” in *The Practice of the Wild* [97–115]).

In *Danger on Peaks*, this sense of a potentially fluid or mobile point of view permeates the apprehension of both “space” and “time,” working to unsettle the hegemony of habitual perspectives or focal settings: human-centered views. With regard to spatial shift, the focus of the speaker’s attention is free to move across the collection from the wide, high transcendent view at the top of Mount St. Helens to historical narratives and personal stories, all the way to the tiny immediacies of phenomenal things, nonhuman beings: the bodies and breath of little birds, cats, squirrels. In the heart of the book, clusters of tiny imagist poems present small, ephemeral, transient things, living beings whose persistent lifeways qualify the delusion of anthropocentrism. In the section “Yet Older Matters,” under the heading “Brief Years,” Snyder assembles poems about nonhuman beings with titles such as “Baby Jackrabbit” (27), “Asian Pear” (28), and “Yowl” (30). And the later section, appropriately named “Dust in the Wind,” includes others such as “Gray Squirrels” (79) and “Spilling the Wind” (81).

These tender glimpses of nonhuman beings seen in their immediacy might appear to be “mundane,” quintessentially this-worldly. They are also, definitively, records of

impermanence: brief years, dust scattered in the wind. Yet there is also a sense in which the reality of these transient beings reveals the whole living system and points to that which goes “beyond.” In “A Dent in a Bucket” (26), all it takes is three lines to evoke a conversation between a domestic human and the wild. “The world” (as Snyder puts it in “The Etiquette of Freedom,” his essay on wildness as instruction in the way of liberation [1990, 19]) “is watching”:

Hammering a dent out of a bucket
a woodpecker
answers from the woods

In the next small poem, a baby jackrabbit lies dead on the ground, its poignant furry body witness to the living wisdom of the food chain: “back of the neck ate out, / life for an owl” (27). And here’s another that simply observes the buoyant, joyous life of tiny birds, in the next small poem “How”:

How

small birds flit
from bough
to bough to bough

to bough to bough to bough (29)

In a way that is curiously comparable to the spacious high view from the mountain, the quality of attention that these little poems evoke suggests a point of view that is exceptionable in its detachment from the compelling grand narratives that might serve to overwhelm it: human narratives such as those of business, money, power, war, and the suffering that they make manifest. Instead, the speaker responds attentively and lovingly to the precise qualities of the present moment. And an alternative to tyranny and delusion is effected by dwelling on the sentience and interconnectedness of the smallest beings: Blake’s “minute particulars,” or what Snyder described, as early as 1967 in the Road Apple interview, as “the preciousness of mice and weeds” (*The Real Work* 17).

In a similar movement between vastness and particularity, the collection seeks to extend readers’ default notions of time or history, and to unsettle the priorities these tend to embody. Repeating a characteristic gesture toward so-called deep time, several pieces in *Danger on Peaks* locate contemporary human agency in relation to great eons of geological change and the long, wandering story of evolution. Again, in the section “Yet Older Matters,” a poem with the same title reflects on the composition of a rain of meteorite: “Crunched inside yet older matter / from times before our very sun” (25). The effect is to situate the joys and conflicts of recent history in relation to the prehistoric. This gesture is instructive in terms of Snyder’s response to suffering, since to locate the urgency of present events in such an unimaginably long timespan cannot but undermine their claim to totalizing authority.

Snyder has often experimented with dating things against what he has considered the 40,000 years of human culture, and to imagine contemporary life in relation to the deep past (see, for example, “24: IV: 40075, 3.30 PM in Axe Handles” (71), or “What Happened Here Before” from Turtle Island [78–81]). Now the speaker very explicitly situates the present in terms of an awareness of the continuity of this deep inheritance. So in “Sand Ridge,” he addresses an ancient ridge of “sand and summer snow and hardy flowers” and imagines tracking its long presence on the planet: “Walk that backbone path / ghosts of the pleistocene icefields / stretching down and away / both sides” (*Danger on Peaks* 38). Again, these lines gesture to the “beyond.” The implication is: do not be tricked by human-centered views.

At the other end of time, many of the poems in *Danger on Peaks* engage in close detail with activities that take place in the daily lives of particular human people, the things we do and make to give our lives meaning in the midst of pain and impermanence. So while one section is called, explicitly, “Daily Life” (39–56), the whole collection is peopled with stories of family, friends, home, work, food, love. In addition to poems about domestic activity (such as “Baking Bread” [83], or “To All the Girls Whose Ears I Pierced Back Then” [64]), several ponder the beautiful complexities of inter-human relationships (“What to Tell, Still” [41–42], “Waiting for a Ride” [56], “Coffee, Markets, Blossoms” [66]), and there is a recurrent concern to use literary language to articulate a steadying (and healing) practice in relation to personal suffering. In “Summer of ’97” (47–49), he describes the joyful experience of working with friends collectively to build an extension to the family house at Kitkitdizze. Right in the midst of the poem is Carole’s illness (her brave laugh, her leaving for hospital, the grieving crew, Carole finally coming home), yet the creative activity of working together on the house is represented as something wonderfully affirming: “This has been fun as heaven” (49). And in “One Thousand Cranes” (94–95), Snyder tells the story of visiting an Asian crafts store of this name in Berkeley, and of talking to the owner about watching the astonishing sandhill crane migration with Carole from their home. The cranes, and the wonder of their life, occupy most of the piece, but their presence is presented as a response to suffering. In the opening sentence, he writes, “When Carole had a bad cancer prognosis some years back, several of her relatives got together and started folding the little origami called ‘cranes’” (94).

It is a long-held view of Snyder’s that the life tracks of the people (and other animals) who inhabit the world are both poignantly ephemeral and, at the same time, another instance of what he calls in this collection “yet older matters.” In a little poem from *Left Out in the Rain* (1988) called “What history fails to mention is,” he puts it like this: “What history fails to mention is / Most everybody lived their lives / With friends and children, played it cool / Left truth & beauty to the guys / Who tricked for bigshots, and were fools” (161). Now *Danger on Peaks* confirms this conviction that the joys and sufferings of domestic intimacy is the ancient human story that continues, regardless of those in positions of authority, unremembered by history.

In all this, Snyder questions and seeks at many levels to subvert the hegemonic relations between center and periphery. But this gesture is not a simple reversal of power that

aims to instate an otherwise disempowered/silenced/marginalized point of view. Instead, it is a more subtle and difficult strategy, which seeks to dissolve the oppositional relation of center and margin by actually subverting the delusion that maintains the dualism.

The clearest example of this strategy at work is in his response to the familiar opposition of city and country: the (centralized, civilized, powerful) city versus rural wildness. As much of the writing states explicitly, if you interrogate the centers of human power, they are found to be empty, nothing there; and even in the most metropolitan of cities, wildness will not go away—it permeates every-thing. *Practice of the Wild* is directly concerned with this, most obviously in the essay, “The Etiquette of Freedom” (3–24). The poetry is also rich in examples. In “Revolution in the Revolution in the Revolution,” the country surrounds the city, the back country surrounds the country, and power comes not from the Pentagon, but from the tiniest seed of mantra (*Regarding Wave* 39). And in *Turtle Island* (1974), often thought of as his most politically engaged collection, the attempt to interrogate the heart of the beast at the Capitol leads to the discovery that it is empty: “the center / The center of power is nothing! / Nothing here. / [...] The world does what it pleases” (44). More recently, the grid of structures that make up New York City is described in *Mountains and Rivers Without End* as a complex ecosystem in which, for all the evidence of metropolitan conquest, wildness endures. Peregrine falcons nest on the thirty-fifth floor, and deep beneath the city, ancient rivers still flow: “Down deep grates hear the watercourse, / Rivers that never give up” (99).

Danger on Peaks explores this perspective further, implicitly presenting it as a vehicle of healing. Two poems in particular develop on the teenage Snyder’s luminous vision of a realm of clouds and cranes as described in the high spiritual view from the peak of Mount St. Helens at the beginning of the book. Decades later, the elder speaker sees the same birds in the context of daily life. In “Really the Real,” the speaker witnesses, just a few miles from the big state highway, “what you might call, / *really* the real, world”: hundreds of sandhill cranes pacing, calling, and gurgling in the wetlands, their ebullient life precisely an instance of the qualities Snyder has celebrated as the wild: “chaotic, leaderless, harmonic, playful—what are they doing? / Splendidly nowhere thousands” (51). In another example, Gary and Carole watch at least a thousand cranes flying over their home; it is the fact of their presence as a manifestation of wildness that confirms the traditional Japanese association of the migratory birds with healing and renewal (94–95). In this way, cranes appear in the collection as an embodiment of the resilient continuity of sentient life, at ease in the midst of our most fraught and developed civilization and all its ills (and joys).

This understanding of “wildness” or “the wild” in terms that resist the dualisms of nature/culture could be Snyder’s most significant contribution to contemporary ecological thought. It is also a powerfully subversive articulation of the “fight” against authoritarian cruelty and greed that his fifteen-year-old self vowed to take up, and one instance of the healing path that goes beyond. Crucially, this view of wildness challenges the oppositional terms (enemy, contest, combat, even fighting itself) of that original vow.

The final section of *Danger on Peaks*, titled “After Bamiyan,” considers these issues directly, facing some of the hugely difficult ambiguities of our inheritance of human culture: Snyder strives to respond to Bamiyan, to 9/11, and to humanity’s continuing war against the biosphere. Reflecting on Denis Dutton’s beautiful poem (101), he uses the destruction by the Taliban of the “giant, gleaming, painted carved-out” Buddhas in March 2001 as an opportunity in which to invoke the possibility of sanity and clarity: “May we keep our minds clear and calm and in the present moment, and honor the dust” (101). In September of the same year, the same gesture is extended, once again finding refuge in impermanence, “the dust”: “The men and women who / died at the World Trade Center / together with the / Buddhas of Bamiyan, / Take Refuge in the dust” (102). Following from this view, the next poem, “Loose on Earth,” goes on to describe humanity as: “a quick // explosion on the planet / we’re loose on earth / half a million years / our weird blast spreading–” (103). Here the atomic catastrophe of August 1945, which was the catalyst for the teenage speaker’s initial awakening of conscience, becomes an iconic image for the “half-million-year long slow explosion of human impact” that the elder Snyder described to me as an ongoing “war against nature” (*Nobody Home* 56). Yet even in articulating the present catastrophe in this way, his characteristic orientation to foreground wildness as a corrective to “human-centred views” means that the poem ends with a reminder of continuity and the long, long view. Beyond the rubble and debris of our human impact, after millennia of weathering, the green wild endures ineradicably: to “soften, fragment, / sprout, and green again” (*Danger on Peaks* 103).

In these poems, the capacity to kindle fire is one expression of the ambiguity of our inheritance as human beings. In a sense, Snyder seems to suggest, the fire that makes us human is a terrifying explosion, a “weird blast,” its artifacts ceaseless wars and bombs. Yet fire is also hearth, home, the unextinguished flame of spiritual practice, and the making of things like poems or massive stone-carved Buddhas. In this unsettling context, impermanence is the condition that makes it possible for us to wake up, and this precious human birth is an opportunity for awareness, even liberation. In this final section of the book, Snyder’s voice speaks more explicitly than before from his lifetime Buddhist practice, evoking his role in that environment as a teacher of meditation. This orientation, which seeks to cultivate calm and compassion in the midst of the raging inferno of suffering and confusion (whether public or personal), is expressed most poignantly in the poem “Falling from a Height, Holding Hands” (104). Here Snyder’s characteristic focus on the precious intimacy of human relationships in the present moment becomes the lens through which great terror is experienced and transmuted. Watching the catastrophe of 9/11 on television, the speaker witnesses something astonishing. The two people on the screen become not “they,” but “we,” and their fall into death is transformed into a dive, all the way down:

What was *that*?
storms of flying glass
& billowing flames

a clear day to the far sky—

better than burning,
hold hands.

We will be
Two peregrines diving

all the way down

The final poem, “A Turning Verse for the Billions of Beings,” recalls the spacious nondual view he witnessed as a teenager from the summit of Mount St. Helens. Invoking purifying words of healing and transformation for the billions of beings in all the realms implicated in our world, words here take the role of ritual utterance (107). In this way, the end of the book points again outside the frame, to the path that goes beyond, and beyond beyond.

Moving focal settings between relative and absolute ways of seeing, between intimacy and vastness, form and emptiness, *Danger on Peaks* responds to the experience of global conflict and personal pain by reminding readers of the continuity of wildness, affirming the value of art, and invoking an ancient practice of wisdom and compassion. This implies another vow: the bodhisattva’s commitment to the liberation of all beings. Amid the recent devastations of human civilization, the social and ecological suffering in both North and South, the book is a radical performance of another aspect of the culture we inherit. I read it as an engaged demonstration of detachment that enacts how a practiced mind may be at ease and free to move within and beyond whatever grids of coercion and delusion might serve to confine it. Yet the capacity for this detachment is useless without the imaginative identification we call compassion. For a Buddhist practitioner, this is the work of a skillful mind: to see beyond, to teach this seeing, and always to use its insight for the healing and liberation of other beings, whatever this takes.

In *Turtle Island*, Snyder described this pathless path as follows:

the path is whatever passes – no
end in itself.

the end is,
grace – ease –

healing,
not saving. (6)

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