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*Photograph of Gary Snyder
by Dianna Smith*

Why we Czechs can understand Gary Snyder poetry

Luboš Snížek

The question, why we Czechs can understand Gary Snyder poetry, isn't as easy as it seems. Let me try to find some satisfying answers.

If the poetry of this American poet is able to address people all around the world (the edition of this magazine is a proof of it), it has to contain Something that touches something inside us despite the color of our skin, the cultural and political-social context or our individual dispositions.

It is possible to enter into the world of Gary Snyder through many doors. For me and my generation (I am a man of forty) it was the door of literature: the Beat generation poetry and then our interest in the hippie movement and counter culture generally. But the next doors are ecology, Buddhism & Zen, or an interest in the life-style of American Indians in the environment of Central Europe. And other doors can be the interest in primitive tribal cultures, or mythology, or just liking for the story telling. All places behind these doors are interconnected and all these doors are open and we can go through them if we want to. As we find very easily, all these doors lead into nature.

The contact of my generation with nature wasn't as tight as in the Gary Snyder life, but it was very close. I can rewrite a Gary Snyder phrase: We Czechs are all yokels.

In former Czechoslovakia every family had parents or grandparents or other relatives who lived in the villages. So we knew the real life in the countryside (however damaged by the collective farming it was): domestic animals and their breeding, feeding, caring for and slaughtering, and also wildlife: mouflons, deer, boars, hares, buzzards, jays, quails, ants & beetles. So I dare to say that every kid of my generation knew some typical village

works and activities such as cone harvesting, sawing and cutting, bringing water from the well, mowing, picking mushrooms (Czechs, Slovaks, Poles or Russians know edible mushrooms well and eat them) and berries (strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, blackberries) and so on.

The truth is that the times are changing and the situation today is a little different. The countryside is more and more the place for holiday and less and less the place of agriculture. Today not everyone has a relative who practices farming.

On the other side more and more young people want to practice an ecological agriculture, practice the alternative, self-sufficient life style. In that case Gary Snyder poetry and essays can be a good wilderness and nature guidebook for them. And it also works this way for some time.

But the doors of his works introduce us into deeper and further countries.

Gary Snyder poetry has two levels – the first: a nice story telling, the second: a theme for hard study.

We can read the poetry almost as a fiction. His poetry tells us the story (whether dreamy, mythical, surreal or real). That's why Snyder poetry and essays are easy to read and understand for workers, white-collar workers, farmers, politicians, scientists or philosophers. It's open to everybody with the open mind and to everybody who wants to take it in.

Well, maybe Czechs and other nations with a totalitarian experience have an advantage over the others because they know very well how to read between the lines. No doubt, the places, where his story (his story – history) goes on, have a certain hallmark of

exoticism for Central Europe readers, but the feelings, impressions, and messages which his story relays are generally transmittable. We can say his poetry is local, but its lesson has a global validity.

It's important for us that such a "simple" story excites our desire to know more, to know what happened before, what will happen after, why it happened and why it is happening just now. The poetry forces us to search, find and check some information and to educate ourselves.

Furthermore, or vice versa – for the contemporary well-traveled young generation who has experience with the global world, the reading of Snyder poetry could arouse interest in the local world.

Gary Snyder is a good storyteller.

He tells lightly, but big events enact under the surface of the tale: the continents move, "diamond drill of racing ice melt waters" works, the woods are being cut or dried, the man is reaching the enlightenment under the new moon tongue, is moved by the flowing of the little creek or by the majesty of mountains.

We are drawn into many ecological, geological, philosophical, spiritual, etymological, or just skillful topics, into the human and non-human relationships, into the transfers of energies, energies of water, rocks and butterflies, into the history of the human race, into the world of shamans and dancers, and old ways. And when we are in danger of being lost in these worlds, the poet splashes us with cold water and lets us go our own (spiritual) way.

It's nice, funny, inspiring and also risky and dangerous. The positive aspect is that we still remain free. And we can go back home at any time. Maybe.

I don't know if my attempt to find some satisfying answers brings any new or specific aspects in comparison with other translators. The fact is that Gary Snyder is well known in the Czech Republic as the Thoreau-esque personality of the world ecological movement. Gary Snyder as a poet is on the second place. However, we can take the ecological aspect of his work as one of the doors to his poetical/philosophical realm.

The first step was done in 2002 during the exhibition "Wilderness – Nature, Soul, Language", and the international conference "Wilderness as the Phenomenon of Integral Culture" at Klatovy-Klenová Gallery in the Šumava region, which was dedicated just to him and the Czech painter, typographer and philosopher Josef Váchal (1884 – 1969).

For me as the translator, Gary Snyder poetry has one more important aspect – his language. He doesn't tell the story with the help of some words. In his poems the words themselves are the storyteller, each with its own story (history). As a poet, he is just "the speaker".

So, how is it possible to translate them into the another language?

I've been reading and trying to translate Gary Snyder poetry and essays for almost twenty years – primarily as unpublishable stuff, now for publishing. But I can never say: "Vow, the translation is finished".

It's very hard to find, for example, the right expressions for technical terms, activities, or some special equipment for the wood-cutting, when the system of forest harvesting in the Czech Republic is a little different from the one in the USA. It is inspiring, but it's not the main problem of translation.

These English monosyllabic words! How many, how nice, how voiced! And Gary Snyder poetic language and his spare way of phrasing!

I like it but how to say it in Czech, when the Czech equivalent for most English monosyllabic words is disyllabic at least? When the Czech words are more "lazy", they are poetical in a different way and I want to try to hold Gary Snyder rhythm.

It's a challenge. So, due to Gary Snyder poetry and essays I still discover strange "back countries" of the Czech language. The more I find, the larger the region of the Czech language is. Due to Gary Snyder I learn and love Czech. What more could I wish?

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