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Pattern Which Connects: Metaphor in Gary Snyder's Later Poetry

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

JULIA MARTIN University of the Western Cape South Africa The Pattern Which Connects: Metaphor in Gary Snyder's Later Poetry What pattern connects the crab to the lobster and the orchid to the primrose and all the four of them to me? And all the six of us to the amoeba in one direction and the backward schizophrenic in another? (Bateson, 16-17) With one or two exceptions, critical readings of Gary Snyder's poetry have argued that he makes little use of metaphor. On this point critics have taken the lead from Thomas Parkinson, whose comments in 1968 seem to have set the trend for many later readers (Parkinson 624). Following Parkinson's emphasis there have been several very useful commentaries which I do not wish to question here.¹ The problem with this kind of analysis is, however, that it tends to overlook the

appearance in the poetry of structures which I can only term metaphoric. This is particularly clear in the later poetry, which has so far received rather scant critical attention. Robert Kern has shown how Snyder's use of syntax and open forms is intrinsic to the "ecological consciousness" which the poetry proposes. My reading suggests that the use of metaphoric structures is as important in this respect. The view which Snyder once rather whimsically called the "Avatamsaka ("Flower Wreath") jewelled-net-interpenetration-ecological systems -emptiness-consciousness" (The Old Ways 64), is surely his most significant contribution to the reconciliation of personal, political and religious models.* And in the later poetry this view of things is often most clearly expressed by means of metaphoric structures. * In parenthetical references, titles of works by Snyder will be abbreviated as follows: AH—Axe Handles (North Point Press, 1983); EHH—Earth House Hold (New Directions, 1969); RW—Regarding Wave (Fulcrum, 1970); TI—Turtle Island (New Directions, 1974); TOW—The Old Ways (City Lights, 1977); TRW—The Real Work: Interviews and Talks 1964-1978 (New Directions, 1980). 100 Western American Literature The Avatamsaka model has been discussed at some length—what has been variously called Snyder's "ecological consciousness," or his idea of "interbirth," "True Communism," and so on. But it is still useful to identify its main features. In a paper given at the Ethnopoetics conference in 1975, Snyder made what I consider to be his most intriguing comment on the subject: From the standpoint of the 70's and 80's it serves us well to consider how we relate to those objects we take to be outside ourselves —non-human, non-intelligent, or whatever. (TOW 9-10) The phrase "objects we take to be outside ourselves" refers here to everything which, in an epistemology of oppositional relations, is habitually defined as "other." From the position of phallogocentric culture then, this has meant: nature, women, "other" races, animals, the body, the "primitive," etc. The corollary of this sort of division is an idea of the individual (person, species, community, etc.) as being a self-contained unit, existing in opposition to other such entities. Working as I do in apartheid South Africa, one is confronted every day with some of the political implications of this sort of binarism. In Snyder's work this aspect is an important one, but his analysis does not originate in a study of ideology. His critique of oppositional epistemology derives largely from his studies in ecology, systems biology and Buddhism. These disciplines also propose an alternative view which informs the poetry. Recent work in ecology and biology has shown that the relation of an individual organism to its environment is that of one open system to another, and that to conceptualize these systems as being "closed," in competition, or in opposition to each other, is to falsify the necessary exchange between them. Buddhism similarly stresses the deficiency of a dualist model in which the skin-bound observer is separated from a world to which s/he stands in opposition. Consequently one commentator defines the term "maya," illusion, as "the power whereby the individual consciousness, distinguishing itself from others, considers itself separate from them" (Woodroffe, 101). If this oppositional separation is illusory, then the practice of meditation...

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The Pattern Which Connects: Metaphor in Gary Snyder's Later Poetry

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