

The Etiquette of Freedom: Gary Snyder, Jim Harrison, and The Practice of the Wild
Ed. Paul Ebenkamp
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*The wild requires that we learn the terrain, nod to all the plants and animals and birds, ford the streams and cross the ridges and tell a good story when we get back home (Gary Snyder, *The Etiquette of Freedom* [55])*

Gary Snyder's voice resounds across the long shot of the vast Pacific Ocean in the establishing shot of John J. Healey's new film *The Practice of the Wild*. The encompassing wild wave of the ocean is a transcendental cipher in both the transcendentalist movement and East Asian Buddhism, both important in Snyder's work, signifying for the former, nature's sublimity, and for the latter, awakened mind. Healey then shows us scenes from both the urban and rural landscapes, foreshadowing Snyder's comments about the importance of understanding nature not in the exclusive sense of The Great Outdoors, but inclusively as everything within the known universe, much as physicists do.

The Etiquette of Freedom: Gary Snyder, Jim Harrison, and The Practice of the Wild is a valuable book that can be seen a companion text to the film. *The Practice of the Wild* is the centerpiece of the project. The film is a brief (52 minutes) composition of black and white film footage and photos, smatterings of conversation between Snyder and Harrison, conversation around the dinner table with others, Snyder reading some of his better known poems, and reminiscences by Joanne Kyger, Michael McClure, Jack Shoemaker, with critical statements by Scott Slovic. Fans of Snyder will enjoy the black and white footage of him on his motorbike in 1950s San Francisco, complete with "end the war" inscribed on the oil cover just below the seat and gas tank, and his reading of "Hay for the Horses" which segues, in a nice bit of editing, with the author reading it in a clean, sparse, well-lit room. While I enjoyed these moments in the film, the most interesting and sometimes poignant moments occur in the flashes of conversation between Snyder and Harrison.

In their excerpted conversations around which all the other filmic elements revolve, Snyder and Harrison touch upon many of the themes familiar to readers of Snyder's work over the last 50 years; however, those new to Snyder will not feel lost because the way in which the two authors converse is casual and exoteric rather than formal and esoteric. I have to say, though, that there is a moment in the film when Harrison is asking Snyder about the recent death of Snyder's wife, Carole, and Snyder tells him that he wrote a poem about it and that he will show Harrison at a later date. It feels as though I am spying on the two men at an intimate moment but with a conflicting desire to see/hear the poem. This moment in the film opens a new view of Snyder in which we have not seen him before. The intimacy of Snyder's responses is due, in part, to the deep questions posed by Harrison.

While the film as a whole does not add to the scholarly appraisal of Snyder's work, some scholars may be interested in the discussion between Snyder and Harrison about the origin of the "How Poetry Comes to Me" poems that emerged on a two day hike in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. This now famous trip became the basis for Jack Kerouac's 1958 novel, *The Dharma Bums*, in which Snyder is fictionally portrayed as Japhy Ryder the "great new hero of American culture" (32). Snyder recalls that the poem "came to me, actually, camping one night in the Northern Sierra, and it actually happened the night that I went up that peak on the Northern Sierra boundary line, the Matterhorn, with Jack Kerouac" (61).

The film's extra features are worth mentioning as they contain additional remarks, in the case of the commentators, and the full reading that Snyder gave for the film of which only a few poems were used. My only criticism of the use of commentators is that there isn't more use of Kyger and McClure in the film; however, what we do have are some thoughtful, personal and critical observations by Kyger, McClure and Shoemaker. The critical literary comments offered by Slovic are useful if the viewer is not familiar with the environmental and philosophical context of Snyder's work. In other words, there's not a lot here for seasoned Snyder scholars. Yet, I don't think that the filmmakers and producers are aiming for a critical study of Snyder. Producer Will Hearst, in his "Foreword" to *The Etiquette of Freedom*, suggests that the idea of the film was to put Harrison and Snyder together and let "the story of Gary's life and how he came to think the way he does [emerge] from their conversations" (viii).

As the titles of both the film and book suggest, Snyder's collection of essays, *The Practice of the Wild*, is the reference point for the project. Hearst tells us that he first contacted Snyder when he "was the editor and publisher of *The Examiner*, in San Francisco" (vi). He invited Snyder to submit a piece for the Op-Ed page and the author sent him "The Etiquette of Freedom" later published as the lead essay in *The Practice of the Wild* (vi). It was Harrison who initially suggested to Hearst that Snyder would make a good subject for a documentary. So, the film, the book, and the direct use of *The Practice of the Wild* are set into a kind of dialogue with each other that speaks not only to Hearst's and Harrison's interest in Snyder but also long-standing themes in the author's life work, "the real work/ 'What is to be done'" (*Turtle* 9).

Editor Paul Ebenkamp constructs *The Etiquette of Freedom* in four parts with the definitions of *wild* at the beginning of the text proper.¹ Part One is entitled "Working Landscapes" and is an interesting assemblage of conversation not included in the film, quotes taken from the various essays comprising *The Practice of the Wild*, quotes from 13th century Soto Zen Master Dogen (1200-1253),² and a few black and white photographs from the years 1940-1986. Part Two is a transcript of the film that includes stills taken during the making of the film (these are also available on *The Practice of the Wild* Facebook page). Part Three is entitled "Further Talks" and includes outtakes from the Snyder-Harrison conversation as well as a sub-section entitled "Outtakes" with further comments from Shoemaker, Kyger, McClure, and Slovic. Part Four contains all the poems that Snyder reads both during the film and as an extra feature on the DVD. Ebenkamp also includes a "*Biographies and Reading Lists*" section for both Snyder and

¹ This text appears in the essay "The Etiquette of Freedom" (*Practice* 9-10).

² Gary Snyder has made a recording of selections from Dogen's *Shobogenzo* ("moon in a dewdrop"), entitled *Zen Teachings of Zen Master Dogen*. Phoenix Audio. Abridged Edition, 2008.

Harrison which will be a big help for those coming to one or both of these writers for the first time.

My only complaint is that the film is too short. Maybe it's because I love to hear Snyder speak and hear his insights that I write this. But there are some thought provoking moments of conversation, such as Snyder's explanation of what he means by nature, and his comments on Zen Buddhism, that make the book but are excised from the final cut of the film. Maybe this is why we are offered both film and book. The book acts as a supplement to the film, and because it is primarily the transcript of the film plus outtakes it makes an excellent companion for those looking for more substance than the film offers. The two work together enlarging our understanding of Snyder and how those closest to him have understood him and his work through the years. One might say, as I am tempted to do here, that the film is a brief portrait of a man, poet, essayist and teacher who has lived his life in an attempt to do something about the environmental crisis we have been in and to make himself native to his place—what Snyder has called, since the 1970s, reinhabitation. By the end of the film, however, what was more apparent to me was the phenomenon of death and impermanence.

Watching Snyder and Harrison walking and talking and also seeing Kyger and McClure prompted a sense of grief in me. These people whom I've been reading for such a long time are getting old! The sparkle is still in their respective eyes and voices, but the tell-tale signs of the passing of time is writ large on their bodies. So, it seemed appropriate to roll the credits and have the last topic of conversation be about death, aging, and Zen Buddhist conceptions of non-identity. It is appropriate to end the film with Snyder reading "They're Listening," a poem that challenges us to think not in terms of the short range of temporality, but in the long range of geologic time—giving us a longer view of life that exceeds yet includes individual experiences of time.

Works Cited

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