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Critical Essays On Gary Snyder ed. by Patrick D. Murphy
(review)

David H. Stanley

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worshipful over-effusiveness and scathing disgust that mark much of what has previously been noted of this most remarkable era and its colorful inhabitants. For the moment, enough has been recorded of their lives; this history of their times is long overdue.

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Critical Essays On Gary Snyder. Edited by Patrick D. Murphy. (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1990. 267 pages, \$38.00.)

Gary Snyder has generally been treated by critics as a public figure first, as a poet second. In part it is because his life has been so well publicized, first as a member of the San Francisco Beat scene, later as a long-term resident of a Zen monastery in Kyoto, member of a communal ashram on an island in southern Japan, most visible figure in an environmentally centered community in the Sierra foothills, and frequent spokesman against nuclear power, uncontrolled and unplanned rural development, and the destruction of the environment.

The superficial treatment of Snyder's poetry is also attributable, though, to its built-in difficulties. In subject, it is consistently reflective of Snyder's own experiences, moving with time from back-country work in the Pacific Northwest to life in Japan to the raising of children and a home in California to contemporary environmental politics. Yet the poetry is not lyric in the usual sense, for it maintains a kind of flat-surfaced objectivity that avoids self-reflection and moral dilemmas. In structure, Snyder's poetry—highly irregular on the page, rhythmically reliant on breath groups, seemingly intended for reading aloud—owes much to *haiku*, *renga*, and other Chinese and Japanese forms. It is not surprising, then, that most Snyder criticism has focused on the man, his influences, his public role, and his subject matter rather than on the poetry itself, in spite of—or perhaps because of—its remarkable appeal to a wide audience.

This collection of eighteen essays—most reprinted from critical journals, five newly written for this collection—is part of the G. K. Hall series, "Critical Essays on American Literature." The articles range in date from 1968 to 1990 and concentrate primarily on Snyder's "ecological vision," in Tom Lyon's phrase, on his background in logging, trail maintenance, and Buddhist studies, and on his development as a poet. Taken as a whole, the volume provides useful perspectives on Snyder's use of Buddhism and East Asian literatures (in essays by Bert Almon, Jody Norton, and Katsunori Yamazato) and an interesting scanning of American cultural attitudes toward the environment and to the public role of the poet during the last twenty years.

The best of the essays, Robert Kern's "Silence in Prosody: The Poem as

Silent Form" (1981), suggests that Snyder's work "privileges not speech but silence, the latter understood to constitute a reality larger than language can account for." Kern also criticizes, justly, much of Snyder's later work, particularly the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Turtle Island*, as audience-directed and performed primarily for initiates. Unfortunately, the five newly written essays do not measure up to the quality or depth of Kern's and Norton's work, and virtually none of them have the temerity to criticize Snyder's occasional self-indulgences. And oddly enough, none of these essays approach in any depth Snyder's grounding in the American literary tradition, particularly the American romantics and the Williams-to-Rexroth poetic line, nor the influence of prose writers from Thoreau to Aldo Leopold.

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Nominations are invited for the 1991 Don D. Walker Award for the best article on a topic in western U.S. or Canadian literature. Any such article published in 1991 is eligible. The nominating committee especially would welcome nominations from sources they might overlook, such as book-length collections of essays and journals which do not specialize in western regional concerns. Please send nominations by 15 May (with photocopies of articles) to **Charles Crow, Department of English, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH 43403.**