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Gary Snyder, a renowned 20th century American poet, has been strongly influenced by Eastern cultures, especially Chinese. The philosophical spirit of Eastern culture and its intuitive way of thinking have taken root in Snyder’s mind and directly shaped his perception of nature. Hence, in view of the inadequacy of Western literary criticism in interpreting the Eastern dimensions of Snyder’s poetry, this article takes the classical Chinese literary theory “Twenty-Four Styles of Poetry” as its theoretical perspective and uses its categories of “Flowing Movement” and “Lofty and Ancient” to explore how the dissolved or solitary poetic self achieves the mental state of “emptiness” (*kong* in Chinese Taoism and *sunyata* in the Buddhist sense) and creates the poetic worlds of the “flowing movement” and the “lofty and ancient” (transcendence) in Snyder’s poems.

Keywords: Gary Snyder, flowing movement, lofty and ancient, emptiness, self

Introduction

Gary Snyder (*1930) is a renowned contemporary American “nature poet”, prose writer, translator, environmental activist, and one of the representatives of the “Beat Generation”. International studies on Snyder’s poetry lay considerable emphasis on Snyder’s poetics, ecological thoughts and cultural implications in his works. Meanwhile, scholars also noticed that his writing was remarkably



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influenced by his unique experience of oriental cultures. As is known, Snyder has profoundly touched Chinese culture ever since childhood; in college, he studied oriental language and literature, especially Chinese classical poetry, and produced his far-reaching translation of Han-shan poetry; later, he spent over ten years in Japan learning and practicing Zen Buddhism. As a consequence of his study of ancient Chinese poetry and his practice of Zen Buddhism, Snyder's poetry has received profound influence from oriental aesthetics and philosophy. The spirit of oriental culture and its intuitive way of thinking have taken root in Snyder's mind and directly shaped his perception of nature and his way of writing. "The tendency to replace logical reasoning with the way of seeing and feeling things" (Liu, 2001: 77) is the core of Snyder's epistemology. Therefore, it becomes natural that the study of Oriental cultural implications in Snyder's poetry is popular among scholars. Works of this type include Sanehide Kodama's "Gary Snyder's Blended World: American Poetic Tradition and Eastern Cultures" (1983), Katsunori Yamazato's "Seeking a Fulcrum: Gary Snyder and Japan (1956-1975)" (1987) and Chung Ling's article, "The Spread of Hanshan Poetry" (1977). In this aspect, scholars especially pay attention to the influence on Snyder's poetry of Chinese thoughts and Chinese culture¹, "including Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Chinese poetry, painting and calligraphy" (Chung, 2006: 19). The influence of classical Chinese poetry on Snyder's poetry writing is also examined through the analysis of the structure, prosody, imagery, artistic style, and other means of expression in Snyder's poetry, with a special focus on the fusion of eastern and western literature in his poetry. Chung especially examines how Snyder creatively brings renovation to English poetry through his application of classical Chinese poetic rhythm (Chung, 1999); Mao makes comparison between Snyder's poetry and classical Chinese poetry (Mao, 2006: 135-136). Nowadays, the latest academic research in this field has seen a diversification and deepening of these approaches.

Yet, so far, in analyzing the poetic traits and aesthetical styles of Snyder's poetry, scholars still tend to use the theoretical perspectives of western literary criticism. For instance, Charles Molesworth approaches Snyder's writings from the postmodern view (Molesworth, 1983); Tim Dean discusses Snyder and the American landscape in the context of the "unconscious" from the perspective of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's ideas (Dean, 1991); Sharon Ann Jaeger analyzes Snyder's poems by a sociolinguistic approach (Jaeger, 1995). Though, widely and detailedly explored, Snyder's poetry has not yet been fully interpreted, due to the inherent limitation of western critical theories in explaining his oriental implications. This paper will adopt the classical Chinese literary

¹ Snyder himself acknowledges that although he loves Japanese culture, he finds more resonance in Chinese poetry and culture (Snyder 1999: 328).

theory, “Twenty-Four Styles of Poetry”², as the theoretical perspective, apply its aesthetical categories of “flowing movement” and “lofty and ancient” to examine the corresponding poetical worlds in Snyder’s poetry, which, fundamentally, is the result of the poet’s understanding of “emptiness”. This paper attempts to demonstrate that “emptiness” (“Kong” in Chinese Taoism and “Sunyata” in the Buddhist sense), an important concept in Buddhist and Taoist thoughts, participates in the creation of Snyder’s poetical worlds and the generation of a dissolved or solitary poetic self. In this way, this study aims to obtain a better understanding of the oriental aesthetical implications in Snyder’s poetry and to stress the value of ancient Chinese literary heritage in contemporary academic study.

Emptiness: The Starting Point of Snyder’s Poetic Worlds

“Emptiness”, firstly, refers to a mental experience of totally forgetting one’s “self”, both one’s body and mind, by which natural things flow into one’s mind and one is integrated into the natural process. Secondly, “emptiness” means the “primary void”, a state of unsubstantiality, the ultimate non-substance, sunyata, that everything in its nature is void and has no substance, for everything is inter-dependent in the prevalent causal link and nothing can exist independently in itself. This understanding of “emptiness” brings about a removal of egoism and the persistent pursuit of what one excessively clings to, leading to a state of peaceful life with a non-utilitarian and non-ego mind. Thirdly, “emptiness” is to get rid of one’s previous knowledge and views of the world which make people fail to see things as they are. This state of emptiness is, in Zhuangzi, an early Daoist’s words, “empty room generating light”, which is explained as “Emptiness of mind generates enlightenment” (Chen, 2007: 142). The idea of “emptiness” in Snyder’s poetry is the combination of these three meanings; it is a calm and tranquil mentality, with a removal of excessive worries and a fusion with nature.

² “Twenty-Four Styles of Poetry”, regarded as Sikong Tu’s work, occupies an important position in the history of Chinese literary criticism. It classifies poetry styles into twenty-four categories according to the traits of the “Yi-jing” (namely the “poetic world” of a certain poem). Each of the twenty-four categories explains one poetic style (“flowing movement” and “lofty and ancient” are among these twenty-four categories). And each category is expressed with twelve lines of a four-word poem. In this sense, it is “a discussion of poetry with poetry”. With poetic language, it depicts twenty-four poetic worlds that are typical of Chinese aesthetic beauty and of Taoist and Zen Buddhist implications.

Snyder's understanding of "emptiness", a significant concept of Chinese philosophy, comes mainly from his abundant experience of Chinese culture and continuous efforts to comprehend Buddhist and Taoist ideas.³

For one thing, "Taoist aesthetic thoughts have always guided the poet's [Snyder] creation" (Wang, 2007: 96). Snyder holds "a lifelong admiration for the Tao Te Ching" (Chung, 2006: 52) and continues to study its meaning ever since his university period. He, with the guidance of Taoist thoughts, recognizes "emptiness" as "a 'Nothing' that can produce the ten thousand things" and a "marvelous" thing that "the ten thousand things will have" "at the center" (Snyder, 1999: 293-294). He holds that a follower of "Tao" when "forgetting" himself can accomplish "Tao" (Snyder, 2003: 161). In one poem of his poetic collection, "Left Out in the Rain," he writes, referring to the teaching of a Taoist philosopher:

Lao-tzu says
 To forget what you knew is best.
 That's what I want:
 To get these sights down, Clear, right to the place
 Where they fade / Back into the mind of my times [...] Empty 5
 And we are free to go (Snyder, 1986: 130).

He accepts the Taoist teaching of "emptiness" and agrees that one needs to forget what one knew to get natural sights "down" and to be "free to go".

For another, "among the various Asian cultures he absorbed, Buddhism was the most thoroughly implemented one in his own life" (Chung, 2005: 52). In the 1977 interview, Snyder even said: "The spiritual legacy of Chinese culture is essentially Zen Buddhism" (Snyder, 1980: 104). He practised Zen Buddhism in Japan for over ten years, and even after he returned to the northern mountainous area of California in 1969, he continued his avid devotion to Buddhism. "Buddhist enlightenment" "guides him with wisdom to reshape his inner self" (Huo, 2013: 139). Till now, he still practices za-zen and meditation every day, which, he emphasizes, can bring about a removal of self and connect himself with the real world. Snyder understands the infinite emptiness conceived by Buddhist thought. His attention to the concept of "emptiness" in Buddhist thoughts shows in the poem, "The Hump-backed Flute Player", in which he writes: "he carried / 'emptiness' / he carried / 'mind only' " (Snyder, 1996: 79). The main idea of this poem is "the continuous transmission across time and space of the Buddhist doctrine of Emptiness" (Hunt, 1993: 8).

Guided by Taoist and Buddhist ideas, Snyder understands quite well the concept of "emptiness", which plays a significant role in his poetry. Many scholars have therefore commented that Snyder's poetry reaches the stage of "non-ego"; more specifically, in Snyder's own words, it is an abandonment of his sense of

³ Of course, he is not free of other influences, especially Japanese culture.

self-importance and a gain of freedom from the interference of his consciousness of the ego, by which he joins “in a larger moment with the world” (Snyder, 1995: 179), with some deeper aspects coming out and displaying themselves (Snyder, 1980: 21). In such a state of mind, he rids himself of the intellectual way of thinking, exploring the natural essence of things through perceiving and experiencing things as themselves and becoming united with everything in the universe. With his “self” dissolved or solitary, his poetic worlds of the “Flowing Movement” and the “lofty and ancient” (transcendence) come into being.

The Dissolved Self: A Poetic World of Flowing Movement

“Flowing movement”, one of the important categories illustrated in “Twenty-Four Styles of Poetry”, describes a beauty of fluidity, smoothness and movements. It goes as follows:

Like a waterwheel drawing in,
Like rolling the sphere of a pearl –
No! – how can it be spoken of?
Such borrowed forms are clumsy.
Earth rolls boundlessly on its axis; 5
Heaven turns forever on its pivot.
First inquire of their origins,
Then hear of their correspondences.
Passing beyond and beyond into diving light,
Then back and back further to dark nothingness 10
Coming and going, a thousand years –
Might this be what it means.⁴

In the above sequence of twelve lines, every four lines can be seen as a meaning unit (Zhang, 2008: 295-299). The first group expresses the view that the seemingly flowing movements of “a waterwheel” and “a pearl” are only “clumsy” “borrowed forms”, which, being merely superficial, miss the ultimate implications of the flowing movement. Then, the second group points out that the real “flowing movement” is the “heaven” and “earth” moving around their pivots and bringing about endless changes in the entire universe. The flowing movement operates in such vast space that it connects the starting point and the ending point of all changes in the world. The last group implies that the “flowing movement” is a fundamental principle of the universe, “coming and going” in infinite time and space. Such a movement can be seen as the real “flowing movement” with two keywords: firstly, “change”, or the vicissitudes of the world; secondly, “interpenetration”, or the interpenetrative relationship among natural things. These conform to the Buddhist idea of “primary void”, the ultimate non-substance,

⁴ Translation from Yuwen (2003: 383-384).

sunyata, with everything existing in continuous flux and in universal interdependence thus empty in its very nature.

First of all, according to “Twenty-Four Styles of Poetry”, the flowing movement is so difficult to “speak of” that “borrowed forms” have to be applied. In the same way, Snyder’s poetry adopts “borrowed forms” – the flowing imageries to “speak of” and create the poetic world of flowing movement, as they serve as the embodiment or the externalization of universal principles.

The typical “flowing imageries” of Snyder’s poetry are as follows: firstly, the flowing lights including the moonlight (as in “Piute Creek”) and the “starlight” (as in “Pine Tree Tops”); secondly, the flowing air, including the wind, mist and haze, which are common in many of his poems; thirdly, the running water, a main image that runs through Snyder’s whole poetry collection of “Mountains and Rivers without End”, including rivers (as in “The Canyon Wren”), stream (as in “Running Water Music”), the torrent (as in “Meeting the Mountains”), melting snow (as in “O Waters”) and the rains (as generally in his poetry collection “Mountains and Rivers without End”); finally, the traveler on a boat or on a road (typically in “Mountains and Rivers without End”) also “flows”. These images, it is important to note, only when they “flow” and serve as media to connect things, form the poetic world of flowing movement. For example, lights of the moon and stars flow vertically, bridging the great earth and the sky overhead; the air permeates natural space, blending everything together; the water, running either vertically or horizontally, knits its passing spot and stretches the poetic world from its proximity to a distant verge. With these images moving in multiple directions, everything is connected and creates a poetic world of integration and inter-connectedness.

In the second place, with the flowing images connecting things and bringing about movements, the flowing perspective of man, on a higher level, connects those flowing images. In Snyder’s poetry, this flowing perspective is embodied in two elements: in the character of a roaming traveller in the poetic world and in the way of arranging the flowing imagery.

For one, the freely roaming traveller in space can bring about movement in the whole poetic space, even when the flowing images like the water or the wind are invisible. Although human beings seem to be too small in a vast landscape, in a sense, it is through man’s experience and perception that the world exists. The wandering traveller is characteristic of Snyder’s “Mountains and Rivers without End”, who, as a “flowing imagery” unfolds the world with his roaming eyes and presents the poetic world of flowing movement, with himself a part of the whole picture, too.

Hills beyond rivers, willows in a swamp,
a gentle valley reaching far inland.
The watching boat has floated off the page. (Snyder, 1996: 5)

The first two lines of the above poem juxtapose a series of objects and point out their location in a parallel structure. With such arrangement, the general landscape seems still and motionless. In the third line, however, the poetic space flows, simply because of a small “boat”, which is animated and personified, brilliantly indicating the existence of flowing water and the observing (watching) eyes of the poet to enjoy the changing scenery. And the boat that “has floated off the page”, a surrealistic image, enlarges the range of the landscape, extends the flowing movement to the distant space, even beyond the literary world to the actual universe. In this flowing process, the man and the boat become one, the man and the whole space are integrated, and the boat and “the page” can penetrate each other: the distinctions between different things, between man and things and between in-text and out-text are all dissolved. In this way, Snyder’s brief words create a poetic world of flowing movement.

Moreover, the transition of the observing perspective can be seen in the arrangement of the flowing imagery. Not only does the “the unique nature of a single image itself” help in the creation of “beauty of fluidity”, but there is additionally “the combination of different images”, which includes “a shift of imagery”, “a mutual interaction between images” and “a continuous trend of flowing from one image to the other” (Liu, 2017: 55-59). In this respect, Snyder’s poem “O Waters” serves as a typical example:

O waters
wash us, me,
Under the wrinkled granite
straight-up slab,
and sitting by camp in the pine shade 5
Nanao sleeping,
mountains humming and crumbling
snowfields melting
soil
building on tiny ledges 10
for wild onions and the flowers
Blue
polemonium
great
earth 15
sangha (Snyder, 1974: 73)

Here, the arrangement of the flowing images also creates smooth fluidity of the whole poetic world. Waters start the flowing movement in this poem as they “wash us, me”. Here, the poet becomes overlapped with the waters. With a

flowing perspective, the running water knitting things all the way, and the poetic space, originally only including the “granite”, “the pine shade”, then with the transfer of the adjective, expands to include the “humming and crumbling” “mountains” and the “melting” “snowfield”, and narrows down to the “soil” “on tiny ledges”, and “wild” “flowers”. Through such arrangement, the poetic world rolls and turns in its flowing movement, also suggesting a fusion of different elements of reality. With waters “Passing beyond and beyond into diving light, / Then back and back further to dark nothingness”, the poet becomes dissolved into the flowing movement of nature, and utters a brief and mystic conclusion: “great / earth / sangha”: it is a thing or a sense of the secret of the world that cannot “be spoken of”. It is the revelation that comes to the poet, the moment he becomes connected with nature.

In the third place, many of Snyder’s poems bear the inner concepts of “change” and “interpenetration”, which help to construct his poetic world of flowing movement. Snyder’s rich experience in the wild has given him a profound appreciation of nature, enabling him to write quite many poems on the changes in the natural world. In the last part of “Mountains and Rivers without End”, the poet goes into the landscape of an old Chinese painting:

Old ghost ranges, sunken rivers, come again stand by the wall and tell their tale,
walk the path, sit the rains

...

Walking on walking,
under foot earth turns

Streams and mountains never stay the same. (Snyder, 1996: 9)

As is written in these lines, time flows, the “ranges” grow old and “rivers” become sunken; space flows, when “earth turns”; and the poet joins into the flowing world, as he is “walking on walking”, perceiving that the universe never stays the same and “change” and “flux” are its forever operating principle. This is also the fundamental meaning behind the word of “flowing movement” described in “Twenty-Four Styles of Poetry”.

The idea of “interpenetration” is also essential in the formation of Snyder’s poetic world of flowing movement. Hua-yen Buddhism, which has remarkably influenced Snyder, believes that the world bears the “all-embracing, syncretic characteristic”, and lays “particular emphasis on the non-obtrusive and interpenetrative relationships among things” (Huang, 1989: 205). Snyder highly values this “interpenetrative relationships”. He sees the world as an integrated one and in his poem calls the earth a “living flowing land” (Snyder, 1974: 41), where all things are “interdepending”, “interconnected”, “interpenetrating”, “mutually reflecting” and “mutually embracing”. For example, his lines “mountains walking on the water, water ripples every hill” (Snyder, 1996: 8) describe the fusion and mutual reflection of water (soft liquid matter) and mountains (hard solid

matter), which create an integral landscape without distinction. Furthermore, Snyder perceives the principle of the universe behind the phenomenon of "interpenetrative relationships among things". He quotes some lines of Sun Chuo, a Chinese writer of the Eastern Jin Dynasty: "When the Dao dissolves, it becomes rivers, when it coagulates, it becomes mountains" (Snyder, 1999: 313). In his opinion, everything is the externalization of "Dao", or natural principles; "each living being is a whirl in the flow, a formal turbulence" and "a song" of the universal movements (Snyder, 1974: 73).

In the fourth place, the key of Snyder's construction of his poetic world of flowing movement lies in the "dissolvment" of his "self". With a "dissolved" mind, man can connect himself with thousands of things throughout the whole universe. Snyder once wrote in his diary about some natural things of Hua-yen Buddhist meanings: "shifting of light and cloud, perfection of chaos, magnificent *jiji mu-ge*/ interlacing interaction" (Snyder, 1969: 15-16). "*Jiji mu-ge*", a Japanese word, describes a mental state free of any worries and any barriers that separate the man and other things in the world. It is the cancellation of self-importance and the dissolution of one's own existence, through which man becomes immersed into the natural flow of the world and connected with the thousands of things in the universe. The moment when he feels the "nature" of things is the point at which his poetic world of flowing streams finally comes into being. The poem below is an example:

rise on rainbows
and falling shining rain
each drop –
tiny people gliding slanting down:
a little Buddha seated in each pearl – 5
and join the million waving grass-seed-buddhas
on the ground. (Snyder, 1996: 81)

This poem shows the dissolution of the human mind in this world of diverse things. The poet becomes dissolved into the "rainbows", the "shinning rain", the rain "drop" and the "waving grass" and "seeds" with the frequent use of present participles expressing simultaneity. And he perceives in all of them "a little Buddha" that flows through things and removes the separation between things. This is also consistent with the idea of Hua-yen Buddhism, which believes that "all phenomena are and depend on other phenomena" (Huang, 1989: 200), and the Buddha nature exists in everything. With the mind melting and coming into nature, the whole poetic world starts the flowing movement beginning with the antinomy of "rise" and "fall", with the poet unconsciously immersed in his natural surroundings, deriving immense delight from inside. The poem's flowing perspective mirrors the movements and changes in the world, and the dissolved heart removes the barriers between man and natural things, so that the poetic world of flowing movement comes in to being.

The Solitary Self: A Poetic World of the “Lofty and Ancient” (Transcendence)

The category of “Lofty and Ancient” in “Twenty-Four Styles of Poetry” describes a state of transcendence beyond worldly mediocrity, which manifests itself as follows:

The man of wonder rides the pure,
 In his hand he holds a lotus;
 He drifts on through unfathomed aeons,
 In murky expanses in the eastern Dipper,
 And a good wind follows it. 5
 T'ai-hua Mountain is emerald green this night,
 And he hears the sound of a clear bell.
 In air he stands long in spiritual simplicity,
 All limits and boundaries lightly passed.
 The Yellow Emperor and Sage-King Yao are in his solitude 10
 Noble and unique – those mysterious principles he reveres.
 Translation from Yuwen (2003: 345).

As is described here, “the man of wonder” “drifts on through unfathomed aeons”, travels in the endless “murky expanses”, and passes “all limits and boundaries”. He can feel how the fresh and cool wind follows the moon (missed in the translation) that comes out from the “eastern Dipper”; and when he gazes afar to see the “emerald green” “mountain”, “the sound of a clear bell” comes to his ears. At the moment of sudden enlightenment, “the man of wonder” feels something deep and enduring, senses eternity in a state of ancient tranquility, and becomes able to communicate with the ancients. According to “Twenty-Four Styles of Poetry”, poems that bear such atmosphere and aura, can be regarded as “lofty and ancient”.

“Lofty and Ancient” connotes “the ascent of the human spirit to transcend vulgar life” (Zhang, 2008: 258). “Loftiness” is the transcendence in space. The poet stands aloft and travels upwards with the wind, the night sky, or the stars, thus going beyond earthly space. In this way, the distance and contrast between the subject and the object are cancelled with a tranquil aesthetic realm coming into shape. Meanwhile, “ancient”, or “antiquity”, is the transcendence in time. The transcendence of time in Chinese philosophy means “a way to overcome the frail existence of human beings” and it is actually “the cancellation of human materiality and the limits of time” (Zhu, 2006: 192). Many of Snyder’s poems bear the characteristic described in “Lofty and Ancient”.

Firstly, the creation of Snyder’s poetic world of transcendence has much to do with the numerous images of mountains in his poems. He has developed an enduring affection for mountains ever since his childhood. He interprets the mountain world as “verticality, spirit, height, transcendence, hardness, resistance, and masculinity” and considers that “those unearthly glowing floating

Alone in the cold, hardly accessible mountain area, the poet becomes close to both the sky and the earth, where all earthly noises are washed away and his mind becomes solemn and silent. In such solitude, he travels with his distant view “down for miles”, running “through high still air”. His space expands, just as what is stated in “Lofty and Ancient”; the poet passes physical limitations (“All limits and boundaries lightly passed”) and acquires spiritual sublimation (“the Yellow Emperor and Sage-King Yao are in his solitude”).

Many more of Snyder’s poems describe his solemn and detached feeling on mountains (for instance, “Covers the Ground”, “The Circulation of Mr. Tamalpais”, and “Raven’s Beak River at the End”). Mountains have become an indispensable medium for him to express his feeling, confide to and communicate with the universe as well as with himself. “For him, high mountains stand for nobility and transcendence of earthly life” (Chung, 2006: 22). That is why in the mountain world he feels that all natural things “soar above human fickleness” (Snyder, 1999: 313).

Secondly, Snyder’s poetic world of transcendence, however, is not merely about those lofty mountains. Other natural things, like the moon, old trees and rocks, also may form a poetic world of profound silence, from which a sudden moment of enlightenment can lead to the state of transcendence depicted in a poem. The most typical one is Snyder’s own favorite poetic work, “Pine Tree Tops”:

in the blue night
 frost haze, the sky glows
 with the moon
 pine tree tops bend snow-blue, fade into sky, frost, starlight.
 the creak of boots.
 rabbit track, deer tracks,
 what do we know (Snyder, 1974: 33)

5

This short poem contains intense images of loftiness, which connect concrete manifestations of heaven and earth, including the mysterious night sky, the white moonlight, stars overhead, the tall pine trees, frost, and the old tracks of rabbits and deer. All of these are of great height or vastness. As a result, they produce an atmosphere of profound silence, which is ideal for a heart (human being, indicated by “the creak of boots”, the only sound among the vast tranquility) to relax, to meditate, and to feel the delicate essence of natural things. “Twenty-Four Styles of Poetry” has stated that in plainness and quiet, man can perceive the faint, subtle secret of the world (Zhang, 2008: 32). At the moment of boots creaking, the poet’s feet are overlapped with the animal tracks. At this point, a feeling of connection with nature comes to him; it brings about a sudden enlightenment of the final line: “what do we know”. This line shows the transcendence of self and his mind’s self-expression: the poet does not figure out

any specific concept with logical reasoning, he understands that “Mind’s self-expression, which has never existed as such, is mistaken for an object. / Due to ignorance, self-awareness is mistaken for an ‘I’.” (Nydahl 2004: 83). The old philosophical question “What does man know?” is here repeated in a calmly agnostic way in an entirely peaceful natural context.⁷ It seems the poet resorts to his senses to feel the message of nature, as he puts it in another poem:

A clear, attentive mind
Has no meaning
but that Which sees is truly seen. (Snyder, 1965: 8)

Thirdly, the poetic world of transcendence also comes from voices perceived by ears, like the sound of a bell, which can be a typical case. Bell sound can break the original silence, bringing a new silence of solemnity in man’s heart. As its ethereal sound continues to reverberate, it takes people to the remote past, which can be seen in Snyder’s poem “At Maple Bridge”:

Where Chang Chi heard the bell.
The stone step moorage
Empty, lapping water,
And the bell sound has traveled
Far across the sea (Snyder, 1999: 544) 5

The Maple Bridge and the Han-shan Temple in this poem are the very ones in Chang Chi’s⁸ famous poem, “Night Mooring at Maple Bridge”, written more than one thousand years ago. With the ancient people gone, this place conveys a historical grief of vicissitude, as well as a feeling of emptiness and deep silence. In this silence, however, comes a crystalline sound of the temple bell. It lingers and travels far across the sea, extending beyond the limits of space and magically connects the past and the present. This resembles what is said in “Lofty and Ancient”: “T’ai-hua Mountain is emerald green this night, And he hears the sound of a clear bell. In air he stands long in spiritual simplicity, all limits and boundaries lightly passed.” (Stephen Owen, 2003: 345) The sound of a bell can bring about a moment of “spiritual simplicity”, of sudden enlightenment, of eternity, and of an interaction with the remote ancient things. In this way, the poet breaks the limits of time, transcends his present existence and travels to the past.

In short, Snyder’s poetic world of transcendence has double meanings: it can be the poet’s staying alone at secluded heights to go beyond earthly life and enjoy the vastness of nature; also, it can be a heart, in profound silence or calm transparency, detecting the very subtlety and quintessence of things and transcend its life at the moment of enlightenment. During the formation of such aesthetical

⁷ This passage is related to imagist poetry (Hulme, H. D., Flint, W. C. Williams), but with its evocative richness and its incantation of a concretely visualised nature scene, it has its own original character. This reference was suggested to me by Wolfgang G. Müller.

⁸ An ancient Chinese poet (around 753) who lived in the Tang Dynasty.

beauty, it is hard to say whether it is the lofty and ancient world that makes a solitary self, or whether it is the solemn mind that creates the poetic realm of transcendence. It is just like what Snyder says in “Ripples on the Surface”: “the little house in the wild” and “the wild in the house” (Snyder, 1992: 381). The poet travels between the vastness and smallness of the world, which is both crude and fine, ancient and fresh. There, the solitary self shifts between a sense of historical melancholy and an optimistic attitude, displaying his reverence, loftiness and enjoyment in the face of eternity and infinity. In his transcendence of time, space, the self and the present earthly world, the poet achieves profound spiritual freedom, and attains the supreme “emptiness” stage in Chinese philosophy.

Conclusion

Snyder is different from early nature writers and ordinary ecological poets. His poetry bears profound traditional Chinese aesthetic implications, due to his absorption of Taoist and Buddhist ideas and the cream of classic Chinese poetry. Snyder “feel[s] a deep resonance with Chinese poetry” (Snyder, 1999: 328). He loves the beautiful poetic scenery painted in classical Chinese poems and Chinese poets’ smart and temperate way to express the subtlety of the world with brief words. More importantly, he loves their peaceful mind to remove every inner confusion, withstand all outside noise and maintain calm and undisturbed. Like these poets, “emptiness” serves as the starting point of his poetic world by bringing about the dissolution and solitude of his poetic “self”. “Emptiness” is an abandonment of his sense of self-importance to achieve a mental state free from the interference of logical reasoning and to join the natural process of the world. When such mental experience of “emptiness” finds expression in his poems, the poetic worlds of flowing movement and transcendence come into being.

In his poetic world of flowing movement, with a gradual and complete cancellation of self-importance, the poet unconsciously immerses himself into nature, becoming a part of its dynamic process, in which he perceives the endless flux in the universe and the interpenetrative relationship among things. “Flowing imagery” serves as a medium to connect things in his poems, and the poet’s flowing perspective connects those flowing images. As the flowing perspective perceives the movements and changes in the world, the dissolved heart removes the barriers between man and natural things. And his poetic world of transcendence coincides with the solitude of “self”. Being solitary in his silent communication with the world, the poet grows detached from the noisy modern world space and seizes enlightenment from the universe. In a feeling of profound silence and ancient tranquility, the poet transcends time and space,

begins to understand the messages from the nature, achieves profound spiritual freedom, and feels eternity.

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