

## MOTHER GAIA: A GLIMPSE INTO THE BUDDHIST AESTHETIC OF GARY SNYDER

*Jeff W. Russell*

*University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*

Gary Snyder's study of classical Chinese poetry as a graduate student at Berkeley and the subsequent ten years he spent studying Rinzai Zen Buddhism in Japan had a major impact on his poetry.<sup>1</sup> The Sino-Japanese influence is apparent from Snyder's early translations of the T'ang Dynasty Buddhist monk and poet Han Shan (literally Cold Mountain) in 1955<sup>2</sup> as well as in his later incorporation of T'ang<sup>3</sup> poetic forms and a cryptic Buddhist rhetoric that transgresses conventional language and is linked to the experience of enlightenment. The theological aspects of Buddhism in Snyder's poetry have been widely researched,<sup>4</sup> but no study has explicated the infusion of T'ang poetics into Snyder's Buddhist aesthetic,<sup>5</sup> particularly in relation to how form, grammar and a Zen Buddhist perspective of language informs his poetry.

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<sup>1</sup> Ch'an Buddhism was introduced to Japan in the thirteenth century where it is known as Zen Buddhism. Zen as it is used in this paper refers specifically to the teachings of last classical master of Chan Buddhism Yun-men or "Cloud Gate" in China during the tenth century. Yun-men's teachings emphasized and popularized the transmission of enlightenment via the study of the *kōan*. Today, in Japan, the Zen sect known for placing an emphasis on *kōan* study is known as Rinzai Zen.

<sup>2</sup> Gary Snyder's translations of Han Shan or "Cold Mountain" were read for the first time on October 13, 1955 at Six Gallery on Fillmore Street in San Francisco following Allan Ginsberg's famous reading of *Howl*. This Six Gallery happening is often referred to as the birth of Beat literature.

<sup>3</sup> Most critics consider the first half and middle of the eighth century as the height of T'ang Dynasty poetry.

<sup>4</sup> See Sherman Paul, "From Lookout to Ashram: The Way of Gary Snyder," part I, *Iowa Review* 1/3 (Summer 1970): 76-91; Nathan Mao, "The influence of Zen Buddhism on Gary Snyder," *Tamkang Review* 5/2 (1974): 125-134; and Ayako Takahashi, "The Shaping of Gary Snyder's Ecological Consciousness," *Comparative Literature Studies* 39/4 (2002): 314-325.

<sup>5</sup> Paul mentions in passing a relation between Snyder's Zen technique and sparseness and omission in "From Lookout to Ashram," p. 82.

The following poem is sometimes referred to as “Mother Gaia” or “Coaldale.” In 1979 it first appeared in a small printing run of 300 copies titled *Songs for Gaia*,<sup>6</sup> and in 1983 it was included in *Axe Handles*. The following is Snyder’s original version from *Songs for Gaia*:

24: IV:40075. 3:30 PM, n. of Coaldale, Nevada,  
A Glimpse through a Break in the Storm  
of the White Mountains

O Mother Gaia

sky cloud gate milk snow

wind-void-word

I bow in roadside gravel

This poem offers prime examples of Snyder’s use of parataxis. Whatever message is conveyed in “Mother Gaia,” it is not spelled out grammatically. Giles explains parataxis, a primary structural feature of Chinese lyric poetry, as follows:

A Chinese poem has no inflection, agglutination, or grammatical indication of any kind, the connection between which has to be inferred by the reader from the logic, from the context, and least perhaps of all from the syntactical arrangement of the words.<sup>7</sup>

Although spoken Chinese often lacks verb inflection, context is easily grasped in conversation, unlike classical poetry, where countless connotations are often present.<sup>8</sup> The lack of both punctuation and prose sentence construction in “Mother Gaia” mirrors the formal elements of a classical Chinese poem. As in classical Chinese poetry, there is a compact quality and no punctuation in the body of the poem, except for the neologism created by two hyphens: wind-void-word. This lack of

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<sup>6</sup> Gary Snyder, *Songs for Gaia* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 1979).

<sup>7</sup> H. A. Giles, *A History of Chinese Literature* (New York: D. Appleton, 1901), p. 144.

<sup>8</sup> The characteristics of spoken classical Chinese are highly debated.

punctuation and sentence construction suggests the idea of an ever-expanding or circular universe common to many T'ang dynasty poems. Also identical to classic Chinese poetry and in large part Chinese language in general, "Mother Gaia" takes place in the present tense. Even "I bow," the only verb found in the poem, is present indicative and active, conforming to the sense of a continuous present.

Snyder utilizes two paratactic strategies. The first is the visual space between sky, cloud, gate, milk, and snow. In line three, he provides a second strategy, the compound ideograph "wind-void-word." This second strategy engages parataxis not only through style but through character construction as well, since two characters in Chinese can carry two separate meanings and one meaning in combination. The character "dusk" (昏) combining the character "sun" (日) and "roots-into-the-ground" (氏) is a compound Chinese pictograph.<sup>9</sup>

The compounded images create one single Chinese character with one specific meaning made up of multiple visual components similar to Snyder's neologism "wind-void-word." The five words in line two echo the T'ang Dynasty form of five characters per line, as do the five syllables in line one. The relationship between the lines is also not readily apparent, although an experience of passing through a "gate" or "void" is gestured in the poem's center.

Gary Snyder's "Mother Gaia" places itself directly in the tradition of later tenth-century classical Buddhist texts by placing Yun-men, translated literally as Cloud Gate, within the poem itself. Yun-men was one of the last classical Ch'an Buddhist masters. A Chinese calligraphic representation of Yun-men appears in the margin of the second to last page of the small press run of Snyder's *Songs For Gaia*, providing another mode of access into "Mother Gaia," where "cloud gate" appears in the second line: Sky cloud gate milk snow. 雲門 or Cloud Gate not only refers to Yun-men, but also to the sect of Buddhism started by Yun-men, which is

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<sup>9</sup> "Pictographs and ideographs...comprise fifteen percent of the nearly fifty thousand characters included in the largest Chinese dictionaries. The earliest types of characters invented name the most obvious and important nouns and verbs of human life, and thus, they often, particularly in poetry, occupy a much higher percentage of a given text than you would expect them to" in J. P. Scaton, "Once More, on the Empty Mountain," *Manoa: A Pacific Journal of International Writing* 12/1: 126-133.

located on Cloud Gate Mountain in Guangdong.<sup>10</sup> This sect expressed the relation of the sky or heaven to nature and enlightenment through highly cryptic Buddhist rhetoric.

Yun-men helped popularize a rhetorical Buddhist teaching style called the *kōan*. Gary Snyder states that one of his reasons for choosing to study Rinzai Zen in Japan was the challenge of *kōan* study: “Not only do they deal with fundamental riddles and knots of the psyche and ways of unraveling the Dharma, it’s done in the elegant and pithy language of Chinese at its best.”<sup>11</sup> A *kōan* is a type of Zen challenge that prompts its students to step outside of traditional concepts of dualism, language and rationalism, and beyond conventional truths to ultimate truth or awakening.<sup>12</sup> Dale S. Wright describes the rhetorical Zen style of language in detail: “The crucial or focal word in a dialogue came to be called a ‘turning word,’ the word upon which the point of the encounter ‘turns’ and the word carrying the power to turn the mind of participants, audience, or reader.”<sup>13</sup>

Yun-men’s turning words encourage meditation and self-reflexivity, and rouse the listener to ponder the world from multiple angles. These turning words often take the form of communicative acts, silence or “direct pointing,” and are not outside language but paradoxically form part of the Zen Buddhist enlightenment rhetoric. Some examples of Yun-men’s use of turning words or communicative acts include strikes from his staff, threats of striking or just turning his back, and walking out of the hall where he is giving a discourse to disciples.

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<sup>10</sup> Digital edition of Soothill and Hodous' *A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms*: [http://www.human.toyogakuen-u.ac.jp/~acmuller/soothill/soothill-hodous.html#body.1\\_div.1](http://www.human.toyogakuen-u.ac.jp/~acmuller/soothill/soothill-hodous.html#body.1_div.1).

<sup>11</sup> “The Real Work,” *The Gary Snyder Reader: Prose, Poetry, and Translations 1952-1998* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint Press, 1999), p. 96.

<sup>12</sup> “A *kōan* is a Zen presentation in the form of a Zen challenge,” Richard DeMartino, “On Zen Communication,” *Communication* 8/1 (1983): 13-28, as cited in Urs App, *Master Yunmen: From the Record of the Chan Master “Gate of the Clouds”* (New York: Kodansha International, 1994), p. 53.

<sup>13</sup> Dale S. Wright, “Rethinking Transcendence: the Role of Language in Zen Experience,” *Philosophy East and West* 42/ 1 (January 1999): 127.

Urs App translated the *Record of the Chan Master "Gate of the Clouds"* with insightful and extensive commentaries, which is a rare study of the role of *kōans* in Yun-men available in English scholarly circles:

Master Yun-men cited the following episode:  
 Master Chuyuan of Shishuang said: "You must know that there is a phrase of special transmission outside the written tradition."  
 A monk asked Shishuang: "What is this phrase of special transmission outside of written tradition?"  
 Master Shishuang replied: "A non-phrase."  
 Master Yun-men said: "A non-phrase is all the more a phrase."<sup>14</sup>

Yun-men's *kōans* are a vehicle to understanding Zen enlightenment as not being separate from language but a highly nuanced rhetoric of silence. They are a reinterpretation of Bodhidharma's direct pointing to the mind. They are not merely pointless riddles but are designed to displace dependency on conventional concepts of language and rationalism, reorienting the receiver's perception.

Like Yun-men's *kōans*, the props of conventional language – grammar, syntax, punctuation – are removed in "Mother Gaia." The connections between words are left to the reader to interpret. The one case of punctuation in the body of the poem, "wind-void-word," functions as a sort of turning word, the point where conventional linear truth and language are most strongly transgressed. The standard signification for "word" is destroyed and simultaneously the neologism "wind-void-word" is created.

The heart of the poem is also mirrored within this one compound word and multiple connotations must be explored to grasp its significance. Heaven or wind passes through void, a complete absence of wind, where it is transformed to become earth or word. Also, word passes through void to become wind. The center of the newly coined word void points towards a nonduality of heaven and earth along with the death and rebirth of the subject. Much like wind, this emptiness is not completely unseen or unspeakable, it has in effect been spoken and, like the wind, leaves a trace of its existent emptiness.

Word, in its standard truth and signification, has been voided or emptied. This mirrors the primary action of the poem, which is also that of a void. This void functions much like the eye of a storm, sucking every object

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<sup>14</sup> App, *Master Yunmen*, pp. 179-180.

in proximity to its center and jettisoning them. In this loaded action, even the reader's view/attention focuses on passing through absolute and marvelous emptiness taking place in this void. Wright has written extensively on the function of language within the Zen experience:

Upon a Zen cultural-linguistic foundation, and often with a discursive impetus, Zen 'awakening' is commonly conceived as a 'sudden,' 'overpowering,' 'breakthrough' experience. Its power is precisely its 'otherness,' its inability to cohere perfectly with any conventionally established form, linguistic and otherwise. Its most decisive metaphors figure it as an experience of the 'void' at the heart of all things, as emptiness, openness, groundlessness.<sup>15</sup>

Not only is the void a central metaphor for Zen awakening, it is also linked to simultaneity. The experience central to the poem takes place in an instant of time, encapsulated in "A Glimpse:"<sup>16</sup> a momentary shining, or flash. In Ezra Pound's terms, the poem "Mother Gaia" communicates via the image, it "presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time."<sup>17</sup> Although many comparisons have been made between Pound's Sino-Japanese imagist project and its influence on Gary Snyder, "Mother Gaia" has much more to do with cryptic Zen rhetoric and the transgression of conventional language linked via Zen Buddhism to the experience of enlightenment.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Wright, "Rethinking Transcendence: the Role of Language in Zen Experience," p. 134.

<sup>16</sup> See title of "Mother Gaia:" "24: IV:40075. 3:30 PM/n. of Coaldale, Nevada,/A Glimpse Through a Break in/the storm of the Summit of/the White Mountains."

<sup>17</sup> Ezra Pound translated Fenollosa's notebooks, which were derived from Fenollosa's study of Chinese in Japan. He later edited these notebooks into *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* that was first published in the *Little Review* in 1919. Pound popularized Chinese poetry in English and his poems are still the most well known, in "A Retrospect Including A Few Don'ts," *Modern American Poetry*: [http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m\\_r/pound/retrospect.htm](http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m_r/pound/retrospect.htm) (10/04/2003).

<sup>18</sup> For a detailed account of the relationship between Pound and Snyder's orientalizing of American verse, see Robert Kern, "Seeing the World without Language: Gary Snyder and Chinese as American Speech," in

D.T. Suzuki published his second series of *Essays in Zen Buddhism* in English in 1952, three years prior to Snyder's first public reading of "Cold Mountain" in 1955. Suzuki's book helped to popularize Zen in the United States and is often considered to be a sort of canonical textbook for Beat writers. "Suzuki sometimes assumes a dichotomy between silence and verbalism, placing Ch'an at one extremity of this dichotomy."<sup>19</sup> Although Snyder often quotes Suzuki in his essays and discussions of Zen, the interplay between speaking and silence in Gary Snyder's poetry is more in line with current interpretations of the paradox between speech and silence. In more recent commentary, Zen silence and communicative acts are considered a mode of communication that circumvents more conventional modes. According to Youru Wang:

By sustaining the position that their words are not different from silence, and that no word has been spoken about any hypostatizable reality, the Chan masters move away from entifying and help people detach from their words. On the other hand, by underlining the non-saying or silence, by treating their saying as something like the finger pointing to the moon (as they always say), pointing to what has not been spoken or what cannot be adequately spoken, Chan masters virtually say a great deal. In this way, Chan masters play on and around the boundary of language without being obstructed.<sup>20</sup>

In a 1970 interview, two years following his return from Japan, Snyder explains the relation of poetry to the heart of the Buddhist experience as the razor's edge between what can and cannot be said:

The true poem is walking that edge between what can be said and that which cannot be said. That's the real razor's edge. The poem that falls all the way over into what can be said can still be very

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Robert Kern, ed., *Orientalism, Modernism, and the American Poem* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>19</sup> From Youru Wang, "Liberating Oneself from the Absolutized Boundary of Language: A Liminological Approach to the Interplay of Speech and Silence in Chan Buddhism," *Philosophy East & West* 51/1 (2001), p. 85.

<sup>20</sup> Wang, "Liberating Oneself from the Absolutized Boundary of Language," p. 93.

exciting, but the farther it is from the razor's edge the less it has of the real magic.<sup>21</sup>

"Mother Gaia" utilizes the unspoken, visual space between images. This becomes a kind of communicative silence. We can find similarities in classical Chinese poetry and the Zen rhetoric of speaking the unspoken, in which the relationships between images and ideas are not spelled out grammatically but suggested through parataxis, or pointing towards meaning.

"Mother Gaia" places the reader simultaneously outside space and time. The experience that takes place within the "glimpse"<sup>22</sup> is an epiphany recording of Pound's "precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective."<sup>23</sup> However, unlike Pound's objective transforming into the subjective, overcoming the subject/object dichotomy or duality as it is called in Zen Buddhism, is a central concern of Zen and thus functions differently in Snyder's "Mother Gaia." The poem functions much like Yun-men's kōan, which turns the listener or reader back upon him/herself for the answer, pondering his words and images from all angles and unshackling the subject/object bond.

O Mother Gaia

sky cloud gate milk snow

wind-void-word

I bow in roadside gravel

A sense of understanding the self or a non-dualistic "I" is central to awakening. The "I" in "Mother Gaia" appears after a grocery list of objects.

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<sup>21</sup> Gary Snyder, *The Real Work: Interviews & Talks 1964-1979*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>22</sup> See title of "Mother Gaia." "24: IV:40075. 3:30 PM/n. of Coaldale, Nevada,/A Glimpse Through a Break in/the Storm of the Summit of/the White Mountains."

<sup>23</sup> This comes from Pound's *Gaudier-Brzeska* (1916) essay on poetic process that expands upon Pound's imagist project; see *Modern American Poetry*, ed. Cory Nelson, [http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m\\_r/pound/metro.htm](http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m_r/pound/metro.htm).



This “I” simultaneously participates as both object and subject or both observer and observed:

The reader is in a privileged position to view both Mother Gaia, representing the spiritual, while at the same time viewing the “I,” bowing in “roadside gravel.” Placing the subject “I” as the reader of the poem places the subject outside of himself, looking at himself viewing the scene. However, this subject and its object are forever receding:

When a human being observes itself or its own thoughts, it finds there is always an observer and something observed. The observer as such is always unobserved; he or she always stands at the center and looks. He or she is in one way like someone in a watchtower; whatever this observer chooses to throw light on it sees, but it itself cannot but stay in the dark. Yet, unlike a watchtower man, the self-conscious human observer can recede, put itself into another watchtower and throw light on the first one, and then into one more and so on-but the observer always remains invisible, a black hole forever unable to grasp itself as subject.<sup>24</sup>

In Zen, this ever-receding subject is often referred to as the first noble truth. It is a starting point sometimes described as suffering or desire. Only by gaining full understanding of the self, can that self can be given up. The title of “Mother Gaia” can be viewed as a type of metaphor for this search and gives the reader a strong sense of this endlessly receding subject or gaze:

**24: IV:40075. 3:30 PM, n. of Coaldale, Nevada,  
A Glimpse through a Break in the Storm  
of the White Mountains**

The first line of the title appears to refer to U.S. Geological Survey map coordinates, and the summit referred to is most likely near Boundary Peaks in the White Mountains, 30 miles north east of Coaldale, Nevada. This could be the exact location where the subject is standing. The lines are arranged as an inverted pyramid emphasizing the glimpse becoming more focused and in the distance, seen “through a break in the storm.” In a later version of the poem from *The Gary Snyder Reader* the title reads:

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<sup>24</sup> App, *Master Yunmen*, p. 40.

24: IV:40075, 3:30 PM,  
 n. of Coaldale, Nevada,  
 A Glimpse Through a Break in  
 the Storm of the Summit of  
 the White Mountains

This version has a very similar effect. Looking up, the “glimpse” expands outward from the storm, to the summit, to the White Mountains and beyond. There is also a sense of the “glimpse” passing through this space or “in” mirroring the subject bowing “in roadside gravel.” In the central line in this later version of the title, “A Glimpse Through a Break in” also forms a kind of visual mirror image that reflects both towards and away from the subject. Simultaneously a literal rift is visible as the storm breaks and the clouds open up. A break in the summit is also visible, as the mountains appear to open up. It is a “void,” a lack or want. Overcoming the duality of subject/object-hood, of observer and observed, is often described as overcoming man’s fundamental rift. In order to overcome this rift, the subject/object dichotomy must be completely jettisoned.

For Snyder to conclude “Mother Gaia” on such an everyday object as “roadside gravel” may seem surprising after passing through the void of language and truth. However, this conclusion is consistent with overcoming an inner rift or duality. According to Yun-men, “My brothers, if there is one who has attained it [enlightenment], he passes his days in conformity with the ordinary.”<sup>25</sup> In a later publication of “Mother Gaia” in *The Gary Snyder Reader*, each line of the poem is center aligned. In this first version however, aligning “O” and “wind” directly over and below the space, between “sky” and “cloud” emphasizes this same space. The effects are the penetration of the space as well as an unbalancing that is recovered in the last line, which is center-aligned and a syntactically complete sentence: “I bow in roadside gravel.” Conformity with the everyday has also been realized grammatically. Earlier in *Songs to Gaia*, we find a similar

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<sup>25</sup> The following is an excerpt from lecture 547a4-b17 by Yun-men: “My brothers, if there is one who has attained it, he passes his days in conformity with the ordinary... You must not waste your time, and you need very much to pay close attention! Anyway, try to get a firm hold [on the meaning of the sayings], pondering them from all angles – and after days or years an entrance will open up by itself!” in App, *Master Yunmen*, p. 108.

conclusion of transcendence in the everyday, in the ironic tongue-in-cheek rhetorical tradition of the Zen master, in this case, “grease.”<sup>26</sup>

Emptiness, anti-entropy ultimate  
 No friction whatever.  
 Let it all slide.  
 The holy, the perfect, transcendent,  
 “grease”

Overcoming this fundamental rift requires the death of the subject as a duality and awakening or birth of the unfettered formless self:

The ‘I’ that was full of itself and desire and attachment yet tried to forget itself – the ‘I’ that was immersed in life and death and was unable to cope satisfactorily with either, this ‘I’ dies. Indeed, its “Great Death” is the breakthrough to the True Self: the “Great Birth.” This is the awakening to the unfettered and formless self that is ‘at ease in the ordinary,’ happy and content with what it is and is not, has and has not.<sup>27</sup>

This scene of death and the locus of rebirth is the void. It is the eye of the storm where the subject/object duality and desire is jettisoned, and unshackled. It is here that enlightenment occurs and the non-dualistic self appears.

The “void” and “gate” are not only central to “Mother Gaia” but also located in the center of the poem itself. The poem describes a marvelous emptiness at its center, “a void” or “gate.” On the left side of the gate/void are objects related to heaven – “Sky, Cloud, Wind” – and on the right are objects related to the earth – “milk, snow, word.” This duality of heaven and earth implodes to form a Zen view of wholeness or complete nature. The spiritual (Mother Gaia) and the everyday (roadside gravel) are bridged by the gate/void as well in a type of Zen awakening or enlightenment. Placed outside of conventional language, truth becomes emancipatory.

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<sup>26</sup> There are no page numbers in *Songs for Gaia* although this is approximately p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> App describes a recurring theme of “breakthrough,” in *Master Yunmen*, pp. 61-62.

Many similarities can be found between Gary Snyder's description of Chinese nature poetry and the Zen aesthetic at work in "Mother Gaia." In the "Great Clod Project," Snyder describes Chinese nature poems:

Mountains and rivers were seen to be the visible expression of cosmic principles; the cosmic principles go back into silence, non-being, emptiness; a Nothing that can produce the ten thousand things, and the ten thousand things will have that marvelous emptiness still at the center. So the poems are also "silent." ...Chinese poetry steps out of narrow human-centered affairs into a big-spirited world of long time, long views, and natural processes; and comes back to a brief moment in a small house by a fence.<sup>28</sup>

By utilizing T'ang poetics in the context of the English language, "Mother Gaia" succeeds in expressing the beauty of the Chinese nature poem and simultaneously disorienting a reader unfamiliar with a poetic tradition that plays in and around the boundaries of language or Snyder's "razor's edge." There are many levels of participation possible in "Mother Gaia," not the least of which is encountering a "fundamental riddle" or "knots of the psyche" as Snyder describes his interest in *kōan* studies. The dual importance of poetic language in describing both nature and verbalizing a transcendent Zen experience are unmistakable in *Mother Gaia*. Many parallels can be seen between "Mother Gaia" and Snyder's description of Chinese nature poems: "The nothingness that produces the ten thousand things will have that marvelous emptiness still at the center" can be easily explicated in terms of "wind-void-word."

The *kōan* structure at work in "Mother Gaia," strongly influenced by Snyder's Sino-Japanese study of Rinzai Zen in Japan, places pressure on subjectivity and disorients the reader in ways that T'ang poetics or what Snyder calls "Chinese nature poetry" does not. In one brief moment, Snyder simultaneously succeeds in having the reader step outside him/herself as if into the eye of the storm and returning to firm ground "bowing in roadside gravel." The entire experience functions in the simultaneity of a void where the reader's view expands and contracts in a glimpse.

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<sup>28</sup> Gary Snyder, "The Great Clod Project" from the *Gary Snyder Reader*, pp. 293-294.