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# Painting Mountains and Rivers: Gary Snyder, Dōgen, and the Elemental Sutra of the Wild

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## Abstract

In this essay I hope to make some new contributions to the philosophical opening occasioned by John Sallis' articulation of an "elementology" more broadly and by his turn to Guo Xi's exquisite Song Dynasty *shan-shui* scroll painting, *Early Spring* (in his forthcoming work, *Senses of Landscape*) more particularly. I do so by bringing the remarkable writings by the American poet and thinker Gary Snyder, especially in relationship to his reading of the great Kamakura Zen Master Eihei Dōgen, directly into the fray of contemporary Continental discourses on the elemental and the ecological. At the heart of this project is Snyder's development of Dōgen's elemental discourse of "mountains, rivers, and the great earth." Like Sallis' own efforts to recast language into a more elemental discourse, this essay will also focus on the manners of speaking specific to the philosophical and poetic self-presentation of the elements, including the relationship between the philosophical and the artistic as such.

## Keywords

Gary Snyder – Dōgen – John Sallis – the elemental – mountains and rivers – *shan-shui* scroll painting

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*Here, everywhere, right now* is mountains, river, and earth.

DŌGEN, *Baika* [Plum Blossoms]<sup>1</sup>

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1 I have generally relied on the new two-volume edition of the *Shōbōgenzō*, *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye: Zen Master Dogen's Shobo Genzo*, ed. Kazuaki TANAHASHI (Boston: Shambhala, 2010), 585; henceforth S. I also use the following abbreviations to indicate the source language



Know for a fact that mountains are fond of wise people and sages.

DŌGEN, *Sansui Kyō* [Mountains and Waters Sutra] (S, 163)



## Preface

It has been to the benefit of contemporary philosophical discourse that John Sallis, in his remarkable works over the last decade and half on the imagination and on the radicalization of aesthetics,<sup>2</sup> has occasioned a retrieval and transfiguration of a discourse on the elemental. His “elementology”<sup>3</sup> of the earth and the sky articulates the bringing “to a kind of presence something irreducibly nonpresent” (*FI*, 42) and is also, as such, a kind of monstrosity, a

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for technical terms: Jp. for Japanese and Skt. for Sanskrit. Except where custom prevails otherwise, I adhere to the East Asian custom of listing the family name first and in order to prevent confusion, I follow the custom of capitalizing the family name when introducing it.

- 2 For a series of considerations of the import of this remarkable accomplishment, see *On the True Sense of Art: A Critical Companion to the Transfigurations of John Sallis*, ed. Jason M. Wirth, Michael Schwartz, and David Jones (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, forthcoming).
- 3 John Sallis, *Force of Imagination: The Sense of the Elemental* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000); henceforth *FI*. This is a work of “pragmatology”—adapted from Plato’s famous Seventh Letter where he wrote of τὸ πρᾶγμα αὐτό, *die Sache selbst*, the thing in itself (341c)—which speaks to *die Sache* “as they themselves appear in their self giving” (*FI*, 38). “Pragmatology as monstrosity requires also elementology” (*FI*, 173): “At the limit of the limit are the elementals that are unassimilable and that delimit the very expanse of all self-showing: earth and sky. Even when one does not see them at all, they are elementally operative, bounding all that one does see and all else that is implicated in what one sees” (*FI*, 172). All images are elemental; they are images not only of themselves, but also of the elements. “All would hinge on declaring: though all things are earth, earth is not a thing” (*FI*, 174). See also *Logic of Imagination: The Expanse of the Elemental* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), *Shades—Of Painting at the Limit* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), *Transfigurations: On the True Sense of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), as well as the forthcoming *Senses of Landscape* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press). For an invaluable consideration of the trajectory and accomplishments of Sallis’ philosophical oeuvre, see Bernard Freydberg’s *The Thought of John Sallis: Phenomenology, Plato, Imagination* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012).

discourse or λόγος oriented to “to showing (*monstrare*), while also alluding to the monstrosities to which such discourse will inevitably be exposed: that in which nonsense becomes interior to, rather than the opposite of, sense.” This thereby gives rise to the presentation of “the elemental, the hypernature in nature” (*FI*, 42).

Sallis helps retrieve the elemental—from the depths of the earth and the expanse of the sky themselves—in the subterranean recesses of a tradition whose dominant metaphysical decisions and tendencies remain complicit with the contemporary ecological crisis. This is neither a new nor an exclusively “occidental” crisis. It would be naïve, for example, to posit glibly a pristine Asian counterpart, miraculously purified by the fruits of Mahāyāna and Daoist culture. Mark Elvin’s sobering and profound study of the three millennia of mounting ecological catastrophe in China, *The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China*, dispels the fantasy that the Daoist and Chan traditions that began in Classical China and that rightly remain inspiring for ecological (even elemental) awakening and practice did very much to stem the ecological degradation in anthropogenic China. “Four thousand years ago there were elephants in the area that was later to become Beijing . . . and in most of the rest of what was later to be China. Today, the only wild elephants in the People’s Republic are those in a few protected enclaves in the Southwest, up against the border with Burma.”<sup>4</sup> Although the Sangha includes all sentient beings, this did little to prevent the decimation of Chinese elephant populations. “There seems to be no case for thinking that, some details apart, the Chinese anthropogenic environment was developed and maintained in the way it was over the long run for more than three millennia because of particularly characteristic Chinese beliefs or perceptions. Or, at least, not in comparison with the massive effects of the pursuit of power and profit” (*RE*, 471).

The possibility that some critical parts of Asian cultures may have also been responding to their own incipient ecological degradation highlights a different dimension of our reception of these traditions. These elemental openings have much to say to and learn from each other, and in this respect, it is prescient that Sallis concludes his forthcoming new work, *Senses of Landscape*, with a pragmatological and elementological account of the Guo Xi’s exquisite Song Dynasty *shan-shui* (山水) scroll painting, *Early Spring* (1072). *Shan-shui* “landscape” paintings are not *representations* of mountains, waters, skies, and minimized humans and their dwellings. They are elemental exercises of the imagination. “Just as form does not come together into form but remains

4 Mark Elvin, *The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 9; henceforth *RE*.

without form, so the senses of landscape—the terrestrial, natural, and topical moments—do not coalesce into an eidetic paradigm in which their ontological differences would be reduced to the fullness of sheer identity.”<sup>5</sup>

This essay will also seek to dwell in and on this opening—*shan-shui* (山水) scroll painting as an elemental response to the oblivion of the elements—and it will do so by bringing two remarkable figures into this field of thought: the American poet and essayist Gary Snyder and his relationship to the great Kamakura Zen master, Eihei Dōgen (1200–1253). Against the background of the ecological crisis of modernity and post-modernity, I will take up the question of the elemental in relationship to their discourse on mountains (山) and waters (水).

## I

Although his profile as a major American poet has been, at least in some circles, dramatically ascendant in the last couple of decades, Gary Snyder’s critical contribution to what it might mean to speak in a compelling language, beyond the duality of art and science/philosophy, of our elemental relationship to the earth (what he calls “the wild” and, following Dōgen, the Chinese landscape tradition, and many classic Chan and Daoist practitioners, “mountains and rivers”) has yet to be fully appreciated. Often Snyder’s work is pigeonholed as mere nature poetry with a twist of Zen mindfulness. David Perkins, in his often illuminating *A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After* (1987), includes Snyder in a group of poets like Robert Bly, James Wright, W. S. Merwin, and Galway Kinnell, who are discontent with the disappointments of “civilization” and who consequently seek its disappearing alternative.

Oppressed by crowds and noise in cities, by roads, wires, and houses everywhere in the landscape, by the glut and litter of material goods, by daily reports of ecological pollution through oil spills, strip mines, smokestacks, and pesticides, by guilt at the extinction or near extinction of animal species, by terror of war, and by contemplation of the possible end of life on earth, the mind is tempted to turn against the civilization Western man has created.<sup>6</sup>

5 John Sallis, *Senses of Landscape* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, forthcoming), chap. 5.

6 David Perkins, *A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 553; henceforth *HMP*. To be fair, Perkins’ commentary precedes the

The Romantics sensed the looming disaster, but it has now arrived in its full fury. Allegedly trapped in “civilization,” we long for its lost antithesis, “nature.” Speaking of the Zen resonances in relationship to the poem “Trail Crew Camp at Bear Valley,” Perkins observes that the poem’s voice has been separated from the ego’s voice, and in this “abnegation of the ego” Snyder can exercise his “Zen ideal” by “concentrating on the immediately given.” “Unity with nature or reality is to be achieved by being wholly where you are” (*HMP*, 587). While there is some truth in this kind of discourse (and its implication that, in Snyder’s poetry, it is the earth itself that is somehow *speaking* is critically important), Perkins’ analysis nonetheless threatens to reinforce the very duality between nature and civilization that Snyder seeks to undo. Moreover, a return to nature, while perhaps nourishing and inspiring, could never be as serious as hard ecological science or rigorous ecological philosophy. This essay is dedicated to dispelling this erroneous—and erroneously dualistic—view and to making a case for Snyder and Dōgen as “elders” who belong to a long and complex set of lineages, ancient and contemporary, that span both Western (Europe as well as Turtle Island’s indigenous peoples) and Asian philosophical and poetic horizons. Both are critical interlocutors in the emergence of an elemental philosophy and the elemental language and language of the elements that occasions us to be once again, in Nietzsche’s celebrated phrase from *Zarathustra*, *faithful [treu] to the earth*.

Snyder’s elemental earth language, rooted in Turtle Island,<sup>7</sup> and in solidarity with the Dao and Mahāyāna Buddha Dharma, is non-dualistic, and I hope to accompany Dōgen and Snyder in exposing the following erroneous dualisms:

*Ecology is a contemporary concern, not an ancient one.* Dōgen’s sutra of the mountains, rivers, and the great earth, so thorough that not “one inch of soil is left out,” as well as Chinese landscape painting (*shan-shui*) is, as we shall see, a direct refutation of this claim.

*Ecology is a science, and only trivially a question of poetic production.* Snyder, following Dōgen, breaks down the dualism between discourse and art; and

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publication of the Snyder works that I am here discussing. Moreover, there is no question that Snyder allies himself with ancient traditions that seek to retrieve the wild from the threat of its extinction.

7 In addition to being the title of Snyder’s 1975 Pulitzer Prize winning collection of poetry (published by New Directions), Turtle Island is the name for the North American continent used by the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois Confederacy) peoples and other Northeastern indigenous peoples.

Snyder's own output, comprised of both essays and poems, exemplifies this non-duality and insists that it is rooted in the non-duality of the earth itself.<sup>8</sup>

*Human beings are in an ecology or bioregion, and while dependent on it, they remain fundamentally distinct from it.* The human mind is an ecology, not in an ecology.

*Western approaches to the problem are irreconcilable with Asian approaches.* Snyder is rooted in both Greek and Asian lineages, as well as many others, including the ancient cultural veins of the Western part of Turtle Island.

*Civilization is opposed to the wild.* This duality, in which we are all either uncritically absorbed in Heidegger's loathsome *Gestell* or neo-Romantics pining for the missing woods is especially pernicious and also belongs to the heart of the prevailing ecological crisis.

And finally: *The elements belong to chemistry and not to the alchemy of the wild.* An elemental speaking, that is, the earth speaking in the form of something like a sutra, is the elemental force of the voiceless voice of the Buddha, what Dōgen in his 1240 fascicle *Keisei-Sanshiki*, called the great earth's and the Buddha's "long broad tongue" (although they are distinguishable, they are elementally inseparable).

## II

Speaking of some of the remarkable ways that the patriarchs and other ancient Buddhas have transmitted the Dharma, Dōgen turned to the elemental words of the great Song poet and lay Buddha Dharma practitioner, Su Tung-p'o (1037–1101, in Pinyin Su Dongpo and also known as Su Shi). Su was enlightened when he heard the sound of a mountain stream flowing in the night. In his poem "We Wash Our Bowls in This Water" from *Mountains and Rivers Without End*,<sup>9</sup> Snyder quotes Dōgen's commentary on Su's remarkable words in the poem that Su had successfully presented to his teacher, Chang-tsung, as proof of his awakening. Su, who "sat one whole night by a creek on the slopes of

8 One can also appreciate this in the inspired concluding chapter, "Elemental Cosmology," of Sallis' *Logic of Imagination*, 244–78.

9 Gary Snyder, *Mountains and Rivers Without End* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1996); henceforth *MR*.

Mt. Lu,” began: “The stream with its sounds is a long broad tongue / The looming mountain is a wide-awake body” (*MR*, 138). The voice of the water with its encompassing tongue alludes to one of the Buddha’s canonical thirty-two characteristics. The river, covered in darkness, was the Buddha speaking. The imposing form—“looming”—of the mountain, that is, the mountain suggesting the looming of all form as such, is the manifesting body of the Buddha, whose ongoing wakefulness calls us to awaken. Mountains and rivers, form and emptiness, are the inseparable, impermanent earth song of the Buddha. The poem continues:

Throughout the night, song after song  
(*MR*, 138)

Through the night, beyond visibility but through listening to the voice of mountain-valley stream—Dōgen will later use language of seeing with one’s ears and hearing with one’s eye—Su hears each and every thing ever taught in all possible schools of the Buddha Dharma, hearing not the mere words of the verses, but that of whose song they too sung.<sup>10</sup> And finally the poem concludes,

How can I speak at dawn?  
(*MR*, 138)

How does one transmit the Dharma? How does one speak the elemental language? Perhaps we could already suggest that this song is a deeply geological song, not in its current usage of the study of the history and laws of earth solids, for that is to confuse the earth with its looming forms, but in the archaic sense of the λόγος and song of Γῆ fully awakened as Γαῖα. Snyder allows Dōgen to weigh in immediately:

Sounds of streams and shapes of mountains.  
The sounds never stop and the shapes never cease.  
Was it Su who woke  
or was it the mountains and streams?

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10 The characters for “song after song” are sometimes read as referring to the eighty-four thousand verses, a classical way of evoking the immense breadth and variety of the Buddha’s teaching, although it can also be heard as saying the immense breadth and variety of the Buddha Dharma, which is to say, to awaken to the infinite variegation and temporal impermanence of the whole earth “without an inch of soil left out.”

Billions of beings see the morning star  
 and all become Buddhas!  
 If *you*, who are valley streams and looming  
 mountains,  
 can't throw some light on the nature of ridges and rivers,

*who can?*

(MR, 138–39)

In seeking to unleash this elemental word, this word that we say not from ourselves—it is not in the end the human subject that is speaking—but from ourselves as “the mountains, rivers, and the great earth,” we hear the long broad tongue of ourselves as bioregional song, as Snyder does in “Raven’s Beak River At the End” from *Mountains and Rivers Without End*:

Mind in the mountains, mind of tumbling water,  
 mind running rivers,  
 Mind of sifting  
 flowers in the gravels  
 At the end of the ice age  
 we are the bears, we are the ravens,  
 We are the salmon  
 in the gravel  
 At the end of the ice age

(MR, 123)

When asked to evaluate his accomplishments, Gary Snyder responded that his finest essay was *The Practice of the Wild* (1990) and that his finest literary work was the book-length poem, upon which he worked on again and off again for forty years, *Mountains and Rivers Without End* (1996). These two works taken together invite us to reflect on the relationship between these two distinctive forms of writing as they articulate what Dōgen and others called “mountains, rivers, and the great earth [Jp. *senga daichi*].” In the fascicle *Busshō* (*Buddha Nature*), Dōgen claims that it was the Twelfth Ancestor, Āśvaghōṣha (c. 80–150 CE), who had maintained that “mountains, rivers, and the great earth are the ocean of Buddha nature” (S, 238). The most famous appearance of this articulation is the famous kōan by the Tang Dynasty Chan Master, Qingyuan Weixin (青原惟信, Jp. *Seigen Ishin*) of the Linji sect, from the seventeenth chapter of the *Wudeng huiyuan*:

Thirty years ago, before I began the study of Zen, I said, “Mountains are mountains, waters are waters.” After I got an insight into the truth of Zen through the instruction of a good master, I said, “Mountains are not mountains, waters are not waters.” But after having attained the abode of final rest [that is, Awakening], I say, “Mountains are really mountains, waters are really waters.”<sup>11</sup>

In the first stage of Zen practice, mountains and waters are just things among things. In the second stage, they are emptied of their self-being (Skt. *svabhāva*), are regarded in their monstrosity. In the final movement, mountains really are mountains and waters really are waters because they show themselves elementally. Mountains and waters are the elements by which the images of mountains and rivers come and go in the temporality of their fragile impermanence. Mountains and rivers do not refer, as they do in Platonism, to a meaning remote to themselves. The Buddha nature or elemental Buddha sea of things is not a remote ontological reality underlying appearances. It is things in their suchness (Skt. *tathatā*), the way of things just as they elementally are. As Dōgen articulates it in *Soku-Shin-Ze-Butsu* (*Mind Right Now is Buddha*), mind or consciousness (*shin*, 心) of mountains, rivers, and earth is not aware of something besides mountains, rivers, and earth:

Thus, we know that the mind [*shin*] is mountains, rivers, and the earth; the mind is the sun, the moon, and the stars. What is said here is not more, not less. Mountains, rivers, and earth mind are just mountains, rivers, and the earth. There are no extra waves or sprays. The sun, the moon, and stars mind is just the sun, the moon, and stars. There is no extra fog or mist. (*S*, 46)

Elemental mind, the mind of the mountains, rivers, and the great earth (*senga daichi shin*), does not add extra fog or mist to perception. There is not some other thing that one perceives besides the things themselves. It is elemental perception, the elementality of perception as such.

How do mountains and rivers elementally comprise the great earth? Snyder wrote both essays and poems, and this essay itself is likewise about poetry and painting, but how do mountains and rivers speak with the long broad

11 ABE Masao, *Zen and Western Thought*, ed. William R. LaFleur (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985), 4. For an excellent discussion of this in relationship to the issues at hand, see also Joan Qionglin Tan, *Han Shan, Chan Buddhism and Gary Snyder's Ecopoetic Way* (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2009), esp. 56–61.

tongue in and between these various forms of writing? Traditionally, this relationship is the stormy and vexing antagonism between the philosophical essay and the work of art, but the theme that holds them together (the great earth and its practice of the wild) invites us to think these two expressions *non-dualistically*.

### III

What is the relationship between art and nature? How are we to hear a line like the one that Snyder has the Mountain Spirit whisper: “All art and song / is sacred to the real. As such’ (MR, 146)? Is this the word of the sutra that articulates the holding together of song and thought, poetry and philosophy?

Speaking of his early Rinzai training, Snyder reflects that he

came to see the yogic implications of “mountains” and “rivers” as the play between the tough spirit of willed self-discipline and the generous and loving spirit of concern for all living beings: a dyad presented in Buddhist iconography as the wisdom-sword-wielding Manjushri, embodying transcendent insight, and his partner, Tārā, the embodiment of compassion, holding a lotus or a vase. I could imagine this dyad as paralleled in the dynamics of mountain uplift, subduction, erosion, and the planetary water cycle. (MR, 155)

Snyder regarded the poetic cycle of *Mountains and Rivers Without End* as “a sort of sutra—an extended poetic, philosophic, and mythic narrative of the female Buddha Tārā” (MR, 158). Wild language as elemental language and elemental language as the wild song of Tārā and Γαῖα is sutra language. To be clear: sutra language is not in the end mere human language but more elementally it is geological language.

Although his decade or so of Zen training in Japan, including his work with Ruth Fuller Sasaki, was primarily in Rinzai lineages, it was in California that Snyder also discovered the elemental language of the extraordinary practitioner at the white heat of the beginning of what came to be later to be called the Sōtō School of Zen. “In the late seventies my thinking was invigorated by the translations from Dōgen’s *Treasury of the True Law* [*Shōbōgenzō*] just then beginning to come out. His *Mountains and Waters Sutra* is a pearl of a text” (MR, 157). These invigorating translations to which Snyder refers primarily were the responsibility of Kazuaki Tanahashi, whose watershed *Moon in a Dewdrop* collection was published by North Point Press, at the time edited by

Snyder's longtime publisher and friend, Jack Shoemaker, who had founded the press in 1980. Gary Snyder even released an audio recording of his readings of some of the fascicles from this collection (*The Teachings of Zen Master Dōgen*).

Dōgen's *Sansui-kyō* (1240), *Mountains and Waters Sutra*, brought many things together for Snyder. Dōgen's title alludes to Chinese landscape painting, a spectacular example of which opens Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers Without End*. Snyder had already studied this tradition with the great Chiura Obata at Berkeley, becoming "aware of how the energies of mist, white water, rock formations, air swirls—a chaotic universe where everything is in place—are so much a part of the East Asian painter's world" (*MR*, 153). When Dōgen attempts to allow this paradoxically chaotic but not disorderly universe speak, he resorts to phrases like the "whole earth without an inch of soil left out."

Dōgen's *Sansui-kyō* (山水經) is not itself a sutra (*kyō*), nor is it a commentary on a canonical sutra.<sup>12</sup> The sutra is Tārā and Γαῖα themselves, which Dōgen, following a venerable Chinese tradition, calls *sansui* (Chinese *shan-shui*, 山水, mountains and waters). This is the term for something like "landscape," especially with reference to paintings, but it is not landscape in the typical sense of a panoptic view of scenery. Rather it is earth as the interpenetration of yin and yang, waters and solids, emptiness and form, free, unconditioned ground and interdependent beings, in the spontaneous, organic auto-genesis of Dao. *San* (山), mountain, rises into form in the most formidable of ways, as if it were an especially violent and implacable expression of form's self-insistence; yet, it too flows, for *sui* (水), water, is pure elasticity, having no form of its own, yet capable of taking any form. *Sansui*, the insistence of form and its concomitant emptiness, is nature as both the stubborn, hard as a diamond, bright as the sun, aspiration of Fudō Myō-ō, the Immovable Wisdom King, and the dark as the moon, beneficently pliable, and overpowering compassion of Kannon (觀音), the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara who looks down and hears the cries of the world.

In *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, in the first part of a section entitled "The Flowing," perhaps itself a way of thinking the manner in which mountains walk and flow as time, Snyder sings of the "Blue-faced growling Fudo, / Lord of the Headwaters, making / Rocks of water, water out of rocks" (*MR*, 68).

12 This leads Graham Parkes to translate *Sansui-kyō* as "Mountains and Waters as Sutras." See his introduction to this work in *Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings*, ed. William Edelglass and Jay L. Garfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 83–86.

In the final poem of Snyder's earth sutra, as he sings through the voice of Zeami's Nō play *Yamamba* (山姥, *Old Mountain Woman*),<sup>13</sup> we hear the words:

Peaks like Buddhas at the heights  
 send waters streaming down  
 to the deep center of the turning world.

And the Mountain Spirit always wandering  
 hillsides fade like walls of cloud  
 pebbles smoothed off sloshing in the sea

old woman mountain hears  
 shifting sand  
 tell the wind  
 "nothingness is shapeliness"  
*Mountains will be Buddhas then*

(MR, 145)

Mountains emerge as Buddhas when the shifting sands, pliable like water, shift and reform like Yamamba herself. In the *Sansui-kyō*, Dōgen meditates on the elemental words that Priest Daokai (1043–1118) of the Chinese Caodong (Sōtō) School offered to the assembly: "The green mountains are always walking; a stone woman gives birth to a child at night." The Green mountains walk, they flow not from the form of themselves, but discontinuously, as non-sequiturs, from the formless into form. This is the walking of mountains, a walking that derives not from what a mountain is formally, but from its seriatim shifting, its discontinuous re-imagination, so to speak. The forms of being are not in time, deriving themselves from themselves, but they express the emptiness of time itself—what Dōgen famously called *uji*, time-being—and hence one could also say that the stone woman, a barren mountain that produces no fruit from itself, gives birth "in the night," that is, from the watery, monstrous, elemental

13 Yamamba (or Yamauba or Yamanba) is a spectral manifestation (*yōkai*) of the mountains in the frequently performed and enduring play. In the remarkable two-scene drama, attributed to Zeami, she offers a traveler refuge in the mountain and asks that they perform the song and dance of the mountains in return. At the end of the play, it is the ancient and bedraggled Yamamba herself, who can shift like the clouds and for whom no mountain depth is inaccessible, who performs the dance.

depths of time itself.<sup>14</sup> This is the Way of the wondrous, even miraculous, dharma (*myōhō*), each of its dharma stages (*hōi*) unprethinkable.<sup>15</sup> Hence, Dōgen can say that “a mountain always practices in every place” (S, 155) and “when your learning is immature, you are shocked by the words ‘flowing mountains.’ Without fully understanding even the words ‘flowing water,’ you drown in small views and narrow understanding” (S, 155–56). In the fascicle *Keisei Sanshoku*, we learn that “Saying that the self returns to the self is not contradicted by saying that the self is mountains, rivers, and the great earth” (S, 89).

This insight is also clearly present in Dōgen’s own practice of the wild, in what he called *bendōwa*, negotiating Dao and wholeheartedly practicing it<sup>16</sup> and where in the fascicle of the same name, we find the following astonishing claim: In Zen mind, one realizes that

trees, grasses, and land involved in this all emit a bright and shining light, preaching the profound and incomprehensible Dharma; and it is endless. Trees and grasses, wall and fence expound and exalt the Dharma for the sake of ordinary people, sages, and all living beings. Ordinary people, sages, and all living beings in turn preach and exalt the Dharma for the sake of trees, grasses, wall and fence. (*HDS*, 13)<sup>17</sup>

Hee-Jin Kim rightly insists that the *sansui* or mountains and waters practice of Dōgen, which included the remote mountain location of his temple, Eihei-ji,

14 For a more extended consideration of the problem of passage in general and in relationship to Schelling, see my *Schelling's Practice of the Wild: Time, Art, Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, forthcoming), chapter three.

15 See ABE Masao’s remarkable discussion of this in his *A Study of Dōgen: His Philosophy and Religion*, ed. Steven Heine (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 81–88. I borrow the term unprethinkable, *unvordenklich*, from Schelling.

16 This translation of *Bendōwa* is from *The Heart of Dōgen's Shōbōgenzō*, trans. Norman Waddell and Masao Abe (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002). Henceforth *HDS*. See also *The Wholehearted Way: A Translation of Eihei Dōgen's "Bendōwa,"* with commentary by Kōshō Uchiyama Roshi, trans. Shohaku Okumura and Taigen Daniel Leighton (North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle, 1997).

17 See also Dōgen’s *Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki*: “When the Buddhas and the Patriarchs categorically state that the mind is plants and trees, revise your preconceptions and understand plants and trees as mind. If the Buddha is said to be tile and pebble, consider tile and pebble as the Buddha. If you change your basic preconceptions, you will be able to gain the Way” (*A Primer of Sōtō Zen*, trans. Reihō Masunaga [Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1971], 66).

was not the “romantic exaltation of them that we see, for example, in nature mysticism, any more than it is the scientific and technical manipulation and exploitation of nature.” The “naïve veneration or exaltation of nature,” evident, for example, in the more reactionary, infantile, anti-scientific giddiness about trees and birds in the worst excesses of Romanticism, was for Dōgen “a defiled view of nature, enslaving humans in a new captivity.”<sup>18</sup> Rather Kim sees in Dōgen’s “love” of nature “not a deification of nature, but the radicalization of nature—nature in its selflessness. Only then is nature undefiled and natural” (DKM, 191).

To be clear: Dōgen is not advocating, nor would he even recognize as sensible, any call to return to a pristine, undefiled nature. There is no unmediated access to nature, no thing-in-itself in some private reality beyond our ensconement in the veil of Maya and its web of representations or delusions. The infinite ground of nature is not a thing, either in itself or as a series of representations originating in human subjectivity. Yes, nature is always interpreted, and human beings can only engage the question of nature within the historical milieu that grants them access to it. This is not, however, to advocate the subsumption of nature under culture, for the living core of nature is not an object that resists the advances of a discerning subject. Nature itself is not something, as Merleau-Ponty contended, following Schelling, that as such can be studied.<sup>19</sup> The infinite depth of our immanence is the alterity of the home within which we emerge. And so Snyder rightly laments:

It’s a real pity that many in the humanities and social sciences are finding it so difficult to handle the rise of “nature” as an intellectually serious territory. For all of the talk of ‘the other’ in everybody’s theory these days, when confronted with a genuine Other, the nonhuman realm, the response of the come-lately anti-nature intellectuals is to circle the wagons and declare that nature is really part of culture.<sup>20</sup>

That nature would be an extension of culture is the global symptom of what Heidegger called the *Gestell*, and as Heidegger warned, when this subsumption

18 Hee-Jin Kim, *Dōgen Kigen: Mystical Realist* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1987), 187; henceforth DKM.

19 For more on this relationship as it regards the problem of nature, see *Merleau-Ponty, Schelling, and the Question of Nature*, ed. Jason M. Wirth with Patrick Burke (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013).

20 Gary Snyder, “Is Nature Real?,” in *The Gary Snyder Reader: Prose, Poetry, and Translations: 1952–1998* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1999), 388–89.

is complete, Dasein can never, as it did so dramatically in *Being and Time*, following Augustine, come to experience itself as a question, as a source of distress and turmoil. This danger allows us to hear Dōgen's celebrated counsel anew: The Buddha Way is to study the self, but to study the self is to forget the self and to awaken to all of Nature (*Genjō Kōan*, S, 30). Wandering the mountains, as did Dōgen as he searched for a teacher in China, finally finding Rujing, Snyder sings his earth song:

The root of me  
hardens and lifts to you,  
thick flowing river,

my skin shivers. I quit

making this poem.

(MR, 72)

In a sense, Snyder ponders, the river composes these words as I quit imagining that it is I who can take full responsibility for “my” poems.

We were following a long river into the mountains.  
Finally we rounded a ridge and could see deeper in—  
the farther peaks stony and barren, a few alpine trees.  
Ko-san and I stood on a point by a cliff, over a  
rock-walled canyon. Ko said, “Now we have come to  
where we die.” I asked him—what’s up there,  
then—meaning the further mountains.  
“That’s the world after death.” I thought it looked  
just like the land we’d been traveling, and couldn’t  
see why we should have to die.  
Ko grabbed me and pulled me over the cliff—  
both of us falling. I hit and I was dead. I saw  
my body for a while, then it was gone.  
Ko was there too. We were at the bottom of the gorge.  
We started drifting up the canyon. “This is the  
Way to the back country.”

(MR, 55–56)

In the backcountry of language awakening to bioregion as ourselves and ourselves as inseparable from the bioregion that makes us possible, that calls us to

the Dharma assembly, we find ourselves with the mountains that Dōgen insisted were fond of wise people and sages.

They are what we are, we are what they are. . . . No hierarchy, no equality. No occult and exoteric, no gifted kids and slow achievers. No wild and tame, no bound and free, no natural and artificial. Each totality its own frail self. . . . This, thusness, is the nature of the nature of nature. The wild in wild. So the blue mountains walk back to the shop, to the desk, to the stove. We sit on the park bench and let the wind and rain drench us. The blue mountains walk out and put another coin in the parking meter, and go down to the 7–11.<sup>21</sup>

There is no region that mountains do not reach, not even the flatlands, no region that is inseparable from the wild. The mountains are high and low, virtuous and vice-ridden, natural and cultural. In the final chapter of *Practice of the Wild* called “Grace,” Snyder explains that at his house they say a Buddhist grace, which begins, “We venerate the Three Treasures [teachers, the wild, and friends]” (*PW*, 185). The three treasures are universally acknowledged, by all negotiators of the Buddha Dharma, to be the Buddha, which Snyder, using his own *upāya* or skillful means, renders as “teachers,” the Sangha, the community of practitioners, whom Snyder renders as “friends,” and finally, and most strikingly, the Dharma, which Snyder renders as “the wild.”

In what manner can the Dharma, the very matter that is transmitted from Buddha Dharma to Buddhist negotiator, be translated as *the wild*?

It all depends on how one hears the word “wild.”

Typically “wild” and “feral [*ferus*]” are “largely defined in our dictionaries by what—from a human standpoint—it is not. It cannot be seen by this approach for what it *is*” (*PW*, 9). Hence, a wild animal is an animal that has not been trained to live in our house (undomesticated) and has not been successfully subjected to our rule (unruly). When we tire of the mores to which we regulate our behaviors, we imagine that “we go wild,” as if this were the way of all non-human forms of life. To call someone an “animal” is to associate them with the outlaws and the uncivilized.

But what happens if we “turn it the other way”? What is the wild *to the wild*? Animals become “free agents, each with its own endowments, living within natural systems” (*PW*, 9). As Snyder begins to explore this turn, he indicates the ways in which the wild “comes very close to being how the Chinese define the

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21 Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (North Point Press, California 1990), 110–11; henceforth *PW*.

term *Dao*, the *way* of Great Nature: eluding analysis, beyond categories, self-organizing, self-informing, playful, surprising, impermanent, insubstantial, independent, complete, orderly, unmediated" (*PW*, 10). And the *Dao*, as we know from the rich interpenetration of Mahāyāna and Daoist traditions in East Asia, is "not far from the Buddhist term Dharma with its original senses of forming and firming" (*PW*, 10). The early Daoists spoke of *Dao* as "the great mother."

We are not either wild or civilized. We *are* the wild. "Mountains and waters is a way to refer to the totality of the process of nature. As such it goes beyond the dichotomies of purity and pollution, natural and artificial. The whole with its rivers and valleys, obviously includes farms, fields, villages, cities, and the (once comparatively small) dusty world of human affairs" (*PW*, 109). We are not civilized animals who every now and again escape the drudgeries of our auto-normalized modes of being by going wild and becoming party animals. "Wildness is not just the 'preservation' of the world, it *is* the world" (*PW*, 6). The wild is the self-organizing autoproduktivity of our being and being as such.

#### IV

Artistic words are elemental words, wild words. But how does the long broad tongue sing? How does language arise "unbidden" (*PW*, 18)?

*Mountains and Rivers Without End* begins with Snyder contemplating a remarkable horizontal hand-scroll that somehow made it to Turtle Island and now resides in the Cleveland Museum of Art, "which sits on a rise that looks out toward the waters of Lake Erie" (*MR*, 8). In a city that conspicuously bears the wounds and scars of hyper-industrialization, overlooking a lake inseparable from this industrial explosion, sits this scroll by an unknown artist or artists, comprised of at least five styles of *shan-shui* painting, perhaps expressing a historical progression of *shan-shui* styles, perhaps expressing the five houses or schools of Zen, but in any case, certain sections "emphasize the human in the midst of nature, while other scenes, reminiscent of other styles, depict an elemental landscape of hard-edged rock and water."<sup>22</sup>

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22 Anthony Hunt, *Genesis, Structure, and Meaning in Gary Snyder's Mountains and Rivers Without End* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2004), 61. See also John Sallis' remark apropos of Guo Xi's *Early Spring*: "There is operative here a kind of reversal: the human figures and such things as dwellings and the paths alongside them, that is, the things that ordinarily claim our primary attention, are withheld from such prominence, and attention

*Shan-shui* painting scrolls, unlike *shan-shui* poetry, arrive relatively late on the scene. “Paintings of large vistas did not appear until around the tenth century. This was after two and a half millennia of self-aware civilization in the basins of the Ho and Chiang. They are at their most vigorous from mid-Sung through the Yüan and early Ming—exactly when much of China was becoming deforested” (*MR*, 159). They were eventually replaced by more microscopic subjects like birds, insects, bamboo leaves, and fruits; this suggests that less and less remained of the wild except for its trace elements in its allegedly opposed civilized life. In *The Practice of the Wild*, Snyder tells us that “nature description is a kind of writing that comes with civilization and its habits of collection and classification,” and hence, landscape poetry does not begin in earnest until the fifth century, despite there having been fifteen hundred years of Chinese song and poetry—the Chinese had to become “removed enough from their own mountains and rivers to aestheticize them” (*PW*, 23).

Following Burton Watson and others, Snyder regards Hsieh Ling-yün (385–433)<sup>23</sup> as the transition point from the “wild” experience of the earth as inseparable from the human habitat in fields and gardens poetry [園詩, *tiányuán shī*] to *shan-shui shī*, or mountains and waters poetry (山水詩). “By the Six Dynasties, the view moved back and became more panoramic.”<sup>24</sup> Despite the political machinations that led to his execution by beheading, Hsieh, who extensively explored the mountains, “opened up the landscape—‘mountains and waters’—to the poetic consciousness for all time” (*WC*, 289). These poems—despite the retreat of the earth and the poetic word’s striving to reawaken its force in language—were not nostalgic, despite the travails of “civilized” life and its toll on human consciousness:

They are not really about landscapes or scenery. . . . 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

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is drawn instead to the topical and especially the terrestrial sense of landscape” (*Senses of Landscape*, chap. 5).

23 Snyder uses the older Wades-Giles transcription. The pinyin is Xiè Língyùn.

24 “‘Wild’ in China” and “The Great Clod” Project,” excerpted in *The Gary Snyder Reader: Prose, Poetry, and Translations: 1952–1998*, 288; henceforth *WC*. “The Chinese and Japanese traditions carry within them the most sensitive, mind-deepening poetry of the natural world ever written by civilized people. Because these poets were men and women who dealt with budgets, taxes, penal systems, and the overthrow of governments, they had a heart-wrenching grasp of the contradictions that confront those who love the natural world and are yet tied to the civilized. This must be one reason why Chinese poetry is so widely appreciated by contemporary Occidentals” (*WC*, 293).

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.” (WC, 293)

Perhaps one could make Snyder’s point like this: When the bioregion is not jeopardized by the manner in which we are in it, we *are* our bioregion; we *are* the self-developing, self-creating movement of mountains and waters that gives us the very possibility—as well as reverence-worthy gift—of our existence and life ways. This, perhaps, is the elemental age of gardens and fields. When the bioregion comes under extreme threat and, in a very real sense, our destructive behaviors are also self-destructive, both to us as a species and to our species being in its interdependence with the complex dynamic of its home (bioregion), then mountains and rivers emerge in art and religious practice not only as something desecrated and taken for granted but as something whose fading value needs to be resuscitated. In a sense, the practice of the wild becomes the practices in which we cultivate mindfulness for the endangered bioregion that we are. *As our way of being holds our elemental being in abeyance, our practice must become increasingly elemental.* We paint and write and sing and sit and otherwise practice ourselves as mountains and rivers precisely because it is no longer obvious that we are mountains and rivers. When we are painting more isolated and discrete forms of life—persimmons, dragonflies, itinerant Zen monks—the elemental has been all the more eclipsed. This is the time in which we fight to save the whales as an isolated species without serious efforts to respond to the catastrophic degradation of their oceans and have no sense that we, too, have our being in and through the very oceans that are becoming increasingly unable to support whales. The subterranean depths of this crisis are remotely detectable in the perceived need to address global warming by the monstrosly synecdochic call to save the polar bears. All of this speaks to our extreme alienation from the earth and from our earth-selves, so to speak. “Nature is finally not a ‘wilderness’ but a habitat, the best of habitats, a place where you can not only practice meditation or strive for a vision, but grow vegetables, play games with children, and drink wine with friends” (WC, 294).

Snyder’s elemental language of mountains and rivers without end is not so much nostalgic—Zen is the call for mindfulness to the now and here, after all—but rather language simultaneously of and in its awakening. Elemental earth language is Buddha Dharma language, now, here, awakening to the wilding of one’s bioregion, including the voices of its decimated aboriginal inhabits, both human and non-human. Snyder, with his poet friends Philip Whalen and Allen Ginsberg, once circumambulated Mt. Tamalpais in Marin County, across the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco, “circling and

climbing—chanting—to show respect and clarify the mind, chanting, among other mantras and sutras, the Dhāraṇī for Removing Disasters” (MR, 85). Disasters indeed! The elemental earth word—Tārā’s endlessly wild sutra language—pays attention (in the sense of the Buddha Dharma practice of *samyak-smṛti* or complete mindfulness) to the endless self-presentation of the mountains and rivers. It is a language of *grace*—“part of the first and last practice of the wild” (PW, 196), of gratitude for the gift of the great earth, a gift that is paradoxically desecrated if simply taken for granted. Did we have to wait for the ecological catastrophe to hear the long broad tongue of the Buddha? In the dawning global monoculture—all becomes culture and culture itself becomes a single culture—in a mounting global hearing loss, perhaps we can also appreciate the degradation of the earth because it does not always whisper the poetic word. Sometimes it screams it.

## V

One of the two epigrams that open *Mountains and Rivers Without End* is a lengthy quotation from *Gabyō* (*Painting of a Rice Cake*), where Dōgen makes the surprising claim that “Unsurpassed Enlightenment”—*anuttara samyaka sambodhi*, the consummation of the Buddha way—“is a painting. The entire phenomenal universe and the empty sky are nothing but a painting. . . . Since this is so, there is no remedy for satisfying hunger other than a painted rice cake. Without painted hunger you never become a true person” (MR, ix). To become a “true person,” the Zen appropriation of a Daoist term to express a “great” or fully realized person, one must take seriously the problem of painting, and by extension, the elementality of art as such.

In the famous fascicle “*Busshō* [Buddha Nature],” when discussing Nāgārjuna, Dōgen claimed that we should “know that a true expression is not done by sound or form, and a true teaching has no particular shape” (*Busshō*, S, 245). In this context, he recounts the skillful story (*upāya*) of Nāgārjuna’s self-manifestation as the full-moon shape. Countless have tried to “paint this story” but “they have only painted the story with the tips of their brush” (*Busshō*, S, 248). To really paint, you do not represent or mimic form, but you completely become a brush. Painting navigates the twin dangers of the fundamentalism of a preoccupation with form and the nihilism of *sūnyatā*-sickness.<sup>25</sup> “If people think that Nāgārjuna’s manifestation of the full moon shape is merely a single

25 The excessive concern with emptiness is the nihilistic and pernicious Zen *sūnyatā*-sickness (Jp. *kūbyō*), as if one were evacuating the concrete and making some kind of headlong descent into pure—that is, merely abstract—emptiness.

circle, they truly see a painted rice cake [*gabyō*]. It is fooling others; such laughing kills people” (*Busshō*, S, 248). When Nāgārjuna “became” a full moon, the point was not that he shifted his shape into the alternate shape of the full moon. The full moon (often associated with realization and awakening), rather, exposed Nāgārjuna’s shifting emptiness. His very body presented itself as *upāya*, as both the emptiness and the form of Nāgārjuna. The word medicine heals no one; the representation of the Buddha is not the emptiness of the Buddha. A painting (畫) of a rice cake is not nutritious. One cannot live on either images or concepts of food.

The image of the innutritious *gabyō* (painted rice cake) refers to a story in *Keisei Sanshoku* [*Valley Sounds, Mountain Colors*] about the great Buddhist scholar Xiangyan (Jp. Kyōgen) who was challenged by Guishan (Jp. Isan): “You are bright and knowledgeable. Say something about yourself before your parents were born, but don’t use words learned from commentaries” (S, 87). The point is not to represent the Buddha conceptually or artistically but to realize oneself and the great earth as the emptiness of the Buddha. Neither scholarship nor technical painting prowess realizes the living, empty ground of the dharma. And so Xiangyan studied through the night, but failed: “Deeply ashamed, he burned the books and said, ‘A painting of a rice cake does not satisfy hunger’” and so, in search of realization, he took up the preparation of actual food by becoming the monastery cook (*tenzo*) (S, 87).

The wily painted rice cake appears again when Dōgen visited Ayuwang Temple and was puzzled by one of its paintings and asked the guest coordinator Chenggui (Jp. Jōkei) what it was. Chenggui responded that it was a representation of Nāgārjuna manifesting in the shape of a full moon, to which Dōgen replied: “Truly it looks like a piece of painted rice cake” (*Busshō*, S, 249). Chenggui laughed, but he “had no sword in his laughter and no ability to tear off the painted rice cake” (*Busshō*, S, 249). Chenggui’s laughter could not penetrate the husk of form so that heaven and earth could be born anew. Dōgen consequently counseled: “Never paint what cannot be painted. Paint straightforwardly what needs to be painted. Yet, [Nāgārjuna’s] manifestation of the body in the shape of a full moon had never been painted” (*Busshō*, S, 249). It had not been painted because the artist lacked the true dharma eye of the imagination.

Yet in a later fascicle (*Gabyō*), explicitly dedicated to the problem of the painted rice cake, Dōgen seems to reverse his position. He clarifies that the point of practice is not to get beyond the painting of a rice cake: “There is no remedy for satisfying hunger other than a painted rice cake. Without painted hunger, you never become a true person” (S, 449). Indeed, in *upāya*, “all painted buddhas are actual buddhas” (S, 446) since we should “know that a

painted rice cake is your face after your parents were born, your face before your parents were born.” If tearing off the painted rice cake is abandoning the painting of the rice cake, indeed, abandoning the great earth’s ongoing non-representational self-portraiture, this is nothing but *śūnyatā*-sickness, attachment to nothingness without seeing that “nothingness is shapeliness” (MR, 145). The *gabyō* is emptiness expressing itself as paint, which in turn expresses the elementality of paint. Hence, when the great Yūnmén Wényǎn (Jp. Ummon) was asked by a monk about going beyond buddhas and surpassing ancestors (i.e., not being caught in or attached to the form of the buddhas and the ancestors), he responded, “A sesame rice cake” (*Gabyō*, S, 447).

Art and science, the essay and song, are *upāya*, the mountains and rivers of the great earth of Tārā. The earth is not elsewhere—Dōgen often insists on the oneness of practice and realization (*shushō ittō*), because the Buddha is not waiting to come but is already the elemental song of the earth “with no extra fog or mist” (S, 46). One does not practice in order to one day reach realization. One’s practice is one’s ongoing realization, indeed the elemental practice of mountains and rivers and the great earth realization as such. The mind right now is Buddha (*soku-shin-ze-butsumi*), but the anticipation of the Buddha as elsewhere, waiting to intervene upon oneself or the earth was what Dōgen unswervingly and vehemently dismissed as the *jinen gedō*, a heretical relationship to nature and the great earth. In the sutra of the earth—its appreciative study, its artistic invocation—we find our ongoing elemental realization. The earth is a great painting because, reciprocally, a great painting awakens our elemental awareness of the earth just as the earth, on the cusp of its eclipse, sings and paints and speaks itself.