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COMMENT ON “SYMBIOTIC NURTURE BETWEEN LITERATURE, CULTURE AND NATURE IN GARY SNYDER’S META-PICTO-POETRY OF LANDSCAPE”

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Reference of the commented article: BI, Jiancheng. Symbiotic nurture between literature, culture, and nature in Gary Snyder’s meta-picto-poetry of landscape. **Trans/Form/Ação**: Unesp Journal of Philosophy, v. 46, n. 4, p. 163-182, 2023.

Bi (2023) primarily examines Gary Snyder’s poems through the lens of Chinese culture, aiming to highlight the ideological depth that connects his work with Chinese cultural influences.

Deeply influenced by Zen thought, Snyder’s creation is rooted in his profound study and practice of Zen Buddhism, which forms the ideological foundation for his creative process and artistic thinking. This influence is notably apparent in his early translations of Cold Mountain Poems.

Zen philosophy emphasizes achieving a state of “no-self” and “emptiness,” where the “heart” gives rise to the “law,” and the “heart” creates the “environment.” However, the essence of the heart is emptiness, rendering all worldly phenomena illusory and unreal. Therefore, the external world perceived by the “heart” is both existent and non-existent, and “non-existence” is its essence while “existence” is its illusion. All things and phenomena

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manifested by the “heart” in this world are like illusions, unreal and insubstantial, and only the individual’s spiritual experience possesses reality. In Snyder’s *The Watchman’s Diary*, he eloquently expresses his experience with Zen, stating: “That which includes all change never changes; without change, time is meaningless; without time, space is destroyed. And so, we have reached the void/nothingness.”

In Chinese classical poetics theory, the pinnacle of poetry aligns with the state of Zen, and the practice of Zen in life finds its expression in poetry. From the perspective of the ultimate states pursued by Zen and Poetry, Zen focuses on seeking and realizing the Tao, with the highest state of enlightenment ultimately transcending linguistic description. While language and concepts possess certainty and limitations, Buddha’s nature remains uncertain and infinite. Zen Buddhism asserts that grasping the true essence of Buddhism through language and writing is impossible, hence the emphasis on “no words.” When language and words must be employed for teaching purposes, metaphors or readily available phenomena are used to convey profound truths. Conversely, the value of poetry lies in the poet’s grasp and discovery of art, which finds expression in concrete words. Therefore, poetry can closely approach the highest state of Zen enlightenment but cannot be created in the form of “no words.”

Snyder adeptly captures the subtleties of Chinese classical poetry, achieving the aesthetic realm of subtle, concise and ambiguous Chinese poetry within the framework of the Western language. Many of Snyder’s poems not only explore Zen and Buddhism but also incorporate the technique of juxtaposing images found in ancient Chinese poetry. His poems are composed of multiple isolated images, and their full meaning is unveiled through the reader’s logic and imagination. This approach transcends the superficial meaning of the images and is exemplified in Snyder’s poem *Pine Tree Tops*. Through concise language, the poem presents a series of visual images seamlessly integrated with the technique of static sketching. By perceiving and intuiting nature, eliminating and transcending the self, Snyder achieves a unity of poetry and Zen, known as “[...] forgetting things and me.”

Bi (2023) further emphasizes that Gary Snyder’s poetry also shares a deep connection with Taoism. At the age of 21, Snyder encountered Arthur Waley’s English translation of the *Tao Te Ching*, i.e. *The Way and Its Power: A Study of the Tao Te Ching and Its Place in Chinese Thought*, which first introduced him to Taoist thought and Chinese culture. He evaluates Taoist

thought as “[...] the thought of the Neolithic Age, which is the basic idea of Chinese culture.”

Taoism, originating from Lao Tzu during the late Spring and Autumn Periods in China, profoundly influenced Chinese culture and encompassed a systematic theory of knowledge applied in politics, philosophy, society and aesthetics. Taoism primarily concerns itself with nature, advocating for “doing nothing” when faced with its phenomena. The Taoist approach to ecology instructs humans to respect and surrender to nature, minimizing excessive interference and striving for harmony with all things. In *Tao Te Ching*, Tao is regarded as the origin of all things, and the text states: “The Way begot one, and the one, two; then the two begot three, and three, all else. All things bear the shade on their backs, and the sun in their arms; by the blending of breath, from the sun and the shade, equilibrium comes to the world.” Since all things are born from the “one,” they should inherently coexist harmoniously.

Snyder demonstrates a deep understanding and respect for Taoist principles. In the poets and environmental activists’ eyes, Western thinking is flawed, prompting Snyder to establish connections between ancient Chinese philosophical thought and his poetry. To abandon the anthropocentric perspective prevalent in Western thought, Snyder modified Taoism, emphasizing the ideas of balance and cooperation with nature. He integrates Taoist wisdom into his ecological writing, contemplating nature through Taoist ideals. Snyder recognizes the harmonious relationship between humanity and nature as a state of perfect “oneness” and fusion with all things. This begins with acknowledging the insignificance of the humanity in the face of nature and cultivating a profound reverence for it. The close affinity between Snyder and Taoist thought is not coincidental. Taoist wisdom provides poets with a profound means of understanding nature. Snyder earnestly asserts the necessity of establishing a direct connection between humans and nature, in contrast to the Western concept that often views nature and humanity as conflicting entities to be controlled by humans.

Snyder’s ecological poetics extend beyond his relationship with nature and encompass his perspective on social life. He views wilderness and society as integral parts of nature, striving for their harmonious unity. Social issues also impact the survival of wilderness, leading Snyder to seek an ecological poetic system that supports his ideas and aids in addressing societal problems. In this regard, the Taoist social outlook and Snyder’s ideas converge, further strengthening his affinity for Taoism at the level of social perspective.

Taoism advocates “simplicity” and “quietness” in social life. Laozi’s *Tao Te Ching* emphasizes three treasures: kindness, frugality (simplicity) and humility. “Frugality” here denotes a focus on “simplicity”, urging individuals to return to their authentic nature and original state. The emphasis of Taoism on “simplicity” criticizes human civilization and challenges Confucianism, positing that the development of human civilization has disrupted the balance of society, leading to a host of social problems and a spiritual crisis. Therefore, Taoism advocates a simple social outlook and the restraint of desires, as excessive material pursuits erode one’s innate nature. Lao Tzu believes the ideal state of achieving “simplicity” lies in the “state of chaos,” where all things merge and become indistinguishable, and individuals abandon the pursuit of fame, wealth and material possessions. Thus, individuals should be content with what they have and endeavor to control their desires. Attaining the state of “simplicity” necessitates entering a state of spiritual “quietness.” Only when the mind is tranquil can one achieve serenity, relinquish desires and material pursuits, and draw closer to the essence of nature.

Influenced by Taoism, Snyder also promotes the ideals of “simplicity” and “quietness.” He firmly believes that the true nature of things can be apprehended through intuition, a state of mind attained in complete tranquility. Snyder advocates returning to nature and embracing a simple way of life. Many of his poems depict his daily existence, evoking authenticity and intimacy when read.

REFERENCE

BI, Jiancheng. Symbiotic nurture between literature, culture, and nature in Gary Snyder’s meta-picto-poetry of landscape. *Trans/Form/Ação: Unesp Journal of Philosophy*, v. 46, n. 4, p. 163-182, 2023.

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