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Gary Snyder: *Smokey the Bear Sutra/Covers the Ground*

Gary Snyder's 1969 pop-art piece and battle-cry, *Smokey the Bear Sutra*, was written the night before a Sierra Club wilderness conference at which he spoke, and exhibited the impassioned improvisation that characterized the era's writers and voices. Snyder was actually a part of the grittier Beatnik-poet led counterculture of the 50's, but after immersing himself in Zen Buddhism between Japan and the Pacific Northwest where he was raised, he found a much more organic voice than his urbanite counterparts. Drawing on experience as a fire lookout in the Cascade Mountains, he fused East with West to translate the inherent majesty and sovereignty of the natural world to a new Green army of purists, hippies, and naturalists. *Smokey the Bear*, the iconic 20th century symbol of the National Park Service and fire-awareness guru, was to Snyder, however absurd, the embodiment of greater responsibility for and reverence to the land, and was a noble metaphor for the Buddha, the Enlightened One.

In the poem, the Great Sun Buddha gathers all of the elements of Nature together to herald a sutra, or a collection of rules, on how to live well. He calls American mountains, coasts, lakes, ponds, and swamps "great centers of power" personified with "powerful nerves and channels" in the form of rivers. He prophesizes that mankind will "wreck everything" despite Man's potential for better. He says he will reappear on Earth, in America...probably in California...as *Smokey the Bear*, the most obvious incarnation of Eastern philosophy and spirituality, to help Man rid himself of constructs limiting of peace and transcendence.

Snyder projects the image of *Smokey* as truly representative of the metaphor, indicating that the his "scout's honor" is actually the tantric mudra for equality of all things under the Dharma, which is the collective laws of Nature. He cites *Smokey's* blue overalls as a symbol of the working man "oppressed by a civilization that claims to save" him but "only destroys" him. Snyder finishes his icon-weaving by comparing *Smokey's* girth to the abundance of the Earth and then begins the sort of eloquent tirade that also typifies his homage to John Muir, in the subsequent poem, *Covers the Ground*. By flooding the reader, no matter his or her politics, with starkly contrasting imagery both of the natural world's flora and fauna and of man-made structures, Snyder leaves one with no other perspective than that Nature is beautiful, ripe, and perfect, and civilization is foolish and chronically destructive. He wants us to remember our explorations and experiences with the natural world, those power-visions we've had in solitude that have left indelible impressions on us and a sense of belonging to the higher, natural order of the Earth that is so easily snuffed-out when we return to the city from our trips. By using the "austere but comic" *Smokey the Bear* figure he provided the American 60's and 70's with a simple reminder that somebody is watching them *and* watching over them. He instills in me the familiar yearning for an older, cleaner, richer, more natural world; one where I am closer to the churches of the Earth...one that truly embarrasses me for living in Los Angeles now and again and again.

Certainly the ready-made 1969 frontline of treehuggers at the Sierra Club conference where a captivated audience for Snyder's evoking of Green Movement pathos. The ecoradical, ecocentric, ecopreservationist, was an outsider, living on the fringe, already removed from the shackles against which he preached. He wants mankind to take up the responsibilities it's been given over thousands of years, and by communing with Nature, and through contemplation and honor, aspire to that perfection of the Dharma, or Laws of Nature, instead of holding onto a platitudinal piety to religion or the inherited trappings of capitalism. Snyder hopes for us to more closely integrate ourselves with Nature in order to narrow the burgeoning gaps between our modern culture and the integral wonders that have reared us. He closes with a promise: "Now those who recite this Sutra and then try to put it in practice will accumulate merit as countless as the sands of Arizona and Nevada, Will help save the planet Earth from total oil slick, Will enter the age of harmony of man and nature, Will win the tender love and caresses of men, women, and beasts Will always have ripe blackberries to eat and a sunny spot under a pine tree to sit at, AND IN THE END WILL WIN HIGHEST PERFECT ENLIGHTENMENT."

What he did was mix the absurdity of a blooming pop culture with the austerities of spirituality. After all, isn't that the world we live in? In a way, by pointing out the humor of our own bindings he pronounces the magnetism of the open country where one can escape from the city and industry and one's lesser self, and live a happier, more fulfilled human life devoted to a greater good...led by *Smokey the Bear*.