Ecologies of the finite and the infinite

Turtle Island
By Gary Snyder,
Cloth, $6.75. Paper, $1.95.

New Poems
By Kenneth Rexroth.
Cloth, $7.50. Paper, $2.95.

By HERBERT LEIBOWITZ

When Walt Whitman advised his countrymen in 1871 to book passage to India he was not dreaming of extending the American empire to Asia, though he was enough of a chauvinist to view the restless migration to the Pacific complacently. Before the Civil War, American mercantile interests, New Englanders prominent among them, had discovered the lucrative China trade. Thoreau had carried the “Phaegon Gist” in his bag to Walden Pond, and Emerson’s Transcendentalism had taken much from Hindu, Buddhist and other Oriental philosophies. For Whitman, as for Emerson and Thoreau, the allure of the East was that it was not tainted by the allegedly worn out forms and methods of Europe. The enterprising American artist might draw on new sources of inspiration, uncover new-old versions of the self, acquire a new lingo of spiritual ecstasy and enlightenment.

This fascination with Oriental script and scripture (“the elder religions,” Whitman called them) continued unabated into the 20th century. By his own testimony, Pound’s stumbling on Ernest Fenollosa’s work with the Chinese ideogram decisively changed Pound’s thinking about—and writing of—poems. And even William Carlos Williams, that stubborn champion of local idiom, remarked in 1950 that poets living in West Coast cities, facing the Orient, had the grand opportunity of “crossing cultures,” of being less confined by the “debased precedent” of Europe than their Atlantic or inland peers.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Allen Ginsberg chants hare krishnas, mantras, and omms at his poetry readings or that Gary Snyder, having spent several years in a Zen monastery in Japan, should look to the East for literary and religious models. For both poets, the West, with its crazed technology and its stress on the exploitative ego, is a threat to the “planetary biological welfare.” The East, by contrast, schools the will to go beyond the acquisitive self and to concentrate on “the power within.”

“The ideas of a poet should be noble and simple,” Snyder quotes the Chinese poet Tu Fu, in a manner accurate to his purposes in “Turtle Island,” his seventh book. Like Thoreau, he wants a “broad margin” to his life and believes that “a man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone.” The virtues of simplicity are the lesson he has learned from Chinese and Japanese poetry.

Snyder’s poems fall roughly into three categories: lyrical precepts (prayers, spells, charms) designed to install an “ecological conscience” so that we will respect the otherness of nature, frequently personified as the tender, generative mother, and use her wisely. (Linked with these poems are a group that register his disgust at the heedless wasters, interlopers and marauders, the suburban developers for whom if you treat nature right, “it will make a billion board feet a year.”) Several poems celebrate domesticity and the family, the poet as doing father and husband bestowing benedictions on his wife and sons. By far the largest segment of his work records quiet moments when he observes the “whoosh of birds’ cloud movements, a volcanic crater, the coyote’s wall, the Douglas fir or a red leaf. These imagistic poems employ a spare notation.

Snyder’s subjects are often appeals: walls, mountains, children, the skinner of a deer, love-making communion with friends on a camping trip—all the ceremonies of innocence. But the poems themselves are this, scattered, forgettable, their rhetorical pulse sluggish, as in “Pine Tree Tops,” a standard Snyder poem:

in the blue night
frost haze, the sky grows
with the moon
pine tree tops
head snow-blue, fade
into sky, frost, starlight.
the creak of boots,
rabbit tracks, deer tracks,
what do we know.

The reader feels he is watching home movies, leafing through snapshots of an exotic trip. What stays afterwards are silhouettes of experience: a bare-breasted woman stooping to pick a shell while her children play nearby, or this:

my friend broke open a dried cayate-
salt

removed a ground squirrel tooth
pierced it, hung it
from the gold ring
in his ear

Despite a few lovely poems—“The Egg,” “Straight-Creek—Great Burn,” and “The Hudsonian Curlew”—“Turtle Island” is flat, humorless and uneventful. (Snyder’s prose is vigorous and persuasive.) The poems are also oddly epistolary. Any random scrap jotted into a journal, the miscellaneous thoughts and images that are the seeds of shaped poems and that most poets discard, are transferred into the poems without the imagination’s critical intervention. “Turtle Island” is a textbook example of the limits of imagination.

I am reluctant to mention these doubts since as the bulldozers stand poised to despoil the wilderness by strip-mining the West for the sake of more dreck and civilized trumpery, Snyder’s sane housekeeping principles desperately need to become Government and corporate policy. He is on the side of the spoils. But as Snyder remarks, “Poetry is the vehicle of the mystery of voice,” and the voice of “Turtle Island,” for all its sincerity and moral urgency, lacks that mystery and “inspired use of language” we call style.

Kenneth Rexroth’s “New Poems,” almost exclusively lyrics like “spindles of light,” are concerned with “the ecology of infinity.” “The endless dark, however, is not a terrifying interstellar hole dwarfing man. Things though in motion are in place. Rexroth’s poems are composed of a flash or revelatory image and silent metamorphoses:

Spring puddles give way
To young grass.
In the garden, willow catkins
Change to singing birds.

Syntax is cleared of the clutter of subordinate clauses, that contingent grammar of a mind hesitating, debating with itself, raging against death and old age. The dynamics of his poems are marked piano—even storms are luminous rather than noisy. There is no hurried quest for consolation: one need only step outdoors and look up at the stars and peace descends, “Orion striding into the warm waves.” This slow music exquisitely suits the feelings of the people in Rexroth’s poems, who are resigned to evanescence. Heartbreak is laconically stated. The same poem can be written over and over—and is. Rexroth’s own poems, his imitations of Chinese poetry, and his translations from the Chinese all share the same stylized calm, like the delicate brush strokes of a Chinese scroll. Through the formal manners of his lyrical cadences, one catches one’s breath in a serene Void and pleasant monotony that does not suppress emotion so much as it suggests the magical glidings of our dreams:

COMPOSED IN A DREAM
On the road of Spring, rain multiplies the flowers.
And the flowers kindle the mountains into Spring.
I follow the brook to its hidden source
Among a thousand golden orioles.

Before my eyes the flying clouds
Change into dragons dancing in the blue sky.
Drunk, lying in the shade
Of these radian blinds, I can’t tell tooth from thumb.

—Ch’i’n Kuan (1048-1100)