

“The Real Work”: Gary Snyder’s Early Poetic Journey From “Cold Mountain Poems” to “Riprap”

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The contemporary American poet Gary Snyder’s translation of Chinese classic poetry turns out to be highly influential in the United States since the 1950s. American literary culture saw in these translations a refreshing perspective that constituted a naturalistic alternative world-view to set against the restless materialist alienation. This study looks into Snyder’s early work *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems* to examine how Snyder handles the cultural differences and makes the recovery of meaning possible. By discussing the translation strategies that Snyder uses to visualize the “Cold Mountain” for his English-speaking readers, this research investigates to what extent Snyder has unlocked the “pure language” in Walter Benjamin’s sense and explores the influence of “Cold Mountain Poems” on Snyder’s original poetry writing, with a focus on his early poems “Riprap”.

Keywords: Gary Snyder, translation studies, East-West literary relations, Buddhism

Introduction

Translating poetry from classic Chinese to English is undoubtedly a tricky task. Ezra Pound’s pseudo-translation of Chinese poetry does not only make him “the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time” in T. S. Eliot’s comment but also has shown that a proper study of the literary relations between China and the West during this and other periods requires an interdisciplinary critical model of cross-cultural interpretation, which includes comparative literature and translation studies. Decades later, the contemporary American poet and translator Gary Snyder’s engagement with Chinese classic poetry, especially his appropriation of the work of the ninth-century Chinese Zen Buddhist poet Han-Shan is seen as an influential cultural phenomenon in the United States. In this study, I look into Snyder’s first collection of poems and translations *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems* to examine how Gary Snyder crossed the cultural lines between the East and the West through his appropriation of the work of the ninth-century Chinese Buddhist poet Han-shan.

Snyder’s first book of poetry *Riprap* was published in 1959, followed by *Myths and Texts* (1960) and a series of other important collections of poems and essays. His translation of the Chinese Buddhist monk Han-shan’s idiosyncratic poetry “Cold Mountain Poems” firstly appeared in the magazine *Evergreen Review* in 1958. The first edition of *Riprap* (500 copies) was printed during Snyder’s stay in Japan, in a tiny shop close to the Daitoku-ji Zen Temple, fold and bound in East Asian style. Later on, when the American edition was about to be born, Snyder and his editor of Grey Fox Press decided to add his translation of “Cold Mountain Poems” into it. This work has shown Snyder’s strong personal style and tendencies since the very beginning of his literary career.

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Apter (2006) suggests the existence of a complex “interstitial contact zone” in creative translation, where the gains and losses, the cultural exchange, the power struggles, and the generation of a translational third space involved in translation all manifest themselves in a variety of ways (Gray, 2006). Besides the stance of this recent scholarship, my approach to this subject will address Benjamin’s (2008) claim that “a real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully” (p. 260). Beyond the discussion of translation strategies, I also intend to explore the influence of “Cold Mountain Poems” on Snyder’s original poetry writing in his first collection of poetry “Riprap” and how it resonates with Snyder’s belief in the “real work of modern man”.

Snyder’s Translation of “Cold Mountain Poems”

In Snyder’s first collection of poems, he published his translations of Han-shan’s poems, along with a short introduction and a few notes on the text. Since the 1965 version of the book, it has been entitled *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems*. Among the 24 poems selected by Snyder, the majority of poems deal directly with Han-shan’s life in the Cold Mountain as a hermit who read nature and life in light of Buddhism; and the other three poems (poems 4, 12, and 20) comment mainly on the earthly pursuit from a Buddhist perspective. All these poems emphasize the spiritual and philosophical dimensions, characterizing life as impermanent, nature as sentient and interconnected with humankind.

In the Chinese original, Han-shan (literally translated as Cold Mountain) was a Chinese Buddhist poet from Tang Dynasty, who appeared as a happy and slightly crazy character who retreated from society to live in the mountains. His ideas are Taoist and Buddhist; the language in his poems is direct and fresh, informal but also organic, full of subtle meaning. When Han-shan talks about “Cold Mountain”, he refers to himself, his home, and his state of mind. On the other side, Gary Snyder is an American poet born of working-class parents in California in 1930. He used to study literature and anthropology at Reed College and had the education background in oriental languages in the graduate school of the University of California at Berkeley. In 1956, Snyder left the United States to Japan and spent several years as a Zen Buddhist student there, until he returned to the United States in 1969 after twelve years of residence in Asia. As an essayist, lecturer, environmental activist, and a Buddhist himself, Snyder has always kept a close relation to nature no matter where he lived. The following is the second poem from Snyder’s translation in the 24 Cold Mountain Poems:

重岩我卜居，鸟道绝人迹。
庭际何所有，白云抱幽石。
住兹凡几年，屡见春冬易。
寄语钟鼎家，虚名定无益。

In a tangle of cliffs I chose a place—
Bird-paths, but no trails for men.
What’s beyond the yard?
White clouds clinging to vague rocks.
Now I’ve lived here—how many years—
Again and again, spring and winter pass.
Go tell families with silverware and cars
“what’s the use of all that noise and money?” (Snyder, 2009, p. 40)

This can be seen as a bold and brave adaptation of the original, since in Han-shan's original version he didn't mention about cars. As Bassnett and Lefevere (2001) point out in their book *Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translation*, the translator starts with the language that the poet has fixed, and then has to set about dismantling it and reassembling the parts in another language altogether. Therefore, the translator's task is to compose an analogous text in another language, and accordingly, the translator is firstly a reader and then a writer. Gary Snyder is exactly such a translator. He composed another group of poems after reading the original Han-shan's poems creatively. Snyder brings his own translation close to home by setting Han-shan in mountains resembling the mountains of Sierra or the Cascades in California rather than Han-shan's own Cold Mountain. In a letter to the linguist Dell Hymes, Snyder explains his method of translation with explicit reference to his versions from the Chinese:

I get the verbal meaning into mind as clearly as I can, but then make an enormous effort of visualization, to "see" what the poem says, nonlinguistically, like a movie in my mind, and to feel it. If I can do this then I write the scene down in English. It is not a translation of the words, it is the same poem in a different language, allowing for the peculiar distortions of my own vision—but keeping it straight as possible. If I can do this to a poem the translation is uniformly successful, and is generally well received by scholars and critics. If I can't do this, I can still translate the words, and it may be well received, but it doesn't feel like I should. (Snyder, 1969, p. 178)

Intentionally, Snyder allowed Han-shan's signifiers to be displaced by what he had just seen with his own eyes. This strategy does not only provide him with a spontaneous alternative rather than a bookish translation approach but also sharpens his comprehension of the Buddhist thoughts conveyed through Han-shan's poems. Besides, in Snyder's translation and his poetic work, the Buddhist thought of interconnectedness is shown in a way that the outer landscape and inner mindscape correspond harmoniously to each other. Here is an example:

寒山有一宅，宅中无阑隔。六门左右通，堂中见天碧。
 房房虚索索，东壁打西壁。其中一物无，免被人来惜。
 寒到烧软火，饥来煮菜吃。不学田舍翁，广置牛庄宅。
 尽作地狱业，一入何曾极。好好善思量，思量知轨则。

Cold Mountain is a house,
 Without beams or walls,
 The six doors left and right are open
 The hall is blue sky.
 The rooms all vacant and vague
 The east wall beats on the west wall
 At the center nothing.

Borrowers don't bother me

In the cold I build a little fire
 When I'm hungry I boil up some greens.
 I've got no use for the Kulak
 With his big barn and pasture...
 He just sets up a prison for himself.
 Once in he can't get out.
 Think it over...
 You know it might happen to you! (Snyder, 2009, p. 54)

In the first sentence, Snyder's translation seems to tie the importance of the outer wilderness closely to the inner psychological state. In the opening line "Cold Mountain is a house", there is no distinction made between the place, Cold Mountain, and the poet, Han-shan. As for the interconnectedness between "where you are" (sense of place) and "who you are" (sense of identity), Snyder would not quarrel with this identification, which is both evident in his own poems and central to the Buddhist philosophy.

Snyder's translation is marked with verbal accuracy, visual accuracy, and more importantly, spiritual accuracy, because Snyder attempts to bypass the mediation of language and appeals directly to see the inner and outer worlds with the eye of Buddhist wisdom. Therefore, Snyder's translation, to a certain degree, is the rebirth or rejuvenation of Han-shan's poems and his Buddhist thoughts. With this intercultural interplay with Han-shan, in Snyder's translation the boundaries between the source and the target texts, the East and the West, the past and the present, all seem to be blurred. It well explains why "Cold Mountain Poems" have been reflowering from Chinese into English in the past decades.

"Riprap": Against Abstract Rationality

Snyder's 24 "Cold Mountain Poems" have become part of the canon of modern American poetry, while they also remain outstanding as translations: sharp, witty, and comfortably straddling the space between classical Chinese and modern American English. These translations have also provided inspiration for many of Snyder's original poems. He employs techniques found in Han-shan and other Buddhist writers in general: a sense of combative confrontation, a vernacular speech that seeks to address a nonelite readership, and use of natural images in the traditional Chinese poetry. A few of Han-shan's themes appear in Snyder's work as well, themes that he works out with a much more realistic sense of the complexities.

One of the most common issues is how one can reconcile a commitment to transcendence—which for Snyder means embracing the natural world and living in harmony with it. Snyder's first collection of verse "Riprap" begins with a poem that clearly shows the influence of Chinese poetic structure, Chinese nature imagery, and Han-shan's way of forming an argument:

Mid-august at sourdough mountain
 Lookout Down valley a smoke haze
 Three days heat, after five days rain
 Pitch glows on the fir-cones
 Across rocks and meadows Swarms of new flies.
 I cannot remember things I once read
 A few friends, but they are in cities.
 Drinking cold snow-water from a tin cup
 Looking down for miles Through high still air. (Snyder, 2009, p. 3)

Though Snyder breaks the lines of this poem to reflect the natural rhythms of speech, he works with the framework of an eight-line poem in the Chinese style. Like many traditional Chinese verses, the title reveals the occasion for composition. The first section (equivalent to the Chinese first couplet) provides the setting and time (looking down on the valley; commenting on the weather at the time of writing). The second section (second and third couplets) gives details about the environment (glare of pitch against the cones, swarms of flies) as well as a comment about his reading and friends. Snyder's description here is deliberately ambiguous; his position on the lookout is liberating, but it also isolates him from human society.

Another poem in “Riprap”, “Kyoto: March” shows a sort of dialectic in progress between nature and humanity, between Snyder’s Chinese antecedents and his own poetic voice:

A few light flakes of snow
 Fall in the feeble sun;
 Birds sing in the cold,
 A warbler by the wall.
 The plum Buds tight and chill soon bloom.
 The moon begins first Fourth, a faint slice west
 At nightfall. Jupiter half-way
 High at the end of night
 Meditation. The dove cry Twangs like a bow.
 At dawn Mt. Hiei dusted white
 On top; in the clear air
 Folds of all the gullied green
 Hills around the town are sharp,
 Breath stings. Beneath the roofs
 Of frosty houses
 Lovers part, from tangle warm
 Of gentle bodies under quilt
 And crack the icy water to the face
 And wake and feed the children
 And grandchildren that they love. (Snyder, 2009, p. 22)

Here, the poet keeps himself out of the poem except as a selective observer. The Chinese style comes through in the finely balanced descriptions of nature that are placed paratactically, one after another. All are lovely; the evocation of such harmony may show the influence of traditional East Asian painting as well. However, Snyder deliberately breaks this Chinese rhythm at the end as he moves from outside to inside and encounters people waking in the morning. A run-on sentence meant to imitate the bustle of people rising from the warm, safe spaces of their beds, and going about their family-centered lives. It is an interesting moment in Snyder’s early poetry—poetry that is usually centered very much on man’s response to the environment. These lines are the first hint of what will later become one of his great themes.

“The Real Work of Modern Man”

The grammatical and metric strategies in “Cold Mountain Poems” indicate the interlocutor’s shift of attention from physical immediacy to visionary experience. The meditative mind perceives itself. With the lucidity of language, Snyder dramatizes a clear attentive mind. The ambiguity in that open-endedness produces introspection in understanding the poems. In this way, readers confront multiple interpretations that his or her self observes and erases each other. This rejection of duality directs to the conundrums of difference and sameness. The layers of meaning suggested in Snyder’s “real work” break the barriers between self and environment, the West and the East, and thus clear the mind. As a poet, Snyder contributed to returning poetry to life. In the belief that poetry and life are interwoven, Snyder comments on the value and function of poetry to society as follows:

The value and function of poetry can be said in very few words. One side of it is in-time, the other is out of time. The in-time side of it is to tune us into mother nature and human nature so that we live in time, in our societies in a way and on a path in which all things can come to fruition equally and together in harmony. A path of beauty. And the out-of-time

function of poetry is to return us to our own true original nature at this instant forever... and so poetry is our life. It's not that poetry has an effect on it, or a function in it or a value for it. It is our life as much as eating and speaking is our life. (Snyder, 1969, p. 73)

In the Afterword of the 2009 edition of *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems*, Snyder says that he would have gone to do more Chinese poetry translation had he stayed with the academy; however, his feet led him toward the zendo. This makes it understandable why he chose the idea of the poetry of minimal surface texture. In Snyder's own words, it is a kind of poetry "with its complexities hidden at the bottom of the pool, under the bank, a dark old lurking, no fancy flavor is ancient" (Snyder, 2009, p. 66). Snyder believes that what is "haunting" in those best of Scottish-English ballads is at the heart of the Chinese *shi* (lyric) aesthetic. He also cited Du Fu, that "the ideas of a poet should be noble and simple" (Snyder, 2009, p. 66). On the other hand, Zen says, "Unformed people delight in the gaudy, and in novelty. Cooked people delight in the ordinary" (Snyder, 2009, p. 66). Regarding those poets who claim that their poems are composed to present the world through the prism of language, Snyder admits their project is worthy, but he also recognizes that "there is also the work of seeing the world *without* any prism of language, and to bring that seeing into language" (Snyder, 2009, p. 67). The latter, in his understanding, has been the direction of most Chinese and Japanese poetry.

Ezra Pound believes that Chinese poetry is highly translatable because he sees the Chinese language is based on images and therefore it is capable of adjusting itself in a precise and dynamic way. Pound wants to make the original and the translation constitute a symbolic continuity. In other words, he intends to project poetry in which the visible, phonic, and semantic dimensions of a language converge in a complex ideogram that will offer the world meaning. Taking a different stance from Pound, translation for Snyder is an ecological program, a Dharmic practice that implies specific responsibilities, whose rendering is designed to maximize awareness of nature on daily, political, and spiritual planes. Snyder as a precocious author has been trying to "uncover the inner structure and actual boundaries of the mind" (Snyder, 1969, p. 127) since his early career, what he called "the real work of modern man". This is partly a response to the anthropologist Diamond's (1974) statement about the "sickness of civilization consists...in its failure to incorporate (and only then) to move beyond the limits of the primitive" (p. 129). The Snyderian poetics promises a novel way of conceptualizing by placing stress on the subtleties of human dialogue and the phenomenological "depth" of the self-other relation. Since his early poetry journey, the inherent creativity and potentiality that inhere in everyday life have limited the dangers of abstract rationality.

Conclusion

Snyder's approach contributed to a more general reception of Han-shan among his fellow American poets and cultural agents. With different responses to the world and its dilemmas, certain sections in American literary culture saw in Asian artists a valuable existential pondering, a refreshing perspective not previously considered, which constituted a naturalistic alternative world-view to set against the restless materialist alienation that they perceived in their own society. It well explains why Han-shan became an iconic figure for the American Beat generation in the 1950th. Jack Kerouac, for example, even dedicated his autobiographical novel *The Dharma Bums* (1959) to Han-shan.

According to Bakhtin (1992), a literary work is not a text whose meanings are produced by the play of impersonal linguistic or economic or cultural forces, but a site for the dialogic interaction of multiple voices, or modes of discourse, each of which is not merely a verbal but a social phenomenon. The American reception of

Eastern and Buddhist values has manifested itself not only in literature but also in social phenomena such as environmental activism and spiritualist-aesthetic tendencies like New Age doctrines and communities. These broad cultural expressions also involve mercantile phenomena such as the publishing industry and other inter-disciplinary interactions such as the cross-polinization between the visual arts and poetry from both sides of the Pacific.

With the gap in attitudes and values between the Buddhist East and the pragmatic West, Snyder has created a third space of exchange, where Han-shan and Snyder both give a part of their utterances to express a proper lifestyle, which possibly exists in the best possible “interstitial contact zone” in the sense of Emily Apter. And this, in turn, becomes the starting point for Snyder’s poetics and the way in which he couples this with environmental values. That is to say, in Snyder’s first collection of poetry and translations, his interaction with Han-shan’s poems helps him to build his unique poetic self rather than becoming a true “Buddhist poet”, which acquires Snyder a profile within the pantheon of 20th century American literature.

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