

Essential Listening

From Reed's Special Collections, the earliest voice recording of Gary Snyder

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Steve Halperin's audiocassette of Gary Snyder's February 1956 poetry reading at Reed College restores an important piece of the college's literary history and opens a rich vein in Snyder studies. Snyder scholars and buffs alike should take note: this recording is a major find, recovering not only the earliest audio of the poet reading his work, but the earliest work-in-progress version of Snyder's long poem *Myths & Texts* in *any* format. The tape also contains six core poems from *Riprap* in completely finished form, four poems that would go into *The Back Country*, and eight from *Left Out in the Rain*. Finally, there are Snyder's introductory remarks and asides to the poems, several of which will be of interest to scholars in and of themselves, especially his comments on *Myths & Texts*, which are lengthy and more revealing of his method and intentions than anything Snyder has subsequently had to say about that poem.

Altogether, Snyder reads for more than an hour. The first half is given to selections from *Myths & Texts*—26 individual poems (roughly half of the published work). Snyder had read some of these poems publicly before (it's not known exactly which ones)—at the Six Gallery in San Francisco on October 7, 1955 (when Ginsberg first unveiled "Howl"); at the Poetry Center at San Francisco State on October 30; and at the University of Washington in early February 1956, ten days before this Reed performance. No recordings have surfaced from any of the other dates, and it's believed none were made.

According to Snyder, the individual poems of *Myths & Texts* were in finished or near-finished form by the time he gave his reading at Reed.¹ [Early drafts of some of these poems are also in Reed's special collections, included with letters to Philip Whalen '51]. What is of special interest on the tape is not so much the evidence of textual variations in these poems compared to their published versions (though there are a fair number), but the larger picture it gives of the late stages of creative organization of *Myths & Texts*. Snyder remarked in an interview some years ago that the final shape of *Myths & Texts* did not come clear to him until the "last lap."² What we are hearing on this tape is Snyder *in* that last lap, just weeks before the completion of the manuscript.

Snyder first began to fit the poems of *Myths & Texts* into an organic sequence in the run-up to the Six Gallery event in fall 1955.³ In a garage behind his Berkeley cottage, he spread out his poems on the floor and climbed up on a stepladder so that he could peer down on them—fire lookout-fashion as it were—and see the broad sweep of his accumulated work.⁴ Discerning relationships, he began to group the poems under three main headings—"Groves," "Beasts," and "Changes" ["Logging," "Hunting," and "Burning," respectively, in the published book]. At the same time, he hit on the title *Myths & Texts* for what he'd been doing—from the story collections of the Bureau of

¹ Gary Snyder to Katherine McNeil, in *Gary Snyder: A Bibliography*, p. 8.

² Gary Snyder, "Knots in the Grain," *The Real Work*, p. 50.

³ Gary Snyder Journal, September 19, 1955, Snyder Papers, UC Davis. See also John Suiter, *Poets on the Peaks*, p. 155.

⁴ Gary Snyder Journal, October 2, 1955, Snyder Papers, UC Davis; and Gary Snyder to the author, October 15, 2008. See also Katherine McNeil, ed., *Gary Snyder: A Bibliography*, p. 9.

American Ethnology that he'd studied heavily back in the days of '49 and '50, at Reed, including *Haida Texts & Myths* by John Swanton.

On the tape, Snyder says that he envisioned the three main sections of *Myths & Texts* as a progression “from trees and plants through sentient animal life, to the highly variable, changeable, transformable life of human beings finally...so that the final idea of ‘Changes’ is the final big imaginative apocalyptic *snap* of the mind which makes one into a Buddha—an enlightened being.”⁵

At the time of his Reed performance, that progression was still coming together, and sounding quite different from how it would eventually look on the printed page. The “Beasts” and “Changes” sections heard here especially bear little resemblance to the “Hunting” and “Burning” sections of the published poem. Snyder was still juggling the sequence of the smaller poems within the main heads, and in some cases moving poems from one section to the other, or even cutting whole poems entirely from the work. On this first part of the tape he's very open with the audience about his process, sources, and plans for the poem with the audience, frankly presenting *Myths & Texts* as work-in-progress, promising at one point, “In the final poem, there are going to be a lot of other poems working in between these two, so the connections will be, I trust, clear.” Or acknowledging, “I wrote these shaman songs high on peyote, I don't know *what* they mean.”⁶

⁵ Gary Snyder, “Introductory remarks to *Myths & Texts*,” audiotape of February 14, 1956 poetry reading, Reed College.

⁶ Gary Snyder, “Introductory remarks to ‘Changes’ section of *Myths & Texts*,” audiotape of February 14, 1956 poetry reading, Reed College.

The tape reveals something of Snyder's longer process, too. Some of the poems that he reads in the "Beasts" section—"Up the Dosewallips" and "Fording the Flooded Goldie River"—for instance, do not appear in the extant working draft of *Myths & Texts*, nor in the published version. Snyder, it turns out, would hold them back for fully thirty years before publishing them in *Left Out in the Rain*. Until this tape surfaced there was no indication that those poems were ever part of *Myths & Texts*.

Not more than six or eight weeks after the Reed event, on the eve of Snyder's departure for several years of Zen training in Japan, he completed the version of *Myths & Texts* that readers know today. No doubt he was keen on finalizing this, his first book, before shipping out, knowing that a new life and new poems awaited him in Kyoto, and if he didn't cap the work in California, it might sit incomplete for a long time.

Snyder finished *Myths & Texts* in early April 1956, at "Marin-an," his hermitage on the slope behind his friend Locke McCorkle's house in Mill Valley. There, he made a double-sided typescript of the whole poem, with facing pages like a book dummy, and dated it, "Sourdough Mt. 1953—McCorkle's Shack 1956."⁷ Sixty pages long, it contained 48 separate poems—a major work for a 25-year old, or *anyone*.

That Marin-an typescript is now part of the Gary Snyder Papers at Kent State University, and is the earliest known version of the finished poem. Clearly, a great deal of work went into it in Snyder's last spring weeks in the States in '56. For scholars of *Myths & Texts*, Reed's tape will be essential listening—and, when fully transcribed,

⁷ Gary Snyder, Title page to "Myths & Texts" typescript, Snyder Papers, Kent State University.

essential reading—because it predates the Kent State typescript by two months and shows the poem in its crucial late stages.

Laden as it is with unattributed literary and anthropological allusions and snippets of shamanic song, *Myths & Texts* was not—and still isn't—an easily accessible poem. Nor did Snyder have an easy time getting it published. Edgy Grove and staid Indiana University presses both turned it down, as did poet-publishers James Laughlin at New Directions, and City Lights' Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who said he *might* be interested, but only if Gary took out "a lot of that stuff about animals and Indians."⁸

Ironically, these quintessentially Northwest poems were eventually published by one of the most East Coast, urban small presses of the time—Amiri Baraka's [LeRoi Jones] Totem Press, in conjunction with Corinth Books in Greenwich Village. In 1960, Baraka (who had been greatly impressed by *Myths & Texts* from first read and courted Snyder for two years to acquire it) printed the poem in a handsome little staple-bound chapbook, the first edition of which now goes for \$100 or more on-line. The book sold about a thousand copies a year throughout the 60s and 70s. Eventually New Directions picked up the rights to *Myths & Texts*, but only after Snyder won the Pulitzer Prize. It has remained in print with New Directions, selling 30,000 copies over the years.⁹

When *Myths & Texts* went to press in 1960, Snyder redated the poem's compositional beginning from "Sourdough Mt. 1953" to "Crater Mt. L.O. 1952," to reflect

⁸ Joanne Kyger to Philip Whalen, February 2, 1959, Whalen Papers, Reed College. See also Gary Snyder to Allen Ginsberg, February 2, 1959, Allen Ginsberg Papers, Stanford University.

⁹ Peggy Fox, Publisher at New Directions, in response to query by the author, October 16, 2008.

the inclusion of lines written and inspiration from his first fire lookout job in the North Cascades. But the real genesis of *Myths & Texts* can be said to go back even farther, to Reed College in late 1950 and early '51, during the time that Snyder was living on SE Lambert Street in Sellwood and working on his senior thesis under professors Lloyd Reynolds and David French. Letters that Snyder wrote to his old Reed friend Dell Hymes, then at Indiana University doing grad work in anthropology, show this to be the case: *Myths & Texts* not only shares many intellectual sources with Snyder's senior thesis (Boas, Swanton, Sapir, Zimmer, and others), but the earliest pieces of what would become *Myths & Texts* were concurrently inspired and written during the same months.

Approved by Thanksgiving, Snyder's thesis proposal called for "an intense study of one myth-cycle subjected to methods and theories now circulating in the fields of anthropology, literature, and psychology." His outline didn't specify a particular myth for analysis—"Probably an American Indian culture-hero" was all he initially proposed—but his 8-part outline, his cutting-edge (for that time) comparative approach, and an insanely ambitious reading load were all approved.¹⁰ "Lloyd is very excited about it; French thinks it's possible," he wrote to Hymes.¹¹ The thesis would eventually run to 154 pages and be called "The Dimensions of a Myth."¹²

¹⁰ Gary Snyder, "Thesis Outline," included in letter to Dell Hymes, November 24, 1950, Hymes Papers, American Philosophical Library.

¹¹ Gary Snyder to Dell Hymes, November 24, 1950, Hymes Papers, American Philosophical Library.

¹² See Gary Snyder, *He Who Hunted Birds in His Father's Village*. Berkeley, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2007.

In early December, Snyder was sifting through Pacific Northwest Indian tales in the turn-of-the-century Bureau of Ethnology field reports, trying to decide on one as the focus of his thesis. He started on Franz Boas's monster volume of *Tsimshian Mythology* but soon backed off, finding it "too daunting."¹³ He turned instead to John Swanton's *Haida Texts & Myths*. Swanton, Snyder came to feel, "had a much better ear for language and story than Franz himself."¹⁴ These were tales that Swanton had collected at Skidegate in Haida Gwaii—the Queen Charlotte islands—in 1900-01, with fantastical titles like "The Man Who Married a Killer Whale Woman" and "He Who Got Supernatural Power from His Little Finger."

In his thesis outline, Gary had proposed an "intense" study of a single myth. Probably he meant to say "intensive," but as things turned out, the end of 1950 was indeed an intense time for the 20-year-old Snyder. Alison Gass '53, his wife of five months, left him in mid-November, and though he and she and everyone else agreed it was best to end their muddled attempts at marriage, the break-up was still sad, the end of "Gareth and Alysoun."¹⁵ (He watched her walk away down Lambert Street in the rain, wearing Lew Welch's old black felt mountain hat, his own raincoat, and a rucksack he'd bought her for her birthday that summer.)¹⁶

Snyder threw himself into his thesis, immersing himself like an overheated alchemist in nights of non-stop reading: Boas and Swanton, Stith Thompson; Sir James

¹³ Gary Snyder, e-mail to the author, February 27, 2008, Suiter private papers, used by permission.

¹⁴ Gary Snyder, e-mail to the author, February 27, 2008, Suiter private papers, used by permission.

¹⁵ For "muddled attempts," see Gary Snyder to Dell Hymes, November 24, 1950, Hymes Papers, American Philosophical Society.

¹⁶ Gary Snyder Journal, November 16, 1950, Snyder Papers, UC Davis, used by permission.

Frazer and Jane Ellen Harrison; Jung and Kerenyi and Joseph Campbell; Robert Graves and Heinrich Zimmer; Radin, Kroeber and Malinowski; Cassirer and Langer. It was a period of “hard drinking and hard reading,”¹⁷ he told Hymes, which left him in an “undifferentiated aesthetic continuum.”¹⁸ Out of this creative cauldron came not only his thesis, but also the first live pieces of *Myths & Texts*.

By Christmas Snyder decided on the Haida tale “He Who Hunted Birds in His Father’s Village,” with its Swan Maiden motif, as the subject for his thesis. The Swan Maiden is one of the oldest and most widespread folk tales, told across the world in ballet, Noh, and around fires. The Haida version, though transcribed and presented by Swanton in prose, is really poetry:

*She flew around above the town for a while
Her heart was not strong to fly away from her husband
By and by she vanished through the sky.¹⁹*

Snyder was drawn to the poetic possibilities of such ethnological material, but was committed to handling “He Who Hunted Birds” strictly from the anthropology side. At the same time, the burgeoning poet in him was pulled to an even stranger and more powerful story called “Big Tail”—which is, according to Swanton, “one of the most important for understanding shamanism among the Haida.”²⁰ With its numinous lines—

¹⁷ GS to Dell Hymes, April 10, 1951, Hymes Papers, American Philosophical Society.

¹⁸ GS to Dell Hymes, April 30, 1951, Hymes Papers, American Philosophical Society.

¹⁹ John Swanton, *Haida Texts & Myths*, p. 265.

*What will you do with the human beings? Are you going to save the human beings?*²¹—

“Big Tail” was the impetus for a new kind of poem for Snyder at this time. After reading it in late December 1950, he wrote in his journal:

“Idea for dealing with Haida mythology (and others, perhaps)
The narrative structure in many of the myths is such that it follows poorly for western reader. Blocks of vivid, unexplainable episodes. *It would be valid practice to try and transmute such a myth into poetry* [italics mine] which by virtue of its form carries a higher effectiveness for the contemporary reader; incorporating such aspects of imagery, rhythm, meter, etc. which are not contained in literal anthropological translation. Pound has done this effectively; why cannot I do the same?”²²

In the same journal entry he then enumerated a half dozen excerpts from “Big Tail” that he thought might be likely candidates for such poetic transmutation—every one of which would eventually be incorporated verbatim with memorable effect into various individual poems of *Myths & Texts*.

Snyder’s first success at this was “Songs for a Four-Crowned Dancing Hat,” (the title, too, is from “Big Tail”), which proved to be a break-through poem for him, and a proto-type for the kinds of heavily allusive poems that would make up *Myths & Texts*.

Written at Lambert Street in the winter of 1950-51 during the same months that he was

²⁰ John Swanton, *Haida Texts & Myths*, p. 303.

²¹ John Swanton, *Haida Texts & Myths*, p. 298.

²² Gary Snyder Journal, December 26, 1950, Snyder Papers, UC Davis, used by permission.

finishing his thesis “Songs for a Four-Crowned Dancing Hat,” turned out to be the first finished poem of *Myths & Texts* (“Hunting 11” in the published book). He sent it off with a letter to Dell Hymes in April, just after finishing his thesis, with the promise, “Bigger stuff also cooking.”²³ Six years later, Snyder read the poem at Reed. We hear it on the tape, unchanged from its published version.

Years ago, in one of the interviews in *The Real Work*, Snyder described his poems as falling into two broad categories—short, lyrical, song-like poems “that people can get into right away” and longer, more complex ritual-and-magic works such as *Myths & Texts* and *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, that took years to write and perhaps demand years—or at least many readings over time—for readers to fully enter and explore.²⁴

Both types of poem are well represented on this tape. After reading from *Myths & Texts* for the first half of his set, Snyder balances out the second half with shorter poems—poems that were written, as he says here, “in a very simple, direct, rocky sort of style.” The best of these will be well-known to Snyder’s readers: “The Late Snow and Lumber Strike of the Summer of ‘54,” “Mid-August on Sourdough Mountain Lookout,” “For a Far-Out Friend,” “Milton by Firelight,” “Praise for Sick Women,” and “Piute Creek”—much-anthologized poems from *Riprap*, his first published book, which at the time of this tape, was still three and a half years from publication.

²³ Gary Snyder to Dell Hymes, April 30, 1951, Dell Hymes Papers, American Philosophical Library.

²⁴ Gary Snyder, “Road Apple Interview,” *The Real Work*, pp. 19-20.

In addition to the poems of *Riprap*, Snyder reads four that later appeared in *The Back Country*—“To Hell with Your Fertility Cult,” “For a Stone Girl at Sanchi,” “A Dry Day Just Before the Rainy Season,” and the Sierra trail-crew poem, “A Walk.”

Snyder’s ancillary remarks to these shorter poems, while not as lengthy as his comments to the poems of *Myths & Texts*, will also be of some interest. A few are just honorific nods to his models and influences—Auden, Yeats, Tu Fu, Robert Graves, Heinrich Zimmer; but others are meatier and contain notions and phrases that should resonate even for casual readers. For instance, before reading “A Walk,” Snyder says, “This is a pure experiment in working with words like rocks.” Referring to his trail crew job from the previous summer, he continues, “When they fix up trails in the Sierra country there are big slick slabs of granite that they have to lay rocks on so that the horses can walk...and I started thinking about making poems the same way I’d lay a cobble of rocks—a cobble of words to walk over the slick rock of metaphysics!”

“Cobble of rocks,” of course, prefigures the well-known epigraph of *Riprap*:

*Riprap: a cobble of stone laid on steep slick rock
to make a trail for horses in the mountains*²⁵

Keep in mind that the “Riprap” poem would not be written for another year after this comment. As for the “slick rock of metaphysics,” in the weeks following this reading, Snyder would work that particular phrase into a memorable line in *Myths & Texts*

²⁵ Gary Snyder, *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems*, epigraph page.

(“Hunting 13” not given at this reading) to come up with as concise and lasting a metaphor for poetry—or *his* poetics, at least—as one is likely to find: “Poetry a riprap on the slick rock of metaphysics.”²⁶

Fans of Snyder’s early work will be pleased to hear how these poems that have been around for quite a while now sounded when they were new—and might be surprised to hear that they are not one word different than the versions we have known all along. Years before publication they were already stone finished. Snyder reads them here exactly as they would later appear in print, down to the word. It’s his *voice* here that makes them new. The hour-long tape captures that voice in its full range, providing a vivid portrait of the poet at twenty-five—perhaps the best documentary take on Snyder from that time in any medium.

²⁶ Gary Snyder, “Hunting 13,” *Myths & Texts*, p. 48.