Subject, Language, and Representation: Snyder's Poetics of Emptiness

Authors : Son Hyesook

Abstract : This project explores the possibility of poetics of emptiness in the poetry of Gary Snyder, one of the most experimental American poets, interpreting his works as an expression of his Buddhist concept, emptiness. This philosophical term demonstrates the lack of intrinsic nature in all phenomena and the absence of an independent, perduring self. Snyder's poetics of emptiness locates the extralinguistic reality, emptiness, within the contingent nexus of language itself instead of transcending or discarding it. Language, therefore, plays an important role in his poetry, a medium intentionally applied to the carrying out of this Buddhist telos. Snyder's poetry is characterized by strangeness and disruptiveness of language as is often the case with Asian Zen discourses. The elision of a lyric 'I' and transitive verbs, for example, is his grammatic attempt to represent the illusory nature of the self. He replaces the solitary speaker with sparely modified, concrete but generic images to prevent any anthropocentric understanding of the world and to demonstrate human enactment into a harmonious interplay with other elements of life as a part of a vast web of interconnections, where everything is interrelated to every other thing. In many of his poems, Snyder employs grammatical and structural ellipses and paratactical construction to avoid a facile discursive relation and to help the reader illogically imagine the inexpressible, the void. Through various uses of typographical and semantical space, his poetry forces the reader to experience the 'thought-pause' and intuitively perceive things-as-they-are. Snyder enacts in his Poetics an alternative to postmodern perspectives on the subject, language, and representation, and revitalizes their skeptical look at any account of human agency and the possibility of language.

Keywords : subject, language, representation, poetics of emptiness