

The Politics of Ethnopoetics

by Gary Snyder

This “politics” is fundamentally the question of what occidental and industrial technological civilization is doing to the earth. The earth: (I’m just going to remind us of a few facts), is 57 million square miles, 3.7 billion human beings, evolved over the last 4 million years; plus, 2 million species of insects, 1 million species of plants, 20 thousand species of fish, and 8,700 species of birds; constructed out of 97 naturally occurring surface elements with the power of the annual solar income of the sun. That is a lot of diversity.

Yesterday, (who was it), David Antin, I believe, told how the Tragedians asked Plato to let them put on some tragedies. Plato said, “Very interesting, gentlemen, but I must tell you something. We have prepared here the greatest tragedy of all. It is called The State.”

From a very early age I found myself standing in an undefinable awe before the natural world. An attitude of gratitude, wonder, and a sense of protection especially as I began to see the hills being bulldozed down for roads, and the forests of the Pacific Northwest magically float away on logging trucks. I grew up in a rural family in the state of Washington. My grandfather was a homesteader in the Pacific Northwest. The economic base of the whole region was logging. In trying to grasp the dynamics of what was happening, rural state of Washington, 1930’s, depression, white boy out in the country, German on one side, Scotch-Irish on the other side, radical, that is to say, sort of grass roots Union, I.W.W., and socialist-radical parents, I found nothing in their orientation, (critical as it was of American politics and economics), that could give me an access to understanding what was happening. I had to find that through reading and imagination, which lead me into a variety of politics: Marxist, Anarchist, and onwards.

Now I would like to think of the possibility of a new humanities. Humanities, remember, being a post-renaissance way of looking at the question of how to shake man loose from the theological vision of the Middle Ages. But I can’t think about our situation in anything less than a forty thousand year time scale. Fifty thousand years is not very long. If we wanted to talk about hominid evolution we’d have to work with something like four million years. Forty thousand years is a useful working time scale because we can be sure that through the whole of that period man has been in the same body and in the same mind that he is now. All the evidence we have indicates that imagination, intellect, wit, decision, speed, skill, was fully developed forty thousand years ago. In fact, it may be that we were a little smarter forty thousand years ago since brain size has somewhat declined on the average from that point of Cro-Magnon. It is interesting that even the average size of the Neanderthal skull, (whom most people have a rather unflattering image of), indicates larger brain size than modern man. We don’t know why brain size declined. It probably has something to do with “society,” if you want to blame it on something. Society providing buffers and protection of an increasingly complicated order so that as it became larger in scope, and populations larger in size, it protected individuals from those demands for speed,

skill, knowledge, and intelligence that were common in the Upper Paleolithic. The personal direct contact with the natural world required of hunters and gatherers — men and women both — a tremendous continual awareness.

What we are witnessing in the world today is an unparalleled waterfall of destruction of a diversity of human cultures; plant species; animal species; of the richness of the biosphere and the millions of years of organic evolution that have gone into it. In a sense ethnopoetics is like some field of zoology that is studying disappearing species. We must have a concern with this because our subject matter is rapidly disappearing and we, (and I mean “we” to mean everyone, regardless of his color or ethical background, who is now plugged in to the fossil fuel industrial society, we are all that “we”), we are the ones who are in some inexorable, karmic, historical way keeping it going down.

Four thousand different languages and cultures about the year 1900, also being swept away in the inexorable push towards monoculture. Monoculture has had two specific kinds of fuelling in the last six thousand years. In that fifty thousand year time scale (I owe a great deal to Dr. Stanley Diamond for my sense of this), the major part of man’s interesting career has been spent as a hunter and gatherer, in “primary” cultures. As recently as 12,000 years ago, agriculture began to play a small part in some corners of the world. It’s only in the last 3 millenia that agriculture has really penetrated widely. Civilization, 8,000 years old; class structure, surplus wealth accumulation, literate societies which on balance in that total represent a very small part of human experience; literacy representing an even tinier part of human experience, since it’s only been in the last two centuries that any sizable proportion of any civilized country has had much literacy. Thus oral literature, the ballad, the folktale, myth, the songs, the subject matter of “ethnopoetics” has been the major literary experience of mankind. Understanding that, it becomes all the more poignant when we realize that the richness is being swept away.

Now, in the first issue of *Alcheringa*, Jerome Rothenberg and Dennis Tedlock made a statement of intention which I’d like to refer back to because it also seems to me that gathering here in this way, almost five years later, we can take a look back and see how those original stated intentions of *Alcheringa* seem to us now and how we’d worked with them. Eight points in this statement. “As the first magazine of the world’s tribal poetries, *Alcheringa* will not be a scholarly journal of ‘ethnopoetics,’ so much as a place where tribal poetry can appear in English translation and can act (in the oldest and newest of poetic traditions) to change men’s minds and lives.” Note that, “to change men’s minds and lives.” “While its sources will be different from other poetry magazines it will be aiming at the struggling and revelatory presentation that has been common to our avant-gardes. Along the way we hope: (1) by exploring the full range of man’s poetries to enlarge our understanding of what a poem may be; (2) to provide a ground for experiments in the translation of tribal/oral poetry and a forum to discuss the possibilities and problems of translation from widely divergent cultures; (3) to encourage poets to participate actively in the translation of tribal/oral poetry; (4) to encourage ethnologists and linguists to do work increasingly ignored by academic publications in their fields, namely to

present the tribal poetries as values in themselves, rather than as ethnographical data; (5) to be a vanguard for the initiation of cooperative projects along these lines between poets, ethnologists, songmen, and others; (6) to return to complex/'primitive' systems of poetry, as (intermedia) performance, etc., and to explore ways of presenting these in translation; (7) to emphasize by example and commentary the relevance of tribal poetry to where we are today; (8) to combat cultural genocide in all of its manifestations."

I think that most of us understand what has happened in regard to those areas of interaction described in points 2 through 7 over the last four or five years, so I'm going to concentrate my comments on the two points "combat cultural genocide" and "what a poem may be."

To combat cultural genocide one needs a critique of civilization itself, and some thought about what happens when "crossing barriers" takes place; when different, small, relatively self-sufficient cultures begin to contact each other and that interaction becomes stepped up by a historical process of growing populations, growing accumulation of surplus wealth and so forth. It's probably true that there's a certain basic cross-cultural distrust in small societies that is resolvable by trade, exchange, or periodic gambling games, festivities, and singing together. The sheer fact of distance alone, physical distance between two households, makes one group think of those other people as "the others."

The real arms race starts maybe with bronze weapons and certainly with iron. Raiding cultures emerge; this is the first turbulent kind of interface. Some people quit farming and hunting, and take up raiding for a living. This goes on today, in what Ray Dasmann calls the relationship between ecosystem cultures and biosphere cultures. Ecosystem cultures being those whose economic base of support is a natural region, a watershed, a plant zone, a natural territory within which they have to make their whole living. Living within the terms of an ecosystem, out of self-interest if nothing else, you are careful. You don't destroy the soils, you don't kill all the game, you don't log it off and let the water wash the soil away. Biosphere cultures are the cultures that begin with early civilization and the centralized state; are cultures that spread their economic support system out far enough that they can afford to wreck one ecosystem, and keep moving on. Well, that's Rome, that's Babylon. It's just a big enough spread that you can begin to be irresponsible about certain specific local territories. It leads us to imperialist civilization with capitalism and institutionalized economic growth. The first energy hit, to go back again to those two fuelings of monoculture, was slavery. The energy we operate by fundamentally is the annual solar income, via agrarian or natural hunting and gathering modes of receiving it plus your labor — man for man — woman for woman, labor. Slavery becomes the first energy hit to speed things up a bit.

The next big energy hit is fossil fuels. Fossil fuels from the 1880's, responsible for the explosion of all growth curves and consumption curves we see in the world today. Impelled by and running parallel with a pre-established ideology of economic growth, but the two much reinforcing each other.

Within that context, we have a number of intellectual human beings especially of the occidental world that, parallel with the world-wide spread of occi-

dental trading habits, become students of other peoples, and (without involving ourselves at this point much into the argument of whether or not anthropology is always imperialism) we can't help but see it as a politically related factor. The very fact of anthropological curiosity is a function of being a member of an expanding civilization. The opposite of that, of the contrast to that, is to be in a cultural situation where you will not have any particular interest in what other peoples' cultural habits are, but simply, hopefully, respect them. In Zen Buddhism they say, "mise mono ja nai," which means this is not something we show to people. No radio interviews, no tapings, no videos, no movies, no visitors are permitted in Zen training establishments. It's not for show. It's open to everyone who wishes to participate but it's not for show. That is the sense that insiders have in their own culture as members. They see people who come to them wanting to study (but not participate) as strangely floating around the surface. We can begin to imagine how weird our anthropological efforts must look to people who are in that other kind of culture which is ecosystem based and deeply rooted in its own identity while not doubting in the least the humanity of other human beings.

Now I'd like to tackle this thing about "combat cultural genocide." How do we combat cultural genocide? Has *Alcheringa* combatted cultural genocide within the last five years? Have any of us in any focussed way combatted cultural genocide? Where is cultural genocide taking place? Let's take Brazil. In a recent issue of *Critical Anthropology*, the magazine of Marxist anthropology that Dr. Diamond has been associated with over the last few years from the New School, we have an article where Dr. Jack Stauder makes these suggestions to fellow teachers about how to take certain simple academic steps in the right direction. He says, if you're going to be an anthropology teacher you should also be able to teach your students the dynamics of their own culture, at least in the critical area of understanding imperialism and capitalism. If you can't communicate that to your students, the you've got no business talking to them about the Xingu. If you can't explain the banking system, well, where are you? He says an anthropologist should be able to teach members of an oppressed culture the dynamics of imperialism, and useful economic understanding, in so far as they want to learn it. I know people who don't want to put their heads into those occidental categories, but if they want to learn they should be helped. It's the difference between being victimized or being the master of the situation: to simply understand how things work. Dr. Stauder suggests that an anthropologist should play an active political role in society. And that we should ally ourselves to peoples' struggle everywhere.

Brazil is only one case in point on the globe but a very instructive one. People are of course oppressed everywhere and the destruction of small traditions is taking place in countries of all degrees of complexity. The Brazilian case is touching because it's probably there that the last primary human beings in the world live: a few small groups, apparently, that have not yet been contacted by expanding civilization. Two hundred and fifty known tribes existed in Brazil in 1900: eighty-seven have become extinct. Between 1900 and 1957 the Indian populations in Brazil dropped from over one million to less than two

hundred thousand persons. The population of Brazilian Indians in the Amazon basin is now estimated at less than fifty thousand. Nambiquara, Cintas Largas, Kadiweu, Bororo, Waura, for example. This destruction is backed by large multi-national corporations; the second largest investor in Brazil is Volkswagen. Volkswagen apparently does not want to convert all its western hemisphere profits all back into Euro-dollars, so it's heavily invested in the development of cattle range in the Brazilian jungle, destruction of forests and replacement of that by grasses to feed the affluent taste for beef of the people of North America. Another is Georgia Pacific, in timber, a company which is also deforesting some of the finest remaining virgin tropical forests of the Phillipines on contracts with the Phillipine government. Rio Tinto Zinc; Litton Industries doing aerial surveys and mapping; Caterpillar Tractor in vast contracts for pushing out the jungle, going directly across the Xingu park. The Brazilian official statement is, "We think the only way for the Indians to improve their health, education and begin self-development is through development." Now, before you laugh, ask yourself this question: Do you have a good answer to that argument? Do you want to take the position that the Indians of Brazil should be placed in a national park with a fence around it and have absolutely no contact with the civilized world at all? How do you answer that? I know as a student of anthropology in the 1950's I became convinced (following along the lines of what my teachers were saying) that the traditional cultures of the world were doomed. We could study them, we could try to preserve what we could find of their languages, customs, myths, folktales, ethno-botanic knowledge and so forth, but it would be quixotic to think that we should invest any political effort in the actual defense of their cultural integrity because the assumption was almost automatic that there was a melting pot process of assimilation (that was probably o.k.) underway and what we had to look for at the other end of the tunnel was a hopeful, international, one world, humane modernism, fuelled with liberal and Marxist ideas. But Marxists, granted the precision of their critique on most points, often have a hard time thinking clearly about primitive cultures, and the usual tendency is to assume that they should become civilized. Right? So I'll come back in a moment to what I think is maybe one way to approach an answer to that question, why do you say that they should be developed? You want to keep them from having aspirin? Or is it even possible?

These strange contradictions. In Argentina there's a national park. One of the groups of the Mapuche lives there. The forest huts are deteriorating, not owing to laziness but because the park services decrees that no wood may be cut or gathered by the Indians. Surrounded by the forest yet disallowed wood and fined if they should dare to cut any. The government provides bundled firewood, but never enough.

These are quotations from Argentina, but I have heard the same thing said in Montana, Utah, Nevada, central Oregon and so forth. Talking about the people called the Mapuche. A colonel of German origin. "Are you going to write about them? They're alcoholics and they sleep with their own daughters." A store owner of Arab origin, "But don't worry for them. I hope they die. You had better concern yourself that there will be a good road built." A restaurant

owner, “I don’t understand them. They starve but they are also so proud that they don’t want to become dishwashers.” A lawyer with a tourist agency, “The Curruhincas live marvelously without any shortages at all, by God, you and I would wish we had the same.” A high official of Park Nationale, “What do you want to say about prohibiting their goats? What we want is to throw them out of here. They are lazy, had bad customs and are dirty. What a spectacle for the tourists. We are studying a project of displacement to another part of the region where they can live as they wish without problems.”

The official didn’t mention that any other region in Neuquen province is desert, bleak and barren, and besides the Curruhinca Mapuche belong and are acknowledged as such under Argentinian law in the area of Lake Lacar.¹

One of the criteria that can be brought to bear against the destructive aspect of industrial civilization is ecological. It has to do simply with this question of the reduction of diversity. I noticed some comments earlier in this conference by some people that seem to at least imply to me that they were in favor of, and assumed that, a kind of one-world assimilation of languages and cultures or, you know, some kind of internationalization, was a desirable process. The ecological critique goes like this, (I quote from Roy Rappaport, “Flow of Energy in an Agricultural Society”): “It may not be improper to characterize as ecological imperialism the elaboration of a world organization that is centered in industrial society and degrades the ecosystems of the agrarian societies it absorbs. The increasing scope of world organization and the increasing industrialization and energy consumption on which it depends have been taken by western man to virtually define social evolution and progress. What we have called progress or social evolution may be maladaptive. We may ask if the chances for human survival might not be enhanced by reversing the modern trend of successions in order to increase the diversity and stability of local, national, and regional ecosystems even, if need be, at the expense of the complexity and interdependence of international world-wide organizations. It seems to me that the trend toward decreasing ecosystem complexity and stability, rather than threats of pollution, overpopulation or even energy famine, is the ultimate ecological problem confronting man. Also, the most difficult to solve, since the solution cannot be reconciled with the values, goals, interests, political and economic institutions prevailing in industrialized and industrializing societies.”

I was talking about economic growth the other day to a young woman. And she said, “But all life is growth; that’s natural, isn’t it?” So I had to explain this, following Ramon Margalef and others: Life moves in certain kinds of cycles, and after an occasion of disruption or turbulence, it rapidly replaces the disturbed fabric, but initially with a small number of species. As the fabric is repaired, species diversity begins to replace single species rapid growth, and increasing complexity becomes again the model, what they call “tending toward climax” resulting in the condition called climax. That is, maximum diversity and maximum stability in a natural system. Stable because there are so many

¹Information on South America from various publications of the *Indigena* group (P.O. Box 4073, Berkeley, CA. 94704)

interlocking points that one kind of, as they say, insult to the system does not go through too many pathways, but is localized and corrected. If you have a field of nothing but grass, and grasshoppers land on it, that's the end of your grass. If you have an acre of which grass is maybe 12% of the biomass, then the grasshoppers hit 12% of the biomass, but you still have the other 88%. That's all. The support implicit in that, the richness implicit in that and also the richness of the recycling of energy through the detritus pathways (organic matter on the downswing rather than on the upswing, the fungi, insects, etc., that live in the rotten wood and the rotten leaves rather than live off the annual production of new biomass.) Detritus is a key to that stability and maturity.

Now, in Dr. Eugene Odum's terms, what we call civilization is an early succession phase; immature, monoculture system. What we call the primitive is a mature system with deep capacities for stability and protection built into it. In fact, it seems to be able to protect itself against everything except white sugar and the money economy trading relationship; and alcohol, kerosene, nails, and matches. (It was John Stuart Mill who said, "No labor-saving invention ever really saved anybody any labor.")

So: ethno-poetics, first as a field. The politics of inventing a new academic field. Politics of having a magazine. Politics of having a conference like this. That's just a little footnote on academic life in America, and that we do these things. I say this jokingly because I'm grateful for what Jerome and Dennis have done; I'm grateful for having been brought here today. That's one level. The next level is "ethno-poetics" and that is, what we do when we start going into other peoples' cultures and bringing back their poems and publishing them in our magazines? I'll argue the positive side of that and it's simply this. And expansionist imperialist culture feels most comfortable when it is able to believe that the people it is exploiting are somehow less than human. When it begins to get some kind of feedback that these people might be human beings like themselves it becomes increasingly difficult.

Collections of American Indian mythology, folklore, and song go back to the 1880's. The quantity becomes really large after around 1900 — Annual Reports and Bulletins of the Bureau of American Ethnology, the American Ethnological Society, the Memoirs and Journal of the American Folklore Society, and so forth. A large body of American Indian literature in English, but almost no publication of it in forms which are easily available to large numbers of people. I ask why. I don't know; it may be just market economy at work, and nobody wanted to read that sort of thing. It may be that no one wanted it to be available outside a scholarly circle.

A similar case: the Ainu and the people of Japan. Dr. Kindaichi and his associates began collecting Ainu oral literature in the 1930's, one of the largest single bodies of oral literature that's ever been collected; in Japanese translation from Ainu. I find no popular Japanese publication of any of that material through the earlier decades: it was just last year that the first easily available paperback of a selection of the oral literature collected by Dr. Kindaichi and his associates has come out. Until now it was buried in very expensive rare scholarly books. The Iwanami Bunko series of paperbacks, about fifty cents

a volume; have translations of all the literatures in the world — Dostoevski, Tolstoy, they've got it all in Japanese translation. So the publishing capacity was there. Why didn't it happen? Why did it just happen now? What will the recent publication of the Villas Boas brothers' book on the Xingu do for the Brazilian Indians? It will probably help. A few people will read that and begin to think, "These are human beings." So there is some tiny increment of political value from the publication of oral literatures.

For most of the 40,000 year time span, people weren't particularly self-conscious about their own body of songs, myths, and tales, but we have some illuminating cases from the 19th century illustrating how publication of ethnical literature reinforces a people's own sense of identity. Take Finland. A young doctor named Lonnrat set himself to walking widely through the northern parts of Finland, collecting the remaining fragments of songs and epics and tales that the people were still telling in the early 19th century. He strung those together in an order which he more or less perceived himself, and called it the Kalevala. It became overnight the Finnish national epic and helped the Finns hold up against the Swedes on one side and the Russians on the other. It may well be that Dr. Lonnrat's walking around in the summertime is responsible for the fact that there's a nation called Finland today.

Point 4 in the *Alcheringa* 8-point list was "encouraging ethnologists and linguists to do work." Something happens when you do that work.

In March, 1902. Alfred Kroeber was in Needles, California. He says: "At Ah'a-kwinyevai, in a sand-covered Mohave house, we found Inyo-Kutavére, which means 'Vanished-Pursue'... he went on for six days, each of three to four hours total narration by him and as many hours of translation by Jack Jones and writing down by me. Each evening, he believed, I think honestly, that one more day would bring him to the end. He freely admitted, when I asked him, that he had never told the story through from the beginning to the end. He had a number of times told parts of it at night to Mohave audiences until the last of them dropped off to sleep. When our sixth day ended he still again said another day would see us through. But by then I was overdue at Berkeley. And as the prospective day might once more have stretched into several, I reluctantly broke off, promising him and myself that I would return to Needles when I could, not later than next winter, to conclude recording the tale. By next winter Inyo-Kutavére had died and the tale thus remains unfinished... He was stone blind. He was below the average of Mohave tallness, slight in figure, spare, almost frail with age, his gray hair long and unkempt, his features sharp, delicate, sensitive... He sat indoors on the loose sand floor of the house for the whole of the six days that I was with him in the frequent posture of Mohave men, his feet beneath him or behind him to the side, not with legs crossed. He sat still but smoked all the Sweet Caporal cigarettes I provided. His house mates sat around and listened or went and came as they had things to do."² That old man sitting in the sand house telling his story is who we must become

²A. L. Kroeber, "A Mohave Historical Epic," *Anthropological Records*, 11.2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), p. 71.

— not A. L. Kroeber, as fine as he was.

What I want to talk about now is not the poetry of others, “ethnoi,” but the poetry of ourselves. Diné poetry, people-poetry, Maidu poetry, human being poetry. In the 40,000 year time scale we’re all the same people. We’re all equally primitive, give or take two or three thousand years here or a hundred years there. Homer then, from this standpoint, is not the beginning of a tradition but the end of a tradition. Homer incorporates and organizes the prior eight thousand years of oral material like the scribes who put the Japanese lore into writing finally. Homer launches those things again forward for another couple of thousand years so that we still have Ajax cleaning powder and Hercules blasting powder. Some kind of looping.

I was impressed by Lévi-Strauss’ opinion that everything has gone somewhat downhill in western culture since the neolithic. He also argues that writing systems have served largely through history to enslave men rather than to serve any useful religious, spiritual or esthetic purpose, since the original use of writing was to write down lists of slaves and to keep an account of what you had in your warehouse, and only much later became used in these other ways. However, the economic anthropologist Marshall Sahlins has changed my mind because he says the paleolithic is where it’s at. As mentioned earlier, ecological criteria are moving in this direction also. According to Sahlins’ research, *Stone Age Economics*, the upper paleolithic was the original affluent society, and he estimates that they worked an average of 15 hours a week. Sahlins says, “if you are willing to grant that paleolithic hunters were in business for their health, then the bow and arrow served their needs.” “In those societies nobody had very much but there were no poor people. There is no class of landless paupers in primitive culture. Landless paupers belong to civilization.” This is also interesting: the average intake of proteins, carbohydrates and all nutrients per day is higher for a primitive person and probably for an archaic person than it was for the vast population of serfs and peasants under the high civilized regimes. The Chinese, who looked down the Tibetans so much, were not themselves aware of the fact that the average nutrition for a Chinese person was far below the average nutrition for a Tibetan person living as a nomad in those barren upland wastes.

So, what is this poetics then that starts back there? Like Dr. Diamond said, primary experience. Our hands got this way by doing certain things a long time. The hand must still do those things or it isn’t what it can be. Beautiful little system. This is the origin of language and poetry from the standpoint of India: Brahma, the creator, is in a profound state of trance. He is silence, stillness. A thought moves somewhere in there. It manifests itself as song, the goddess Vak. The goddess Vak becomes the universe itself as energy. Of that energy all sub-energies are born. Now, Vak, in Indo-European philology is the same as the Latin “vox” of the English “voice.” This goddess takes on another name: she’s also called Sarasvati, which means “the flowing one,” and she’s recognized today in India as the goddess of poetry, music and learning. She’s represented as wearing a white sari, riding a peacock, carrying the vina and a scroll.

In the primal days of that energy flow, language was just “seed syllables.” The practice of mantra chanting in India, which is the chanting of those seed

syllables, is conceived of as being a way to take yourself back to fundamental sound-energy levels. The sense of the universe as fundamentally sound and song, begins poetics. They also say in Sanskrit poetics that the original poetry is the sound of running water and the wind in the trees.

There is sacred song and secular song. In the case of sacred song there are two categories: songs which are made of magic syllables and have magical meaning only, and sacred songs which have literal meaning. In the category of secular song, you can think of all the songs of all the people of the world as going through divisions like these: lullabies to sing babies to sleep; playground rhymes for kids; power vision songs of adolescent initiation; courting songs of young people; work songs — net-hauling, hammer-swinging, rice transplanting, canoeing, riding, hunting songs, with a specific magical set of skills and understandings; celebration songs, war songs, death songs. We can fit all of our own poetries into these.

One other category which is critical is “healing songs,” because out of the healing songs, songs that were obtained by people who got particularly strong power vision songs and went back for more, evolved specialization: that is to say, the specialization of the shaman or medicine person as a singer/healer. That comes to us in history as the fellows Plato wanted to kick out. Now, I like to think that the concern with the planet, with the integrity of the biosphere, is along and deeply-rooted concern of the poet for this reason: the role of the singer was to sing the voice of corn, the voice of the Pleiades, the voice of bison, the voice of antelope. To contact in a very special way an “other” that was not within the human sphere; something that could not be learned by continually consulting other human teachers, but could only be learned by venturing outside the borders and going into your own mind-wilderness, unconscious wilderness. Thus, poets were always “pagans,” which was why Blake said Milton was of the devil’s party but he didn’t know it. The devil is, after all, not the devil at all, he is the miming elk shaman dancer at Trois Frères, with elk antlers and a pelt on his back, and what he’s doing has to do with animal fertility in the springtime.

At very bottom is the question, “how do you prepare your mind to become a singer.” How to prepare your mind to be a singer. An attitude of openness, inwardness, gratitude; plus meditation, fasting, a little suffering, some rupturing of the day-to-day ties with the social fabric. I quote again from the Papago: “a man who desires song did not put his mind on words and tunes. He put it on pleasing the supernaturals. He must be a good hunter or a good warrior. Perhaps they would like his ways. And one day in natural sleep he would hear singing. He hears a song and he knows it is the hawk singing to him of the great white birds that fly in from the ocean. Perhaps the clouds sing or the wind or the feathery red rain spider on its invisible rope. The reward of heroism is not personal glory nor riches. The reward is dreams. One who performs acts of heroism puts himself in contact with the supernatural. After that, and not before, has fasts and waits for a vision. The Papago holds to the belief that visions do not come to the unworthy, but to the worthy man who shows himself

humble there comes a dream and the dream always contains a song.”³

The symbolism of the muse, the goddess, is strong in our occidental tradition and it’s also strong in the Sanskrit and Tamil traditions of India. The Chinese tradition is somewhat different but has very interesting contacts with a kind of muse point of view that very early that became covered over: It’s in Taoism, and within the emphasis on the female, the feminine, the spirit of the valley, the *yin*. Taoism being, following Dr. Joseph Needham’s assessment of it in *Science and Civilization in China*, the largest single chunk of matrilineal descent, mother consciousness-oriented, neolithic culture that went through the, so to speak, sound barrier of civilization in the Iron Age and came out the other side halfway intact. Thus through its whole political history it has been anti-feudal and anti-patriarchal, so much so that Dr. Needham says that in a way Taoism was a 2,000 year-long holding action for the Chinese communist revolution. Dr. Needham is a bio-chemist from England.

Our own mythology — mostly accepted on faith — is the scientific view of the universe. There’s an interesting convergence that I want to develop a bit now, which is delightful. It’s the Gaia Hypothesis. The earth-goddess again. Two scientists, James Lovelock and Sidney Epton, in England, have done a paper called “The Quest for Gaia.” Gaia, in Greek mythology, is the original earth-goddess sprung from Chaos, who produced Uranus, mated with Uranus, mothered Chronos, the Titans, the Cyclops and the Giants, and then the next generation was the first generation of gods.

The Gaia hypothesis is a biochemists’ hypothesis, that the whole of the biosphere is one living organism which has strategically programmed its evolution for 3 billion years, including producing us. (Which may have been its one mistake.) One of the most interesting evidences of this kind of work is the releasing of oxygen into the atmosphere by oceanic micro-organisms, creating first an oxygen environment but then also by a breakdown of certain oxygen molecules creating the ozone shield screening ultra-violet rays, permitting cells to move out onto the land. As cells get out onto the land, more oxygen, more ozone shield is created, thus increasing the possibility of the spread of life. “Thus, green plants not only get the benefit of carbon dioxide but also are warmed by the radiant flux returned to the ground by the atmosphere. The atmosphere’s window on space is transparent to visible light but is closed at the ultraviolet end by ozone absorption and carbon dioxide and water vapor. This grand scale synergy of green plants in the atmosphere is the result of millions of years of evolution of life and of the atmosphere which are therefore closely interdependent.”⁴ The atmosphere is the creation of life for its own uses. Hence, the planet earth looks like a nacreous shell from outer space such as that which Venus might have stepped out of.

Poetics of the earth. Concentrations of communication-energy result in language, certain kinds of compressions of language result in mythologies; compression of mythologies brings us to songs. “The transmission” — this is Dr.

³Ruth Underhill, *Singing for Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 7.

⁴David M. Gates, “The Flow of Energy in the Biosphere,” *Energy and Power* (N.Y.: Scientific American, 1971), p. 45.

H. T. Odum — “the transmission of information is an important part of any complex system. Small energy flows that have high amplification factors have value in proportion to the energies they control. As the smallest of energy flows, information pathways may have the highest value of all when they open work gate valves on power circuits. The quality of this information, tiny energies in the right form, is so high that in the right control circuit it may obtain huge amplifications and control vast power flows.”⁵ In the great universe, the main “theme” of energy flow is in massive objects coming together realizing their own gravity. Solar radiation per square meter out in space is 1.395. 99.98% of the energy influx on the earth is solar. The tiniest fraction of that is captured by the chlorophyll of plant leaves. Here’s the poetics: “Morowitz has presented the case, in thermodynamics, for the hypothesis that a steady flow of energy from the inexhaustible source of the sun to the unfillable sink of outer space, by way of the earth, is mathematically destined to cause the organization of matter into an increasingly ordered state. The resulting balancing act involves the ceaseless clustering of bonded atoms into molecules of higher and higher complexity and the emergency of cycles for the storage and release of energy. In a non-equilibrium steady state, which is postulated, the solar energy would not just flow to the earth and radiate away; it’s thermodynamically inevitable that it must rearrange matter into symmetry, away from probability, against entropy, lifting it so to speak into a constantly changing condition of rearrangement and molecular ornamentation. If there were to be sounds to represent this process, they would have the arrangement of the Brandenburg concertos, but I’m open to wondering whether the same events are recalled by the rhythms of insects, the long pulsing runs of bird songs, the descants of whales, the modulated vibrations of millions of locusts in migration.”⁶

That is, you know, on some subliminal level what we’re tuned into — for our language, for our songs. It keeps bringing us back around to earth: I’m going to quote one which you all know. “Don Juan squatted in front of me. He caressed the ground gently. ‘This is the predilection of the two warriors, this earth, this world. For a warrior there can be no greater love. Only if one loves this earth with unbending passion can one release one’s sadness. A warrior is joyful because his love is unalterable and his beloved the earth embraces him and bestows on him gifts. This lovely being, which is alive to its last recesses and understands every feeling, soothed me, cured me of my pains and finally when I had understood my love for it, it taught me freedom.’ ”⁷

Now, looking at our poetry of North America — Turtle Island — in the light of the past, of other traditions, and this old new sense of the Earth, it seems to me that we are just beginning. It wasn’t until the 3rd century A.D. in China that landscape poetry began to emerge, poetry which developed over a number of centuries and ultimately amplified, informed, explored the seasons, the rivers, the waterfalls, the mountains, creating a lore of reference and allusion to plants, each in their season, and the qualities of those seasons in relations to human

⁵H. T. Odum, *Environment, Power, and Society* (N.Y.: John Wiley, 1971), p. 172.

⁶Lewis Thomas, *The Lives of a Cell* (N.Y.: Viking Press, 1974), pp. 27–28.

⁷Carlos Castaneda, *Tales of Power* (N.Y.: Simon & Schuster, 1974), p. 285.

affairs.

We're just starting, in the last ten years here, to begin to make songs that will speak for plants, mountains, animals and children. When you see your first deer of the day you sing your salute to the deer, or your first red-wind blackbird — I saw one this morning! Such poetries will be created by us as we reinhabit this land with people who know they belong to it; for whom “primitive” is not a word that means past, but *primary*, and *future*. They will be created as we learn to see, region by region, how we live specifically (plant life!) in each place. The poems will leap out past the automobiles and TV sets of today into the vastness of the Milky Way (visible only when the electricity is turned down), to richen and humanize the scientific cosmologies. These poesies to come will help us learn to be people of knowledge in this universe in community with the other people — non-human included — brothers and sisters.

[Based on a talk given at the Ethnopoetics conference at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, April 1975.]