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## SAILING THE METAPHORICAL SEAS OF THE MIDDLE EAST: GARY SNYDER'S "BOAT OF A MILLION YEARS"

*Anthony Hunt*

Gary Snyder's "Boat of a Million Years" is one of the 39 sections of *Mountains and Rivers Without End*. As such, it has its place within the network of images and ideas of the larger poem, yet it also has an interpretive and experiential life of its own. The *Sappa Creek*, a T-2 tanker on which Snyder worked as a fireman from August 1957 to April 1958, floats at the center of the numerous symbols encountered in this short section. A fleeting glimpse of the boat also appears in "Things to do Around a Ship at Sea" (*M&Rs* 28-29)<sup>1</sup> and some of the actual dates and locations of its progress appear in *Earth House Hold*:

At Sea Arabian Sea 6: XI  
Suez canal eleven eleven  
At Sea 29: XI  
At Sea Arabian Sea 8: XII  
Iskenderun, Turkey 20: XII: 57  
Istanbul 25: XII  
Back through Suez 4: I: 58  
At Sea  
18: II: 58 heading back into the Persian Gulf  
Ras Tanura 20: II: 58  
At Sea 20: III: 58. ("Tanker Notes" 54-68)<sup>2</sup>

In such notes we imaginatively sail the seas of the Middle East with Snyder, our Lilliputian ship voyaging along the coastlines of both the Modern and Ancient Worlds. As if its movement were directed by the unwinding and rewinding of scenes on a horizontal scroll, more than once the ship travels from the oil depots of the Persian Gulf, up

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<sup>1</sup> Future references to *Mountains and Rivers Without End* will be cited as *M&Rs*.

<sup>2</sup> Yet another poem, entitled "The Sappa Creek," was published in *Earth House Hold* (and again in *No Nature*). "T-2 Tanker Blues" was published in *Riprap & Cold Mountain Poems*. Snyder's experience on board the boat is alluded to or reflected upon in several other poems and essays.

the narrow Red Sea, and through the Suez Canal into the Mediterranean. The port city Ras Tanura, a terminus for Arabian pipelines, underscores the boat's role as a transporter of the black-gold liquid from the Middle Eastern oil fields to the cities of modern civilization. As one who is mindful of global ecology, Snyder is well aware of his compromised position on the *Sappa Creek*; in "T-2 Tanker Blues" he points out his "hatred of machinery and money & whoring my hands and back to move this military oil—..." (*Riprap & Cold Mountain Poems* 27). Yet Snyder also writes to capture the world as it is, a dynamic interaction of workaday humans in the context of their technologies. *Myths and Texts* describes the logging environment in its totality; the voyage on the *Sappa Creek* records the world of seamanship and oil. Like Walt Whitman (whose poetry he was reading on this particular journey), Snyder is no stranger to contradiction; nor is he troubled by it. Well instructed in the koan practice of the Rinzaï school of Zen, Snyder's world view recognizes paradox as a fundamental element of life.

With service to the Oil God (or Goddess) at its literal core, "Boat of a Million Years" nevertheless transforms the journey of the *Sappa Creek* into several other realms of significance. Snyder's correspondence with Will Petersen reveals the poet's mindset at the time. On the 10th of November, while sailing the Red Sea "in the narrow place just south of Suez heading Northwest," Snyder writes:

all the long way southwest the southern coast of Arabia never out of sight of what is really an enormous thousand-mile scarp with stratification clear to view, a straight cliff well over a thousand feet high, not a sign of life not even one spit of a seed... (Petersen 84)

Snyder's geological observations provide an insight into the meaning of the title-phrase, "Million Years." To voyage on the veritable Red Sea is to float upon waters that fill an immense rift in the planetary crust; a traveler on the *Sappa Creek* gets an authentic look at the ancient landscape of Gaia as it has evolved, and continues to evolve, in time. In terms of human emergence upon the planet, it brings to mind a "million year" journey that extends well back into the period of Pleistocene glaciation.

Yet the beings inhabiting the waters of this poem are as mythical as they are factual. Although Snyder plants himself as a tangible referent in the poem—"sun already fries my shoulder blades, I / kneel on ragged steel decks chipping paint"—, the images ultimately lead away from the realistic. In his correspondence with Petersen, the poet reveals his enchantment with "the classical world"—Crete, Sicily, Pompeii, Byzantium, Turkestan:

This is the sea where heroes sailed.  
& goddesses came to shepherds on mountaintops, & the  
dawn is REALLY rosy-fingered, the sea wine-dark, & I  
intoxicate myself with Classical memories & look about  
for pagan deities & long prowed galleys. (Petersen 86)

Immensely impressed by Byzantium, Snyder at one time planned an entire section of *Mountains and Rivers Without End* called “Sophia.” He told Petersen that Byzantium (Istanbul) “hit me like bricks,” making special mention of “the terrible silence of Hagia Sophia that has been Christian & Moslem & is now void.” Although “Boat of a Million Years” is primarily set in the Red Sea and no direct mention is made of Hagia Sophia’s empty dome, Byzantium is demonstrably not far from Snyder’s poetic thinking. Allusions to William Butler Yeats, another poet fascinated by Byzantium, are found both in Snyder’s letter to Petersen and in the emphatic references to dolphins in the poem. In two poems—“Byzantium” and “News for the Delphic Oracle”—Yeats drew on the traditional symbol of dolphins as “bearer[s] of the souls of the departed to the island of the blessed” (Jobes I 459). In the former, he depicts spirits riding the backs of the dolphins: “Astraddle on the dolphin’s mire and blood, / Spirit after spirit!” (*Selected Poems* 132-3). In the latter poem he extends the image considerably. The spirits become “Innocents [who] re-live their death” while straddling “each a dolphin’s back / And steadied by a fin.” It is not until the “brute dolphins plunge” toward a “cliff-sheltered bay / Where wades the choir of love” that their passengers may finally “pitch their burdens off” (*Selected Poems* 176-7). In Snyder’s poem the boat metaphorically rides the backs of the dolphins as they “streak in, swirl and tangle / under the forward-arching wave roll / of the cleaving bow.” As passengers on this “Boat of a Million Years” we endlessly relive our death, riding the back of the planet-boat as it arches and spirals its turning way through the cosmos. The mythical “island of the blessed,” Yeats’ “cliff-sheltered bay / Where wades the choir of love” is no terminus for Snyder. Instead, “led by the dolphins” and with no human beings, as “Teilhard said ‘to seize the tiller of the planet,’” thereby steering it purposefully into the waters of its future, the journey itself “toward morning” becomes its own satisfaction. Thus Snyder mocks the position taken by the Jesuit philosopher and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (*Phenomenon* 278). Although Chardin is viewed as one of the early enthusiasts for a Gaia hypothesis, his rather mystical vision of human evolution toward an “Omega-point,” a realm of higher consciousness that “leaves animal and material life virtually behind,” is far too detached from the veri-

table earth for Snyder to accept it.<sup>3</sup> For Gary Snyder, humans must attend to the “forward-arching wave roll” of the planet and note the natural rhythms of other beings as they move together toward morning, again and then again. There is no other life.

As Yeats clearly knew, the word “dolphin” is linguistically related to “delphis,” and “delphi.” One travels to Delphi, the legendary Greek sanctuary dedicated to the sun god Apollo, for a prophetic look into the future, i.e. to get the news from the Delphic Oracle. Snyder’s poem, however, is primarily about the Red Sea, far closer to Egyptian culture than to Grecian traditions. The gods that concern us here must prefigure Apollo, and, indeed, it is the “sun,” clearly stressed in Snyder’s poem—“sun already fries my shoulder blades” “boat of the sun”—, that links us to yet another myth. If, on one level, the sun is the energy supply for the planet, the ultimate source of the oil welling up from within, it may also be transfigured into the boat of the Egyptian God Râ (Re), a Sun-god who sails through the skies on a never-ending cycle as the planet turns.

Râ sailed over the sky in two boats; his morning boat was called “Mântchet,” or “Mätet,” or “Âtet,” and his evening boat “Semktet.” His course was guided by Maät, the personification of law, order, unflinching regularity, etc. After he set in the west in the evening he entered the Tuat under a different form, and by the help of the gods who were there, and by the power which he possessed in his own person, he passed through that region successfully, and appeared in the sky of this world the next morning in his usual form. As he passed through the Tuat he gave air, and light, and food to those who, for some reason or other had been doomed to dwell there. Two fishes swam before the boat of Râ, and acted as pilots and warned him of coming

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<sup>3</sup> On “seize the tiller of the planet”: The original quotation reads: “le reve dont se nourrit obscurément la Recherche humaine, c’est, au fond, de parvenir à maîtriser.....l’Energie de fond dont toutes les autres energies ne sont que les servantes: saisir, reunis tous ensemble, *la barre du monde*, en mettant la main sur le Ressort meme de l’Evolution” (*Phenomenon* 278. My emphasis). I am indebted both to Mark Gonneman of the Dept. of Religion at Stanford University and, through him, to Father Jacques Séverin Abbattucci for finding the source of this quotation.

On Snyder’s attitude toward Teilhard de Chardin’s “Omega-point”:

...Sir Galahad is the only knight to achieve the Grail and a vision of God; he was a truly pure knight, a virgin. *The Divine Comedy* heads straight for Paradise. In the twentieth century this line of thought is represented by Teilhard de Chardin and the “New Age” thinkers who count themselves his followers. They propose an evolution in which humankind leaves animal and material life virtually behind, becoming higher consciousness, to achieve One ultimately with the “Omega-point.” ...I take all this to be essentially the idea of continual Progress in fancy dress. (“Journey to...” 2; Typescript GSP B5: F75)

danger; these were called “Abtu” and “Ant,” respectively.... (Budge *Book of the Dead* 166)

Here are the two fish that “play in the waves” before Snyder’s boat, albeit under slightly different names.<sup>4</sup> Like Râ’s “Mântchet” boat, Snyder’s “boat of morning” sails between the “sycamores of turquoise” as the earth turns under it and the sun rises in the sky until it becomes the “boat of the sun.” The sycamore is the “Egyptian tree of life. In the east of heaven, gods sat in it, and it provided them with fruit. After death humans went to the tree” (Jobes II 1521). More to the point of the poem, Wallace Budge tells us that

The Egyptians believed that certain deities took up their abode in trees, and several trees were regarded by them as sacred. . . . The god Râ appeared each morning from between two sycamore trees of turquoise. . . . (*Osiris*... II 259)

Conceivably, Snyder’s title for the section is derived from Budge’s translation of the Egyptian hieroglyphics representing the “sky boat” as the “Boat of Millions of Years” (*Osiris*... I 95-96).

“Turquoise” has further echoes. In the *Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore, and Symbols* Râ has “hair of lapis lazuli” (Jobes II 1315), the Egyptian goddess Isis is designated as “Lady of Turquoise,” and her brother/ husband/ lover, Osiris, is referred to as the “God of Turquoise and Lapis Lazuli” (Jobes II 1609). Indeed, both the turquoise and the locale of this Red Sea poem strongly suggest the story of Isis and Osiris who bring civilization and peace to Egypt. Isis, whose hallmarks are faith, loyalty, and maternal care, was originally a local Nile delta goddess who eventually became the supreme goddess of Egypt. Osiris, once honored as a nature deity, a dying and resurrected god symbolizing the mystery of eternally recurring vegetation, ultimately became the mythical ruler of the souls of the dead.

Early in their joint reign, Osiris set out to spread civilization to every country in the world by disarming their inhabitants with songs and music, leaving Isis at home to rule. Returning to Egypt he was murdered by Set, their jealous brother. Sealed in a casket, Osiris’s body floated upon the waters of the Nile, finally coming to rest in Phoenicia where a tree grew up around it. Grief stricken, Isis searched for her dead husband/brother until she found the coffin-within-the-tree. Extracting his body she lovingly reanimates Osiris with her tears

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<sup>4</sup> Snyder spells them as “abt fish” and “yut fish.” The former is clearly derived from Budge’s “abtu fish”; the latter is problematic. When I asked the poet (in October 1996) about the name “yut,” he acknowledged that he may have misspelled it in the notes he took before he wrote the poem.

(a “flowing”?) and manages to conceive (a “dance”?) their son, Horus. Yet Set again finds Osiris, this time ripping his body into fourteen pieces which he casts in all directions. With the exception of his genital member which she fails to find, Isis restores her husband’s body piece-by-piece, finally wrapping it in linen cloth (a prototype of mummification) to give him eternal life. Osiris chooses instead to rule over the souls of the dead leaving Isis to watch over their son, Horus.

According to Erich Neumann, Osiris’s genitalia is consumed by an “oryrhynchus fish” (71) which was ambiguously “abhorred and venerated [in Egypt]. It was supposed to have eaten the phallus of Osiris and to have sprung from his wounds. . . . The animating and fertilizing power of water can also be represented phallically as a fish. The fish is both the phallus and the child” (Neumann 71). Several ideas and images in Snyder’s poem overlap here. In addition to pictures of abt-fish and yut-fish just off the boat’s bow and dolphins carousing in the water, the *Sappa Creek* itself may be envisioned as a fish. Like the “animating and fertilizing” oryrhynchus fish, it sucks the revivifying oil from the pipeline nipple at Ras Tanura, drawing liquid from the maternal earth in order to feed civilization. Childlike, the boat depends on both water and oil, floating upon the former and utilizing the later to voyage forward. Adult and masculine, it penetrates the sea with its “cleaving bow.”

Few of these mythical elements are manifest in “Boat of a Million Years,” yet tokens of Egyptian mythology clearly hover in the background as harbingers of the poet’s developing relationship with a wise and compassionate goddess, lover as well as mother. Isis, both river goddess and type of the Great Goddess, the Magna Mater, is often pictured with her son Horus on her lap, much as the Virgin Mary holds the infant Jesus, or the Bear Mother holds her infant. Revivified by Isis’s animating power, Osiris’s role as a dying and resurrected god underscores the cyclic elements of their common story.

Because the dwindling resource of precious Gulf oil openly drives this section even as it energizes the mechanized world, a melancholy mood hangs over the poem, one which ultimately explains the presence of the Dutch freighter. The possibility exists that Snyder is merely recording an actual encounter with a Dutch ship, yet his stress on its color and nationality seems intentional. On the one hand, this “dawn white” boat with a “red stack” is a prefiguration of Ra’s midday “boat of the sun.” Its “Dutchness,” however, extends the pipeline spatially, via the Netherlands, into Europe, thereby demonstrating an energy link between Europe and the Middle East. Nevertheless, turning once more to Snyder’s letter to Will Petersen, we see another myth rising

intentionally out of the text. Snyder remarks, on “22 December 1957” that the *Sappa Creek* has had a change of orders; it will return to the Red Sea, then proceed through the Suez into the Mediterranean for a port in Turkey. His frustration is evident:

**This damned ship**

just goes on & on like the flying Dutchman, I sort of begin to believe it will never go home or stay anywhere more than a day, until the last drop of deep-down Arabian oil is drawn & the last gearbox oiled & the ultimate airplane wrecked & all the paint gone & the Sappa Creek just floating around in its own rust & ruin with its hoary white-bearded crew re-reading the ten thousandth time the same magazine & wondering when we'll ever get home. (Petersen 86 [emphasis in original text])<sup>5</sup>

This “Dawn white Dutch freighter” with its rhythmic “red stack” in the “Red Sea,” like the *Sappa Creek*, is a token for the “Flying Dutchman,” a ghostly presence eternally passing and re-passing, doomed never to return to “home,” one more character in this cosmic Nô play called *Mountains and Rivers Without End*.

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<sup>5</sup> “*Flying Dutchman*, spectre ship of popular legend; it is believed to haunt the waters around the Cape of Good Hope, and its appearance is a sign of imminent disaster. In the most common version of the legend, which forms the basis of the opera *Die fliegende Holländer* (1843) by the German composer, Richard Wagner, Captain Vanderdecken gambles his salvation on a rash pledge to round the cape during a storm and so is condemned to round the cape forever. In another legend the captain, Falkenberg, must sail forever through the North Sea, playing at dice for his soul with the devil. The dice-game motif recurs in the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) by the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge; the mariner sights a phantom ship on which Death and Life-in-Death play dice to win him...”. (*Encyclopaedia Britannica: Micropaedia* 203)



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*Anthony Hunt*  
University of Puerto Rico  
at Mayagüez

## **“Boat of a Million Years”**

Gary Snyder

from *Mountains and Rivers Without End*

The boat of a million years,  
boat of morning,  
sails between the sycamores of turquoise,

Dawn white Dutch freighter  
in the Red Sea - with a red stack-  
heads past our tanker, out toward Ras Tanura,  
sun already fries my shoulder blades, I  
kneel on ragged steel decks chipping paint,  
Gray old T-2 tanker and a  
white Dutch freighter,

boat of the sun,  
the abt-fish, the yut-fish,  
play in the waves before it,

salty Red Sea  
dolphins rip sunlight  
streak in, swirl and tangle  
under the forward-arching wave roll  
of the cleaving bow

Teilhard said “seize the tiller of the planet” he was  
joking,

We are led by dolphins toward morning.