Book Review

Jason M. Wirth, *Mountains, Rivers, and the Great Earth: Reading Gary Snyder and Dōgen in an Age of Ecological Crisis* (New York: SUNY, 2017), 147 pp., \$20.95 (pbk), ISBN 978-1-4384-6542-5.

Jason M. Wirth's *Mountains, Rivers, and the Great Earth* is not, as the author points out, a typical academic study of its subjects, the American poet, essayist and environmental activist Gary Snyder, and the thirteenth-century Japanese Zen Master Dōgen. This volume in the SUNY series in Environmental Philosophy and Ethics appears under the shadow of the current ecological crisis and is mindful of the nightmarish consequences of failing to adapt our behaviour. For this reason, Wirth emphasizes in the preface that his study is better understood as 'a meditation and philosophical engagement that seeks to read, think, and practice *along with*' Snyder and Dōgen (p. xiii). Forswearing academic distance, Wirth looks to Snyder and Dōgen as inspirational teachers in search of not only a better understanding of the interconnectedness of ecological systems but also guidance on how to act.

Despite its short length, Wirth's study has a broader scope than its title suggests. Masterfully ranging between Mahāyāna Buddhism, American literature, environmentalism, and Western philosophy, Wirth draws on a multitude of sources in order to better understand our relation to the environment. Supplementing his accessible explications of Dōgen's thought with considerations of similar ideas in the writings of Pope Francis and Ignacio Ellacuría, Wirth recognizes religion's importance in shaping our thought and practice during the ecological crisis. Dōgen's teaching of the non-duality of practice-enlightenment holds importance for environmental philosophers due to its emphasis on the inseparability of everyday practice and its effects. Wirth finds in Dōgen's 'Great Earth' a powerful expression of Buddhist interdependence, providing a spiritual amplification of scientific ecology.

The book's three parts (The Great Earth, Turtle Island, Earth Democracy) are each divided into two chapters. In Chapter 1, Wirth makes the case for Snyder and Dōgen as 'critical interlocutors in the emergence of an earth-philosophy-poetics-ethics-science', highlighting the importance of interdisciplinary dialogue in responding to the present ecological situation (p. 4). Wirth uses the Buddhist concept *upāya*, or 'skillful means', to explain that Snyder's idea of 'the Wild' and Dōgen's 'Great Earth' are two forms of the same teaching: they do not engage a 'New Age fantasy of a lost and intrinsically beneficent and harmonious Eden', but rather encourage a mindful view of the world as being made up of interdependent processes of nature (p. 15). *Upāya* recurs in the following chapter as Wirth emphasizes the mutual benefits of art and science, and therefore the significance of the poetic word to practice. This chapter

draws heavily on Buddhism, including the Mahāyāna teaching of *sūnyatā*, or 'emptiness', the idea that all phenomena are empty of inherent essence and therefore dependent on conditions as part of a causal flow.

The third chapter moves away from a macroscopic view of the world towards a consideration of smaller bioregional systems. Wirth here focuses on the West Coast of the United States to examine the problems of living in a place without awareness of it as an interdependent ecosystem. Analysing *Moby-Dick*, Wirth sees Captain Ahab as a symbol of imperialist ideologies of place, while presenting Snyder's call for individuals and cultures to become 're-inhabitory' as a more sustainable way of living. Wirth emphasises the need to engage in a new humanities, beyond anthropocentrism. This is, of course, well underway with the continued development of the environmental humanities. But for Wirth, this is not just a new university discipline but 'part of an awakening to earth democracy' (p. 64). Chapter 4 takes a fascinating departure into a discussion of the relationship between humans and bears, with the former's anthropomorphized representations of the latter indicating a debasement of spiritual ecology. Wirth's contemplation of the separate worlds of bears and humans leads him to an examination of Dōgen's *Genjō Kōan*, concluding that 'our place is a palace, not just resources at our disposal' (p. 82). As the only environment in which we can survive, our continued destruction of it seems ever more insane.

The final section begins with a chapter devoted to the potlatch, the Native American gift-giving feast, 'as an image, both archaic and radically futural, of how to *re-inhabit* the Great Earth' (p. 87). In this alternative economic exchange, responsibility and gratitude replace consumerism and self-aggrandizement. The alienation from nature effected by modernity and modern philosophy may be resisted with the potlatch, which for Wirth is another 'way of naming ecology' (p. 91). In the closing chapter, Wirth borrows Vandana Shiva's concept of 'earth democracy', which he interprets as 'a place-based sense of communion where all beings are interconnected and all beings matter' (p. xxiii). He presents this as a goal toward which societies should strive in order to practice a more sustainable and more ethical way of life. In recognition of interdependence, 'earth democracy grants personhood to all of the creatures whose manners of life make a place possible' (p. 113).

Wirth's passion, resulting from his avoidance of academic distance, produces an urgent sense of the ecological stakes of the current crisis, as well as the practical value of Snyder and Dōgen's ideas for producing potential solutions. *Mountains, Rivers, and the Great Earth* is a powerful exercise in interdisciplinarity. Its eclecticism invites students of literature, philosophy, religion, and ecology, as well as anyone interested in the question of how to live during a time of ongoing environmental degradation.

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