

Earth house hold

Book review

1969

a review of

Earth House Hold by Gary Snyder, New Directions Paperback, 143 pp., \$1.95

Liberation News Service — Gary Snyder spoke at a Berkeley teach-in on ecology and politics recently. It was the end of a long afternoon, at the end of two very long weeks, and most of the students had gone on about their business, but those who stayed found their poet.

Snyder understood that People's Park was not an issue, not a Symbol, not an intimation of a need at once solid and visionary—the long twilight struggle for what he called “the non-negotiable demands of the earth.” Everyone there hushed and moved closer to the podium.

One measure of the abstractedness of so many on the left is that a well-known Berkeley politico dared to follow Snyder with a rasping tactical broadside, as if Snyder had not already made plain the stakes. Almost everyone left.

Snyder calls himself a “Dharma revolutionary” and the left dare not dismiss him. You can consign him to one or another tradition—Thoreau, Kerouac's beats, Western Zen-seekers—and he is indeed all of them.

But there is something about him too in which the San Francisco Diggers found early inspiration: it is tender without weakness, earth-seeking without romance, religious without reverence, combative without cant. He is a poet who uses words sparsely and is not used by them.

Earth House Hold is a book you can have a conversation with; it should have been published loose-leaf. The bulk is diary jottings from Snyder's 1950s wanderings, on mountains and ships; there are also short and pointed essays (extended jottings) on Indian legends, poetry, the family (an argument for the matrilineal family which women's liberation groups as well as male counterparts should take up), Buddhism, commune-tribes, perception.

To me, the whole amounts to a fresh -reminder of the transcendent stakes of a socialist revolution: flashes of integrated ways of living. Snyder does not pose; this and the openness of his perception save him from the flimsy if attractive politics of self-indulgence.

Unlike some flower people, he is taken with the reality of the world outside himself, so he is not putting us on when he calls himself a revolutionary, and he doesn't mean “you've got to change your mind instead.”

Of course he misses much, which a poet cannot afford to, let alone a revolutionary poet. The people in his world are marginal people—forest rangers, islanders, sailors—and he does not contact the textures of ordinary desperate life as ordinary people live it.

He is wholly Yankee in his doubts: he is convinced in his experience of the claims of the earth, and thinks no nation in the world has heeded them.

I don't know about China, but I think he's wrong about Cuba and certainly the Vietnamese are paying the best of tributes to their soil by ridding it of the U.S. Army.

Sure, let's argue with Gary Snyder, fill what he leaves empty—but inside the family.

Snyder can help us do one thing we've scanted, which is to understand how American capitalism rips up everything of value, to taste the concreteness of the loss and to broadcast visions of a new civilization which knows

coexistence with the earth. (There are excellent articles on the corporate rape of national parks and forests and on the splits in the conservation movement in No. 14 of the *Old Mole*, 2 Brookline St., Cambridge, Mass. 02139).

The class struggle, remember, must point toward a prize, a happy ending. And in the struggle for a higher plane of human life, *Earth House Hold* is a green arsenal.

fifth Estate

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Fifth Estate #85, August 7-20, 1969

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