

Sample Explication

Gary Snyder's "Axe Handles," a short (36-line) poem, tells a small domestic story which widens into a meditation on parenting, the transmission of cultural heritage, and the relevance of ancient wisdom to ordinary, everyday life. The poet (who speaks the poem), tells about teaching his son Kai, on an April afternoon, how to throw a hatchet so deftly that it will lodge into a stump. Kai remembers having seen a hatchet-head stored in "the shop," and goes to get it. He "wants it for his own." The father uses the hatchet they had been throwing to shape an old broken axe handle into a handle for Kai's rescued hatchet-head. As he works, the poet suddenly recalls a phrase from his reading of the modern American poet, Ezra Pound, who did free translations of Chinese literature: "When making an axe handle / the pattern is not far off." He paraphrases the quotation to his son, relating it to their own task of using a hatchet to make a handle for a hatchet. The poet, meditating again, associates the wisdom of the phrase first with Lu Ji, (the Chinese poet and essayist who died early in the 4th century A.D.), and then with a former teacher of his own who translated Lu Ji's work. Then the poet has a revelation which leads him to compare Lu Ji, Pound, his teacher Shih-hsiang Chen, and himself to axes, simultaneously models and tools in the ongoing handing-down of cultural patterns (particularly poetry) from generation to generation. The poet predicts that Kai, as yet just a "handle" is also slated "soon / To be shaping again" for generations yet unborn. The poem ends with a simple understated phrase expressing the poet's awe at the continuity of human culture expressed by people in tools as well as in books: "How we go on."

Snyder is known for the plainness of his diction and the accessibility of his style. "Axe Handles" is written in unrhymed free verse lines of from three to ten syllables, resulting in a long and narrow shape on the page, a forward propulsion, a natural leading-onward. Words at the beginning echo each other in randomly placed half-rhymes and with alliteration, giving supple shape and musicality to the poem: "show/how/throw," "sticks/stump/shop," "gets it/wants it/hatchet/cut it/take it," "long/length," "phrase/first." These sonic pleasures add to the genial tone of the poem, the sense that the poet and his son enjoy each other's company, that the atmosphere is bright and relaxed, that what one initiates, the other will follow. The first half of the poem is laced with verbs as two male members of one family work and play for the space of an afternoon in early spring. All of the lines are phrase-length, ending cleanly without disconcerting enjambments; the verse proceeds with balance and grace, with an almost kindly, storytelling tone of voice.

Snyder emphasizes the surprise and serendipity of "the phrase / First learned from Ezra Pound" occurring to him right on cue by cutting the poem in half with it. He marks it off with quotation marks and indents its second line dramatically from the left-hand margin. He does not say that he *remembers*, or calls to mind, Pound's phrase, but instead, he seems to hear it, clear as a clarion: it "Rings in my ears!" (a stunning use of the only exclamation mark in the poem). The sudden route that

Axe Handles

One afternoon the last week in April
Showing Kai how to throw a hatchet
One-half turn and it sticks in a stump.
He recalls the hatchet-head
Without a handle, in the shop
And go gets it, and wants it for his own.
A broken-off axe handle behind the door
Is long enough for a hatchet,
We cut it to length and take it
With the hatchet head
And working hatchet, to wood block.
There I begin to shape the old handle
With the hatchet, and the phrase
First learned from Ezra Pound
Rings in my ears!
"When making an axe handle
the pattern is not far off."
And I say this to Kai
"Look: We'll shape the handle
By checking the handle
Of the axe we cut with-"
And he sees. And I hear it again:
It's in Lu Ji's Wen Fu, fourth century
A.D. "Essay on Literature"-in the
Preface: "In making the handle
Of an axe
By cutting wood with an axe
The model is indeed near at hand."
My teacher Shih-hsiang Chen
Translated that and taught it years ago
And I see: Pound was an axe,
Chen was an axe, I am an axe
And my son a handle, soon
To be shaping again, model
And tool, craft of culture,
How we go on.

-- Gary Snyder

opens up to him between the real and the literary, is not an abstraction, but a sensuous experience; not a conscious thought, but an unbidden spoken sound. So should his reading function in his life, Snyder seems to imply, as coterminous with his work (and play) with tools, as a seamless part of his afternoons with his growing son, a “natural” bolstering of everything he does.

“Axe Handles” is a poem of many and varied repetitions, loving its own vocabulary for its usefulness in the here and now, and over long, long centuries. In a poem that stresses how much of language and culture is inherited, it is appropriate that Snyder does not strain for synonyms, but instead lovingly repeats again and the same words: the word “hatchet” six times in the first thirteen lines, the word “axe” seven times in the last half of the poem, the word “handle” eight times, weaving through the lines from beginning to end. These words, and the tools they refer to, belong to the Snyders and are casually used by them, but they also have been handed down over centuries, burnished by use, and remade according to pattern. The wisdom first quoted in the poem as derived from Ezra Pound is repeated in the poem twice again, once in his own words, as if the speaker could not relish it enough. What was taught to him by Pound, by Lu Ji, and by Chen, he seizes to teach to Kai, in this providential moment. He is both a disciple of archaic wisdom, a practitioner of it, and a teacher in his own right, using the tools in his hands to demonstrate how “we’ll shape the handle / by checking the handle / Of the axe we cut with –“ This is a lesson at once in tool-making, in philosophy, and in aesthetics.

It is part of the casual anecdotal feel of the poem that it is held together by “ands,” each development in its small drama introduced by this humble conjunctive. “This happened and then this happened, and then I heard, and I said, etc” : a most rudimentary method of plot advancement. Still, “and” can be read as profoundly connective, as well as casually so. When Snyder turns, in the middle of the poem to paraphrase Pound’s phrase to his son, he begins with an (uppercase) “And” that teaches the reader the connection between the two halves of the poem, between action and contemplation, between the past and the present, between the external order of things and the imaginative order of things, between parenting and poetry.

Also, the word “and” is followed twice by epiphany, by an expansion of the horizon of understanding. The poem says, line 22: “And he sees,” and line 31, “And I see.” That Kai “sees” so swiftly the elegance and comedy of using a tool to make a tool of the same kind justifies the speaker’s understated pride in him. Snyder himself takes the second epiphany, expressed it in terms of metaphor, casting himself simultaneously as late learner and mature teacher among teachers: “And I see: / Pound was an axe, / Chen was an axe, I am an axe / And my son a handle.” Part of what Snyder “sees” here is that he has earned his space among the masters, those who actively craft the culture, by receiving it, using it, and passing it on. It is typical of Snyder that he should announce this profound connection with mingled confidence and humility, in language without a hint of grandiosity: “how we go on.” Without ado, the “we” of that phrase acknowledges a familial lineage of makers from the 4th century A.D. to the present, from Lu Ji to Kai Snyder, and, of course, beyond.

An recurring theme in Snyder’s poetry is his love for tools which he presents as providing ways to interact with the physical environment, ways of negotiating human life. Often the tools of physical labor are seen as analogous to the poet’s tools of the trade. In “Axe Handles,” the handle itself is very important: literally, the part of the tool that is designed to be held or operated by the hand. But the poem also demonstrates how immersion in the world, either by manual or by scholarly labor, gives people a kind of metaphorical “handle” as well, a sense of competence or achievement or understanding. When, in the poem, Snyder’s experience in the everyday world of working and playing outdoors with his son coincides with wisdom gleaned from literature, he is deeply gratified. That the piece of wisdom should be precisely *about* the method and value of cultural transmission deepens and justifies his love for intensely lived daily experience, and for poetic tradition, particularly Asian poetic traditions.

The poem shows Snyder’s way out of finding the past burdensome, as some twentieth-century American poets do. Instead he “hears” his forebears’ words spoken as if into his ear, and knows them to be of immediate and absolute pertinence. He finds his embeddedness in history not a trap, but a secure path, a repeating pattern in which “we go on.” The sweet companionability of his relationship with Kai is contiguous with his filial relationships with teachers and with poets he has read and emulated. They pass down to him not only their poetry, but their poetics, bound together as in Lu Ji’s *Wen Fu* (his “Essay on Literature” which both describes and demonstrates the art of poetry). The “tool” of poetry is forever both a model artifact and a device for making more poetry, just as the axe is itself a model and a tool. So the poem “Axe Handles” is a new poem (a brand-new finely-hewn axe), made out of Snyder’s living experience, yet also modeled on and constructed by using those venerable “axes,” Ezra Pound and Lu Ji, and the translator, Shih-hsiang Chen.

Sara Lundquist