

The Forest in the Library

by Gary Snyder

I prepared a talk for the October 19, 1990, dedication of the new West Wing of Shields Library, University of California at Davis.

In the old and original spirit of dedications, and in honor of the life of buildings, I want to invoke the many presences that are here — not invisible, just rarely seen — whose good-will toward this project can certainly be hoped for. We are right on the territory of the old Patwin village of Putah-toi, which was a large, settled, and affluent community whose memories went back several thousand years. May the deeply conservative spirit of the Native Californians, and their love for lore and the rituals that preserve it, welcome this structure to a long and useful life. May the even older presences here — the valley oaks and in particular the great oak within the courtyard (bemused as it may be by recent changes), the Swainson's hawks that soar past the top of Sproul Hall, the burrowing owls, and Putah Creek itself (reduced as it is for the moment) — lend their support to this human effort of a university and a library. May the trees that were sacrificed for this expansion be justified by the good work that should come forth. We devoutly hope that this large enterprise will serve the welfare of watersheds, owls, trees, and, of course, human beings.

As for this new wing itself, it is an elegant structure of cast-in-place concrete — that is to say, a transformation of water-washed gravels, a riverbed stood on end. The architects tell me that this new part of the building is substantially made up of old riverbeds of the Stanislaus River drainage — which has this come over here visiting. We are, so to speak, now introducing these assembled elements to each other, that they may wish each other well.

It is also the case that in fin-de-millennium California we have much longer threads of connection: in addition to the historical links eastward to Europe and Africa, we now look westward to Polynesia and Asia in matters both ecological and economic. We have historical and cultural connections to the south with Hispanic culture, and the Great Pacific flyway brings the Canada geese and pintail ducks from their nesting grounds in the far north to the marshes just beyond the campus. All of these lineages are present in our daily lives and are literally represented in the cosmopolitanism of our student body and the diversity of our studies. This is all to be welcomed, even as we simultaneously celebrate the antiquity and resilience of the original nature of our treasured California landscape.

We live at the intersection of many forces, and in the case of the library in particular, there is one more force to be invoked. That is our occidental humanistic and scientific intellectual tradition. It has demonstrated an extraordinary ability to maintain itself through time. The institution of the library is at the heart of that persistence. Although Strabo said, "Aristotle was the first man to have collected books," there were in truth hundreds of outstanding private libraries in Hellenic Greece. What survived of Aristotle's personal library became the basis of one of the first institutional libraries, which soon became a feature

of classical civilization. There were, of course, far older libraries, and in the broader sense archives of literature and lore were kept worldwide, in virtually all cultures whether they had writing or not.

The original context of teaching must have been narratives told by elders to young people gathered around the fire. Our fascination with TV may just be nostalgia for that flickering light. My grandparents didn't tell stories around the campfire before we went to sleep — their house had an oil furnace instead, and a small collection of books. I got into their little library to entertain myself. In this huge old occidental culture, our teaching elders are books. For many of us, books are our grandparents! In the library there are useful, demanding, and friendly elders available to us. I like to think of people like Bartolomé de las Casas, who passionately defended the indians of New Spain, of Baruch Spinoza, who defied the traditions of Amsterdam to be a philosopher. (And in my days as an itinerant forest worker I made especially good use of libraries: they were warm and stayed open late at night.)

Making hoards and heaps, saving lore and information, are entirely natural: some zooarchaeologists have excavated heaped-up wood-rat nests out in the Mojave Desert, packed full of little wood-rat treasures, that are twelve thousand years old. We humans are truly just beginners.

Pursuing this line of thought, my friend Jack Hicks of the English Department and I were talking about how one might see the university as a natural system, and wondering what the information flow would look like. We found ourselves, in this year of forest consciousness, recalling the venerable linkage of academics to groves. In China, too, academies such as the Han-lin were called "groves." We considered that the information web of the modern institution of learning, right down to the habitat niches of buildings, has an energy flow fueled by the data accumulation of primary workers in the information chain — namely the graduate students and young scholars. Some are green like grass, basic photosynthesizers, grazing brand-new material. Others are in the detritus cycle and are tunneling through the huge logs of old science and philosophy and literature left on the ground by the past, breaking them down with deconstructive fungal webs and converting them anew to an edible form. These people on the floor of the information forest are among the hardest workers, and to be sure are affrighted occasionally by hawklike shadows sailing over them.

The gathered nutrients are stored in a place called the *bibliotek*, "place of the papyrus," or the *library*, "place of bark," because the Latin word for tree bark and book is the same, reflecting the memory of the earliest fiber used for writing in that part of the Mediterranean.

If you allow me to carry this playful ecological analogy further, we can say that the dissertations, technical reports, and papers of the primary workers are in a sense gobbled up by senior researchers and condensed into conclusion and theory — new studies that are in turn passed up the information chain to the thinkers at the top who will digest them and come out with some unified theory or perhaps a new paradigm. These final texts, which are built on the concentrated information assembled lower on the chain, will be seen as the noble monarchs of the academy-forest. Such giants must also succumb in time and

return to the forest floor.

When asked “What is finally over the top of all the information chains?” one might reply that it must be the artists and writers, because they are among the most ruthless and efficient information predators. They are light and mobile, and can swoop across the tops of all the disciplines to make off with what they take to be the best parts, and convert them into novels, mythologies, dense and esoteric essays, visual or other arts, or poems. And who eats the artists and writers? The answer must be that they are ultimately recycled to the beginners, the students. That’s where the artists and writers go, to be cheerfully nibbled and passed about.

The library itself is the heart of this ancient forest. But as Robert Gordon Sproul [former president of the University of California] said in his highly regarded speech of 1930, the library would be useless just as a simple collection of books or information. It is the organization, the intelligent system that can swiftly seek out and present one tiny bit of its stored information to a single person, that makes it useful. What lies behind it all, of course, is language. As I have written elsewhere, language is a mind-body system that coevolved with our needs and nerves. Like imagination and the body, language rises unbidden. It is of a complexity the eludes our rational intellectual capacities, yet the child learns the mother tongue early and has virtually mastered it by six... Without conscious device we constantly reach into the vast word hoards in the depths of the wild unconscious. We cannot as individuals or even as a species take credit for this power; it came from someplace else, from the way clouds divide and mingle, from the way the many flowerlets of a composite blossom divide and redivide.

Yet acknowledging all that freshness and order from within, our inherent intellectual infrastructure, should only intensify our regard for the amazing *deliberateness* that has given us our institutions of higher learning, within which the library is another sort of relatively unappreciated infrastructure not unlike language itself. The refinement of organization makes a library work, and like the rich syntax of a natural language, it almost eludes us. For most of us, it borders on mystery and calls, if not for offerings, at least for gratitude. So I want to express the gratitude we must all feel for the good luck that has brought us together today, with this fine library, admiring its handsome newly extended shell, which will be serving the great project of world intellectual culture. We celebrate a new opening, a new step, in this old-new project of human self-knowledge.

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