CHAPTER – VI

BIOREGIONALISM AS THE GEORGIC OF OUR TIMES

“Nature is not a place to visit, it is home – and within that home territory there are more familiar and less familiar places. Often there are areas that are difficult and remote, but all are known and even named.”

Gary Snyder

Georgic is the genre of literature that from classical antiquity has been dealing with the farming life. As a traditional literary genre it represents models of dwelling. Dwelling symbolizes humanity’s long-term relationship to the land, which explicitly indicates the obligation on the part of human beings to develop a relationship of care and gratitude with nature. Greg Garrard in his book, Ecocriticism defines ‘dwelling’ from the point of view of ‘duty and responsibility’. According to him,

“Dwelling is not a transient state; rather, it implies the long term imbrications of humans in a landscape of memory, ancestry and death, of ritual, life and work.”

Ecocriticism assigns a great significance to georgic; ecocritics believe that only a long-term relationship can inculcate in the human psyche a feeling of attachment to the planet, which in turn would suggest a panacea for the ecocidal
activities of human beings. The other tropes – pastoral, wilderness and apocalypse –
certainly enable man to explore his relationship with nature. Yet, from an
eccritical perspective none of these tropes can provide a complete understanding
of nature. Greg Garrard points out how they fail to “suggest a mode of practical
existence as an immediate reality” and so according to him, “pastoral and
wilderness tropes typically imply the perspective of the aesthetic tourist, while the
apocalypse encodes the vision of a prophetic imagination.”^3 Georgic, on the other
hand, can delve deeper into the various implications of the man-nature relationship
because, as a literary genre, georgic is founded on a prolonged link with the land.

From a historical perspective, farming is a symbolic activity that helps in
maintaining a healthy and respectful relationship with the landscape. Georgic
literature in its beginnings used to deal with the practical aspects of agriculture and
rural affairs. Virgil’s *Georgics* which is a didactic poem written in imitation of the
earlier Greek poet Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, is generally supposed to be the model
for this genre of literature. Virgil’s work is a panegyric of traditional Italy and its
rural life that idealizes a farmer’s life. Despite the frugality and austerity of the
farmers’ life and all its difficulties at the practical level, rural life is often projected
in georgic literature as morally satisfying.

The focus of georgic literature has been nature and its scenes, smells and
sounds, its timelessness and the humble and hard life of human beings lived in
relation to nature. Nature has been projected as an idyllic landscape with a serene
environment in which man lives in a harmonious relationship with his natural
surroundings. The relevance of georgic as a literary genre is that it can be viewed as
record of an ideal rural landscape and a harmonious human life in the context of the fast-paced changes that the modern landscapes are undergoing.

Greg Garrard refers to Lynn White Jr.’s argument that Genesis 1:26, “And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle and over all earth.”, is responsible for providing “a scriptural licence” for man to exploit nature “within the framework of moral laws set out elsewhere”. What is problematic about this view is that the way the term “dominion” is interpreted. Many philosophers censure White’s argument as they “claim that stewardship or usufruct, rather than despotism, is enjoined” by the words of Genesis.4

All non-secular societies seem to ascribe a religious significance to farming, but Virgil foregrounds the practical aspects of farmers’ life. As Garrard aptly points out, Virgil’s “... aim is not the dispensation of sacred law to a chosen people, but the promotion of good husbandry and the restoration of Roman social virtues in the country side.”5 Garrard also analyses the reasons for an over-politicization of georgic; he finds that conservative agrarianism has always tried to contrast an ideal life of farmers, characterized by virtues such as industry, thrift and measured self-interest, with rural capitalism. Thoreau has inveighed against the greed of farmers that motivate them to take away maximum from the land. According to him, “the true harvest is measured in wild animals and bird songs, meditation and instruction. ...” and hence he reminds the farmers that “[b]ly avarice and selfishness, and a groveling habit, from which none of us is free, of regarding soil as property ... the landscape is deformed, husbandry is degraded with us, and the farmer leads the
meanest of lives. He knows Nature but as a robber.”16 Here it is quite evident that Thoreau by reinforcing the element of ethics in it is actually protesting against the tendency to over politicize the georgic.

A transient relationship with the landscape makes man callous towards nature, prompting him to plunder and exploit the planet. This alienation from nature has aggravated the intensity of the imminent ecocatastrophe. In this context, a long inhabitation and ancestral links with the temporal landscape assume great importance. In a known physical landscape of soil and climate a rural dweller feels rooted; the sense of connectedness and security that he experiences in that locale help him lead a sustainable and healthy life. This state of rootedness that is celebrated by georgic is often placed in profound opposition to the deracinated life of urbanites.

The ‘sense of place’ has become a very crucial concept both in ecocriticism and ecopsychology. Ecocritic Donelle. N. Dreese in Ecocriticism: Creating Self and Place in Environmental and American Literature quotes the observations of Neil Evernder to contend that feeling alien in a place or being attached to a place has strong impact on human psyche:

“... there appears to be a human phenomenon similar in some ways to the experience of territorially, that is described as aesthetic and which is , in effect, a “sense of place”, a sense of knowing and being a part of a particular place. There is nothing mysterious about this – it’s just what it feels like to be home, to experience a sense of light or smell that is inexplicably “right”.”17
Dreese feels that when a person feels at home in a particular place it can be
described as a complex psychological experience that can be linked to man’s search
for connection with nature:

“Culture, language, history, belief systems, social practice, and other
influences on human development are as much a part of place as the
physical landscape one crosses. If that place which provides the
connection that we desire is not readily available to us, we find a
way to create our own space or home, which we can inhabit and feel
at ease with ourselves and our surroundings. Writers are certainly
not exempt from this human search for connection . . .”

Many contemporary nature writers explore this urge for rootedness and for
establishing a connection with nature, which is the fundamental source of all life.
Dreese considers the writings of these writers as manifestations of ‘literary
regionalism’. Aware of the danger of being affected by a narrowness of perception,
the contemporary American environmental writers try to redefine literary
regionalism in a wider sense. Michael Kowalewski refers to this change of trend in
his essay, Writing in Place: the New American Regionalism. According to him, the
modern writers try

“. . . to redefine the concept of regionalism by moving it away from
its rural limitations to include such diverse landscapes as the urban
and western.”

This attempt to redefine regionalism has led to the origin of a new trend
called ‘bioregionalism’. Bioregion is a naturally defined area which is characterized
by certain physical and environmental features. It is an area that shares similar
topography, plant and animal life, a specific climatic pattern and a human culture
that is closed linked to that area. Human beings who belong to a bioregion may also
have a specific pattern of life style. The boundaries of a bioregion are different
from the political borders around counties, provinces, states and nations. A
bioregion may have less rigid boundaries, mostly watersheds around that
geographic area. The significance of a bioregion is that it may be self-sufficient in
terms of food and various other products and services.

Bioregionalism promotes the concept of bioregions instead of politically or
economically demarcated areas because bioregionalists feel that the identification
with a place and its history and culture can help humanity lead a sustainable way of
life. Awareness about the local environment and the pattern of the community life
there enables human beings to follow the rules of nature. In this perception, a
bioregion is not merely a geographical terrain, but a terrain of consciousness as the
characteristic pattern of the terrain teaches its inhabitants how to live in that place
sustainably. In this dimension bioregionalism is different from regionalism or
parochialism which are characterized by a narrowness of perception. Hence
bioregionalists advocate a place-based life and the relearning of the culture and
history of that territory in order to adapt to that place and the community that lives
there as an essential practice for modern man who is alienated from nature, which is
his actual home.

In contemporary literature a place or an environment takes the central place
and this construction of nature has physical, psychological, historical, ideological
and ecological implications. The writers seek to understand their self by identifying
it in relation to the concept of place. Dreese considers this practice as
“reterritorialization”, which is not merely a physical act, but a deeply emotional one
as well. In that context, reterritorialization becomes a psychic activity and ‘place’
assumes the role of a metaphorical site to represent a refuge or a conflict that arises
when the nature writers “more closely examine borders and zones of human and
ideological contact.”

The ecological implications of the act of reterritorialization make it a major
concept in the context of environmental concern. Dreese throws light on the link
between environmentalism and reterritorialization:

“Reterritorialization . . . also describes attempts to redefine notions
of a particular landscape or refer to the desire to adjust one’s natural
environment in order to emphasize the relationship between natural
world and the self as reciprocal and historical . . . Some writers
demonstrate relocation and travel as part of the search for self and
community identification . . .”

In the act reterritorialization a territory is remapped geographically or
metaphorically and this process has deep psychological implications. Dreese traces
the psychological activity involved:

“The desire for that inexplicable feeling of home starts with a vision,
a memory, or a nostalgic yearning involving all the senses
ev envisioning and/ or recollecting the details of place within the mind.
As the psyche constructs the territory, choices are made not only of
where but also of who and what stays or goes. Home not only encompasses the sense of place but also an environment in which people feel accepted and loved for who they are and where they are free from oppressive forces.”

The emphasis placed on the significance of having a ‘sense of place and community’ in order to inculcate the sense of rootedness in contemporary American literature dealing with the environment seems to be closely paralleled by the views of many ecopsychologists. For instance, Gestalt Therapy, which is a major school of psychotherapy, puts forward a concept of “ecological groundedness” as an “ideal of healthy functioning.” This concept is evidently an exemplification of bioregionalism. Ecopsychologist, William Cahalan, in his essay, “Ecological Groundedness in Gestalt Therapy” exclaims the psychological implications of developing a sense of place:

“Groundedness is a dynamic state of a person that includes the sense of confidence, pleasure, and wonder resulting from progressively deepening contact with the wild and domesticated natural community of the person’s neighborhood and larger land region: with unpaved ground, soil or landscape, with weather and the diversity of native plants and animals; and with human family, neighbors, and cultural activities. The persons have a growing sense of the ways in which these aspects of home or place are intimately connected with his or her self as well as with household and with each other.”
Cahalan considers farming as an activity that is central to this experience. Agriculture is viewed as an act of connecting with the rhythms and the life patterns of the earth, which in turn can enable man to experience an expansion of the human self; the integration of human and universal selves results in a realization of humanity’s ecological self:

“Growing food and cultivating the soil can be central to this experience. Being grounded is enhanced and renewed by periods of extended, sensuous, empathic engagement with the world, balanced by restorative moments of inward reflectiveness. This rhythm involves an intuitive cycling between the individual’s more contracted, contained sense of the self, on the one hand, and a more expanded, relational, or extended sense of the self on the other, including the ability to lose oneself at times in union with the world. When we experience this self-extended state, the Earth tends to be sensed as the all-embracing, enduring self of which the individuals in one unique but temporary expression.”

Ecopsychology recognizes humanity’s urge for rootedness and a sense of place as “a deep, genetically based need” because “our very nervous system requires this face to face, balanced giving and taking, a self-corrective interchange within the human and non-human life community.” Ecopsychologist John E. Mack contends that the western community is characterized by a limitless “species arrogance”, which is the outcome of its scientific and technological progress and material success. This “species arrogance” has created a sense of superiority in
modern man and has alienated him from the rest of the nature. In the context of an imminent ecocatastrophe it has become inevitable for humanity to acquire a sense of rootedness in a place and community in order to revive new forms of environmental responsibility in community life. In his essay “Politics of Species Arrogance” in *Ecopsychology* he describes how this attitude prevailing consciously or unconsciously among the westerners as well as in the citizens of other industrialized nations has proved detrimental both to the human race and to the planet:

“We regard it[the planet] as a thing, a big thing, an object to be owned, mined, fenced, guarded, stripped, built upon, dammed, plowed, burned, blasted, bulldozed, and melted to serve the material needs of and desires of human species at the expense, if necessary, of all other species, which we feel at liberty to kill, paralyze, or domesticate for our own use . . . This attitude contrasts dramatically with the pragmatic, live-and-let-live, and reverential relationship with nature that is reflected in the words of Native American leaders, who recognize our complete interdependence with the earth and the need to live in balance and harmony with nature.”16

Ecopsychology explores the basic shifts of human identity that is consequent of man’s alienation from nature due to ‘species arrogance’. It suggests that humanity should gain reentry into the web of life around it. For this purpose human beings have to accept a territory as ‘home’, acquire knowledge about its geographical features and the historical and cultural patterns of the community life
in that place and make efforts to adapt to the life there. Ecopsychologist Elan Shapiro defines this process as ‘environmental restoration’:

“By mimicking the life-sustaining patterns inherent in a place, they aim to bring back the vitality and diversity that the community living there needs in order to thrive . . . in mimicking the complex patterns of relationship in a healthy and diverse community, people naturally absorb the vitality and wisdom inherent in a place.”"^{17}

According to him, connecting to a place is an effective way to link the alienated and isolated individual self of the urban-industrial man to the self of nature whose boundaries are always fluid. Shapiro in his essay, “Restoring Habitats, Communities and Souls” analyses the impact of environmental restoration and revival of a closely-knit community life on the human psyche:

“A number of forces operate to link individual human and community healing with the process of habitat restoration. People experience deep pleasure and release from sweating together – feeling the elements of soil and water, rock and plant, while doing a common task with a visible positive outcome – an earthy, purposeful community becomes intensely tangible.”"^{18}

The concept of ‘Reterritorialization’ suggested by ecocritics like Donelle Dreese is exactly concomitant with the idea of environmental restoration put forward by ecopsychologists as both these concepts highlight the necessity to rewrite humanity’s relationship with the land that has been altered by technological
and industrial processes. The ecopsychological implications are clearly evident when Dreese analyses the nuances of the experience of reterritorialization:

“Mythic, psychic, and environmental reterritorializations involve the claiming of space for oneself and an understanding of the place’s history, its physical constituents, and one’s own psychological reactions to these aspects . . . we are our environments. We take in physically and psychologically our surroundings and they become part of who we are. That is why it is of great importance for our surroundings to be healthy and habitable. Place and self are not separate entities . . .”19

Place-based literature is gaining significance in the realm of nature writing. The two paradigms of the sense of place and community apparent in such works are too powerful to be ignored. Writers like Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder integrate the wild and the domestic into an ideal, nevertheless viable rustic way of life that they have adopted as a practical way of living. Berry clearly supports this kind of bioregionalism in his non-fiction work, Life is a Miracle:

“The standards of our behavior must be derived, not from the capacity of technology; but from the nature of places and communities. We must shift the priority from production to local adaptation . . .”20

Another paradigm of the intense urge for a sense of place and community is reflected in the efforts of a section of the urban population to integrate the best of both the urban and rural, by setting up ‘a third place’ besides the place of residence
and place of work. Sociologist, Rey Oldenburg in his study on the problem of place in America, vividly depicts the plight of a modern urbanite living in a fragmented individual world:

“A man works in one place, sleeps in another, shops somewhere else, finds pleasure or companionship where he can, and cares about none of these places . . . There is little sense of place and even less opportunity to put down roots.”21

According to Rey Oldenburg, the highly privatized life of modern urbanites prompts them to shun community life:

“Our comings and goings are restricted to the home and work settings and those two spheres have become preemptive. Multitudes shuttle back and forth between the “womb” and the “rat race” in a constricted pattern of daily life that easily generates the family desire to “get away from it all”.”22

What Oldenburg laments here is the loss of an informal public life, without which “our urban environment is like an engine that runs hot because it was designed without a cooling system.”23 As a sociologist he feels that if man wants a relaxed and a fulfilling daily life he should maintain “a balance in three realms of experience. One is domestic, a second is gainful or productive and the third is inclusively sociable, offering both the basis of community and the celebration of it.”24 Oldenburg is referring to the trend in the contemporary society to view the domestic, professional and social life of an individual as separate entities. If these realms of a person’s life are not linked it can result in a sense of rootlessness in him
which in turn can cause an irresponsible behavior towards the environment. There is an increasing awareness in the contemporary American society about the need to opt for the life in a small city as it can enable humanity to achieve a more meaningful harmonization of man and the environment. The realization about the need for a third place as a “core setting” of informal public life is reflected in the literature of the present time. Oldenburg quotes Max Lerner’s views on the problem of place in order to emphasize the prevalence of this urge in American literature:

“A number of recent American writings indicate that the nostalgia for the small town need not be construed as directed towards the town itself: it is rather a “quest for community . . . a nostalgia for a compassable and integral living unit. The critical question is not whether the small town can be rehabilitated in the image of its earlier strength and growth – for clearly it cannot – but whether American life will be able to evolve any other integral community to replace it. This is what I call the problem of place in America, and unless it is somehow resolved, American life will become more jangled and fragmented than it is, and the American personality will continue to be unquiet and unfulfilled.”

Ecopsychologists Mary. E. Gomes and Allen. D. Kanner claim that bioregionalism is a vision that has powerful political and cultural implications and that knowledge about this is essential for any effort to improve the health of the human psyche and the health of the planet:
“Bioregionalism involves breaking down existing social structures and respecting nature’s own creative contours. At the level of governments, this includes redrawing political boundaries so that they are based on the integrity of natural systems. Culturally bioregionalism seeks to replace the growing corporate monoculture with tradition and sensitivities that spring from the qualities of the land. On all levels, bioregionalism has challenged centralized, top-down, linear approaches to life and has reclaimed the concept of anarchy. In the words of bioregionalist, Jim Dodge, “Anarchy does not mean out of control; it means out of thin control”.”

Reducing the levels of pollution and human consumption or inculcating ecologically healthy habits like recycling, though very important, cannot help humanity much to reclaim a bioregion. The vision of bioregionalism involves creation of an identity as the member of the biosphere; this membership can be gained by integrating an expanding human self into a universal self. According to Mary. E. Gomes and Allen. D. Kanner, bioregionalism

“...involves a change in our sense of identity, so that we allow our surroundings to grow into us, to let the land reclaim us like the ivy growing over an old house or wild flowers pushing up through cracks in the pavement. It means the death of the old industrial self and the birth of something new.”

Ecocritic Greg Garrard considers ‘bioregionalism’ a “socialist georgic”, a version of the traditional georgic, which is transformed to suit the needs of the
contemporary world. He accepts Kirkpatrick Sale’s definition of a bioregion in his 

*Dwellers in the Land* as

“an eco-political unit that respects the boundaries of pre-existing indigenous societies as well as the natural boundaries and constituencies of mountain range and watershed, ecosystem and biome. Opposing what they call ‘giantism’ at every level, bioregionalists promote decentralization of the economy in the form of regional diversification and self-sufficiency, as well as the anarchistic dismantling of the centralized nation-state in favor of confederated self-governing communities of 1,000 to 10,000 people . . . Bioregionalism is therefore a politics of ‘reinhabitation’ that encourages people to explore more deeply the natural and cultural landscape in which they already live.”

Garrard contends that bioregionalism as a culture of dwelling can be perceived as a viable modern georgic as the traditional form of georgic seems to be losing its relevance. Despite all his objections against the modern version of georgic, he feels that it can provide a suitable platform to solve many environmental issues at a local level.

Both Gary Snyder and Wendell Berry are strong advocates of rootedness. In *Turtle Island* Snyder emphasizes the need to have our feet fixed ‘on the ground’ as no cultural or social transformation is possible when human beings are deracinated. Like Berry, Snyder too advocates ‘stewardship’ of nature:
“. . . find your place on the planet, dig in and take responsibility
from there . . . Get a sense of workable territory, learn about it, and
start acting point by point.”

Snyder recalls how North America was “all populated” a few centuries ago,
when human beings were surrounded by abundant flora and fauna. Then it was a
real “home” because “home, of course, is as large as you make it.” He portrays
how nature becomes a ‘home’ when man learns to treat non-human beings as his
companions:

“The wild requires that we learn the terrain, nod to all plants,
animals and birds. Ford the stream and cross the ridges, and tell a
good story when we get back home.”

Snyder is using the image of an extended home that includes not only the
world of culture but the flora and fauna too. He refers to the American expression
‘home place’ which enables mankind to perceive ‘place’ as an experience. Then the
heart of a place becomes home, as the heart of a home is the hearth. Snyder, in
order to build up this argument, points out how a child as he grows up picks up the
home language which is mostly the local vernacular. Once he starts exploring the
surroundings, he begins to imbibe the culture and traditions and myths and history
of the home landscape. According to Snyder, revisiting the childhood landscape or
revisualizing it “with its smells and textures, walking through it again in your
imagination, has a grounding and a settling effect.” He believes that having a
place as home, which anchors the life of an individual, is not an impossibility as he
is aware of how the native people and the people of earlier cultures had “a home-base on earth” even when they has to wander for the purpose of work:

“Our place is a part of what we are, yet even a “place” has a kind of fluidity: it passes through space and time. It may undergo a series of changes – but such changes will be like “another set of lines on the palimpsest”.”

Snyder’s perception of the ideal ‘place’ which can be humanity’s ‘home’ is modeled on the ‘self-governing regions’ of ancient cultures, integrating the wild and the domestic. Another earlier practice that he refers to is a “common pool resource”, which promotes “sharing a natural area” within a social and territorial context. He views the commons as a “contract a people make with their local natural system.”

Snyder observes that it is the business interests of an industrial society that introduced the enclosure movement in the fifteenth century which led to the loss of the commons. He traces the changes that American society has undergone in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries which resulted in what Snyder refers to as the “tragedy of commons”:

“In America in the nineteenth and twentieth century the truly local people, the Native Americans, were decimated and demoralized and the new population was composed of adventurers and entrepreneurs. Without some federal presence the poachers, cattle gazers, and timber barons would have had a field day. Since about 1960 the situation has turned again: the agencies that were once charged with
conservation are increasingly perceived as accomplices of the extractive industries, and local people – who are beginning to be actually local – seek help from environmental organizations and join in defense of the public land.”

Snyder feels that there is an urgent need to recover the commons – the local land - and use it for the community, ensuring the involvement of local people in all the activities there. In *The Practice of the Wild* Snyder enumerates the features of the system of the commons:

“The commons is a curious and elegant social institution within which human beings once lived free political lives while weaving through natural systems. The commons is a level of organization of human society that includes the non-human. The level above the local commons is the bioregion. Understanding the commons and its role within the larger regional culture is one more step towards integrating ecology with economy.”

In the past people lived in territories conformed by a set of natural criteria which used to provide them a fluid and indistinct human experience. Later when the arbitrary and violently-imposed boundaries of emerging national states cut across these biotic and ethnic zones, its inhabitants were deprived of a holistic, ecological and community-based living. ‘Bioregion’ is Snyder’s proposal to supplant these lost, traditional commons:

“Bioregional awareness teaches us in specific ways. It is not enough just to “love nature” or to want to “be in harmony with Gaia”. Our
relation to the natural world takes place in a place, and it must be
grounded in information and experience.”

Snyder envisions ‘bioregion’ as spaces as that overlap, the boundaries of
which are biota, watersheds, landforms and elevations. Knowing a bioregion deeply
is equivalent to knowing the spirit of that place, which in turn, is knowing oneself.
Holding this view Snyder is projecting bioregion as a physical reality that combines
the geographical, psychic and spiritual aspects of human life. In The Practice of the
Wild he describes the experience of being a part of a bioregion:

“If you know what is taught by plants and weather, you are in on the
gossip and can truly feel more at home. The sum of a field’s forces
becomes what we call very loosely the “spirit of the place”. To know
the spirit of a place is to realize that you are a part of a part and the
whole is made of parts, each of which is whole. You start with the
part you are whole in.”

Snyder feels that recognizing our responsibility to pass on this planet to the
future generations for millennia to come can make us concerned about the earth.
Besides, we need to honor the land’s antiquity. Then bioregion becomes an entity
that links the past, present and future of the landscape. In this context Snyder
expresses his desire to accept the traditional name for the continent, “Turtle Island”,
to supplant the more political term, ‘America’:

“Home – deeply, spiritually – must be here. Calling this place
“America” is to name it after a stranger. “Turtle Island” is the name
given to this continent by Native Americans based on the Creation
mythology. The United States, Canada, Mexico, are passing political entities; they have their legitimacies, to be sure, but they will lose their mandate if they continue to abuse the land.”

The concept of bioregion, for Snyder, is the way to gain a deep knowledge about the place; it is the knowledge of the past, present and future of the planet that is inextricably linked to the past, present and future of humanity. Hence he considers bioregion as “the entry of a place into the dialectic of history.” It creates an awareness in human mind about the non-human world, which otherwise would be relegated to the background.

Snyder is conscious of the usual criticism of bioregionalism that it is an expression of parochialism, regional strife and an unacceptable expression of cultural diversity, but he considers these allegations baseless as they seem to arise from man’s fear of a small society and the critical view of the State:

“Cultural pluralism and multilingualism are the planetary norms. We seek the balance between cosmopolitan pluralism and deep local consciousness. We are asking how the whole human race can regain self-determination in place of centuries of having been disenfranchised by hierarchy and/or centralized power.”

The relevance of bioregionalism to the contemporary world is the balance that it maintains between “cosmopolitan pluralism’ and “local consciousness”. The significance of this view is that Snyder does not limit it to a rural program or to a blind worship of a native custom. Instead his perception of the bioregional movement as a program for the restoration of ‘urban neighborhood life’ and the
‘greening of cities’ resembles Elan Shapiro’s concept of ‘environmental restoration’. While supporting such a movement Snyder seems to have immense hope:

“. . . the nations of the world will eventually be more sensitively defined and the lineaments of the blue earth will begin to reshape the policies. The requirements of sustainable economics, ecologically sensitive agriculture, strong and vivid community life, wild habitat – and the second law of thermodynamics – “all lead this way”.”\(^{42}\)

Knowing a region and the fundamentals of life there ‘grounds’ a person deeply in his place; this process of being ‘rooted’ makes life meaningful:

“‘There is strength, freedom, sustainability, and pride in being a practiced dweller in your own surroundings, knowing what you know.’”\(^{43}\)

Ecocritic Charles Molesworth in *Gary Snyder’s Vision: Poetry and Real Work* analyses the tribal structure of Snyder’s vision, which postulates ‘a sort of isolated communal existence’:

“. . . Snyder envisions a solution to the ills of modern life only through a sort of Buddhist negation of will, combined with a carefully thought out, regionally focused consciousness of natural balances, he must rely on the grace and aesthetic power of mental states and faculties. But since he is aware that the power of the mind – in cultural, social and political institutions and dominant values – has been as thoroughly polluted as the environment [he suggests] the
power-vision in solitude. . . liminal awareness, a consciousness heightened, fed, and structured when the subject exists in between the orders of common experience.44

Wendell Berry, in the poem ‘To a Siberian Woodsman’ in *Collected Poems* pledges complete allegiance to his place:

“. . . I am the outbreathing of this ground.
My words are its words as the wren’s song is its song.
. . .

I sit in the shade of the trees of the land I was born in.
As they are native I am native, and I hold to this place as carefully as they hold to it.” (p. 96-97)

In the poem ‘The Sycamore’ the tree becomes the symbol of his rootedness:

“In the place that is my own place, whose earth
I am shaped in and must bear . . .” (p.65)

Berry considers the modern tendency to migrate from countryside to cities and the consequent deserting of farm lands as a destructive activity which has an adverse effect on human culture. He laments this in *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*:

“It is by the measure of culture, rather than economics or technology, that we can reckon the nature and the cost of the country-to-city migration that has left our farm land in the hands of five percent of people. From a cultural point of view, the movement
from the farm to the city involves a radical simplification of mind and character.”\textsuperscript{45}

Hence, Berry advocates a reverse movement. In the modern georgic that he writes the emphasis is on the necessity of a farmer to be rooted in a culture and a place:

“This is because the best farming requires a farmer – a husbandman, a nurturer – not a technician or a businessman. A technician or a businessman . . . can be made in a little while, by training. A good farmer, on the other hand, is a cultural product; he is made by a sort of training, certainly, in what his time imposes or demands, but he is also made by generations of experience. This essential experience can only be accumulated, tasted, preserved, handed down in settled households, friendships and communities that are deliberately and carefully native to their own ground, in which past has prepared the present and the present safeguards the future.”\textsuperscript{46}

In another book of Berry, \textit{Farming: A Handbook}, the poem ‘A Standing Ground’ is a poetical portrayal of this vision:

“There is no earthly promise of life or peace
but where the roots branch and weave
their patient silent passages in the dark;
uprooted, I have been furious without an aim.
I am not bound for any public place,
but for ground of my own
where I have planted vines and orchard trees,
and in the heat of the day climbed up
into the healing shadow of the woods.”  (p.116)

In another poem, ‘On the Hill Late at Night’, Berry declares,
“... I am wholly willing to be here
between the bright silent thousands of stars
and the life of the grass pouring out of the ground.
The hill has grown to me like a foot.
Until I lift the earth I cannot move.”  (p.113)

When Berry poetically configures his relationship to the farmland he equates it to marriage. The title poem ‘The Clearing’ in the section ‘Clearing’ of *Collected Poems* the poet explores this symbol:

“A man who does not ask too much
becomes the promise of his land.
His marriage married
To his place, he waits
and does not stray. He takes thought
for the return of the dead
to the ground that they may come
to their last avail.”  (p.182)

The meaning of being rooted, to Berry, is to become a part of a cyclic pattern of changing seasons. In the poem ‘The Wish to Be Generous’, the poet depicts his urge to be one with this cyclic process of nature:
“. . . Let the world bring on me
the sleep of darkness without stars, so I may know
my little light taken from me into the seed
of the beginning and the end, so I may bow
to mystery, and take my stand on the earth
like a tree in a field, passing without haste
or regret towards what will be, my life
a patient willing descend into the grass.”  (p.114)

Berry’s perception of death as the going home to the earth demystifies death itself and assigns it a common place in the natural happenings of life. In the poem ‘Testament’ the poet’s exhortations to his friends and relatives about how they should respond to his death, assume significance in this context:

“You will recognize the earth in me, as before
I wished to it in myself: my earth
That has been my care and faithful charge from birth,
And towards which all my sorrows were surely bound,
And all my hopes. Say that I have found
A good solution, and am on my way
To the roots . . .”  (p.163)

Donelle Dreese, while critically analyzing Berry’s poetic collection ‘Clearing’ observes how the poet has rewritten the farm’s narrative to give it a new paradigm. Dreese points out Leon Driskell’s claim that Berry’s suggestion for a life
of rootedness and a strong community life is being accepted as an alternate way of life by many contemporary Americans:

“Wendell Berry’s home is a farm on the Kentucky River . . . he explores environmental issues in novels, essays and poetry, and his actions support his ecological philosophies. His work is of place, and whether he writes poems, novels or essays, he reveals his preoccupation with the land and his sense of culture as derived from his acceptance of a way of life many people today regard as “alternative”, claims Leon Driskell . . . Berry lives an alternative lifestyle by living closely with the land and exploring relationships between the human and non-human worlds in his writings. In exploring these relationships he rewrites the farm landscape into a narrative of marriage, history and community while he provides a lesson in stewardship in order to save the farm from ruin. Ultimately the construction of the farm and his work on it becomes a construction of the self as Berry prepares himself for pending life changes.”

In concrete and mystical poetic language he depicts the workings of the natural world as a part of his daily life. In the poem ‘Praise’ in the section ‘The Country of Marriage’ of Collected Poems the poet exhorts his fellow human beings to be an inextricable part of the web of life in their own places:

“Be here
like the water
of the hill
that fills each
opening it
comes to, to leave
with a sound
that is a part
of local speech.” (p.161)

‘The Clearing’, the title poem of the collection of poems ‘Clearing’, vividly captures Berry’s belief that those who deracinate themselves by alienating themselves from their places and by remaining ignorant about their places and the people who reside there are trying to live in a fools’ paradise:

“We don’t bother nobody,
and we don’t want nobody
to bother us,” the old woman
declared fiercely
over the fence. She stood
in strange paradise:

a shack built in the blast
of sun on the riverbank,

a place under the threat of flood,
bought ignorantly, not
to be bothered. And that
is what has come of it,
“the frontier spirit,” . . .”  
(p.181)

As a contrast, the poet derives his identity in relation to his ‘place’. The landscape and the community that resides there give him companionship, which is invaluable for him. The fifth section of the poem ‘From the Crest’ in Collected Poems depicts this inevitable relationship:

“Going into the city, coming  
home again, I keep you  
always in my mind.  
Who knows me who does not  
know you? The crowds of the streets  
do not know that you  
are passing among them with me.  
. . .  
We will write them a poem  
to tell them of the great  
membership, the mystic order,  
to which both of us belong.”  
(p. 192)

Berry portrays how the urban-industrial society is ignorant of the value of a strong community life. His concept of the sense of belonging that prevails among the people who feel rooted to their place is evidently in conflict with the consumerist culture of a profit-oriented economy. In an essay, “Does community Have a value” in The Landscape of Harmony Berry opines,
“... the place once occupied by community is now occupied by people who are not, in the same close effective sense, a community. The place is no longer central to its own interest and its own economy. The people do not support themselves so much from the place or so much by mutual work and help as their predecessors did; they furnish much less of their amusement and consolation; purchasing has more and more replaced growing and making; and less and less of local knowledge and practical skills is passed on to the young. In 1938, the community and its economy were almost identical. Today the community is defined mostly by the mere proximity of its people to one another. The people belong, often to their own detriment, to a national economy whose centers are far from home.”

A ‘colonial economy’, as Berry points out, is likely to oppose the development of strong local economies. In this kind of an economy both purchase of raw material and sale of the finished products often happen in far off places. Berry feels that it is ideal to opt for local production from locally available raw materials aimed at local use:

“The old local economies of subsistence, which in America were often incomplete and imperfect, were nevertheless sources of local strength and independence, and ... they were the beginning on which we could have built. Their replacement by the ‘consumer
economy’ has brought a helpless dependence on distant markets, on transported manufactured goods, on cash and on credit.”

Berry opposes the replacement of small-scale farming which is practiced at a local level by large organizers of agri-business:

“If an appropriate limitation of scale is not accepted, then the community is simply replaced by large-scale operators who work in isolation and by the dispossessed and excluded poor, who do not stay in place but drift in to the cities where they are counted, no longer as ‘surplus’ farmers (or miners or wood worker) but as ‘unemployed’.”

Modern man can regain a sense of attachment to his locale and lead a strong community life only by ‘proper husbanding of nature’ and ‘a stewardly care’ of nature:

“The only preventive and the only remedy is for the people to choose one another and their place over the rewards offered to them by outside inventors. The local community must understand itself finally as a community of interest – a common dependence on a common life and a common ground. And because a community is, by definition, placed, its success cannot be divided from the success of its place, its natural setting and surroundings: its soils, forests, grasslands, plants and animals, water, light and air. The two economies, the natural and human, support each other. Each is the other’s hope of a durable and a livable life.”
Edward Abbey’s perception of nature as a refuge from the urban-industrial culture and as a ‘lost Eden’ distances it from the arena of practical life. Yet, Abbey’s awareness about the significance of rootedness finds expression in some of his writings. For instance, in *Desert Solitaire* in a discussion about the Navajo Indians, Abbey reflects on what differentiates them from other poor people all over the world; one difference that he notices in the lives of Navajos is that they can still be rooted to a place, though the place is the reservation:

“... difference in the situation of the Navajo Indians from that of others sunk in poverty is that the Navajos still have a home of their own – the reservation, collective property of the tribe as a whole. The land is worn out, barren, eroded, helplessly unsuited to support a heavy human population, but even so, however poor in economic terms, it provides the Navajo people with a firm base on earth, the possibility of a better future, and for the individual Navajo in exile a place where, when he has to go back there, they have to take him in. Where they would not think of doing otherwise.”

In Abbey’s *A Fool’s Progress: an honest novel*, when the protagonist, Henry analyses his failed relationship with his third wife, Elaine, he recalls how both of them had alienated themselves from the community. He starts thinking that lack of roots in the firm ground has adversely affected their relationship. Henry thinks aloud:

“She needed what humans need: a sense of community. . . She needed connection with the past and future of family, clan, kinfolk
and tribe. And most of all she needed ownership of a piece of earth, possession of enough land to guarantee the pride and dignity and freedom that only economic independence can bestow. . . But the need is so deep and ancient that most people have lost even consciousness of it. Only the instinct remains.”

It is this thought that motivates Henry to return to his parents’ farm, his home, which according to him can heal all deep wounds and regenerate the lost health of his life. A similar awareness is foregrounded when Henry recalls his brother, Will’s efforts to rejuvenate their ancestral farm, which his father seems to have destroyed by ushering in a technological culture:

“Will kept the farm going in his free time, not for Paw’s sake or for Mother’s sake either and not even for his own. He did it, I guess . . . for the place itself. To keep it alive, a going concern. Not for monetary profit . . . but because he was there, the farm was there, he had to do it.”

Abbey seems to believe that it is quite natural for human beings to experience a sense of belonging to place. Yet Abbey has not developed this theme adequately in his writings.

Like Abbey, Bill McKibben also accepts the urge of human beings to be ‘grounded’ to a place as a fundamental need. Instead of reflecting on the various implications of the feelings of rootedness and the sense of belonging and the role of community, McKibben perceives the ecological angle of this man-nature
relationship. In *The End of Nature* while discussing his ‘post-nature’ concept, he comments:

“People causing pollution were at some remove from the pollution”55

Modern man’s callous attitude towards nature and his destructive acts are often traced to his deracinated state by all these writers as well as by ecopsychologists and ecocritics. McKibben points out how the modern trend of thinking globally has proven detrimental to the environment:

“For some years one of the chief (and admirable) slogans of environmentalism has been “Think globally, act totally” . . . Our local problem here in the Adirondack – acid rain – has its cause in Ohio and Kentucky. And now, as the climate warms, our local problem – the death of trees – starts to have its causes everywhere. Everywhere.”56

Here McKibben shares the ecopsychologists’ belief that the ecocidal actions of modern man are an indication of his psychic dysfunction resulting from an alienation from the land and the community that exists around him.

Annie Dillard’s writings on nature are expressions of an exalted state of mind, characterized by an acute sense of awareness that enables her to experience the ‘present’ intensely. But the elements of georgic literature are not so prominent in them. The wilderness that she explores in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, for instance, is often referred to as neighborhood by Dillard. It is near an inhabited place and the writer’s attention strays to some of her neighbors once in a while. Apart from this Dillard does not focus specifically on any aspect of human dwelling on the earth.
Dillard’s first novel, *The Living* can be considered as a departure from her other works. This invigorating and intricate portrayal of the life of the pioneer generation in Puget Sound in the nineteenth century is an august celebration of human endurance and adventure. As the story of the settlement of the pioneers in an enormous forest, it can be included in the genre of literature of dwelling. It depicts the trials and travails of the people who encounter the wild in its true essence, cut down tall trees and clear small spaces in the vast forest to settle down there, with tremendous optimism about building up a successful economy. Yet they find their dreams collapse at regular intervals when they are forced to go back to a state of complete dependence on nature. Though *The Living* can be considered a celebration of dwelling, it does not belong to the literature of farming as it does not project any agricultural idyll. In general the writings of Annie Dillard do not seem to come under the purview of ‘georgic’ literature or its modern version, ‘bioregionalism’. Nature with its wilderness together with the world of culture is ‘home’ for Dillard, though she is aware of the existence of different sets of rules for both these worlds. Most of the contemporary nature writers who exhibit a concern for the environment believe that to know who human beings are they must know where they are. Knowing the place and feeling a sense of belonging to that place and the community that resides there are inevitable for the self-seeking humanity. Gary Snyder’s words in *A Place in Space* reflect this awareness which can ultimately be considered as the rationale behind the modern georgic or bioregionalism:

“Another question is raised: is not the purpose of all this living and studying the achievement of self- knowledge, self-realization? How does the knowledge of the place help us know the self? The answer,
simply put, is that we are all composite beings, not only physically but intellectually, whose sole individual identifying feature is a particular form or structure changing constantly in time . . . Thus knowing who we are and where we are are intimately linked. There are no limits to the possibilities of the study of who and where.”57
END NOTES


5. Garrard, 109.

6. Thoreau quoted by Garrard, 110.


8. Dreese, 3.


10. Dreese, 18.


12. Dreese, 47.


15. Cahalan, 217.


18. Shapiro, 226.

19. Dreese, 15.
23. Oldenburg, 114.  
25. Max Lerner quoted by Oldenburg, 108.  
27. Mary E Gomes and Allen D. Kanner, 121.  
28. Garrard, 118.  
33. Snyder, The Practice of the Wild, 27.  
34. Snyder, The Practice of the Wild, 31.  
35. Snyder, The Practice of the Wild, 34.  
38. Snyder, The Practice of the Wild, 38.  
40. Snyder, The Practice of the Wild, 41.  
41. Snyder, The Practice of the Wild, 42.  
42. Snyder, The Practice of the Wild, 43.  
43. Snyder, The Practice of the Wild, 178.  
46. Berry, The Unsettling of America, 45.
47. Dreese, 79.
49. Berry, The Landscape of Harmony, 68.
50. Berry, The Landscape of Harmony, 75.
51. Berry, The Landscape of Harmony, 75.
56. McKibben, 37-38.
57. Snyder quoted by Dreese, 1.

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