

Is "America! America! God shed his grace on thee" a hymn? Yes, it's in most hymnals, but is it a hymn? It's a patriotic meditation, perhaps even contemplation [if the soul attachment to country rises to soul-consuming focus]. But it's a prayer only if the nation is considered God or at least a god--in which case also it's a hymn, i.e. a praise sung to a god or goddess or spirit [as, e.g., the Nazi hymns to the deutscher Geist]. Well, "America!" is an apostrophe, i.e. a thing addressed as though a person [or a person absent addressed as though present].....Animism and monism, without radical theism's [Jewish and Christian and Muslim] Creator/creation distinction, cannot sharply distinguish prayer and apostrophe. The poetic naturalism of Wallace Stevens and THE HUDSON REVIEW, the whole romantic tradition, current American "poetic intellectuals" [on which see #49B] such as Loren Eiseley and Rene Dubos, the God-nature-soul interweave in England's Blake-Wordsworth-Coleridge [gone bananas in Keats' "Beauty is truth"], the anti-Vietnam humanist rebellion against technopsychic rationalism [reminiscent of the 19th century's romantic rebellion against 18th-c. rationalism, the unconfined eternal breaking out of socio-cerebral limits], the perennial mystic sucking of the supranatural into "nature" in the elative, without-remainder sense, the fascination with Tolkien's neo-myth [the all-alive world of the hobbits, illustrated by trees ranging by gradations from world as dead to world as alive (217, THE TWO TOWERS)], countercultural prelapsarianism (a bypass of "sin"), from Whitman's fuzzy-focused naturalism in lyric mode to Neruda's sharp, even golf-course Sunday-morning "communion with nature" [heightened in Mike Murphy's GOLF IN THE KINGDOM], and the neo-nativism of American-Indian-imitating Gary Snyder.....

....YES, Gary Snyder, who as much as any one of us has been able to enter into the American Indian consciousness and almost talk like Black Elk [though one would be well advised, before reading Snyder, to read slowly BLACK ELK SPEAKS and THE SACRED PIPE].

Now for the suggestion behind this thinksheet: Since for many prayer is even deader than God, poetic-naturalistic apostrophe may provide some experience of the prayer mode, which is a soul-set essential to the full flowering of our humanity. Folks are even trying to measure the beneficent effect of talking to plants [on the plants, that is]--a techno-wrinkle on the prayer mode. Eastern-hemisphere "meditation," offering the minimum of both metaphysics and discipline in its secular versions, is of the prayer mode [though, as centering in the self instead of in the god, is not prayer]. Biblically, "idolatry" is praying to what is, but also is "nothing" of what it would have to be in order truly to be prayed to, viz. the God of Abraham-Moses-Jesus.

ILLUSTRATION: Here's an apostrophe [falsely called "prayer"] by Gary Snyder [oft-printed, beautifully so with color-photo support, in 26Jan71 LOOK]. Note the final sexual-image division of space as masculine and mind as feminine, a quasi-hypostatization or -personalization, with a bow to "Mother Earth" in the poem's first line.

PRAYER FOR THE GREAT FAMILY

How like/unlike
Francis and G.M.
Hopkins!
Gratitude to Mother Earth,
sailing through night and day--
and to her soil:
rich, rare and sweet.
in our minds so be it.

Gratitude to Plants,
the sun-facing light-changing

leaf and fine root hairs;/standing still
through wind/and rain: their dance is/in the
flowing spiral grain.//in our minds so be
it.///Gratitude to Air,/bearing the soaring
Swift/and the silent Owl/at dawn. Breath
of our song/clear spirit breeze.//in our
minds so be it.///Gratitude to Creatures,/our
brothers, teaching secrets,/freedoms
and ways; who share with us their milk;

self-complete,brave and aware.//in our minds so be it.//G. to Water: clouds, rivers, glaciers;/holding
or releasing;/streaming through all--/our own bodies salty seas.//in our minds so be it.//G. to the Sun:/blind-
ing pulsing light/through trunks of trees,through mists,/warming caves where bears and snakes sleep--he who
wakes us.//in our minds so be it.//G. to the Great Sky/who holds billions of stars--/and goes yet beyond that,/
beyond all powers/and thoughts and yet is/within us--Grandfather Space./The Mind is his Wife.//so be it.