

ANTHROPOMETRY BY
ANY OTHER NAME:
BEAUTIFUL CHILDREN, HOMELY
PARENTS, AND A BLUEPRINT
FOR "MARRIAGE FROM THE
STANDPOINT OF ART"

By

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At the beginning of the twentieth century, the United States imported from England a potent and peculiar movement. It channeled a long-established concern growing out of the Gilded Age that the city corrupts mankind and prompts a degeneracy inflicted upon humanity by modern civilization, and arose also from a confluence of Social Darwinism and the pioneering work of statisticians Francis Galton and Karl Pearson. Seemingly all at once, scientists, intellectuals, legislators, health officials and technocrats in the United States began to argue after 1900 that modern society encouraged, protected, and rewarded the propagation of the feeble-minded, the sickly, the mentally unbalanced, the criminal, and the lazy. Welfare capitalism, which was

needed to protect individual Americans' liberty from corporate entities, had what appeared to many the unfortunate side effect of supporting a vast class of degenerates who reproduced at a far higher rate than their "worthy" countrymen.¹

Thus began the eugenics movement (from the Greek for "well-born" or "good birth"), which sought through to increase the number of "desirable," or "fit," births in society and limit those of the "unfit." Foundationally, the eugenics movement in the United States was marked by certain assumptions: that "fit" and "unfit" were quantifiable and ontological markers; that heredity rather than environment was the engine of differentiation; that the rules governing stock breeding and human reproduction were functionally the same; and finally and most importantly, that evolution driven by natural selection had, because of the mechanisms of the modern world, been supplanted by social evolution that tended to favor the proliferation of the unfit and restrict population growth of the fit. Such ideas, and in particular this last notion, were readily identifiable by many in an increasingly urban, industrial world. The only solution, then, was to correct the degenerative spiral through the development of a eugenics mindset which would encourage the fit to breed and discourage propagation by the poor, the feebleminded, the insane, and the criminal.² The metrics by which the latter would be measured and the means by which eugenic programs would be implemented subsequently occupied eugenicists and

¹ Donald Pickens, *Eugenics and the Progressives* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1968).

² Mike Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought 1860-1945: Nature as Model and Nature as Threat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 216-22; 242-48.

their opponents for the next half-century. During this time thirty two states in the United States instituted some variation of eugenic sterilization laws. Legislatively, the eugenicists achieved their first victory in 1907 with a sterilization law in Indiana, and their apex in 1927 with the Supreme Court's *Buck v. Bell* decision out of Virginia that spawned the famous phrase, "Three generations of imbeciles are enough."³

Beginning in the 1930s, a combination of the scientific advancement in embryology, genetics, and heredity in conjunction with Germany's persecution of a whole host of "lesser" peoples in pursuit of a "master race" made continued urgings to control reproduction of its citizens and their larger implications fuzzy and unpalatable to both geneticists and the vast majority of the American people. The decade, however, undergirded by the desperation of the Great Depression, remained hotly contested by eugenicists and their opponents and signaled a general decline in its popularity. Few continued to make the same types of arguments after the end of World War Two, and those who did re-modulated their arguments with new vocabularies. Yet to dismiss the potency of the eugenics movement is to do a disservice not only to those lives irreversibly touched but also the larger historical context. Understanding anxieties about the fit and the unfit and what should be done in pursuit of those goals is critical to understanding the intellectual, social, and cultural milieu of American life from 1900-1960.

That eugenic concerns continued to inhabit the social

³ Paul A. Lombardo, *Three Generations, No Imbeciles: Eugenics, the Supreme Court, and Buck v. Bell* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 276.

sciences—and in some cases the hard sciences as well—after 1945 has seen some excellent treatment in the literature of the last decade. Thus, here I would like to explore an atypical case in the cultural history of American eugenics in the postwar era: the concatenations between theories of classical beauty, art, and eugenics in the work of Midwestern artist Corydon Granger Snyder.⁴ Snyder was born in Atchison, Kansas, on February 24th, 1879 to George E. Snyder and Carrie Celeste Louisa Granger. Recently of Utah, where his brother Scott was born in 1876, Corydon's father was thirty-nine years old when he was born, a bookkeeper by profession, while his mother was twenty six and a stay-at-home mom. Corydon would come to know

⁴ Atypical only in that cultural histories of eugenics have almost exclusively focused on the interwar period. For example, Christina Cogdell, *Eugenic Design: Streamlining America in the 1930s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Lois, A. Cuddy and Claire M. Roche. Eds. *Evolution and Eugenics in American Culture and Literature, 1880-1940: Essays on Ideological Conflict and Complicity* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2003); Susan Curell and Christina Cogdell. Eds. *Popular Eugenics: National Efficiency and American Mass Culture in the 1930s* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006); Daylanne K. English, *Unnatural Selections: Eugenics in American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Betsy L. Nies, *Eugenic Fantasies: Racial Ideology in the Literature and Popular Culture of the 1920s* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Martin S. Pernick, *The Black Stork: Eugenics and the Death of "Defective" Babies in American Medicine and Motion Pictures Since 1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). No cultural histories of eugenics treating the ideas of the movement after World War Two exist, to my knowledge. As we will see below, this clearly does not mean they do not exist, but rather that they are more subtle and implicit. In other words, we just have to look harder and more closely to see them.

loss early in life, when at the age of just one his mother passed away, but hopefully got some relief from the presence of Carrie's mother, Lucy Hulings, who had lived with them since her husband passed away. The other steady presence in the family was Maggie Cotter, a thirteen year-old local Kansas girl who lived with the Snyders as a domestic servant.⁵ It is unclear just how long Snyder stayed in Kansas, but it is likely that not long after he became of age, he left the state of his birth, continuing the nomadic tradition of his family by moving to Minnesota after four years of high school.⁶ Snyder would grow up to be a slight of build, his draft card from World War One showing him as a five foot, three inch, one hundred twelve pound man at the age of thirty.⁷ There he would meet Minnie M. Blair, where the two would be married in St. Paul, Minnesota, on March 27th, 1908.⁸

Over the next five years they had three children: Fern Snyder was born August 10th, 1909, in St. Paul, MN (though she does not appear on the 1940 census), George Corydon Snyder (named after Corydon's father) was born October 20th, 1910, and Lacigale Snyder born 1913.⁹ The 1940 census gives us some sense of how the family weathered the Great Depression. At some point they moved to Chicago. Minnie must have died between 1913 and 1940, for she does not appear. George, who reported the

⁵ United States Census, 1880.

⁶ His father was born in Indiana, his mother's family originally from Virginia before moving to Massachusetts before Carrier was born (United States Census, 1940).

⁷ United States World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918.

⁸ Minnesota, Marriages, 1849-1950.

⁹ United States Census, 1940.

family's information to the census-taker, was the only member of the family to attend college (for two years); he became a policeman for the city of Chicago, earning a very comfortable salary of twenty-five hundred dollars. At twice the average income in 1940 of \$1,368, this meant the family, further assisted by Lacigale's reported earnings of \$1,000 from working as a dancer in a night club, was comfortably off.¹⁰ This is also despite Corydon, at that point a self-employed artist, drawing no reported annual income.¹¹ Corydon's World War Two draft card in 1942 shows the family still living in Cook County, Illinois.¹²

Snyder's self-published *Art and Human Genetics: How to Choose the Right Mate For You*, the final edition of which was published in 1952, also had a long history. Snyder had been thinking about the topic for years. The frontispiece and preface both list the first edition being published in 1928. How it changed over the years is difficult to pin down, though Snyder does admit in the introduction that much of the material remains the same, with some additional comments on "types" and an additional disclaimer on the first page which asserts (somewhat disingenuously) that his discussion of types is meant only to relate to features and not skin color.

Taken as a whole and considered within the larger context of the postwar eugenics sensibility in the United States, *Art and Human Genetics* serves as a particularly

¹⁰ Diane Petro, "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime? The 1940 Census: Employment and Income," *Prologue Magazine* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2012).

¹¹ United States Census, 1940.

¹² United States World War II Draft Registration Cards, 1942.

incisive example of how, for some, phenotype¹³ continued to express in relatively uncomplicated terms (at a length of only thirty pages) the heredity of both individuals and groups. That heredity, in turn, suggested for author important meaning for the future of the human race (and also implied conclusions about the present). Split into roughly halves, the first section of *Art and Human Genetics* sets the foundation for the second and proposes three roughly discrete but interlocking projects to be explored: first, that there exists an objective, quantifiable, and universally valid notion of beauty; second, that society can, and should, strive to increase its number of beautiful people and (its inevitable corollary) decrease the number of "homely" people; and third and finally, that the mechanism by which to achieve this project exists if we combine the aesthetic and tools of classical art and those of the science of genetics.

Snyder is kind enough to describe in some detail his prescription for the ideal male and female types. One should make sure that:

- 1) The eye line comes at the center of the head; 2) The nose line comes halfway between the brow and chin; [and] 3) The edge of the lower lip comes slightly above halfway between the bottom of the nose and chin. In choosing a mate, watch the angle of the chin and the length of the nose . . . These are the most important points, but watch also the width of nose, the length of upper lip and the width of the head across the cheek bones. Bulging or receding

¹³ An organism's observable physical characteristics and traits.

foreheads should also be given consideration.¹⁴ Facial features, however, are not his only concern. Equally important is that one is well-proportioned—especially in his or her limbs—and not too tall but not too short. In other words, Snyder's Platonic ideal of beauty is a man or woman with average build and regular features (as interpreted against the type of people he saw living in the Southern Plains and Midwest during his life). "Regular" remains a somewhat fluid (yet important, as we will see) term in the text, at times seeming to mean "symmetrical" or proportional, at others clearly more akin to that which is found in Greek sculptures, and still elsewhere simply that which is common.¹⁵ Just as tall people are today disproportioned and so feeling like outcasts, the abnormally short are as well.¹⁶

To effect greater numbers of the beautiful, regular, and proportional continues in the 1952 edition the motivation behind the first edition of the text, and is expressed in its original title: *Beautiful Children from Homely Parents: If They Are Opposites* (1928). It also serves as a bridge to the dual problems, in Snyder's estimation, that his project solves (and thus reminds us why this is much more than a harmless pamphlet): first, to provide a systematic and authoritative exploration of beauty as it relates to type, and both as they impact reproduction, for "[i]t is hardly likely that any normal person would have children if he knew in advance that the children would be handicapped in life by

¹⁴ Snyder, *Art and Human Genetics*, 2.

¹⁵ Snyder, *Art and Human Genetics*, 6-8; 4; 12.

¹⁶ Snyder, *Art and Human Genetics*, 6-8.

extreme homeliness.”¹⁷ This might seem, despite the use of the word *handicap*, like nothing more than the type of (still eugenically oriented) marriage advice that gained steam alongside the genetic counseling clinics after World War Two.¹⁸ It is the parallel mission that Snyder offers to solve via this text, however, which makes it clear that his underlying concern also engages the eugenic impulse as it manifested in the population control movement and, at the same time, places *Art and Human Genetics* next to other neo-eugenic Malthusian treatises of the postwar era (like Fairfield Osborn’s *Our Plundered Planet* and William Vogt’s *Road to Survival*, both published in 1948). Engaging a new ecological imperative that environmental historian Thomas Robertson identifies as “emphasiz[ing] carrying capacity, ecological interconnection, over-consumption, degradation, and hard limits to growth,”¹⁹ in the postwar era, Snyder writes in the opening pages of his discussion that “it is hardly desirable in this day and age to breed a race of giants. In fact it has been stated by scientists that in the not far distant future it may be necessary to breed a smaller race in order to offset the fast diminishing food supply. It is to be hoped, however, that before that time we have a rational birth control.”²⁰

Robertson persuasively argues that this imperative is

¹⁷ Snyder, *Art and Human Genetics*, 3.

¹⁸ Alexandra Minna Stern, *Telling Genes: The Story of Genetic Counseling in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012): 2-72.

¹⁹ Thomas Robertson, *Malthusian Moment: Global Population Growth and the Birth of American Environmentalism* (Piscataway, NJ, USA: Rutgers University Press, 2012): 2.

²⁰ Snyder, *Art and Human Genetics*, 6

based for men like Raymond Pearl and Aldo Leopold less in a eugenic sensibility—though he rightly accedes to its presence—and more as a new appreciation of ecological principles that melded concerns about national security and social relations.²¹ These early stirrings of ecology and environmentalism (starting in the late 1920s but gaining steam in the 1950s), as Robertson shows, were decidedly more concerned with populations. Contrarily, for Snyder, as we will see, the latter is not the case, for one of the hallmarks of eugenic ideologies and programs—at least in the United States—is that they, by necessity, explicitly targeted the individual. The boundaries between these two notions are not necessarily clear-cut. Robertson demonstrates that ecological discourse during these nascent years was preoccupied with sacrificing the individual to preserve the integrity of the herd (both in terms of culling abundant populations and subsets of those groups carrying disease); eugenicists, on the other hand, sought the opposite: improvement of the herd by improving the individual. In other words, one focused on elimination, and the other on procreation. Snyder's argument that we need to "breed a smaller race" speaks clearly to the latter. And it is in explicating the mechanisms by which we might achieve this goal of a more proportional, beautiful, and smaller race that Snyder most clearly reveals the eugenic underpinnings of *Art and Human Genetics*.

The casual reading of this text might erroneously suggest that, despite half its title, in fact there is little genetics contained within. There is no discussion of genetic mutation, alleles, or population statistics. But a closer look

²¹ Robertson, *Malthusian Moment*: 8, 15-18, 37, 52, 86.

reveals that Snyder in fact remains very much concerned with the particulars of how genetics might be marshalled to improve the human race. Four short quotations illustrate this. On regression towards a mean, he writes:

In writings on eugenics a great deal has been said regarding height, color of hair and eyes, but little on the feature and nothing on the possibility of opposite extremes equalizing the features and creating a normal type in their offspring.²²

Again on regression, as a caption to profile sketches of a nuclear family with three children, he asserts:

When EACH of the parents has one or more IRREGULAR features, but which are OPPOSITE to each other's, the children will have features that are more nearly REGULAR than either of the parents.²³

One more time on regression, but with some injection of Mendelian inheritance:

Coming back again to the matter of facial proportions, let us first consider the fact that the children of parents having opposite extremes in features may quite closely resemble one of the parents. The chances are that at least one in three will. Nevertheless, there will be some correction towards the regular type of features. And in another generation, care in respect to any objectionable feature will remove it entirely as a family tendency.²⁴

Lastly, a clearer formulation of Mendelian inheritance, from the standpoint of art:

When one parent has REGULAR features, and the other parents has ONE or more IRREGULAR features, the children will all resemble the

²² Snyder, *Art and Human Genetics*, 6.

²³ Snyder, *Art and Human Genetics*, 17. Emphasis in original.

²⁴ Snyder, *Art and Human Genetics*, 10.

IRREGULAR FEATURED parent. This is because the REGULAR FEATURED parent is really a NEUTRAL, and has little or no effect in modifying the IRREGULAR features of the other parent.²⁵

Snyder's terminology here is easily translatable to the realm of genetics, with "neutral" indicating a heterozygous parent (with one dominant and one recessive gene), and "regular" and "irregular" indicating pure recessive and dominant homozygosity, respectively. It appears that "irregularity" is the dominant trait, for even one irregular feature dooms the next generation to the same irregularity of features. The text itself is bracketed by diagrams showing the measuring of heads, and the second half of *Art and Human Genetics* turns itself to showing various types of opposite couples and what their offspring would look like (see Fig. 1 on next page).

Dozens of profile sketches of husbands and wives, mostly ordinary people but including in its analysis famous families like the Roosevelts (of the Franklin Delano variety) and the Trumans, make up the rest of the text. Large, small, upturned or pointed noses, jutting or slanting foreheads, too widely or narrowly set eyes, square or receding chins, and symmetry of features dominates the seventy-odd sketches in those pages, with explanations of probability, equalizing of features, and compatibility of heredity accompanying them. And despite Snyder's assertion above that "little on the feature and nothing on the possibility of opposite extremes equalizing the features and creating a normal type in their offspring" has been dealt with in the eugenic literature, this preoccupation with the mechanisms by which

²⁵ Snyder, *Art and Human Genetics*, 18. Emphasis in original.

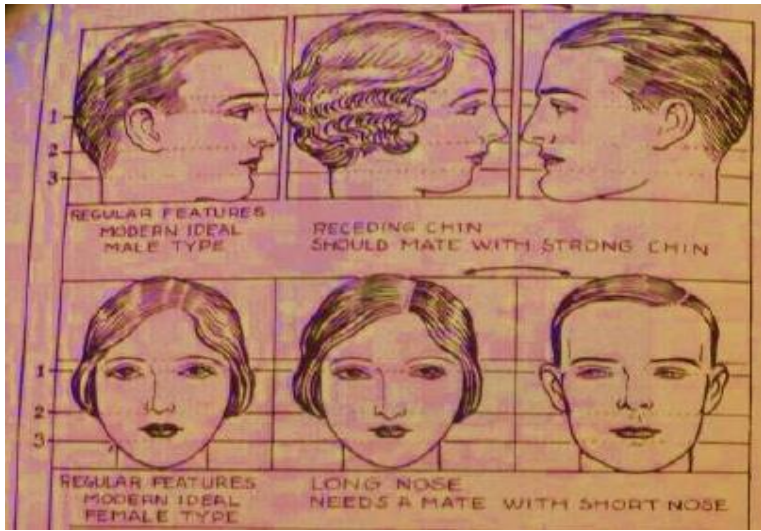


Fig. 1. Corydon Granger Snyder, *Art and Human Genetics* (Chicago, 1952): 2.

the offspring of opposite types approaches the “regular” is a clear regurgitation of the work of none other than Francis Galton himself, founder of the eugenics movement, who pioneered the theory and investigation of how all sorts of oppositions resolved themselves in the children of “abnormal” parents according to a bell curve.²⁶

The most important point following this uncomplicated genetics should be obvious—Snyder’s conception of heredity is lifted from the late nineteenth century rather than the mid-twentieth, when this text was published. Even

²⁶ Francis Galton, *Hereditary Genius* (London: Macmillan, 1869) and *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development* (London: J.M. Dent & Company, 1883).

early geneticists like T.H. Morgan, for instance, were cautious of eugenics from the beginning, and he was among the first in the field to actively attack the movement in the late 1910s as it became clear that complex intra- and extra-genomic environmental factors played a role in shaping both genotype and phenotype. Indeed, geneticists by the 1920s had turned their attention to nonhuman animals precisely because it was too difficult, scientifically as well as ethically, to design experiments with humans that controlled for all the factors at play.²⁷ Yet Snyder remained stuck in the late nineteenth century, perhaps driven by the seemingly clear-cut linkages between developing a quantifiable measure of human features and using the latter as support for a eugenic discussion of beauty.

Additional support for this statistics-mania can be seen in the only other available public expression of Snyder's project. In 1938 he contributed to an article published in the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* and written by none other than the journal's originator, himself an early and longtime proponent of anthropometry. Ales Hrdlicka served as the first curator of the National Museum (now the Smithsonian Institution of Natural History), was a powerful figure in the early eugenics movement, and counted among his friends Madison Grant and Frederick Osborn.²⁸ Titled "Growth of the Head During Adult Life: Further Evidence," Snyder appears along with seventy two other contributors detailing changes in the head size of

²⁷ Nathaniel Comfort, *The Science of Human Perfection: How Genes Became the Heart of American Medicine* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012): 68-70.

²⁸ Comfort, *The Science of Human Perfection*.

themselves or family members over a lifetime. "My son's head has grown at least an eighth in hat size during the last five years," Snyder writes. "He is 28 years old and up to a few years ago we could wear each other's hats. He wears at least an eighth larger now. I get a 7 or 7 1/8 and he takes 7 1/4, which goes down easily over my head."²⁹ Hrdlicka, as is clear in the longer article, remained adamant into the late 1930s that physical anthropology was a viable subdiscipline long after most others had long abandoned it, and Snyder it appears shared that interest.

It might seem to some that *Art and Human Genetics* is nothing more than a peculiarly archaic but ultimately harmless pamphlet, the work of a self-employed artist at the twilight of his career feeling left behind in the modern world: "As far back as when I was ten," Snyder writes halfway through, "I remember I used to wonder why some people were good looking while others were homely, and if there wasn't some way that everyone could be beautiful."³⁰ Such benign statements reinforce this interpretation. But what lies behind this seemingly nostalgic but facile treatment of opposite types and marital compatibility is in actuality nothing less than an attempt to unearth the long-dead sciences of anthropometry and phrenology, and their far more insidious progeny, eugenics.

Such an interpretation sees reinforcement, beyond what we have seen above, in two additional ways. One is surprisingly straightforward, demonstrating the point that

²⁹ Ales Hrdlicka, "'Growth of the Head During Adult Life: Further Evidence,'" *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 24, no. 2 (October-December 1938): 147.

³⁰ Snyder, *Art and Human Genetics*, 19.

after 1945 many remained willing to speak in explicitly eugenic terms. Throughout *Art and Human Genetics*, Snyder consistently refers to "types" and "the normal"—consistently the language of early American eugenicists from a half-century before, who were rising along with the larger movement and championing issues like immigration restriction, anti-miscegenation laws, and forced sterilization for residents of mental institutions and prisons. It is unsurprising when, finally, halfway through, Snyder makes a particularly anachronistic assertion. "It is, of course, possible to tell by certain measurements of the head," Snyder argues, "if one belongs to the Nordic, Semitic or other recognized types. It is also true that certain races have traits of character which are shared more or less by the majority of their people. Added to this is the fact that each race has physical characteristics peculiar to itself, there is a slight basis for character readings from that angle."³¹

Only once in the text does he use the word *eugenics*, (on page six), and there is, curiously, no qualification of the word or even the whiff of pejoration in his use of it. This "typing" of races enjoys, of course, a long (and troubled) history in American and European thought, from Louis Agassiz and Samuel George Morton, to James George Frazer to, to Paul Broca. The "allure of numbers," as Stephen Jay Gould calls it, had its heyday in the second half of the nineteenth century, during which time heads were measured, articles were published, and humankind was shoehorned into a neat hierarchy ultimately, benignly constructed or not, marked indelibly the bodies of large

³¹ Snyder, *Art and Human Genetics*, 14.

swaths of the human race.³² And it is possible to draw a straight line between the intellectual framework driving the phrenologists and head-measurers through their descendants among the cognoscenti of American eugenics. Thus, perhaps the most surprising quality of *Art and Human Genetics* is its disinterment, three-quarters of a century later, of this slippery slope in western scientific thought down which so many tumbled.

The second and more subtle manifestation of eugenics comes in Snyder's assertion that, when choosing a mate with whom to have children, "one must [in addition to facial type] also consider the many things that the sober minded are considering today, such as mutual interests, social position, and mental qualities."³³ Even today, young couples are urged by marriage counselors and advice columnists alike to choose a spouse with a similar level of education, interests, and compatible personalities. Snyder's argument as such seems by itself rational and reasonable; in conjunction with what are clear ideas about the current status and future prospects for the human race, they take on new meaning.

It is in this context that Snyder's opening remarks that "it is hardly likely that any normal person would marry and have children if he knew in advance that the children would be handicapped in life by extreme homeliness" take on their true significance.³⁴ *Art and Human Genetics: How to Choose the Right Mate for You* is at once a eugenic

³² Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: Norton, 1982): 105-142.

³³ Snyder, *Art and Human Genetics*, 14.

³⁴ Snyder, *Art and Human Genetics*, 3.

polemic inhabited by concerns about beauty, normality, population control and ecology, and marital relations. The simultaneous solution to the irregularly featured, abnormal, oversized and incompatible in this country, it concludes, is a "rational [system of] birth control" with art and human genetics at its core. It is certainly somewhat anachronistic in its conception. But, as Nathaniel Comfort has written, at its core the eugenic impulse was shaped by the desire to relieve suffering and offer a self-directed hand to improving the lot of humanity.³⁵ To treat this, or any other eugenic text, as a mere contaminant to society that must be excised from the annals of history is to mistake its connection to the past and its power as a cultural artifact in its present. Corydon Granger Snyder never published another edition of his book, and died in Cook, Illinois, in February (the same month as his birth) in 1968. He was eighty nine.³⁶

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³⁵ Comfort, *The Science of Human Perfection*: x.

³⁶ United States Social Security Death Index.

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