The poetry of Robert Bly

by Robert Richman

On one of the most “radical” poetic careers of our time.

With the publication this year of Robert Bly’s Selected Poems[1]—a volume preceded by a number of books celebrating this writer’s work[2]—the time has surely come to take a closer critical look at one of the most “radical” poetic careers of our time. Robert Bly himself has always insisted that, of the many poetic movements spawned during the Sixties, none was more radical than his. To establish the priority of his own literary outlook, Bly has spent much time belittling that of his rivals in this period—the confessional and New York School poets, on the one hand, and, on the other, the formalist poets who survived the Sixties. In Bly’s view, “both cooked and raw poetry in a certain sense in the United States is head poetry.” To deal with the objects of the external world, as both the confessonals and the New York School poets do, is, in his view, to be in thrall to the “logic” of that world. True free-associational surrealism, which is what Bly has long advocated for poetry, is achieved by turning inward, “into” the body and away from the “head” and the world. It is therefore hardly surprising that the only criterion of quality for this poetry of “weird” and “deep images” is said to be its resistance to analysis. Bly’s best poetry, according to William Heyen in Robert Bly: When Sleepers Awake, has always “defied serious inquiry and involved [that is, complex] explication.” “The prized conditions,” according to Donald Wesling, another admirer of his work, “are Not Understanding and Not Saying.”

A look at the recent publications devoted to Bly’s writing suggests, however, that far from defying serious inquiry and explication, Bly’s poetry is as full of explicable matter as The Waste Land. And the question of form in Bly’s poetry has also been recently opened for review. Bly himself has lately abandoned the harsh antiformal polemics that used to be his stock-in-trade. In the new Selected Poems he has chosen to include a few previously unpublished poems from the late Forties and early Fifties written in iambic pentameter. In addition, Bly’s comments, interspersed throughout the book, show the poet far more willing to make concessions to the value of form in general and to acknowledge its presence in poems we had been previously asked to perceive very differently. This is not to say Bly has abandoned every vestige of his radical outlook. Indeed, one of the more amusing things about the Selected Poems—as well as many of Bly’s prose writings of the Eighties—is the rhetorical hole he digs himself into by trying to maintain his old radical
principles while flaunting an admiration for form: “It is not iambic,” he says about one group of poems in the Selected Poems, “but free verse with distinct memories of form.” For a writer whose unequivocal rantings against form and meaning were long a familiar feature of the literary scene—most of them on the order of, “I refuse to say anything at all about prosody. What an ugly word it is!” and “It’s so horrible in high school when they say, ‘What’s the interpretation of this poem?’”—even this small shift in outlook acquires a certain significance. Clearly a concerted effort is being made by Bly and his many supporters to present a more tempered picture of his aesthetic position for posterity. But does this revisionist view of Bly’s poetry really account for what he has written and what he has claimed for it?

Robert Bly was born sixty years ago in the rural farming community of Madison, Minnesota. He belongs to the impressive generation of American poets that emerged in the years immediately following the war. Bly’s fellow students at Harvard—he was there from 1947 to 1950—including Richard Wilbur, Donald Hall, Adrienne Rich, Kenneth Koch, and John Ashbery. Like many of his classmates, Bly was under the sway of the formalist impulse then governing American poetry. According to the chronology in Howard Nelson’s Robert Bly: An Introduction to the Poetry, Bly had “virtually memorized” Robert Lowell’s Lord Weary’s Castle, which had been published the year before Bly entered Harvard. But unlike most of his contemporaries, he chose to withhold from publication the book of formalist poems, entitled The Lute of Three Loudnesses, which he had assembled after graduation. The work from this book that is now included in the Selected Poems reveals an immature but by no means inconsiderable talent:

```plaintext
Spring has come; I look up and see
The agile companies of April sit
As quaint and graceful as medieval guilds.
Grouse feathers float away on the still lake.

Summer and reeds; summer and partridge chicks.
Then bees: eaters of honey till their death.
The honey gatherers, coming and going, drive
Their endless honey circles to the hive.

The sedge root in the river lifts and frees,
And blackbirds join in flocks, their duties through.
And now the last autumnal freedom comes,
And Zumbrota acorns drop, sun-pushed as plums,
To half-wild hogs in Carolina trees,
And disappointed bees, with half-gold feet,
Sail home. For me this season is most sweet,
And winter will be stamping of the feet.
```

Bly’s dissatisfaction with the poems of The Lute of Three Loudnesses—“I heard a whisper of Milton,” writes Bly in the Selected Poems, and “something in it didn’t fit me”—led to a period of self-
imposed isolation in New York City and Cambridge from 1951 to 1954. These years of reading and reflection have taken on a considerable importance in the Bly mythology, almost as important as the suppressed first book of poems. According to Bly and his commentators, this period was crucial in the transformation of the writer from a craftsman in rhyme and meter (what Bly would later call “antique work”) to a surrealist free-verse poet. For this period of loneliness, as Bly describes it in the *Selected Poems*, “made clear to me [the] . . . interior starvation” which had given birth to the formal poetry Bly had been so unhappy with.

In 1954 Bly enrolled in the writing program at the University of Iowa, and the following year he married Carolyn McLean. In 1956, Bly travelled to Norway on a Fulbright grant to translate Norwegian poetry. Bly is of Norwegian descent but knew no Norwegian at the time. It was in the Oslo Public Library that he encountered the work of the South American poets Pablo Neruda and Cesar Vallejo, the Spanish poet Juan Jimenez, and the German poet Georg Trakl. Overwhelmed by what he perceived to be the imaginative freshness of the work of these “surrealist” poets—far more authentic, Bly believed, than the French surrealists— Bly promptly started a literary magazine when he returned to the United States. Its express purpose was to provide a forum for translations of the work of these writers. But *The Fifties*, as the magazine was called (it would eventually become *The Sixties, The Seventies, and The Eighties*), was also used as a vehicle for attacks on the poetry establishment. The editorial in the inaugural issue, published in 1958, read, in part: “The editors of this magazine think that most of the poetry published in America is too old-fashioned.” Bly sent copies to all the contributors to *The New Poets of England and America*, the anthology of formalist poetry edited by Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson which had appeared that same year. By the time the second installment of *The Fifties* appeared in 1959—featuring the first surrealist-inspired work of James Wright, a young poet who, like Bly, had abandoned the formalist path—Bly’s commitment to his new aesthetic was solidly established.

In 1958 and 1959 Bly interrupted work on the surrealist “country poems” that would appear in his first published book, *Silence in the Snowy Fields* (1962), in order to finish a book of political poems. It was called *Poems for the Ascension of J. P. Morgan*, and failed to find a publisher. (A few of these poems would turn up in *Silence in the Snowy Fields* and *The Light Around the Body*, Bly’s second published book, which appeared in 1967). Bly remained undeterred in his sense of poetic mission. American poetry was then going through a tremendous upheaval: Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* had appeared in 1956 and Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* in 1959—and Bly was anxious to be a part of the new movement. In 1961 he brought out *Twenty Poems of Georg Trakl*, translated by himself and James Wright. By this time Bly had forged more alliances with poets, among them Donald Hall and Louis Simpson, two of the editors of *The New Poetry of England and America* who were experiencing crises of confidence in their own formalist verse. Bly also met Galway Kinnell and David Ignatow around this time, two more poets sympathetic to his cause.

*Silence in the Snowy Fields* was the first major contribution to Bly’s burgeoning surrealist movement. The first poem in the volume, entitled “Three Kinds of Pleasures,” provided the
movement with a kind of brief poetic agenda:

I
Sometimes, riding in a car, in Wisconsin
Or Illinois, you notice those dark telephone poles
One by one lift themselves out of the fence line
And slowly leap on the gray sky—
And past them the snowy fields.

II
The darkness drifts down like snow on the
picked cornfields In Wisconsin, and on these black trees
Scattered, one by one,
Through the winter fields—
We see stiff weeds and brownish stubble,
And white snow left now only in the
wheeltracks of the combine.

III
It is a pleasure, also, to be driving
Toward Chicago, near dark,
And see the lights in the barns.
The bare trees more dignified than ever,
Like a fierce man on his deathbed,
And the ditches along the road half full of a private snow.

Bly’s pleasures are indeed threefold: the surreal, as tentatively evidenced in the image of the
leaping telephone poles in the first stanza; the freedom to assert one’s emotional state rather than
conjure it through an elaborate network of poetic devices, as in “It is a pleasure, also, to be driving
. . .”; and the freedom to construct a poem out of a series of plain, if finely drawn, random
observations. Most of the other poems in the book are made up of sequences of description—also
occasionally interspersed with “surreal” images—that are far more random than this. As Bly
remarked, “when the poems of *Silence in the Snowy Fields* came, I set them down with very little
rewriting, maybe one or two lines only. . . they arrived as complete as they came.” They were, he
said on another occasion, finished “in the thirty or forty seconds that it took to write the poem.”
The final stanza of “Driving Toward the Lac Qui Park River” seems to confirm Bly’s remarks:
Nearly to Milan, suddenly a small bridge,
And water kneeling in the moonlight.
In small towns the houses are built right on the ground;
The lamplight falls on all fours on the grass.
When I reach the river, the full moon covers it.
A few people are talking, low, in a boat.

By attempting to “penetrate down into an evolutionary part of the mind,” as Bly felt Nemda, Trakl, and Vallejo had done, the poet challenged the orthodoxies not only of the formalist poetry of the late Forties and early Fifties but of the modernist poets as well. In the poetry of Eliot, for example, seemingly disparate images and allusions are united by an underlying intellectual structure. If the imagery happens to cohere, as Bly insisted, the poem had to be disposed of. According to the poet, the most “genuine line” in a poem is the “weirdest line . . . the one that apparently doesn’t make any sense . . . .” “To Pound an image meant ‘petals on a wet, black bough,’” said Bly. “To us an image is ‘death on the deep roads of the guitar.’”

Silence in the Snowy Fields also repudiated Eliot’s notion of the objective correlative. In Bly’s view, the emotion that the correlative objectifies is destroyed by the very process of its objectification. Bly’s “deep” poetic images, emerging from “within,” purportedly contained purer emotions whose psychic energy was still intact: “If I reached my hands down, near the earth,/I could take handfuls of darkness!” or “The sun lies happily on my knees.” Bly’s other way of challenging the objective correlative (for which he is perhaps more famous) is to make simple statements of his feelings. Two well-known examples of this in Silence in the Snowy Fields are “I have awakened at Missoula, Montana, utterly happy” (the last line of “In a Train”) and “Oh, on an early morning I think I shall live forever!” (the first line of “Poem in Three Parts”).

It is easy to understand why Bly’s aesthetic—or anti-aesthetic—became so popular in the Sixties and Seventies. It found sympathetic readers among the growing number of people who resented the complexity of modernist—and postwar—poetry. Eliot made no bones about the fact that the poet must be learned and his work difficult. It was those who felt themselves to be disenfranchised from Eliot’s exclusive club that Bly claimed as his own. Being a poet could not be simpler, he told them, because each one of us

has our own psychic rhythms. . . . Anybody at his peak moment, who wants to sit down and write a poem, can write it. . . .

All one needed was a little “inner animal imagery,” or, failing that, the ability to state that one was happy, sad, or indifferent in a given town at a given time of day. The idea spread like wildfire.

It is not surprising that many perceived Bly’s poetry to be a long-awaited resurgence of
Romanticism. But the nineteenth-century English Romantic poets’ suffusion of their being into the external world is vastly different from Bly’s solipsistic engorging of the world. As Robert Langbaum points out in *The Poetry of Experience* (1957), the Romantic poets did not so much seek to overwhelm the world with their subjective being as confirm their inner experiences in the crucible of the world. “There remains,” Langbaum tells us, “the hardheaded critical awareness [on the part of the poets] that the self is something other than the object” of the poet’s attention. The Romantics never sought, as Langbaum says, “to put the head to sleep.” Putting the head to sleep is a perfectly apt description of the poetic program of Robert Bly.

*Silence in the Snowy Fields* was not entirely devoid of poetic virtue, however. There is something to be said for the freshness of Bly’s language, and for the poet’s attempt to bring a wide-eyed wonder to the Minnesota countryside. But the solipsism of this poetry—perfectly embodied in Bly’s barren, unpopulated landscapes—all but obscures the musicality of the language.

As appealing as the solipsistic poetry of *Silence in the Snowy Fields* was, it lacked the single element crucial in the Sixties for a truly popular—and critical—success: politics. This element was firmly entrenched in Bly’s next book, *The Light Around the Body*, which was published in 1967 and received the National Book Award for poetry in 1968. The conflation of surrealism and politics—a practice Bly also borrowed from his South American models—is evident in “War and Silence” —

The bombers spread out, temperature steady.
A Negro’s ear sleeping in an automobile tire.
Pieces of timber float by, saying nothing.

Bishops rush about crying, “There is no war,”
And bombs fall,
Leaving a dust on the beech trees.

One leg walks down the road and leaves
The other behind; the eyes part
And fly off in opposite directions.

Filaments of death grow out.
The sheriff cuts off his black legs
And nails them to a tree.

—as well as in “Driving Through Minnesota During the Hanoi Bombings”:

The sergeant said,
“I felt sorry for him
And blew his head off with a shotgun.”
These instants become crystals,
Particles
The grass cannot dissolve. Our own gaiety
Will end up
In Asia, and you will look down in your cup
And see
Black Starfighters.
Our own cities were the ones we wanted to bomb!

In “The Teeth Mother Naked at Last”—first published by City Lights Books in 1970 and included three years later in *Sleepers Joining Hands*—surrealistic imagery is for the most part disposed of. Replacing it is a sustained, hate-filled invective against everything in American life that Bly loathed:

Helicopters flutter overhead. The death-bee is coming. Super Sabres
like knots of neurotic energy sweep
around and return.
This is Hamilton’s triumph.
This is the triumph of a centralized bank.

The ministers lie, the professors lie, the
television reporters lie, the priests lie.
What are these lies? It means that the country
wants to die.

This is what it’s like for a rich country to make war.
This is what it’s like to bomb huts (afterwards described as “structures”).
This is what it’s like to kill marginal farmers
(afterwards described as “Communists”).

It’s because the average hospital bed now costs
two hundred dollars a day
that we bomb the hospitals in the north . . .

Any poet not mentioning the war in 1970 ran the risk, of course, of being implicated in the “genocide.” All the same, this appeared to be an egregious about-face for Bly. Unlike the confessional poets, for whom politics was a logical next step, Bly had presented himself as the poet of interior life. He had claimed, again and again, that society and culture threatened the purity of the poet’s psychic rhythms. He had vociferously campaigned against what he called the “journalistic mind” in poetry, and had criticized poetry in which the words, as he said, had “their
energy corrupted” by evil external forces. If Silence in the Snowy Fields demanded a poetry truly free of the rhetoric of the world, then The Light Around the Body seemed to be an outright betrayal of the earlier book. It was a book swamped by the rhetoric of the world.

Bly had an explanation, of course. The political poems of The Light Around the Body, he reasoned, were attempts to show “that the political poem comes out of the deepest privacy.” “Neruda, Vallejo, Antonio Machado, Aleixandre, and Lorca,” says Bly in the preface to the section of poems from The Light Around the Body in the Selected Poems, taught him that it was “just and natural to write of important national griefs in one’s poetry as well as of private griefs.” As long as these “national griefs” emerged from one’s body, insisted Bly, they were not simply political rhetoric but the authentic subjective eruptions of a deeply grieved person. And who was to say whether these poems emerged from one’s inner soul or were the product of the fallen world? Why, the poet himself. What we were offered was, in short, the same old solipsism. And as before, anyone who dared to question whether political imagery could be of the requisite psychic depth was automatically accused of using the superannuated critical tools of a dying culture. In the Sixties and Seventies, few wanted to be guilty of this crime.

Even if we take The Light Around the Body and “Teeth Mother” in their own terms—as attempts to expiate the alleged sins (greed, commercialism, aggression) of America—they still miss their target. Bly’s high moral fervor is undone by some gross miscalculations. Most obvious of these is Bly’s repeated stereotyping of people. “No one in business can be a Christian,” says Bly in one poem. Accountants, executives, advertising men, and Indians are all similarly typecast (the last in a poem entitled “Hatred of Men with Black Hair”). This alarming attitude crops up in Bly’s other works and statements from this time as well. In an interview from 1966 Bly declared that “the typical football player. . . mistreats women, because he has always mistreated the woman that is inside him.” What this stereotyping now looks like is the inevitable point of view of someone who has dwelled too long in the unpopulated landscapes of his own subjectivity.

Bly’s political poetry corresponded to some rel-life activism during these years. In 1966 he organized the first anti-war poetry readings at Reed College and the University of Washington. The same year he co-founded American Writers Against the Vietnam War. In 1967 he took part in a Pentagon demonstration, and was arrested for blocking the entrance to an induction center. And in 1968, at the ceremony for the National Book Awards, Bly in his acceptance speech urged the young people in the audience to defy the draft. At the same ceremony he donated his award money to the “resistance.” Ten years later Bly was still castigating his fellow poets—John Berryman was his bête noire—for “refusing to get up on one of those [anti-war] stages.” Much of the other work Bly produced during the late Sixties and early Seventies—Twenty Poems of Pablo Neruda (1969), translated by Bly and Wright, The Morning Glory (1969), a chap-book of prose poems, Twenty Poems of Tomas Tranströmer (1970), and Neruda and Vallejo: Selected Poems (1971)—was obscured by the running political commentary. In 1971 Bly predicted “a very swift disintegration of all the structures of society” replaced by a world of isolated, self-sufficient
communes. Clearly, Bly’s primary interest was in taking his solipsism to the streets.

“The Teeth Mother Naked at Last” was the first poem written following Bly’s intensive reading of Jung, which had begun in 1969- Jung’s association of the unconscious with femininity and the conscious mind with masculinity struck a responsive chord in Bly, who promptly caricatured it in his writings. As Bly explains it in the essay “I Came Out of the Mother Naked” in Sleepers Joining Hands (1973), masculine awareness—which Bly identified with rules and morality—defeated the feminine consciousness—identified with nature, compassion, intuition, and poetry—in a struggle for control of the planet. Sleepers Joining Hands was an attempt, in Bly’s words, to “right [the] spiritual balance” on earth. But for Bly righting the balance naturally meant giving the mother consciousness the upper hand. Bly condemns everything associated (in his own mind, anyway) with the masculine impulse, from literary criticism to the desire to “go out and conquer Africa,” and is full of praise for everything associated with the feminine outlook. What Bly really liked about Jung’s theories, or what he saw in them, anyway, was their simplicity. The world was neatly divided into two camps: the good and the bad. One is to be disposed of and one is to be saved. All special circumstances, contingencies, and complexities are conveniently ignored.

Of course, the masculine attribute most roundly condemned by Bly during his Jungian phase was poetic form. In an interview published in Craft magazine in 1972, Bly went to considerable lengths to indicate that his poetry is written without the assistance of what he refers to as “the stiff part of the mind.” After the interviewer gets Bly to admit grudgingly that the poems of The Light Around the Body are composed in “high” or poetic language, the interviewer—clearly relishing the idea that he’ll go on record as the only person ever to have forced Robert Bly to admit that his poetry is crafted—proudly declares: “That’s a matter of craft.” But Bly retorts: “. . . what guides this craft is an instinctive sense for when a sentence is alive and when it’s not . . .” When it comes to his “technique” or to what gives birth to a poem, Bly is even more evasive. He simply does not say anything.

Not surprisingly, Bly tried to revise literary history along these same anti-formal lines. All “great poems,” he said, “like the Odyssey, take[s] [their] form . . . without mind intervention.” Bly sought to revolutionize the art of translating poetry in a similar fashion. Knowing the language well wasn’t the most important factor in translating poetry, Bly insisted, since “[w]hat you are essentially doing is slipping for a moment into the mood of the other poet. . . into an emotion which you may possibly have experienced at some time.” In truth, Bly’s ideas about translation merely allowed the translator, as James Dickey put it, to take “as many liberties as [he] wants to take with the original, it being understood that this enables [him] somehow to approach the ‘spirit’ of the poem [he] is translating.” The emergence of public readings of poetry during this time was also given encouragement in Bly’s ideas. When you read poetry, Bly explained, the mind intervenes. When you hear poetry, on the other hand, there is less chance of the mind analyzing the work and thereby suppressing a deep subjective interaction with the poem. Criticism of poetry also underwent a drastic change, thanks in part to Bly’s theories. Fewer and fewer writers on
poetry analyzed what they read. Instead poetry was admired for—to borrow a phrase of Howard Nelson’s—its “flowing, rushing, knotting, whirling” energy. An entire way of writing about poetry was quickly becoming obsolete, and it was Bly who had played a major role in drafting the blueprint of its destruction.

Bly provided the generation of poets coming of age in the Seventies with plenty of examples of anti-poetic poetry to accompany his anti-critical rhetoric. The following excerpt, for example, from Bly’s “Six Winter Privacy Poems”—which opens the book *Sleepers Joining Hands*—reminded budding poets how easy it was to stand by whatever banality they had first put down on paper:

My shack has two rooms; I use one.
The lamplight falls on my chair and table
and I fly into one of my poems—
I can’t tell you where—
as if I appeared where I am now,
in a wet field, snow falling . . .

• • •

There is solitude like black mud!
Sitting in this darkness singing,
I can’t tell if this joy
is from the body, or the soul, or a third place!

Bly wasn’t through yet. After all, he was still using the stanza and line—“antiquated” poetic units of measure. The prose poems of *The Morning Glory* (1975) and *This Body is Made of Camphor and Gopherwood* (1977) sought, in Bly’s words, to “calm the language down” even more, thereby making it a truer reflection of the timeless flow of the inner body. “[I]t was as if I had descended into my body at last,” says Bly in the *Selected Poems*, “and that immersion is the subject of the poems. The joy [of the poetry] lies in its being unfocused”:

The cucumbers are thirsty, their big leaves turn away from the wind. I water them after supper; the hose curled near the rhubarb. The wind sound blows through the head . . . What is comforted words help, the sunken islands speak to us . . .

Is this world animal or vegetable? Others love us, the cabbages love the earth, the earth is fond of the heavens—A new age comes close through the dark, threatens much, so much is passing away . . .

Even some of the critics who had previously supported Bly rebelled against *This Body is Made of Camphor and Gopherwood*. One of them, Philip Dacey, in a piece entitled “This Book is Made of Turkey Soup and Star Music,” cited by Nelson, wrote:
Although Bly, a classic literary demagogue, rails against artifice in poetry . . . many of the prose poems in this book are more artificial—pieces clearly contrived in a language one is not likely to hear outside the poem—than virtually any of, say, Frost’s poems in blank verse. Frost and countless others achieve the natural or a semblance of it through the artificial; Bly wishes to bypass the latter and ends up smack in the middle of it.

Apparently Bly was sensitive to the charges. His next book, *This Tree Will Be Here for a Thousand Tears* (1979)—a group of surrealist country poems much in the vein of those in *Silence in the Snowy Fields*—was an obvious effort to conciliate the critics and readers who had grown impatient with his work. But these poems, written at intervals during the previous sixteen years, are more literary and less spontaneous than their predecessors. The book was promptly attacked by Eliot Weinberger—never a supporter of Bly’s—who began his review, which appeared in *The Nation* on November 17, 1979, with the sentence, “Robert Bly is a windbag, a sentimentalist, a slob in the language.”

Bly attempted to start off the decade of the Eighties on a new foot. The Man in the Black Coat Turns (1981) was heralded as the poet’s long overdue reconciliation with the masculine consciousness, a “return to the father,” as Bly put it. “To be able to respect your father is such a beautiful thing!” Bly declared in an interview at the time. Although the surface details of the poems in this book seem to be vaguely “about” masculinity, little else has changed. Indeed, the same undiluted anti-rationalism and anti-formalism that governed the earlier poetry governs almost everything here. This is from “What the Fox Agreed to Do”:

> And the shells, the mollusc shells, grow large.  
> Smoke twists up through water,  
> the moon rockets up from the sea floor.  
>  
> The fox agrees to leap into the ocean.  
> The human being feels a splash around him.  
> Hebrews straddle the slippery dolphins.

And this is from the prose poem entitled “Eleven O’Clock at Night” (none of these prose poems were included in the *Selected Poems*):

> I lie alone in my bed; cooking and stories are over at last, and some peace comes. And what did I do today? I wrote down some thoughts on sacrifice that other people had, but couldn’t relate them to my own life. I brought my daughter to the bus—on the way to Minneapolis for a haircut—and I waited twenty minutes with her in the somnolent hotel lobby. I wanted the mail to bring some praise for my ego to eat, and was disappointed. I added up my bank balance, and found only $65, when I need over a thousand to pay the bills for this month alone. So this is how my life is passing before the grave?

The critics in Bly’s thrall—there were still many of them—responded to this book, as they almost
always had, by relinquishing their critical powers: “I risk, of course,” said one, “by trying to be too rational (male-conscious), damaging [Bly’s] subtle fabrics.”

Howard Nelson, in his recent book on Bly, does not view the poetry in *The Man in the Black Coat Turns* as another episode of solipsistic surrealism. He finds it not only full of meaning—an attempt, in his words, to “recover the past”—but full of allusions to the New Testament as well. But then Nelson discovers allusions, “sexual metaphors,” “symbols,” and coherent imagery everywhere in the Bly *oeuvre*. “The consciousness in the *Snowy Fields*,” Nelson avers, “is in fact quite complicated.” Nelson’s ability to misconstrue Bly’s poetry—not to mention his ignoring the poet’s numerous statements of intention—is remarkable. Bly’s defiantly illogical imagery is said by Nelson to be a “smooth arc of association”—a phrase more easily applied to the poetry of the despised Eliot than to that of Bly. Astonishingly, Nelson asserts that Bly

prizes spontaneity but also believes in revision. For him, the free flow of the mind in and of itself is neither avant-garde nor necessarily very interesting.

This is not the blatant contradiction of Bly’s aesthetic it appears to be, or so Nelson claims. For the “intelligence” Nelson finds running rampant in Bly’s poetry is not the mind’s intelligence, but the “body’s wisdom,” the consciousness of nature. “The rational intelligence,” explains Nelson, “is not the only intelligence.”

John Unterecker, who has contributed a foreword to Nelson’s book, resorts to a similar strategy in his discussion of Bly’s musical effects. Bly’s “high” poetic language, Unterecker says, is “probably largely uncalculated,” “perhaps casual in composition,” “half-conscious,” and written “without a great deal of premeditation.” Yet a few sentences later Unterecker acknowledges that Bly “trusts to an ear that he’s trained by careful listening . . . .” Now *trained* is very much the opposite of *casual, half-conscious* and *uncalculated*. But Unterecker, like Nelson, wishes to honor Bly’s free-associational method while simultaneously claiming some quality of mind for the poetry. Clearly, it is no easy task.

In truth, though, Unterecker and Nelson are only responding to a tack recently taken by Bly himself. In a 1981 essay called “Form that is Neither In nor Out”—which begins, “I have been thinking lately that we have not been very faithful servants of art”—Bly declares:

. . . I have often thought of form as a prison . . . a kind of dungeon in which heart material gets imprisoned. Suppose I were wrong on that. If so, we need to find a way to speak of form so that its wild or intense quality becomes clear. The distinction between form as prison and form as wildness may correspond to a distinction between kinds of form, in particular, the mechanical and the organic . . . . I maintain then that the more form a poem has—I mean living form—the closer it comes to the wild animal.
This view is reiterated in an essay in the Selected Poems entitled “The Prose Poem as an Evolving Form,” in which Bly speaks of how “form in art relies on form in nature for its model.” But whether it is Nelson’s “organic” form, Unterecker’s “half-conscious” form, or Bly’s “wild” and “living” form, it all bespeaks a willed effort to conflate two irreconcilable attitudes toward poetry. For Bly and his critics, it is not enough for poetry to appeal to a primitive level of consciousness. It must be “composed” by that consciousness too.

Intelligence and form have been praised by Bly in other recent essays and interviews too. “All artists love art,” he says in one, “but we miss sometimes in Whitman reminders of what a triumph the intensely worked poem can be.” “Before solitude can give any nourishment to the poet, evidently a certain level of literary culture has to be reached.” “Writing poetry means a lot of study.” “Obsession with image can become a psychic habit as much as obsession with persona.”

Robert Bly’s recent change of heart is interesting as a part of the cultural history of our time—and anyway, he has every right to change his mind. But his well-publicized shift does nothing to rescue the poems, the majority of which suffer from the two worst poetic excesses of the Sixties: politics and solipsism. This is unfortunate, because Bly has displayed from the start an enormous gift for language, and these excesses have worked against his strongest talent. To this reader, only a handful of the pastoral poems in Silence in the Snowy Fields, an equally small number of the “thought” poems from the early Eighties, and the previously suppressed formalist work of the late Forties do not betray this gift. Here is a section of another early poem—entitled “Schoolcraft’s Diary Written on The Missouri: 1830”—which we are now seeing for the first time:

Now night grows old above this riverboat.
Before I end, I shall include account
Of incident tonight that moved my wonder.
At dusk we tied the ship to trees on shore;
No mortal boat in these night shoals can live.
At first I heard a cry: then shufflings, steps.
The muffled sounds on deckoak overhead
Drew me on deck. The air was chill, and there
I sensed, because these senses here are sharp
And must be, something living and unknown.

Far from being evidence of “interior starvation,” as Bly claimed they were, these youthful lines hint at what Bly’s poetic achievement might have been had he not chosen to abandon formalism for the gratifications of a half-baked surrealism. What we have instead is poetry disfigured by politics and the supposed pleasures he derives from being “wrapped in my joyful flesh.”


3. As John Haines writes in an essay in *Of Solitude and Silence*, by the late Sixties and Seventies “a second and third hand pastoral surreality manifested itself and all kinds of people began writing poems crowded with stone and earth images and forced imagery of darkness. Small, tousled animals were creeping out of all kinds of castles in the oaks and maples, and from little houses in the grass. Moose were sighted in the suburbs of Los Angeles, as I recall, and wolves were baited on the rooftops in San Francisco.” Go back to the text.

Robert Richman’s book of poems, *Voice on the Wind*, was recently published by Copper Beech Press.

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 5 Number 4, on page 37

Copyright © 2020 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com