



Robert Bly's Concept Of Imagery In Poetry : A Study

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Abstract: *Man's inner feelings can't become clear to him until he sees them in outside objects. Invariably the outside landscape in which they become clear to him is almost always the place where man is born. Poetry is also a healing process, and that when a person tries to write poetry with depth or beauty, he will find himself guided along paths which will heal him, and this is more important, actually, than any of the poetry he writes.*

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"For according to the outward man, we are in this world, and according to the inward man, we are in the inward world..... Since then we are generated out of both worlds, we speak in two languages, and we must be understood also by two languages.¹ The dichotomy suggested in this quotation from Jacob Boehme, the 17th century German mystic, which Robert Bly uses as an epigraph to "The light Around the Body" might, as well, define Bly as a person and as a poet, since he himself is similarly bifurcated in terms of the 'inward' and 'outward' worlds of his life and the 'two languages' paralleling these 'two worlds' that are so vividly represented in his work.

Robert Bly says that man's inner feelings can't become clear to him until he sees them in outside objects. Invariably the outside landscape in which they become clear to him is almost always the place where man is born. Although 'deep imagism' is particularly associated with Robert Bly. Robert Bly has some reservations: "I don't use the term 'deep image'.....I don't like it. All images are deep. The subjective image I don't like either All images are subjective: that is to say. I make a distinction between the picture, on the one hand, in which there are simple objects from the outer world, and an image."² To illustrate the former, he cites Ezra Pound's line when he saw the people coming out of the Paris metro and compared them to 'petals on a wet black bough' – where one object is being compared to another object – whereas an example of what Bly would consider to be an image would be Bonnefoy's 'an interior sea lighted by turning eagles'. It is, therefore, clear that there is something surrealistic about his images. However, Bly is quick to make a distinction between surrealist image and negative surrealism. Bly says, "There may be

something called a false unconscious which we are not quite aware of. For example, we have young poets in the USA who turn out image after image after image, and yet the images don't refer solidly to anything in our inner psyche, so, evidently they're not coming from the unconscious. This kind of false surrealism that we all know – light verse surrealism, we can call it – is all around us. They appear to be images, they appear to be connected with the poet's unconscious, in which the rational mind of Western man is so terrified of losing control and allowing itself to sink into depth that it makes up images imitating the unconscious. It is the same process as when manufacturers make a plastic table imitating a wooden table. We know that such processes are going on all the time in the outer world, and I think they're going on in the inner world too....."³. Here lies the individual, unmistakable talent of Robert Bly which distinguishes him from the other surrealists. It is not the false unconscious he relies on as the fountain of his poetic material. As he declares, 'the true unconscious always links itself with feelings and emotions'.⁴ These emotions first start to move out into the landscape, then they turn and come back, thus forming an intricate circle. Illustrating it he says, "With William Wordsworth they move out into the hills, and with Juan Ramon Jimenez they move out into the landscape of Andalusia".⁵

Bly believes that poetry is also a healing process, and that when a person tries to write poetry with depth or beauty, he will find himself guided along paths which will heal him, and this is more important, actually, than any of the poetry he writes. Poetry, according to Bly, is 'a form of energy'. When we begin sensing energy we just feel it a little at a time. As the process of writing moves forward, the poet's energy gradually begins appearing in every line: eventually the lines don't resemble anyone else's because they're all composed of the poet's energy. As Bly explains, "If we compose a poem of seven lines, we can feel that every line has energy which belongs to ours. In fact, it isn't ours, but it has some mark of our unconscious or conscious on it. At that point we can begin to intensify if we want to, and what the Buddha is always saying is that intensification comes through a move toward ecstatic experience". Poetry, Bly believes, cannot go forward unless it goes all the way back into biological time, archaic time, so that somehow we come in contact with all these elements inside us – that's the implication of Freud and Jung.

Robert Bly has led readers first through poems directly generating deep feelings from deep images, followed by complicated efforts to synthesize myth, psychology, neuroscience, religion, art and morality, then back into straight forward examination of human relationships. Besides translating, he repeatedly has demonstrated how the forms and aesthetics of other literatures can enrich American poetry. As for the rule of self-identification, instead of proclaiming or asserting himself as spokesman. Bly addressed himself, sometimes chiding: 'Robert, you're close to joy but not quite here'. "My Sentence Was a Thousand Years of Joy" is the work of 'a farm boy/Who follows tracks that lead away from the tractor' through earthy images of animals, places and music, history and literature, to pointed aphorisms and instructions: 'Tell me why it is we don't lift our voices these days,/And cry over what is happening'. Grief, love and joy are Bly's main themes. His detractors sometimes deride his insistent attention to grief, and complain about his attacks on social cheerfulness.

Bly's concept of the use of imagery in poetry is concurrent with what Kelly says regarding it, "When the image, *prima materia*, is lacking the verbal gesture is quickly emptied: the poem elapses instead of happening. The fundamental rhythm of a poem is the rhythm of images: their textures, their contents, offer supplementary rhythms. "Technically speaking, the imagery we find in the works of Robert Bly can very well be called surrealistic, in spite of the poet's refusal to admit so. One of such typically surrealistic poems "Silence" is quoted in full to make the point.

The fall has come, clear as the eyes of chickens.
Strange muffled sounds come from the sea.
Sounds of muffled oarlocks,
And swamping in lonely bays,
Surf crashing on unchristened shores,
And the wash of tiny snail shells in the wandering gravel.

My body also wanders among these doorposts and cars
Cradling a pen, or walking down a stair.
Holding a cup in my hand.
And not breaking into the pastures that lie in the sunlight.
This is the sloth of the man inside the body,
The sloth of the body lost among the wandering stones of kindness.

Something homeless is looking on the long road –
A dog lost since midnight, a small duck
Among the odorous reeds,
Or a tiny box-elder bug searching for the window pane.
Even the young sunlight is lost on the window pane,
Moving at night like a diver among the bare branches
silently lying on the floor.

(Silence)⁶

As a matter of fact, the personalization of American poetry has evolved in various ways. In the work of Robert Bly, James Wright, and W.S. Merwin a personal poetry occurs as a result of the exploration of and response to the most inner reaches of the poet's self below the rational and conscious levels. Poems grow out of images discovered in the depths of human darkness; they are spoken by the voice of that most profound silence in a man. Both Robert Bly and Kelly would agree that emphasis should be shifted from the syllable to the image as the poem's crucial component. Bly lays special claim to the term 'image', contending that Pound and company were on false grounds. "Even the imagists were misnamed: they did not write in images from the unconscious, as Lorca or Neruda, but the simple pictures, such as 'petals on a wet black bough(The Fifties 3, 1959).

Concluding the argument it could well be said that *Silence in the Snowy Fields* signalled a new beginning in American poetry and it immediately put Bly on the literary map. It remains his signature volume. The thematic 'signature' in the forty-four lyric poems in *Silence* is Bly's blatant, insistent use of what is called 'deep images'. These 'deep images', as Bly himself says, are filled with great spiritual energy and leap from one thing to another by 'trusting the unconscious'. They are, therefore, images which may initially seem irrational, include the intellect in their attempt to be psychologically accurate. As Bly explains in his essay "Recognizing the Image as a Form of Intelligence" (1981), "such images allow a poet to bring up into consciousness.....connection[s] that [have] been largely forgotten by the conscious mind. In making use of such 'deep images', Bly argues, poets, and thereby readers, are 'gaining knowledge' they would not otherwise have access to in ordinary ways".⁸

One notes in this that Bly uses imagery not unlike that of the pre-Vietnam poems, especially in the image of the moonlit plain. In fact, that very image functions here ironically as the reader perceives that the romantic setting is occupied by the skulls. Bly's method consequently represents an important modification in the use of the Emotive Imagination. The lyricism that attends the natural world has become an ironic lyricism attending horrible reversals of the natural world. The reader, instead of drifting tranquilly inward and toward his own private world, is thrust outward upon the abuses of the public world. The poem does not end in reconciliation or a sense of moral advance; rather, it concludes upon a note of accusation and a sense of moral retrogression. One notices first of all how Bly's sense of collective consciousness allows him readily to assume the voice of a whole culture, and his secure sense of values justifies a biting criticism of that culture, not only for its actions but for the modes of consciousness that support those actions.

Conclusion: Poetry, according to Bly, is a form of energy. As the process moves forward, the poets' energy gradually begins appearing in every line. Then the process of intensification brings it to the stage of 'ecstatic experience'. Poetry, as he believes, "cannot go forward unless it goes all the way back to biological time, archaic time, so that somehow we come in contact with all these elements inside us – that's the implication of Freud and Jung".⁹ However, apart from directly generating deep feelings from deep images, in Robert Bly we also find complicated efforts to synthesize myth, psychology, neuroscience, religion, art and morality, then back into straightforward examination of human relationships. Although Bly's style varies considerably from book to book, what binds all his poetry together is his consistently predominant concern with the interior world of imagination, unconscious, spirituality and psychology. Thus even in his political poems, the focus is on the interior of a national psyche. Indeed, the fundamental world of his poetry is the inward world. What goes to his credit is that to this kind of poetry of interiority fraught with great dangers. Robert Bly has given an aesthetic dignity. Moreover, he has also given a new esthetic to the American poetry which lays the rule that the fundamental rhythm of a poem is the rhythm of images; their textures, their contents, offer only supplementary rhythms.

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