

MODERN AMERICAN POETRY

Leaping Into the Unknown: The Poetics of Robert Bly's Deep Image

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For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror.
--Rainer Maria Rilke

In an essay published in 1961, Robert Kelly coined the term "deep image" in reference to a new movement in American poetry. Ironically, the term grew in popularity despite the critical disapproval of it by the group's leading theorist and spokesperson, Robert Bly. Speaking with Ekbert Faas in 1974, Bly explains that the term deep image "suggests a geographical location in the psyche," rather than, as Bly prefers, a notion of the poetic image which involves psychic energy and movement (TM 259).¹ In a later interview, Bly states:

Let's imagine a poem as if it were an animal. When animals run, they have considerable flowing rhythms. Also they have bodies. An image is simply a body where psychic energy is free to move around. Psychic energy can't move well in a non-image statement. (180)

Such vague and metaphorical theoretical statements are characteristic of Bly, who seems reluctant to speak about technique in conventional terms. Although the group's poetry is based on the image, nowhere has Bly set down a clear definition of the image or anything resembling a manifesto of technique. And unlike other "upstart" groups writing in the shadow of Pound and Eliot, the deep image poets—including Bly, Louis Simpson, William Stafford, and James Wright—lacked the equivalent of the Black Mountain group's "Projective Verse," or even, as in the Beats' "Howl," a central important poem which critics could use as a common point of reference. This essay, then, attempts to shed some light on the mystery surrounding the deep image aesthetic. It traces the theory and practice of Robert Bly's poetic image through the greater part of his literary career thus far.

In 1958 Bly and James Wright published the first issue of *The Fifties*: a magazine of poetry and opinion (subsequently *The Sixties* and *The Seventies*). On the inside of the front cover was written: "All the poetry published in America today is too old-fashioned." Bly argues that after Pound and Eliot, American poetry slipped back into the English tradition of the iamb, a shift which Bly claims means that the conscious mind (as opposed to the unconscious) is leading, or

advancing, in the poetry. Bly suggests instead a more passionate, irrational style of writing modeled after the Spanish poets Neruda, Lorca, Vallejo and Machado; in Germany, the work of Hölderlin, Rilke, Goethe, Trakl; and in France, Rimbaud and Baudelaire primarily. This loose distinction between American and European poetry is best stated and argued in the essay "A Wrong-Turning in American Poetry." A typical passage from this essay compares the passion of Lorca with the craftsmanship of Eliot:

Lorca conveys his emotion not by any "formula" but by means which do not occur to Eliot-by passion. The phrase "objective correlative" is astoundingly passionless. For Lorca there is no time to think of a cunning set of circumstances that would carry the emotion in a dehydrated form to which the reader need only add water. (19)

The essay continues by juxtaposing passages from both camps of poetry for comparison, admittedly particularly bad examples from the English Tradition against the best of European and ancient poetry. Perhaps the distinction to be made need not be defined geographically; the examples provided by Bly in this essay show a distinction between conventional narrative verse, and a daring imagistic style. Bly would agree with Pound that poetry is not prose chopped into line lengths. Like Pound, Bly was interested in turning poetry away from a narrative style to one in which the image evokes a striking and profound effect in the reader.

The image, however, for Bly, is not the image of Imagisme, and in the same essay he openly criticizes the poetry of Pound's Imagiste movement:

The only movement in American poetry which concentrated on the image was Imagism, in 1911-13. But "Imagism" was largely "Picturism." An image and a picture differ in that the image, being the natural speech of the imagination, can not be drawn from or inserted back into the real world. It is an animal native to the imagination. Like Bonnefoy's "interior sea lighted by turning eagles," it cannot be seen in real life. A picture, on the other hand, is drawn from the objective "real" world. "Petals on a wet black bough" can actually be seen. (26)

Clearly, Bly is over-simplifying the technique of Eliot and Pound in order to be polemical, but there is nevertheless a shift in emphasis between the subjective manipulation of objective materials in the Modernism of Pound and Eliot, and, as Dennis Haskell has described the Deep Image technique, the "rational manipulation of irrational materials" (142). The irrational materials, according to Bly, are donated to the poem by the imagination, which in his aesthetic becomes synonymous with the unconscious:

The Romantic view of composition, which derives from the English and the German Romantics, means that the poet asks the unconscious, or the hidden man, or the hidden woman, or the latent intelligence, to enter the poem and contribute a few images that we may not fully understand" (TP 9).

The rational element in Bly's poetry distinguishes it from the complete irrationality and automated writing of the Surrealists. Unlike the poetry of Andre Breton and the French Surrealists, Bly's poetry is not an all-out assault on consciousness; rather, it operates through both the conscious and unconscious parts of the mind in what Bly has referred to as "psychic

leaps": "In many ancient works of art we notice a long floating leap from the conscious to the unconscious and back again, a leap from the known part of the mind to the unknown part and back to the known" (LP 1). These leaps of association, motivated by emotion and not reason, are precisely what Bly admires and emulates in Spanish poetry.

In "Driving Toward the Lac Qui Parle River," the leap occurs in the final stanza:

I

I am driving; it is dusk; Minnesota.
The stubble field catches the last growth of sun.
The soybeans are breathing on all sides.
Old men are sitting before their houses on car seats
In the small towns. I am happy,
The moon rising above the turkey sheds.

II

The small world of the car
Plunges through the deep fields of the night,
On the road from Willmar to Milan.
This solitude covered with iron
Moves through the fields of night
Penetrated by the noise of crickets.

III

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. (SP 45)[2](#)

This poem has a very private, pensive mood, expressed mainly through tone and imagery. Although description of landscape plays a key role in the poem, the images which comprise this description do not aim at accuracy to objective detail. Instead, images such as "The soybeans are breathing on all sides," and "The small world of the car / Plunges through the deep fields of the night," reveal the speaker's emotional state, that is to say, the speaker's mood permeates the description of surrounding landscape. This is essentially Pathetic Fallacy with a surrealist twist. Even those images which are comparatively traditional seem highly selective, such as the references to old men sitting on car seats, and the moon above turkey sheds. We might say that in "Driving," subjectivity is welcomed into the poem and its narrative; in one instance, the subjective element enlarges to a degree at which description lapses into declaration: "I am happy." The images become progressively laden with emotional weight through the first two stanzas, from the stark recounting of fact in the opening line, to the image presented in the final three lines of the second stanza, which Toshikazu Niikura has described as "the inner landscape of [the speaker's] mind" (126).

In the final stanza, we receive the speaker's mystical vision, signaled by the adverb "suddenly." These are the deep images which Donald Hall has cited in 1961 as exhibiting a new kind of imagination in American poetry (24). In these images, considerable effort is made to remove the divider separating objectivity and subjectivity. Ekbert Faas, tracing the roots of Bly's poetic theory through French Surrealism, Zen Buddhism, Jungian Psychology, and Olson's theory of Objectism, argues that there exists similarly in Bly's poetry an attempt to transcend consciousness:

It is only beyond this stage that all dichotomies of good and evil, past and future, inward and outward, and, above all, the duality of subject and object cease to be seen as opposites-not, however, by an extinction of the mind but by its tranquilization. (722)

For Bly as well as other Deep Image poets, solitude plays an important role in this tranquilization. In "Driving," this solitude is explicit; it enables the speaker to descend slowly into a meditative state of mind in which ordinary things suddenly become defamiliarized and perceived in a new and unusual fashion: water kneels, lamplight falls on all fours, moonlight covers, and an overheard conversation takes on peculiar significance. The speaker's mystical vision comes to be expressed as physical proximity to the earth: the images in this final stanza are all conspicuously descriptive of being low or low places. For Bly, lowness and being low are obviously expressive of union with the earth, a state in which aesthetic vision is possible. Many of the images in "Driving," therefore, intermingle elements of both speaker and world to express a union intimated beautifully in the "Lac Qui Parle" of the title. We have the sense that the deep images of the final stanza are in the voice of both speaker and nature, a voice which is foreign but comprehensible.³

In the political poetry of *The Light Around the Body* and *The Teeth Mother Naked at Last*, Bly adopts a radically different voice. Bly's poetry in these volumes is motivated by a growing awareness of the social and psychological ills of American society brought to light by the Vietnam war. In his essay "The Spiritual Problem of Modern Man," Carl Jung discusses the growing interest in psychology in the western world. Jung's hypothesis, taken from his experience with individuals and applied on a communal scale, is that an imbalance of attention directed to the objective world, found in materialism, science, and technology, creates a blockage of psychic energy that wells to dangerous proportions. In extreme cases, this imbalance eventually finds release in hostile and destructive ways, forcing one to confront the psychic problems at the root of this destruction. Applying this theory to modern man, Jung writes:

An intimation of the law that governs blind contingency, which Heraclitus called the rule of enantiodromia (conversion into the opposite), now steals upon the modern man through the by-ways of his mind, chilling him with fear and paralysing his faith in the lasting effectiveness of social and political measures in the face of these monstrous forces. If he turns away from the terrifying prospect of a blind world in which building and destroying successively tip the scale, and if he then turns his gaze inward upon the recesses of his own mind, he will discover a chaos and a darkness there which he would gladly ignore. (204-5)

Bly's political poems attempt to turn the reader's gaze inward to the dark recesses of America's "national psyche." The image is used to probe the unconscious of the reader in a confrontational

manner by exposing the dark side of American culture, both domestic and abroad. While Bly's poetry often attacks the American government and persons in positions of power, Bly at heart believes in the democratic process, and maintains that a government and its actions are representative of the collective population. We could say, in Jungian terms, that Bly writes in his political poetry of the American shadow.

In "Driving Through Minnesota During the Hanoi Bombings," Bly writes:

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! (SP 74)

The image here attempts to bring the responsibilities of the Vietnam war into the kitchens of the American people. The image of jet fighters in a coffee cup directly connects the war with the individual reader, implying a relationship, initially suggested in the title of the poem, between the gaiety of Americans and their capacity for destruction. Jungians often speak of "projection," the phenomenon of unknowingly externalizing inner psychological elements onto an outer object, and Bly with this image is trying to reveal the fear and self-hatred fueling America's aggression against North Vietnam, a dynamic in which blind American patriotism translates into unsubstantiated fear of Communists bordering on mass neurosis. In actuality, Bly believes, Americans hate and want to destroy parts of their own culture, and in this sense he writes, "Our own cities were the ones we wanted to bomb!" The image, then, is used here symbolically to depict a causal relationship between the domesticity of the reader's life and the atrocities occurring simultaneously overseas.

In another poem, Bly suggests that projection occurs in a domestic context as well as in international politics. "Hatred of Men With Black Hair" attempts to expose the psychology of American racism against Native American Indians. The final stanza of this poem contains a powerful image:

Underneath all the cement of the Pentagon
There is a drop of Indian blood preserved in snow:
Preserved from a trail of blood that once led away
From the stockade, over the snow, the trail now lost. (SP 75)

This image, perhaps influenced by Lorca's "Beneath all the statistics / there is a drop of duck's blood" ("New York"), gains its rhetorical force through the use of symbolism. The image loses much of its energy when stripped of its symbols:

Underneath all the weaponry of the Pentagon
There is a drop of fear preserved in the unconscious.

I have removed some of the symbolism from the original. A still more literal translation might be: "Beneath all the denial of the conscious mind / There is a part of ourselves we fear." The image in its original form attempts to reach beyond consciousness to a deeper area of the reader's psyche through the use of what Jungians would call archetypal symbols. Jung has argued that the symbol possesses extraordinary power:

A symbol does not define or explain; it points beyond itself to a meaning that is darkly divined yet still beyond our grasp, and cannot be adequately expressed in the familiar words of our language. (CW 336)

The deep image, in this case, does refer to a geographical location in the psyche. Here, Bly employs the vague but far-reaching meaning associated with certain symbols such as blood and snow;⁴ he exploits what he thinks are the "deeper" meanings behind symbols in much the same way that dreams and fairy tales often use symbols in a form of discourse aimed beyond consciousness.

The images in "Counting Small-Boned Bodies" also contain symbols, but the effect they produce does not rely heavily on symbolic meaning. This poem, which pertains to the daily body counts advertised in the media during the war, contains three images that show the human body progressively diminished in size:

Let's count the bodies over again.

If we could only make the bodies smaller,
the size of skulls,
we could make a whole plain white with skulls in the
moonlight.

If we could only make the bodies smaller,
maybe we could fit
a whole year's kill in front of us on a desk.

If we could only make the bodies smaller,
we could fit
a body into a finger ring, for a keepsake forever. (SP 73)

The poem makes a statement against the censored, sanitized account of war by the media, where the enemy is objectified and death becomes a statistic. Corpses are depicted increasingly as tidy manageable items as the human body is rendered smaller by some unexplained method, until the corpse becomes, at an extreme, something pleasing and aesthetic in the form of jewelry. The eerie images are designed to re-sensitize the reader to the horror of mass death through the modest proposal, posed in a satiric, sardonic tone, of participating in acts of such gross insensitivity. "Counting Small-Boned Bodies" stands out from other anti-war poetry by its depiction of violence not in vivid, grotesque imagery, but in disturbingly inhuman terms.

In passages of *The Teeth Mother Naked at Last*, Bly adopts the opposite approach, providing accurate, uncensored images of war:

Artillery shells explode. Napalm canisters roll end over end. Eight hundred steel pellets fly through the vegetable walls. The six-hour-old infant puts his fists instinctively to his eyes to keep out the light.
But the room explodes.
The children explode.
Blood leaps on the vegetable walls. (SP 77)

Here the image is used to provide graphic description in a kind of eyewitness account of war, similar to Denise Levertov's war poetry which, figuratively speaking, drags the reader through Vietnam villages and jungle. In all of Bly's political poetry, images are used chiefly to shock the reader and precipitate change. The distinctive mark of Bly's political poems is that they operate through the psychology of the reader, and not via an intellectual political argument. In keeping with the Jungian framework in which the poems are written, Bly believes that social and political change originates with personal psychological change, an approach that addresses the source of the problem and not its symptoms.

The graphic images of *The Teeth Mother* signal the beginning of a gradual movement away from the surreal, deep image of Bly's early poetry to a less surreal, descriptive image in Bly's prose poems and the later poetry of *The Man in the Black Coat Turns* and *Loving a Woman in Two Worlds*. The prose poems of *The Morning Glory* indicate a turning away from public back to the personal matters that concerned Bly in his first book. Like *Silence in the Snowy Fields*, these poems express an intimacy between speaker and nature which for Bly is nothing less than spiritual. But the outward movement from self to nature that we saw in "Driving" does not occur in these poems in a single, large leap. In developing his theory of leaping poetry, Bly writes that there may be in a poem several shorter leaps of association (LP 4). The object poems which comprise the bulk of *The Morning Glory* associate images as a way of accomplishing this leaping. In the object poem, the poet meditates upon a particular object, allowing the plenum of sensual detail to stimulate the imagination and produce a series of playful associative leaps, often leading to some sort of discovery or revelation. Many of Bly's object poems turn spiritual and surreal near their close:

The Mushroom

This white mushroom comes up through the duffy
lith on a granite cliff, in a crack that ice has widened.
The most delicate light tan, it has the texture of a rubber
ball left in the sun too long. To the fingers it feels a
little like the tough heel of a foot.

One split has gone deep into it, dividing it into two
half-spheres, and through the cut one can peek inside,
where the flesh is white and gently naive.

The mushroom has a traveller's face. We know there
are men and women in Old People's Homes whose souls
prepare now for a trip, which will also be a marriage.
There must be travellers all around us supporting us whom
we do not recognize. This granite cliff also travels. Do we
know more about our wife's journey or our dearest friends'
than the journey of this rock? Can we be sure which
traveller will arrive first, or when the wedding will be?
Everything is passing away except the day of this wedding. (TP 52)

Part of the enjoyment in reading an object poem comes from tracing the movement of the poet's mind as it associates from one image to the next. The poet's endeavor in writing in this form lies in the delicacy of the leaps, enabling the reader to follow on this journey; if there are any jarring shifts or gaps in the trail, we lose our way, the poem becomes words, and we are left unfulfilled. In "The Mushroom," we are led from the sight of a mushroom growing up from a crack in a mountain, to a highly imaginative spiritual concept at its close.⁵ The poem turns inward with the image "The mushroom has a traveller's face," which hinges between the physicality of the object and what it comes to represent for Bly. Howard Nelson has argued that "Bly wants in the image a conjunction of the physical and the unknown, the sensory impression and the inner reverberation" (81). In "The Mushroom," Bly allows the imaginative irrational associations surrounding the object to surface in the latter half of the poem. In this way the object and the image may be seen as convenient vehicles for entering the playful and poetic space of the imagination. In Freudian terms, the image here enables both poet and reader to by-pass the ego and enter a more imaginative mode of thought in which knowledge is unrestricted by reason. Such a discourse naturally turns either inward or universal, which in Bly's thinking are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

This technique of association reminds us of the Symbolist style of associating in highly imaginative ways for surreal or dream-like effect, and indeed Bly has acknowledged an indebtedness to GÈrard de Nerval, LautrÈamont, Aloysius Bertrand, Baudelaire, Mallarme and others for their work in "exploring these paths of association" (LP 15). "Thought of in terms of language," Bly concludes, "leaping is the ability to associate fast." In Bly's object poems, we find a slow, meditative quality of time in which the associations are facile and the leaps are short, but in the prose poems of *This Body is Made of Camphor and Gopherwood*, Bly's associating is wild and rapid, creating chasms in the text that demand the reader make large, imaginative leaps. Here is the first paragraph of "We Love This Body," from that collection:

My friend, this body is made of energy compacted and whirling. It is the wind that carries the henhouse down the road dancing, and an instant later lifts all four walls apart. It is the horny thumbnail of the retired railway baron, over which his children skate on Sunday; and the forehead bone that does not rot, the woman priest's hair still fresh among Shang ritual things. . . .

The influence of French Symbolism which had informed the poetry of Yeats and Eliot at the beginning of the century, extends into the work of Bly as late as the 1970's. At a time in literary history when many American poets were turning away from what Pound called the "flabby," imprecise technique of French Symbolism, Bly appreciated its high degree of imagination and

poetic energy, and used it mid-career in his prose poems as a way to get the quality of leaping that he desired into his poetry.

The prose poems of *Morning Glory* and *This Body* have been characterized by critics as incorporating a more personal voice than Bly's prior work.⁶ In "Poetry, Personality and Death," Galway Kinnell criticizes Bly's early poetry for its lack of authenticity. Kinnell argues that Bly employs throughout this poetry a persona in order to avoid revealing his true self:

In his first two books Bly avoids specific autobiographical detail almost entirely. Though he speaks in the first person about intimate feelings, the self has somehow been erased. The "I" is not any particular person, a man like the rest of us, who has sweated, cursed, loathed himself, hated, envied, been cold-hearted, mean, frightened, unforgiving, ambitious, and so on. Rather it is a person of total mental health, an ideal "I" who has more in common with ancient Chinese poets than with anyone alive in the United States today. (204)

In an article published one year later, Bly as much as admits to these charges:

Time after time in my twenties, after typing up a group of poems hopefully, I would notice an absence. The poems seemed well written, and yet a psychic weight was missing, something imponderable, that I seemed not in control of. I think this weight . . . comes from opening the body to grief, turning your face to your own life, absorbing the failures your parents and your country have suffered, handling what alchemy calls "lead." ("What the Image Can Do" 39)

Ironically, despite Bly's expressionist aesthetic, his early poetry often lacks a sense of profound expression—a sincerity and kind of reckless honesty in the writing process which Don McKay alludes to when he calls the blank page "that dreadful place . . . that pool full of wonderful risk" ("Night Field").

The movement toward a more personal and honest speaker in Bly's prose poems comes to fruition in *The Man in the Black Coat Turns*. In this collection we find a more consistent voice than previously as Bly turns his poetic expression inward to face the grief of his own life. The image and Bly's style as a whole in these poems is more conventional and less gimmicky or theory-motivated. Notice the change of voice in the following poem from this collection:

Fifty Males Sitting Together

After a long walk in the woods clear cut for lumber,
lit up by a few young pines,
I turn home,
drawn to water. A coffinlike band
softens half the lake,
draws the shadow
down from westward hills.
It is a massive
masculine shadow,
fifty males sitting together

in hall or crowded room,
lifting something indistinct up into the resonating night.

Sunlight kindles the water still free of shadow,
kindles it till it glows with the high
pink of wounds.
Reeds stand about in groups
unevenly as if they might
finally ascend
to the sky all together!
Reeds protect
the band near shore.
Each reed has its own thin
thread of darkness inside;
it is relaxed and rooted in the black
mud and snail shells under the sand.

The woman stays in the kitchen, and does not want
to waste fuel by lighting a lamp,
as she waits
for the drunk husband to come home.
Then she serves him
food in silence.
What does the son do?
He turns away,
loses courage,
goes outdoors to feed with wild
things, lives among dens
and huts, eats distance and silence;
he grows long wings, enters the spiral, ascends.

How far he is from working men when he is done!
From all men! The males singing
chant far out
on the water grounded in downward shadow.
He cannot go there because
he has not grieved
as humans grieve. If someone's
head was cut
off, whose was it?
The father's? Or the mother's? Or his?
The dark comes down slowly, the way
snow falls, or herds pass a cave mouth.
I look up at the other shore; it is night. (SP 145)

This poem accumulates much of its meaning through a consistent inter-play of light and dark images. In the opening image, for example, we are presented the clear-cut wasteland lit up by a few young pines. This image not only articulates a light/dark duality, but suggests as well young/old and innocent/mature dualities which resonate with the many allusions to personal psychology later in the poem. Another image contributing to this theme is the reference to the woman who, instead of lighting a lamp, waits in the dark for her husband to return. But the dominant images are the lake half-covered in shadow and the approach of night, from which are drawn many other images of light and dark presented throughout the poem. Clearly, of the two, darkness dominates in the poem, establishing a somber, perhaps gloomy mood. Dark images include references to both literal and archetypal shadow, a coffin, the interior "thread of darkness" of reeds, black mud, a dark kitchen and night.

As with many of Bly's poems, description of landscape occupies the opening stanzas, then the poem turns inward, marked by a change of voice. The change of voice in this poem not surprisingly is a distancing from the first person narration to third person in the third stanza and most of the fourth. Again, this is typical of Bly; there is a tendency to pull back and speak about intimate matters from the perspective of a disinterested party. The discussion in this case concerns the difficulty involved in growing up in a dysfunctional family dominated by an alcoholic father, and the effect the father's sickness has upon the son. Expressed in characteristically Jungian terminology and thought, the boy becomes a *puer aeternus*, or eternal youth.⁷ The speaker admits that he cannot join the company of other men because he has not grieved, and the rhetorical question asking whose head was cut off effectively symbolizes in its separation of body and mind the son's estrangement not only from other men but also from his own feelings and emotions. He has "ascended" up into the idealistic world of the mind: "What does the son do? / He turns away, loses courage, / . . . / grows long wings, enters the spiral, ascends." The second half of the poem, therefore, is the speaker's remembrance of childhood pain, and his musing over the psychological effects in the present day of this difficult history.

By structuring the poem in halves, Bly seems to be asking the reader to make connections between the symbolic description of landscape and the psychology of the speaker. Many of the images of the poem support this reading through their symbolic allusions to psychology, most notably the concept of shadow. In the central image of the poem, from which it takes its title, the massive shadow that darkens half the lake is described specifically as masculine. The other, light side of the lake, "glows with the high / pink of wounds," which may be interpreted literally as physical wounds, but in the context of the poem, a figurative meaning of psychological wounds is apparent. Perhaps the most noticeable connection to be made is between the image of the reeds that appear "as if they might / finally ascend / to the sky all together," and the boy in the following stanza who figuratively does ascend. The description of the reeds continues: "Each reed has its own thin / thread of darkness inside; / it is relaxed and rooted in the black / mud and snail shells under the sand." Again, a psychological reading of this image may easily be coaxed from the symbolism here: the reeds, having internalized the shadow instead of projecting it outward, are now relaxed and "grounded" in the dark earth.

What we have in "Fifty Males," then, is an excellent example of reflexive reference: images in the poem refer internally to other elements within the poem. This is not to say that they don't also refer externally to landscape. In fact, they do both. Through a skillful rendering of double

entendre, images in "Fifty Males" function both literally as description of landscape, and symbolically as depiction of the speaker's psychology and personal history. This is not Pathetic Fallacy, in which description of landscape is symbolic of the narrator's emotions, but a style in which the images possess associations with the speaker's psychology. Having become versed in the principles, methodology, and terminology of Jungian theory, it is to be expected that Bly's expression of personal psychology would take the form of symbolization of natural landscape. The images of light and dark carry for Bly associations that position the speaker within the realm of light, idealism, ascension, and innocence. The task at hand for the speaker, the poem seems to suggest, is to grieve "as humans grieve," to descend from the world of light to the world of shadow imaged in the poem by the approach of night. In the poem's closing lines, the narration slips back into the first person as night arrives: "The dark comes down slowly, the way / snow falls, or herds pass a cave mouth. / I look up at the other shore; it is night." I want to emphasize, however, that while familiarity with Jungian psychology provides for the reader access to the obvious, symbolic associations of the images, the poem is not dependent on this familiarity. Bly here is not speaking through symbols, but attempting to evoke an imaginative and emotional response from the reader through the interplay and resonance of vivid images of the natural world, as he has done throughout his literary career. While the images of this poem may carry a deeper value that points to a particular system of psychology, they remain first and foremost elements of perception and imagination.

One poem which underscores this point is the most famous from *The Man in the Black Coat Turns*, and from which the volume takes its title:

Snowbanks North of the House

Those great sweeps of snow that stop suddenly six feet from
the house . . .

Thoughts that go so far.

The boy gets out of high school and reads no more books;
the son stops calling home.

The mother puts down her rolling pin and makes no more
bread.

And the wife looks at her husband one night at a party and
loves him no more.

The energy leaves the wine, and the minister falls leaving the
church.

It will not come closer-

the one inside moves back, and the hands touch nothing,
and are safe.

And the father grieves for his son, and will not leave the
room where the coffin stands;

he turns away from his wife, and she sleeps alone.

And the sea lifts and falls all night; the moon goes on
through the unattached heavens alone.

And the toe of the shoe pivots
in the dust. . . .
The man in the black coat turns, and goes back down the hill.
No one knows why he came, or why he turned away, and
did not climb the hill. (SP 148)

This poem opens with its central image of snowbanks stopping abruptly just a few feet from the house. This is immediately followed by a statement indicating the significance of this image for Bly: "Thoughts that go so far." The poem continues by presenting a list of unexplained acts of incompleteness that echo this opening image. These statements play an important role in the poem by supplying the associations to be related to the image, rather than relying heavily upon symbolic meaning. We are given the image, the abstract statement, and the resonant particulars, all of which are summarily grouped in the generic phrase: "It will not come closer." Then in one of Bly's characteristically curious moves, we are presented with the mourning scene of the second stanza which Bly has indicated refers to Abraham Lincoln.⁸ Why the mourning Lincoln enters the poem at this point is unclear, but the small, unusual stanza, inserted between the two main passages, contributes little to the poem. The final stanza is the poem's tour de force. Bly first turns our attention outward to the sea and the cosmos, then focuses it intensely on "the toe of the shoe pivot[ing] / in the dust," the instant in which "the man in the black coat turns" and the act of climbing the hill is left incomplete.

Who is this mysterious dark figure on whom the poem comes to focus at its close? Bly is too complex a poet for it to be, as William Davis has claimed, merely a father figure.⁹ Davis reads this poem as introducing the theme of father-son relationship dealt with at length in the volume, and as representing one stage of the recovery of the shadow which Bly discusses in *A Little Book on the Human Shadow* (Understanding RB 135). I find both these interpretations inaccurate. For one, aside from the dubious reference to Bly's father suggested by Davis, and the curious middle stanza of the poem, father-son relationship does not enter the poem. But Davis' second point is more interesting, that the poem expresses an initial stage of shadow recognition and recovery in Jungian psychological works. This reading would entail that the speaker recognizes during the course of the poem some rejected, suppressed element of himself, and that there would be a positive sense of discovery or accomplishment at the poem's close. This does not turn out to be the case; in actuality, the poem leaves the reader with a profound sense of disappointment and mystery. Davis is correct, however, to identify the mysterious dark man as a shadow figure. What needs to be reinforced is that this shadow figure is grouped with the other characters peopling the poem whose acts are abruptly discontinued for reasons not provided by the speaker. The poem is especially haunting because the questions introduced concerning motive beg to be answered, which is precisely the effect desired by the poet. The reader is left grasping for answers which "will not come closer." Like the snowbanks which do not reach the house, there are "thoughts that go so far" but will not surface. Bly seems to be suggesting in "Snowbanks" that despite our desires, there are thoughts that continually remain just out of reach, and he associates this phenomenon with the concept of the Jungian shadow. "Snowbanks," therefore, is not about shadow recognition and retrieval, as Davis has claimed, but our inability to discern the deeper, hidden motives of many of our acts and "decisions."

Again, in this poem, Bly's image corresponds with an interior, subjective element or elements. Although Bly's style varies considerably from book to book, one consistency is his predominant concern with the interior world of imagination, unconscious, spirituality and psychology. Even in Bly's political poems, in which he turns his attention outward to the public, the focus is on the interior of a national psyche. Bly attacked Pound, Eliot and Williams for remaining outward and objective in their poetry, but certainly Bly's distrust and almost complete rejection of the objective world is a similar failing. The difficulty with a poetry that remains inward-seeking is that it demands a universality of subjectivity. Many of Bly's images never leave the interior atmosphere of the poet's imagination; ironically, although Bly's poetry is rhetorical and audience-oriented, it is the audience which is forced to approach the poet, and not the poet reaching out to a common ground. This style is particularly problematical in Bly's case because the poet's interior world is inconsistent and fraught with bizarre spiritual notions. In a scathing review of Bly's technique, Robert Rehder touches upon this point:

Going back to Boehme or to the later work of Jung, as Bly does, is a refusal to confront the notion of the unconscious, a denial of reality, like his references to indeterminate forces and spirit horses. Poetically, this homemade religion is Confederate money, so much snake oil, impossible to believe in because we know too much about ourselves-and the earth-and because we are never completely convinced that Bly believes in it. The rhetoric is too apparent. (281)

The approach translates into a fundamental flaw in the logistics of Bly's theory: the reliance on the deep image as a device designed to affect the reader's unconscious within a medium which necessarily operates on the level of consciousness. There is no way around the gap separating the intelligibility of language and Bly's desire for a poetry of the unconscious. The deep image attempts to vault this gap, although one has the impression that the attempt often falls short.

Deep image poetry, however, is not without merit, and has contributed to the advancement of American poetry in several key ways. It is the first attempt in American poetry to incorporate fully the theories of Freud, Jung and other depth psychologists into the poet's expression, although as I have argued, its over-reliance on these theories is its failing. In addition, Bly's unwavering dedication to breaking down old systems of thought and poetic technique has resulted in greater freedom than in the Modernism of Pound and Eliot for intimate and confessional expression in poetry, a style which Pound had dismissed as "the mere registering of a bellyache and the mere dumping of the ashcan" (PW 42). In posterity, deep image poetry may be regarded as a counterbalancing force to the technique-oriented craftsmanship of the great modern writers, and later the Black Mountain Group. In this regard, Bly helped open the door to an era in which the imagination is more readily accepted as one of many forces shaping and contributing to the poem.

NOTES

2 Since Bly is continually revising his poems, whenever possible poems cited will be from his most recent Selected Poems.

3 Rehder interprets the title similarly (271).

4 See Gitzen, in which he traces the associations surrounding some of Bly's commonly-used symbols, such as darkness, water, snow, moonlight, fire and light.

5 Other critics who have noticed the journey motif in Bly's poetry include Stitt and Nelson 82.

6 In addition to Kinnell, whom I quote, see the anonymous review of *This Tree Will Be Here*, reprinted in *Critical Essays* 65; also Sugg in the same collection in which he writes: "An interesting feature of "The Point Reyes Poems" [middle section of MG] is Bly's increasing ease with his speaking 'I.' Several of the poems have a flavor of the diary, with a personal narrator telling anecdotes about, or just making reference to, his intimate life" (227).

7 Jung's theory of puer aeternus maintains that an imbalance in identification with the mother results for most men in a certain "ascension" into idealism, narcissism, passive-aggressive behaviour, and generally a sense of estrangement from other men.

<="" a="">8 Mentioned in *A Gathering of Men*.

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<="" a="">9 Davis writes: "References to "the man in the black coat," the father, and the snow parallel Bly's memory of "My father wearing a large black coat . . . holding a baby up over the snow . . . my brother or myself" (135; Bly's quotation from "Being a Lutheran Boy-God in Minnesota").

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deeper into the molecular and cellular mechanisms of behavior. The.Â Illustration: robert neubecker. "Being a researcher, no matter the field, is about adaptation." Leaping into the unknown. Passion is not something you can plan for. When I was in elementary school and someone would ask, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" I would shout something along the lines of "a pirate, astronaut" or "a Tyrannosaurus rex" because those were the things that piqued my interest at the time. ^ Leaping Into the Unknown: The Poetics of Robert Bly's Deep Image. ^ The term was first used by Robert Kelly in his essay "Notes on the Poetry of Deep Image" which appeared in Trobar 2, see Ullman, Leslie, "Deep Imagists: The Subconscious as Medium" (Word doc). ^ For more on Bly's take on the Deep Image see Bushell, Kevin, "Leaping Into the Unknown: The Poetics of Robert Bly's Deep Image". v. t.