

Robert Bly's *Iron John* and the New "Lawrentian" Man

The public acceptance of *Iron John: A Book About Men* warrants an appraisal of Robert Bly's uncommon work as a "lay analyst." No poet in the United States in recent years has commanded so much attention. As a popularizer of archetypal psychology Bly has found a growing audience through public readings and lectures and more recently through a Bill Moyers television program which highlighted the wilderness "gatherings" of men who have engaged with Bly on a ritualized variant of the *talking cure*. Their stories often involve the elaboration of a highly charged "polytheistic" fairy tale in which "archetypes" or ancient symbols stand for a host of anxieties, instincts, and buried feelings. Gods and Goddesses, old "wise men," crones, lost children, and unlikely humans and animals are frequently described in overtones that are both romantic and metaphysical. The more intangible the archetype, the more important it may be, since Jungian psychology, like medieval alchemy, claims these are the materials which configure the "soul." A fully "individuated" man is a healthy reader of the unconscious.

As a "figure" the archetype may be likened to Dante's Virgil. As a building block in the story shared by the analyst and patient it may be analogous to the Rosetta stone. Once decoded it reveals the architecture of the psyche. In his early retreats, Robert Bly concentrated on the archetype of the "Great Mother" as a representation of the connection between the human mind and the seasonal cycles of the planet. Participants emphasized the "mystique" of story telling and singing in which intuition, reception, and empathy were understood as "Great Mother" characteristics. The "Great Mother" retreats fashioned the idea of a healing synthesis for men in which their buried "feminine" traits would be encouraged. Several poems in Bly's *Selected Poems* describe the masculine search for the feminine principle as a struggle necessitated by the "poverty" of a masculine sensibility. In "A Dream of Retarded Children," Bly recounts a dream which is entirely feminine in its empathy and reception:

That afternoon I had been fishing alone,
Strong wind, some water slipping in the back of the boat.
I was far from home.
Later I woke several times hearing geese.
I dreamt I saw retarded children playing, and one came near,
And her teacher, face open, hair light.
For the first time I forgot my distance;
I took her in my arms and held her.

Waking up, I felt how alone I was.
I walked on the dock,
fishing alone in the far north.

The poem reminds me of Blake's "Enitharmon" with its oneiric division of masculine and feminine experience. What's important is that the feminine unconscious has revealed its underworld of feeling. The poet must admit this messenger. In "Song of a Man Who Has Come Through," D.H. Lawrence wrote:

Oh, for the wonder that bubbles into my soul,
I would be a good fountain, a good well-head,
Would blur no whisper, spoil no expression.

What is the knocking?
What is the knocking at the door in the night?
It is somebody wants to do us harm.

No, no, it is the three strange angels.
Admit them, admit them.

In all of Bly's work, and in the writing of James Hillman and Marie-Louise Von Franz, two well known Jungians, fairy stories and dreams with their "strange angels" are "admitted" because their archetypes speak for and from the world beyond appearance, whether we choose to call this the unconscious or to give it a gnostic name. The figures in our dreams are celebrated as icons: they are presented as figurative proof that everything in nature is alive and connected. In *Anima Mundi* a collection of essays on archetypal psychology, Hillman notes that when the archetype of

Pan is alive "then nature is too, and it is filled with gods, so that the owl's hoot is Athena and the mollusk on the shore is Aphrodite. These bits of nature are not merely attributes or belongings. They are the gods in their biological forms."

Bly's incorporation of gods and goddesses underscores his insistence that nature is alive and that the planet is a living force. In "An Evening When the Full Moon Rose as the Sun Set," the poet "sees" these figures that remind us of the living universe:

The sun goes down in the dusty April night.

"You know it could be alive!"

The sun is round, massive, compelling, sober, on fire.
It moves swiftly through the tree stalks of the Lundin
grove as we drive past....

The legs of a bronze god walking at the edge of the world,
unseen by many,

On his archaic errands, doubled up on his own energy.

He guides his life by his dreams;

When we look again he is gone.

The figure of the striding god lends to a natural event an anthropomorphic association which restores men to the center of the cosmological drama. The aim of *Iron John* is to discover charged, heroic archetypes which will enable men to personify their masculine instincts and thereby affirm their place in nature in a mythology that stands alongside that of the "Great Mother." "What gender might the water be?" asks Bly, "Is it masculine or feminine?"

In our society, the earth and all the water in it is considered to be feminine, and by extension, it belongs to women. In the West, the sky belongs to men, and the earth to women; there is a "sky-father" and an "earth-mother." There's nothing wrong with those phrases, but two other phrases have fallen into oblivion: sky-mother and the earth-father.

Bly argues that when women say the earth is female, "a man feels he has lost the right to breathe." Accordingly, "the Iron John story, which is pre-Greek, does not polarize earth and sky. Iron John lives

in the water, under the water. He also lives wholeheartedly on earth; his wildness and hairiness in fact belong to earth and its animals. Neither earth nor water seems exclusively feminine or masculine.”

This is “ur” masculinity. Iron John’s hair is his emblem of wildness: he is like Enkidu in the Gilgamesh epic, only he’s a more expressive form, an archetypal medium who possesses an organic knowledgeability. In the sequencing of Bly’s ideas about masculinity, Iron John appears as an episodic reminder of the power of heroic and life-affirming instincts. Men need Iron John because “fierceness” has gone out of them. Bly asserts that the men he’s been seeing in his travels (apparently the same ones who followed the psychological cartography of Jung by exploring their “feminine” interiors) have become “soft.” Bly says that “the male in the past twenty years has become more thoughtful, more gentle. But by this process he has not become more free. He’s a nice boy who pleases not only his mother but also the young woman he is living with.”

The problem as Bly sees it is that men have been learning from a matriarchal mythology at the expense of their masculine gods. Sampson has lost his hair to Delilah. In a poem called “Crazy Carlson’s Meadow,” Bly describes an overgrown field and equates its decline with the collapse of the “fierce” world of the grandfathers:

Crazy Carlson cleared this meadow alone.
Now three blue
jays live in it.
Crazy Carlson cleared it back to the dark firs.
Feminine poplars have stepped out
in front, now
he is dead,
winding their leaves slowly in the motionless October air,

leaves midway between pale green and yellow,
as if a yellow
scarf were floating
six inches down in the Pacific. Old fir branches

above and below make sober
octopus caves,
inviting as the dark-
lidded eyes of those women on islands who live in bark huts.

A clear sky floats over the firs, pure blue,
too pure and deep.
There is no room
for the dark-lidded boys who longed to be Hercules.

There is no room even for Christ.
He broke off
his journey toward the Father,
and leaned back into the Mother's fearful tree.

He sank through the bark. The energies the Sadducees
refused him
turned into nails,
and the wind of Cana turned back to Vinegar.
Blessings on you, my king, broken
on the poplar tree.
Your shoulders quivered
like an aspen leaf before the storm of Empire.

When you died, your inner horse galloped away
into the wind without
you, and disappeared
into the blue sky. Did you both reach the Father's house?
But the suffering is over now, all consequences finished,
the lake closed
again, as before the leaf fell, all forgiven, the path ended.

Now each young man wanders in the sky alone,
ignoring the absent
moon, not knowing
where ground is, longing once more for the learning
of the fierce male who hung for nine days only
on the windy tree.
When he got down,
darkness was there, inside the folds of darkness words hidden.

There is an explicitly "Lawrentian" architecture in this poem as well as in many passages in *Iron John*. Men have lost their vitality to women because they have forgotten the stories of the patriarchs. Like Lawrence, Bly wishes to restore the masculine principle in the mental absolute of archetypal psychology. Both Bly and Lawrence conceive of the feminine as an opposing principle, an "agon" which must be fought. Consequently, this is a book about archetypal initiation which derives its ideas from a corrective impulse. Only men can initiate men. Bly says, "women can change the embryo to a boy, but only men can change the boy to a man. Initiators say that boys need a second birth, this time a birth from men."

In the absence of this initiation men are without affect. Bly describes "a finely tuned young man, ecologically superior to his father, sympathetic to the whole harmony of the universe, [who] himself has little vitality to offer." In contradistinction Bly says: "The strong or life-giving women who graduated from the sixties, so to speak, or who have inherited an older spirit, played an important part in producing this life-preserving, but not life-giving man." Taken a step further, this enervated man lacks the fervent, compensatory, atavistic mythology that will allow him to defend himself against women while at the same time living out his affirmation of the male principle as a cosmological value. Describing the men he encountered at a retreat in 1980 Bly says:

The "soft" male was able to say, "I can feel your pain, and I consider your life as important as mine, and I will take care of you and comfort you." But he could not say what he wanted, and stick by it. *Resolve* of that kind was a different matter.

In *The Odyssey*, Hermes instructs Odysseus that when he approaches Circe, who stands for a certain kind of matriarchal energy, he is to lift his sword. In these early sessions it was difficult for many of the younger men to distinguish between showing the sword and hurting someone. One man, a kind of incarnation of certain spiritual attitudes of the sixties, a man

who had actually lived in a tree for a year outside Santa Cruz, found himself unable to extend his arm when it held a sword. He had learned so well not to hurt anyone that he couldn't lift the steel, even to catch the light of the sun on it. But showing a sword doesn't necessarily mean fighting. It can also suggest a joyful decisiveness.

“Resolve” and “decisiveness” are presented here as masculine virtues. This is the language of combat, a Lawrentian vehicle. In this passage “decisiveness” depends upon the exclusion of any admission that Circe is a “patriarchal” image: she merely stands for “a certain kind of matriarchal energy.” In the emergent Yin and Yang of the male/female battle, Odysseus must raise his sword or risk becoming Oedipus or the Christ figure in Bly's “Crazy Carlson” who fails to find the father and falls back “into the mother's fearful tree.” In *Fantasia of the Unconscious* Lawrence concludes that domesticity with women represents a sentimental and destructive self-consciousness. When they lost their primal fierceness men also lost their “masculine” connection to the planet.

The “soft” male, living his life in the sphere of the woman, is deprived of his unbridled gods: he is without volition or purpose. In his intimate relationships he practices a “leprous forbearance,” a polite but rueful form of parlor chatter in which he never says what he means. The solution is a return to the wild:

You've got to know that you're a man, and being a man means you must go on alone, ahead of the woman, to break a way through the old world into the new. And you've got to be alone. And you've got to start off ahead. And if you don't know which direction to take, look round for the man your heart will point out to you. And follow – and never look back. Because if Lot's wife, looking back, was turned to a pillar of salt, these miserable men, forever looking back to their women for guidance, they are miserable pillars of half-rotten tears.

This is the Lawrence who once announced that the introduction of women as school teachers would have disastrous conse-

quences for America. It's the Lawrence who believed that it's better for a man to be a passionate Vronsky than a milksoppish Tolstoi – who, after all, invented “Tolstoi-ism” and wore “that beastly peasant blouse.” It's the Lawrence who lost his father twice a day: once to the mines and then to domestic life.

Looking to women for guidance is for Lawrence the greatest of modern illnesses. Masculinity, once a sacrament between the men and boys, has had its spiritual life broken by the intrusive mother-child relationship. Describing the boy who grows up entirely in the mother's domain Lawrence says, “the poor little devil never knows one moment when he is not encompassed by the beautiful, benevolent, idealistic, Botticelli-pure, and finally obscene love-will of the mother.”

Iron John fashions its therapeutic plot in the service of this idea. It's a devotional book which argues that men cannot experience spiritual growth in a consequential way while living in the feminine domestic circle. In metaphorical terms, men must cross from the mother's house to that of the father. Bly cites examples from ritual cultures which sought to ensure the transformation of boys into men through ceremonies. Out in the wild the boys learn that growing up involves a series of wounds and in many instances they receive a ceremonial wound as a sign that they have crossed over into manhood. Bly asserts that once they've been initiated, young men have been “welcomed” into masculinity in a consequential way. They've learned “moistening” myths which “lead the young male far beyond his personal father and into the moistness of the swampy fathers who stretch back century after century.”

In *Healing Fiction* James Hillman argues, as all archetypal psychoanalysts argue, that the best denouement in the battle of stories which constitutes therapy is finding a plot that's good for you. In Hillman's example, Freud gives Dora's story a new ending and thereby cures her. Until this moment the patient is a passive character, then the “revisioning of the story into a more intelligent,

more imaginative plot" allows for the heroic comedy of self-development to begin. In *Iron John* an imaginative story for men is substituted for the one that's been generated both by television and the domestic world of women. Each has, according to Bly, devalued the role of the father. The fairy tale of Iron John and its refined interpretation combine to form a reverie in which medieval and Romantic images reverberate. As Bachelard has pointed out, in reverie the reader experiences recurring images, an inversion of logical categories, and proliferating ambivalence, all of which allow for multiple readings of symbolic language. The animated phenomenology of the Jungian imagery in Bly's *Iron John* is built on the resurrection of archetypal kings, swords, wild men, lost boys, as well as queens and fair maidens. A lost boy encounters the "genius" of the woods and learns that he must steal the golden key from under the queen's pillow if he's to escape her rule over his temperament. The key frees Iron John from the cage in which civilization has endeavored to secure him. In turn he becomes the "spirit guide" for the boy who would become a man.

The work of Joseph Campbell comes to mind, as well as the very popular books of Robert Johnson, a Jungian analyst who examines the grail legends to illustrate his ideas about becoming a man. The nostalgia for heroic icons suggests that masculinity is a "tabula rasa" or "vessel" onto which traditional constellations must be painted. Bly's archetypes are drawn from medieval romance and he presents them as autonomous metaphysical entities which inhabit the invisible sphere of each man's psychological life. These figures appear too in many of Bly's recent poems: the man in the black coat, the "invisible" bride who stands behind the physical bride, the "prodigal" son, etc. In *Iron John* the folk image which is utterly traditional and which depends upon popular occultist beliefs is presented as a psychological reality for men:

There is a king in the imaginative or invisible world. We don't know how he got there. Perhaps human beings, after

having loved the political king for centuries, lifted him up into the invisible world, or perhaps it went the other way round. At any rate, there is a King in sacred space. From his mythological world he acts as a magnet and rearranges human molecules. He enters the human psyche like a whirlwind, or a tornado, and houses fly up in the air. Whenever the word *king* or *queen* is spoken, something in the body trembles a little.

This interior king enacts an agreement with men: he will serve as an inner warrior, a guarantor of a strong and decisive emotional life if, in turn, the man learns how to protect his King. Bly notes that "a man whose King is gone doesn't know if he has the right to decide even how to spend the day. When my King is weak, I ask my wife or children what is the right thing to do."

In Bly's analysis, the man who temporizes is likely to fall prey to a woman's pertinacity, he becomes a "conductor" of feminine anger, and his warrior gives way. In a Jungian metallurgical metaphor, the man becomes mere copper:

The more the man agrees to be copper, the more he becomes neither alive nor dead, but a third thing, an amorphous, demasculinized, half-alive psychic conductor. I believe that a woman sometimes finds herself channeling the rage of dozens of dead women who could not speak their rage while alive. Conducting that rage is dangerous.

Bly's failure to probe the etiology of Jungian imagery leads to page after page of Masonic prose. The aim of this work is to create for men a revolutionary sense of selfhood, but reading through the book's geometrical arrangements of archetypes I'm reminded of Lawrence's assertion that "the *apparent* mutual understanding, in companionship between a man and a woman, is always an illusion, and always breaks down in the end." The elaboration of a heroic, figurative spirit-journey for men is consequent to such a view. The assumption that "fierceness" is a crucial attribute of the fully developed male is one that Lawrence would have celebrated, but that I cannot.