

An Archetypal Reading of Robert Bly's Selected Poems

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Abstract

Bly's concern with the use of the archetype in his poetry received an avalanche of criticism as it is employed to convey his vision and themes from a psychic perspective. As a facet of the deep image, Bly's archetype is essentially used to reveal man's relation with the inner and the outer world and his endeavor to coincide between them. Also, through the use of the archetype, he images the contemporary man, focusing on his inward emotion. This research aims at examining selected notable poems implying the Jungian archetype, identifying its role and function in these poems with reference to Jung's theory of the archetype as belonging to the collective unconscious and the deep image.

1. A Review of the Jungian Archetype with reference to Contemporary Literature

By the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century, American society witnessed many drastic changes and watersheds represented by the aftermath of World War II. It has had its impact on the individual and the society as well. Some of them are the increase of unemployment, the increase of the crime, and the decline of the moral and the spiritual values which had influenced him psychologically. The contemporary American poetry, then, emerged to reflect the naked reality of that crucial period. It differs widely from the early twentieth-century American poetry (1910-1945). In this period, and up to nowadays, the poetry cannot be traced to specific literary canon or school; it is a poetry of a group of poets whose thoughts and visions vary due to the complexity and chaos characterizing the zeitgeist and reflected on the psychic aspect of their life. Some of their poems have been written many crises of the contemporary man, other poems were written to attack wars, and so many poems address a variety of themes according to the poet's personal experiences. All in all, this poetry is characterized by the decline of the poetic traditions common in the previous era. It has resulted from the changes that have been stated early in this paper. Moreover, on the new distinctions of contemporary American poetry is its

preference for isolated, dreamlike images that resisted narrative or thematic articulations. Robert Bly was the most influential spokesman for this new style; his 1963 essay "A Wrong Turning in American poetry" attacked the empirical cast of fifties poems and called for a freer, less rational kind of imagery. The works of Bly, James Wright, Galway Kinnell and

Louis Simpson exemplified what came to be called Deep Image style, loosely grounded in Jungian psychology (Gilbert, 81).

As Gilbert has indicated, Bly occupies a noteworthy status in coining the deep image style as a kind of reaction against the empirical style common in the poems of the fifties. Also, he adopts the use of the archetypes as themes and symbols to enhance his poems thematically and drag the reader's attention about implications not fully understood to reveal their internal thoughts and create the most congruent atmosphere with these thoughts.

It is asserted that archetypes exist in almost all works of art and literature, therefore, comprehending their influence on contemporary poetry is of particular significance critically. In this respect, (Quetchenbach) concentrated on the essence of the Jungian model in the function of Bly's poetry:

The moral and ethical effectiveness of Bly's poetry depends, in particular, on the validity of his application of a Jungian model of consciousness and on the ability of readers to experience and, albeit unconsciously, understand the connections that the deep image reveals (75).

Defining archetypes, or to be specific the Jungian archetypes, is not an easy task for researchers at all. However, one has to look for the simplest and easiest definitions and apply them in a crystal-clear way to the selected poems. Bly has found in Jung's archetypes the psychological base through which he communicates his psychological themes. Hence, William Davis remarks that "his obsession with "inwardness" led him toward the archetypal base upon which Jung built, and he found in Jung's disciples, Erich Neumann, the very source of what he had been seeking all along" (as cited in Dwivedi, 71). Generally speaking, archetypes are demarcated as universal symbols and images that are essential parts of the "collective unconscious" which is defined as

a deeper layer, which does not derive from personal experience and is not a personal acquisition but is inborn.... It is, in other words, identical in all men and thus constitutes a common psychic substrate of a suprapersonal nature which is present in every one of us (Jung, 22).

As shown by Jung (1875–1961), a Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who founded analytical psychology, archetypes are part of the "collective unconscious" and they represent psychic counterparts of instinct or innate knowledge that lead to conscious conduct.

To Jung, the concept of archetypes "is an indispensable correlate of the idea of the collective unconscious." It also "indicates the existence of definite forms in the psyche which seem to be present always and everywhere." (Jung, 64). Although this very concept is changed apparently since then, it is still the same in its core. Moreover, some contemporary scholars have added some different and simple definitions to archetypes. For instance, Pearson (1998) agrees with Carl Jung's claim that archetypes are "deep and abiding patterns in the human psyche that remain

powerful and present over time.” (XXvi) Although Pearson goes with Jung’s opinion that “archetypes may exist in the “collective unconscious,” the “objective psyche,” or may even be coded into the make-up of the human brain,” he believes that these archetypes can be found clearly in

dreams, art, literature, and myth that seem to us profound, moving, universal, and sometimes even terrifying. We also can recognize them when we look at our own lives and those of our friends. By observing what we do and how we interpret what we do, we can identify the archetypes that inform our lives. Sometimes we even can recognize the archetypes dominant in someone’s life by their body language. (Pearson, XXvi)

In other words, archetypes are symbols, characters, and attitudes that have a strong effect on people around and they can be easily recognized and identified through familiarity. In this respect, John W. Tigue argues that “Archetypes may be represented by mythic images, but are themselves formless. Archetypes store the memories of human ancestry, not of individual persons, but of the experiences of the species” (23).

Additionally, motifs or themes found in different mythologies, and images found in peoples’ myths, separated in time and place, have a common meaning that provokes comparable psychological responses and serves similar cultural functions (Guerin, 184). Such universal symbols, motifs, and images are also called archetypes. Philip Wheelwright elucidates in *Metaphor and Reality*, that such symbols are

those which carry the same or very similar meanings for a large portion, if not all, of mankind. It is a discoverable fact that certain symbols, such as the sky father and earth mother, light, blood, up-dowry the axis of a wheel, and others, recur again and again in cultures so remote from one another in space and time that there is no likelihood of any historical influence and causal connection among them (111).

Otherwise speaking, archetypes, as symbols, convey the equivalent part of humankind. For example, the sky father and earth mother, light, blood, are repeated over and over in societies so remote from each other.

2. Robert Bly and the Deep Psychic Image

Bly is one of the major precursors of what is called the Deep Image movement. It is intrinsically concerned with the poet’s unconscious level of feeling. In this respect, being based on Bly’s own words, Beach furthers:

The poetry of Deep Image sought to use the visual image as a means of accessing deeper levels of feeling or consciousness, often in the form of sudden epiphanies or revelations of insight. In the words of Robert Bly, the Deep Image poem could be distinguished from the imagism of the 1910s and 1920s by its use of the image to enact “psychic leaps” between the conscious and the unconscious. According to Bly’s theory, the poet should not only attempt to capture images apprehended by the conscious mind, but should “ask the

unconscious . . . to enter the poem and contribute a few images that we may not fully understand” (179).

Accordingly, the deep image is pertinently correlated with the poet’s unconscious level of feeling which is, according to Bly, the core of the poetic creative process represented by rendering a certain poetic image that is not fully realized by the reader. It appears as a postmodern technique to fulfill the needs of the reader concerning his internal psychic thought as he suffers from the drastic changes the American society witnessed. Hence, Robert Bly’s works have influenced contemporary American poetry, for they reflect a kind of “psychic wrangling with poetic predecessors” (Harris, 3). Bly’s unique nature of images has been described as “deep” or “leaping.” They are “developed to establish his characteristic symbology that moves through the natural to the visionary” Bly is a “metaphysician,” and “mystic” poet, who says in “Eleven O’Clock at Night,” “I am aware of the consciousness I have, and I mourn the consciousness I do not have” (17) (Harris, 3, 104).

Bly’s symbols, on the other hand, are somehow fixed. For instance, darkness, solitude, water, and privacy, as Harris put it, “continue to possess intrinsic interest and existential significance, continue to serve as catalysts for vision” (104). Furthermore, Bly sees man symbolically faces the above symbols as forces. He also thinks that the public man is sometimes a victim rather than a villain, “as one whose externality has developed in response to cultural, familial, and historical demands” (Harris, 104).

In his essay, “Notes on the Poetry of Deep Image” (1961), Robert Kelly (1935-), an American poet, first coined the term “deep image” to refer to a new movement in American poetry. The term is associated with the poetry of Robert Bly (1926-), James Wright (1927-1980), Louise Simpson (1923-2012), William Stafford (1914-1993), and other poets of “the emotive imagination” in the 60s and 70s of the 20th century. “These poets,” as Edward Hirsch, “deployed the image to concentrate the inner and outer energies, to unite the psycho and cosmos” (158).

The poetry of this movement is characterized by having longer poems included profound and free-standing images and heroic tones. Although the term, “deep image,” was critically disapproved, it became popular later due to redevelopment by the movement’s leading theorist and spokesperson, Robert Bly. In an interview, Bly states his concept of deep image, saying:

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. (Bly, *Talking all Morning*, 180)

Metaphorically speaking, Bly’s words refer to the similarities between animal and poem and body and image. So, the poem as a whole is likened to an animal whose body, like image, cannot move without energy. Likewise, Bushell in his article, “Leaping Into the Unknown: The Poetics of Robert Bly’s Deep Image,” comments on the Bly’s words, stating: “Such vague and metaphorical

theoretical statements are characteristic of Bly, who seems reluctant to speak about technique in conventional terms (2).

Nonetheless, the image, for Bly, is not that for Imagist poets. Bly believes that an image, unlike what Imagists believe, is similar to a picture, “drawn from the objective “real” world.” He even criticizes the poetry of Ezra Pound’s Imagist movement in the first issue of *The Fifties*, stating that

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 (Bly, *The Fifties*, 26).

Similarly, Edward Hirsch, in his *A Poet’s Glossary*, comments that the deep Imagist poets “used rational means to summon the irrational and retrieve forgotten relationships . . . [and] sought to unite both the conscious and the unconscious mind through “psychic leaps,” thus filling their poems with spiritual energy” (158).

Bly’s collection of poems entitled *Silence in the Snowy Fields*, first published in 1962, marks a watershed in his poetic journey. It includes his major oeuvre boldly poetized with a deep image style. “Driving Toward the Lac Qui Parle River” is one of the brilliant poems in which both the landscape surrounding the poet/ narrator and his inward emotion are interpenetrated to create a deeply contemplative atmosphere. Although (Beach, 180) remarks that the poem lacks the narrative or psychic drama and written in an understated style, (Dwevedi, 41) asserts that the poem implies magical and intuitive elements. Despite the familiar images in the first and second stanzas, it is used to initiate the poem’s atmosphere of solitude and prepare the reader’s mind to a deeper image. The poem opens with a depiction of a landscape while the poet/ narrator is driving toward Minnesota:

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 carseats
In the small towns. I am happy,
The moon rising above the turkey sheds.

.....
This solitude covered with iron
Moves through the fields of night
Penetrated by the noise of crickets.

(SSF, 20)

The quoted lines do not have a deep image but reveal the poet's state of solitude which "allows him to descend into a state of mind in which ordinary things suddenly became defamiliarized and are perceived in a new and unusual fashion" (Beach, 181). The last stanza evolves a pivotal point of change from a familiar image to deep and associative one, enhancing the poem thematically in an almost magical and intuitive description of the image of the sudden small bridge (Dwivedi, 41).

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 in the grass.
When I reach the river, the full moon covers it;
A few people are talking low in a boat.
(SSF, 20)

The last line in which the poet/ narrator hears people in a boat talking without understanding their speech clearly. Here the poet evokes the state of solitude and the sudden deep image of the small bridge to trigger the poem's major theme. In the last line, the poet's/ narrator's passage over those people talking without obviously understanding what they are talking tackles the theme of the human relations in contemporary American society as characterized by detachment resulted from the solitude and the triumphant materialism which hover the whole society.

3. Bly's Archetypal model and the view of the Inner World

Bly's poetry is fundamentally characterized by its allusiveness and difficulty as he intends to delve deeply into the human psyche and reveal man's thoughts from within in a form of realistic themes rendered by the use of the deep image and the archetype. They are employed in order to coincide between the physical and the spiritual worlds. Thus, "Bly's double conception of darkness, the inspiring darkness of the inner world held in suspension with the terrifying blackness of the outer" (Libby, 87). He also wields the tangible poetic image put in a postmodern frame so as to drag the reader's attention and reflect the zeitgeist. To fully comprehend Bly's point of view about the inner world, it is better to begin with lines, quoted by Bly himself, taken from Novalis, a German poet in the 18th century: "The seat of the soul is where the inner world and the outer world meet. Where they overlap, it is in every point of the overlap" (as cited in Bly, *News of the universe* 55).

Death, darkness, and silence are the first paths to the inner world in Bly's opinion. Death is at the heart of Bly's poetry. Symbolically, it is not a transformation of the body but an immersion of the body in the physical things. "If this elusive immersion is achieved, as Anthony Libby put it, "the body in its fullness contains and is contained by "the inner world," which is this world, not illuminated but condensed to its deepest indivisible essence" (85). That is to say, the spiritual union

with the universe physically. Silence recalls the poet's inner world and enables him to express the sense of detachment and discontent about the current reality in which he lives. By engaging both the inner and outer world, Bly focuses on his surroundings. He urges to reveal the true reality of American society after the watersheds it witnessed and resulted in creating a corrupted and violent society. As a poet and a psychiatrist, he counsels the American individual to withdraw from the outward world and all its inimical pressures and resort to the inner world where spontaneity and serenity are recognized. For Bly, the inner and outer world are both created in a complementary form and can never be isolated psychologically (Dwivedi, 28). "Despite his moral revulsion, Bly's ability to immerse himself in things enables him to evoke the alien world of machines and mechanical men as fully as he evokes the inner world" (Libby 88).

Bly's "Kneeling Down to Peer into a Culvert" is one of the notable poems which is mainly based on water archetype. This archetype, then, is appreciated as a symbol through which he intends to convey the poem's major theme. As the poem's title indicates, the poet gets through a situation of kneeling down to have a look inside a culvert which is a drain under a road. The situation is highly speculative to trigger a deep image in the reader's mind by using the water archetype. The poem opens with this situation and continues to delve into a deep image that sums up the cycle of human life as a system mainly shedding light on the psychological perspective:

I kneel down to peer into a culvert.
The other end seems far away.
One cone of light floats in the shadowed water.
This is how our children will look when we are dead.
I kneel near floating shadowy water.
On my knees, I am half inside the tunnel—
blue sky widens the far end—
darkened by the shadowy insides of the steel.

(NA, 374)

In these lines, Bly wields a variety of poetic devices and elements that help create the poem's atmosphere, stimulating the psychic aspect in the reader. The water imagery occupies an immanent significance as all the poem's elements center around it like the use of repetition of such words as "shadow" and "lake." Furthermore, Bly's use of diction is highly associative. Such diction as "inside," "shadowy," "darkened," "tunnel" helps the poet to delve into his deep psyche and stimulate the reader psychologically. In the second stanza, the poet reveals his inner dark thought by stating "darkened by the shadowy insides of the steel." The poet's inner thought appears dark and futile. As the next stanza indicates, it stimulates the reader's interest in the wretched reality of life which seems, according to the poet, inherited from one generation to another:

Are they all born? I walk on farther;
 out in the plowing I see a lake newly made.
 I have seen this lake before. ... It is a lake
 I return to each time my children are grown.
 I have fathered so many children and returned
 to that lake—grayish flat slate banks,
 (NA, 374)

This norm, as the quoted lines above associate, becomes futile, lacking the desire and the renewal to survive. This is what is rendered by the lake archetype. It is “the lake the poet has seen before and to which he returns suggest[ing] a collective unconscious from which spring eternal archetypal patterns”(Samet, 25). This archetypal pattern of the lake reveals the poet’s collective unconscious through which he communicates the poem’s major theme. In the last stanza, Bly depicts life as stagnant and effete:

How long I live there alone! For a thousand years
 I am alone, with no duties, living as I live. Then one morning a head like mine pokes from the
 water. I fight—it’s time, it’s right—and am torn to pieces fighting.
 (NA, 374-5)

These lines reflect the poet’s inner thought as associated and influenced by his surroundings and its pressures and sufferings. He renders a solution for a problem rendered earlier in the poem; by symbolically employing the culvert, Bly predicts the future of the coming generation in a uniquely allusive style and a deep image accomplished with the lake archetype.

It is obvious that Bly shoulders the task of a social reformer who attacks all the changes that occurred in the American society and their drastic impact resulted from the mercilessly triumph of the materialistic issues and the decline of the moral and spiritual values so far as the coming generation is concerned through referring to “children” repeatedly. In the last stanza, the tone of perplexity and frustration is against the reality continuing to relegate under the impact of these changes from which the loss of harmony in the life of the American individual, what is reflected negatively on his/ her psychic and inward feeling. This theme is addressed by Bly’s poetic creativity of employing a deep associative image alongside the lake archetype.

Bly’s “awakening” is another notable poem based on the water archetype. It corresponds to Jung’s assertion of water archetype, not as a symbol or figure of speech, “but a living symbol of the dark psyche” (Libby, 87). In this poem, the water is mentioned thrice:

We are approaching sleep: the chestnut blossoms in the
 mind
 Mingle with thoughts of pain
 And the long roots of barley, bitterness
 As of the oak roots staining the *waters dark*.....
The living in water.

(SSF, 26, *Italics mine*)

It is pivotally coincident with Jung's view as symbolically referring to the human dark psyche. Besides, Bly's use of the contrast between life and death based on this archetype handles the central themes in *Silence in the Snowy Fields*. In this poem, as in other poems in this collection, the poem "introduces the themes of painful experience brought by an awareness of death, sorrow and the division between the inner and the outer worlds" (Dwivedi, 62). In the last stanza, the poet's tone gets more realistic, maintaining the psychic and the deep domain prominent, about the conflict between life and death.

Washing, continual washing, in water now stained
 With blossoms and rotting logs,
 Cries, half-muffled, from beneath the earth, the livingawakened at last like the dead.

(SSF, 26)

The quoted lines reveal the poet's location within the conflict of his inner world, the dark one embodied by the water archetype as correlated with "darkness", and the outer world and, on the other hand, his suffering from the spiritual deadness and the strife for survival. The last line includes an assertive simile: "awakened at last like the dead." Thematically, it reflects the idea that, according to Bly, the spiritual deadness or the death-in-life and the actual death are the same, letting the reader attribute the reasons and circumstances up to his/ her own personal experiences as a man living in the chaotic contemporary society. Once more, in this poem, Bly innovates in embodying his inward emotion towards the bitter reality in a relatively short poem, rich with symbols, images, and devices that all center around the Jungian water archetype.

4 – Conclusion

Robert Bly, one of the prominent figures in contemporary poetry, receives a wide vogue due to the diversity of themes and techniques in his poems. He is among the precursors of the Deep Image movement which is mainly concerned with the poet's collective unconscious, not the common image which is apprehended clearly by the mind. As a poet, Bly undertakes the role of the moralist whose concern is the negative impact of the many drastic changes the American society witnessed and suffering of the contemporary man from them. More particularly, he dealt with the inward emotions which are revealed through his use of the Jungian archetype based on the collective unconscious. Reading the archetypes in Bly's poetry is a pertinent step towards interpreting his poems succinctly so as to delve deeply into the domain of the poet's unconscious and grasp his themes and vision. By using the many archetypes, Bly advises the American individual to avoid the pressures and sufferings of the outer world and resort to the inner world to attain inner peace and maintain survival. It is evident that Bly considers all these changes as the main cause of man's loss of harmony between his inner thought and the outer world. He wants to say that self-satisfaction cannot be attained without achieving the optimum level of harmony. Thus, the loss of harmony imposes the spiritual deadness on man as a result of the decline of the moral and spiritual values and the prevailing materialism. For Bly, the spiritual deadness or the death-in-life and the actual death are the same.

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