

Victoria Frenkel Harris: On Robert Bly

In his essay "The Dead World and the Live World" (1966), Robert Bly distinguishes between two kinds of poetic consciousness, that which brings "news of the human mind" (he would include the confessional poets in this category) and that which brings "news of the universe." The second kind of poetry requires that the poet go deeply inward, "far back into the brain," where he is likely to find what, in "The Work of James Wright" (1966), Bly calls "some bad news about himself, some anguish that discursive reasoning had for a long time protected him against" (66-67). But the poet must not stop there. He or she must penetrate "much deeper than the ego . . . at the same time [becoming] aware of many other beings" ("Dead World" 6). Ultimately, the poet achieves those depths where "life inside the brain and the life outside" exist "at the same instant" (7). The incarnation of the poem crystallizes at this point of perception, at this subjective instant of simultaneous interaction between the perceiver and the perceived.

This type of poetic consciousness, which I have called the incorporative consciousness, seeks to integrate self, others, and the cultural and physical worlds. Aesthetically, the incorporative consciousness endorses intuition and subjectivity, psychic integration forming its central goal. Differing from the more conceptual or rhetorically conceived metaphor, which linearly compares vehicle and tenor, the incorporative mode reconciles both, often in paradoxical fashion. Light emanates from darkness, without apparent source; horizontal planes suddenly acquire vertical depth; while within some external structure or house, one's body becomes a house, which one may also enter. Apparent opposites, especially inner and outer, spirit and body, the archetypal male and female, merge into a single, organic whole. Thus the poetry becomes an extension of the incorporative consciousness that creates and interprets it. Never "achieved," always in the process of becoming, the incorporative consciousness constantly expands; deep and leaping imagery incarnate that process without interrupting it.

Before this harmonious mingling with the external landscape can occur, however, an integrated interior landscape is necessary. The achievement of such integration involves a slow and sometimes painful process of individuation. This process is often represented in Bly's poetry by a physical journey. "All poems are journeys," Bly has said. "The best poems take long journeys. I like poetry best that journeys--while remaining in the human scale--to the other world, which may be a place as easily overlooked as a bee's wing" (Selected Poems 88). Significantly, Bly's first book, *Silence in the Snowy Fields* (1962), opens with an automobile trip, as the speaker travels through and internalizes a part of his Midwestern landscape.

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The physical journey is of course a developmental extension of the more important psychic journey recorded in the entirety of Bly's work. Whereas the physical journey is linear and may be completed, the psychic journey has no destination. It is a journey of individuation, continual becoming. As the incorporative consciousness grows, inner and outer energies gradually intermingle, the subjective moment expands, and fixed boundaries give way to energy vibrations in a surrounding, fluctuating world. The identification of separate things is replaced

by reciprocal motion whereby the world is internalized, and each centripetal motion enlarges the poet so that his works spring from an increasingly greater psychic reservoir.

From *The Incorporative Consciousness of Robert Bly*. Copyright © 1992 by the Board of Trustees of Southern Illinois University.

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Author:

Victoria Frenkel Harris [2]

Review Process:

Single Review

Target:

Robert Bly

Source URL: <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/content/victoria-frenkel-harris-robert-bly>

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