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Grief, love, and joy

A thousand years of joy: a film about Robert Bly, by Haydn Reiss, DVD, 2015, 81 mins, $35

Reviewed by Nick Duffell, Psychotherapist

Robert Bly 'has reintroduced the notion that language is wealth', says the Devon-based storyteller Martin Shaw in this stunning crowd-funded documentary on the Minnesota poet and founder of the Mythopoetic Men's Movement. It premiered in London this August, introduced by the incomparable Mark Rylance, and it is indeed a rich feast for the viewer.

We follow this powerful octogenarian's beginnings as a dreamy farmer's son through naval service to political activist, denouncing the Vietnam and Iraq wars, championing the First Nations, valuing the environment via the Sierra Club, to reclusive poet. With his enthusiasm for the ecstatic tradition of Europe, South America and Persia, Bly made acceptable a new, grounded mysticism. Connected to snow and dust as elements of his childhood, as words known in the body, he combined Norwegian poetry, oriental music and the reverence of local place with the psychic depths enshrined in longings, the blessing of older men, Jungian therapy, gender perspectives and fairy tales.

Once upon a time, in time, then as now, as Bly might say, a certain farmer liked his drink too much and his foppish intellectual son too little. Over time, the son chose to love the father and celebrate the hunger men have for their fathers, surprising the feminists, who first couldn't believe that being *for* men meant not being *against* women. The early period of Bly's life is well documented, and features much strong commentary. 'Robert was very hungry [when] young, spent some times in isolation and spiritual poverty looking for what would feed him', says Gary Snyder, explaining why, even though not associated with the beat poets, Bly was a brother; his 'poetry was married to politics'.

His genius for translating and introducing other cultures to the Anglo-Saxon world has been a major gift. 'He gets it at the level of language, he gets it at the level of

imagination', explains the drummer/storyteller Michelle Meade. For Bly, translating the great ecstatic poets – Neruda, Machado, Hafez, Kabir, Basho, Rilke – was as valuable as his own work rooted in the spoken tradition of Yeats and his mentor William Stafford. 'These poems needed to be released from their cages', says Coleman Barks, whom Bly encouraged to take on Rumi.

Several times, the movie succeeded in raising goosebumps on my skin, reminding me of how Bly's work carries you from the head to the heart, from the wilds of rural Minnesota to a deep cultural belonging in the world. It shows him revelling in ordinary language used existentially: this is perhaps why his writing helps me remember what I regularly forget. Bly appears to have a working alliance with the unconscious that Joseph Campbell and Marion Woodman (both appearing in the film) recognized, and which makes his work so appealing to psychotherapists. We witness his joy reading Rumi declare the whole universe to be dangling on a swing that hangs between conscious and unconscious realms – which is of course where Bly's own work plays.

With a regular eye on what Jung called the Shadow, he generously recommends how best to negotiate it; often this requires some fierceness: 'When you are beginning to write, your *persona* will give lines and your inward being will give you lines; and since you don't know the difference, the poem is nix'. It was the daring and audacity in the Sufis that first attracted him, explains Persian scholar Leonard Lewisohn; and Shaw tells a wonderful tale of Bly, aged 80, courting trouble with some provincial Devon lads in a midnight street, reciting Yeats to them. His fierce compassion runs through his oeuvre. A poet must engage with politics and war, and 'cry over what is happening', he tells us, for 'despair and reason live in the same house', and Bly knows how to 'hold the grief pipe in his mouth'.

Grief, love and joy are his main theme, says the review of his collection of Ghazals in English from which the film takes its name (Bly, 2004). If you have never heard Bly reading, you're in for a treat. Here's an excerpt from one of the terrific out-takes:

> I don't mind you saying I'll die soon,
> Even in the sound of the word soon
> I hear the word you
> Which begins every sentence of joy
> … Ah, you're a thief, the judge said,
> Let's see your hands
> I showed my calloused hands in court.
> My sentence is a thousand years of joy.

For me, only another Minnesotan troubadour, recently rightly honoured with a Nobel Prize for literature, has this knack for combining existential alertness with story that speaks directly to the soul. And there is a wonderful intimate moment of him with Bly with James Ragan; for once overawed by these men of stout words, Bob Dylan raises a toast to Silence.

In some recent footage, we see the veteran poet pottering around his local bookshop, and delighting in a relationship with his second wife which he proudly says is 'no longer adolescent'. Bly admits his failings as husband and father, but (Bly) 'a good way to learn something is to start to teach it'. Human love is not differentiated from the elemental; he is not transcendent in his approach to spirit, but immanent.

> Every breath taken in by the man
> Who loves, and the woman who loves,
> Goes to fill the water tank
> Where the spirit horses drink. (Bly, 1985)

But he is not a confessional poet. Such elements are only needed as one of many lines in any poem and should never dominate, he advises – which is how the poems stay universal and true.

Some of us will wish that Bly's menswork had been better showcased, as the film's director Haydn Reiss agreed. 'You know, it was an impossible project', he told me. 'What I wished was a time machine to go back several decades and be in the midst of a retreat, or poetry reading, and see Robert in full force. Life-changing for many of us.'

I thought Bly's first book *Iron John* failed to do justice to his vision. It was panned in Britain at its release. 'The unfortunate review of *Iron John* was by Martin Amis: a man with no father issues', quipped Hayden. I much preferred *The Sibling Society*, which was a powerful critique of postmodern America, perhaps 'too hard a slap in the face of an increasingly self-absorbed, fame-driven, and now tech-enhanced, culture', Hayden added, and too much to deal with in this already-packed film, that warrants more than one viewing.

Bly's work has profoundly influenced me; he generously endorsed my first book, so it's an immense privilege to recommend this film to you.

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