

**The Politics of**

# Manhood

**Profeminist Men**

**Respond to the**

**Mythopoetic**

**Men's Movement**

**(And the**

**Mythopoetic Leaders**

**Answer)**

**Edited by Michael S. Kimmel**

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PROFEMINIST MEN  
RESPOND TO THE  
MYTHOPOETIC  
MEN'S MOVEMENT  
(AND THE MYTHOPOETIC  
LEADERS ANSWER)

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EDITED BY

Michael S. Kimmel



Temple University Press : Philadelphia

Temple University Press, Philadelphia 19122

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Published 1995

Printed in the United States of America

⊗ The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984

Text design by Erin Kirk New

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The politics of manhood : profeminist men respond to the mythopoetic men's movement (and the mythopoetic leaders answer) / edited by Michael S. Kimmel.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 1-56639-365-5 (cloth). — ISBN 1-56639-366-3 (paper)

1. Men's movement—United States. 2. Men—United States—Psychology. 3. Feminism—United States. I. Kimmel, Michael S.

HQ1090.3.P65 1995

305.32'0973—dc20

95-34527

*for*

MICHAEL KAUFMAN

*colleague, comrade, collaborator  
and constant friend*

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# IV

THE PERSONAL  
IS PERSONAL:  
THE POLITICS  
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MASCULINIST  
THERAPEUTIC

# Homophobia in Robert Bly's *Iron John*

GORDON MURRAY

I WANT TO START WITH A STORY. I'm deep in a redwood forest on the Mendocino coast with a hundred men. Night has fallen. We take off our clothes by the light of stars. Men lift large smooth river rocks from a bonfire and put them in the pit of a small round sweat-lodge built of branches and tarps. Naked, 6 of us file into the pitch black lodge, close the door, sit in a tight circle, and begin to heat up. It is an unusual way for me to get to know a group of men. We name men who have mattered to us—we evoke their spirits, their memories, or the ways we have incorporated them into our lives. Men invite in fathers, grandfathers, sons, mentors, brothers, ancestors and gods. When it is my turn I close with “. . . and my lover Paul.” The next day a man shared his reaction: “When you said ‘my lover Paul’ I felt an icy wind blow through me. I froze: the silence felt dangerous.” Homophobia can be an unexpected icy wind.

This event took place during a week-long gathering of men led by Robert Bly, mentor of the “mythopoetic” men’s movement. My story might be titled: “Mythopoetic Men Meet Gay Liberation.” Bly’s book *Iron John*<sup>1</sup> was the best selling non-fiction book of 1991; this branch of the men’s movement is growing phenomenally, which thrills some of us and scares others. I want to share my mixed feelings about this book, and illustrate how this wing of our movement inappropriately protects itself from the unexpected icy winds of homophobia that I brought into that sweat lodge that night.

In his book, Bly retells the Grimm Brothers’ fairy tale “Iron John” with commentary that casts the story as an initiation tale. He draws connections to traditional cultures, Greek myth, and contemporary dilemmas of the soul. At times I am moved to tears. When Bly describes how the Kikuyu men

offer their blood in a bowl to nourish the initiate, he comments: "Can he have any doubt now that he is welcome among the other males?" I feel an empty, frightened place in me that has never been welcomed into the community of men in such a primal, unmistakable way, a part that still strives to belong.

This is Bly at his best. He is a poet, he writes beautifully, intuitively. I can see myself or men I know in lines such as these:

men with an ideal father in their heads need to build an entire room for the father's twisted, secretive, destructive, vulgar, shadowy side . . . The son who always knew about his father's cruel and destructive side . . . needs to build a second room to house the generous and blessed side of his father.

A man in guilt may decide to fail during the first half of his life. That's his punishment for not having saved his mother.

A mentor can guide a young man . . . to build an emotional body capable of containing, more than one sort of ecstasy.

But there are gaping holes in Bly's book, and one is his discussion of homosexuality. Or rather, his lack of discussion. There are only three explicit references to homosexuality in the book. In one he refers to the threat of homosexual rape used to intimidate Michael J. Fox in a movie on Vietnam. (p. 85). In one he mentions that in the mythological garden, a man can fall in love with a woman, or with a man. (p. 133). The most extensive reference is in the preface, where he tries to account for his silence on the subject. "Most of the language in this book speaks to heterosexual men but does not exclude homosexual men." He goes on to explain that: "It wasn't until the eighteenth century that people ever used the term homosexual; before that time gay men were understood simply as a part of the large community of men. The mythology as I see it does not make a big distinction between homosexual and heterosexual men." (p. 10).

Now there has been a lively debate in the current gay cultural and historical renaissance about exactly this issue: whether homosexuality is something "real" and "essential" that transcends its historical manifestations, or, on the other hand, whether the homosexual/heterosexual distinction is socially constructed. In telling us that the term "homosexual" makes a distinction that's only a century old, Bly weighs in on the side of the social constructionists, but so does everyone else! Historian John Boswell points out that no one involved in this controversy identifies as an "essentialist," although constructionists accuse others of being that way.<sup>2</sup> Everyone agrees that whatever

we denote by "homosexuality" manifests in other cultures and other times very differently. But this should be the starting place for exploring the homoerotic, not the end. To dismiss a discussion of everything homoerotic by claiming homosexuality is a social construction is intellectually irresponsible.

Let me give you some examples of what Bly leaves out, with the help of Christine Downing's *Myths and Mysteries of Same-Sex Love*,<sup>3</sup> and Bernard Sergent's *Homosexuality in Greek Myth*.<sup>4</sup> The Greek gods Bly refers to most often are Zeus, Apollo and Dionysius. Bly exhorts us to raise up Zeus energy, "which encompasses intelligence, robust health, compassionate decisiveness, good will, generous leadership." But he doesn't mention Ganymede, the beautiful young man Zeus brought to his side as, some say, an initiate. Plato describes how Zeus teaches Ganymede about love:

The lover Zeus cannot contain all the love that flows into him, so some of it reenters the beloved, Ganymede, fills him with love. He feels a desire, like the lover's yet not so strong, to behold, to touch, to kiss him, to share his couch, and now ere long the desire, as one might guess, leads to the act.

Is this not a beautiful description of, to quote Bly, "a mentor guiding a young man . . . to build an emotional body capable of containing, more than one sort of ecstasy"?

Bly speaks of Apollo, a golden man who stands for wholeness, radiance, sun-like integrity, morality, perfection. And he mentions Hyacinthus, the uninitiated boy who dies in ritual sacrifice. But he doesn't tell us that they were lovers, that Apollo is, of all the Greek gods, the one who had the most male lovers, and that Apollo was infatuated with Hyacinthus, as Ovid says, "beyond all other mortals," and that Hyacinthus chooses Apollo from among his several suitors. Apollo is the paradigmatic lover and the model initiator who accidentally kills his beloved Hyacinthus while teaching him the arts of sports and hunting. Is this not a bittersweet description of the death of the boy in us, our sons and nephews, as we become men?

Bly speaks of Dionysus, born from the thigh of Zeus, eaten by the Titans, reconstructed from his heart which survived. Dionysus, says Bly, stands for the "ecstasy that can come from tearing and being torn, for the dark, alert, dangerous energy," which like Zeus and Apollo energy, he encourages us to evoke in ourselves. But why does he avoid telling us how Dionysus carves the branch of a fig tree to resemble a phallus, and sits on it to fulfill an erotic promise to the dead Prosymnus? Is not the homosexual intercourse in Dionysian rites the "ecstasy that can come from tearing and being torn"?

Bly speaks at length of tribal initiation rituals, particularly those in Paupua

New Guinea, where he finds living examples of his main thesis—which I find compelling and true-to-life—that men need a second birth, this time from men, not women. He tells us “men have lived together in heart unions and soul connections for hundreds of thousands of years.” He tell us “A boy cannot change into a man without the active intervention of the older men.” He goes so far as to tell us that “a substance almost like food passes from the older body to the younger . . . as the boy stands next to the father, as they repair arrowheads, or repair plows” and so forth.

What he doesn't tell us is that men have lived together not only in heart unions and soul connections, but sexual unions as well. What he doesn't tell us is that the “active intervention of the older men” often includes years of sexual partnership. What he doesn't tell us is that the “substance almost like food” that passes from the older body to the younger is often semen, passing not as the boy stands next to the older man, but as they engage in fellatio or anal sexual intercourse.

To give you some examples from Gilbert Herdt's *Ritualized Homosexuality in Melanesia*.<sup>5</sup> Many tribes believe that the ritual ingestion of semen is necessary to grow a boy into a man. Among the Marind-Anim tribe a stable relationship may arise between the boy and the older man, who call each other “anus father” and “anus son.” When the boy is older he may marry his anus-father's daughter. In the Etoro tribe, the semen is drunk, and “a youth is continually inseminated from about age 10 until he reaches his early mid-twenties.” The father of an 11- or 12-year-old boy in the Kaluli tribe picks an older man to engage in homosexual intercourse for several months, and they “point to the rapid growth . . . the appearance of peach fuzz on beards, and so on, as the favorable results of this child-rearing practice.” Some anthropologists theorize that in taking the passive role in intercourse, the boy is “integrating a continuing feminine component into the masculine psyche,” necessary to being a full man.

What are we to make of practices that we might call child abuse, but in other cultures are literal or symbolic descriptions of male initiation? If they were isolated instances from an exotic culture they would be intriguing enough, but what makes them compelling is the links that Sargent and others are beginning to explore between, for example, the initiations of ancient Crete, of ancient Greece, and of Melanesia before the missionaries arrived. Herdt points out that they pose a challenge to all of us interested in understanding the development of gender identity. Bly does us a service by dusting off and re-interpreting, the legacy of our own pre-industrial cultures but a disservice by his selective attention to that legacy.

Why does he pick and choose from the mythological and tribal data, excluding references to homosexuality? I think it's homophobia, a making-invisible, which goes something like: "It's OK to be gay, let's just not talk about it, let's just treat gays and lesbians like everyone else." This homophobia is seductive, for we gay people want to be treated like everyone else in many ways: in housing, jobs, healthcare, the right to serve in the military and have legally sanctioned domestic partnerships. But we also want our differences and unique perspective to be seen, and we, who are newly excited as we discover our hidden history across cultures and centuries, want to share the insights and riddles of those discoveries.

The two branches of the men's movement, the mythopoetic branch and the pro-feminist, gay-affirmative branch, are at a critical juncture in their relationship. Those of us in the pro-feminist, gay-affirmative branch must recognize the phenomenal growth of the mythopoetic movement and carefully ask ourselves "why?" What part is anti-feminist backlash and what part a healing voice that speaks to the wounds and needs of contemporary men? And what part of our response to this growth is envy, since no book on homosexuality or homophobia or feminist men has enjoyed the popular acclaim of *Iron John*? We need dialogue with the mythopoetic men not only for their insights, but to prevent a whole segment of men entering the men's movement indoctrinated in the homophobia of making-invisible.

The mythopoetic branch needs to move beyond the pretense that, since the word "homosexual" is only a hundred years old, that homoerotic relations are not part of the deep masculine. We need to acknowledge and examine our individual and collective homoerotic shadow. We need to recognize the astonishing prevalence of homoerotic behavior in conjunction with male initiations and male myths across cultures and history, if we are to do justice to that history and come to a full understanding of what it means to be a man today.

## NOTES

1. Bly, Robert: *Iron John: A Book About Men*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1990.
2. Boswell, John: "Revolutions, Universals and Sexual Categories," in Duberman, Vicinus & Chauncey, ed.: *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*. Meridian, 1990.

3. Downing, Christine: *Myths and Mysteries of Same-Sex Love*. New York: Continuum, 1989.
4. Sergent, Bernard: *Homosexuality in Greek Myth*. Boston: Beacon, 1984.
5. Herdt, Gilbert, ed.: *Ritualized Homosexuality in Melanesia*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

# The Shadow of *Iron John*

PAUL WOLF-LIGHT

ROBERT BLY'S BOOK *Iron John* has cast a long shadow over contemporary ideas concerning men and masculinity and the practice and shape of 'Menswork' generally, whether therapeutic, antisexist etc. It clearly struck a chord in many men, particularly in the United States where it remained on the best sellers lists for over a year. In this country, although its influence seems to have been more peripheral there are few men involved in 'Menswork' who do not know of it.

At a time when the issues of men and masculinity seem to be becoming more prominent in the public sphere it feels appropriate to examine in more depth what is an important and seminal work. Structured around the Brothers' Grimm fairy story *Iron John*, the book offers a rich and poetic view of manhood and masculinity. It attempts to reconnect the sense of being a man with both Nature and modern civilisation, in doing so trying to offer alternatives to more 'macho' and destructive stereotypes of masculinity without losing what could be called the 'male soul'. Using parts of the *Iron John* story as metaphors for different stages of masculine development, Bly attempts to describe a process in which men can discover their maleness and mature as men without losing touch with their connection to the Earth and the historical and anthropological roots of masculinity. Yet although inspiring, illuminating and worthwhile in what it aspires to, it is also riddled with serious contradictions and flaws.

The very name *Iron John* conjures up the image of a dark and foreboding figure, armoured, inflexible and grim. As a symbol for the transformation of men away from the rational, rigid, unfeeling and destructive stereotypes of the past he seems grotesquely inappropriate. Yet the figure is clearly impor-

tant to Bly. So much so that the book is named after him rather than the Wild Man, with whom he appears interchangeable during the story as told by Bly.

I believe that many of the flaws and contradictions in the book emanate from the dark qualities contained in this figure, qualities that Bly does not appear to recognise. They appear to reflect his own disowned and unconscious shadow which emerges time and again throughout the narrative. This shadow seems much closer to the social and historical legacy of men and masculinity both in terms of values and behaviour. It is authoritarian and autocratic, impersonal, contemptuous and violent. In short, the very image of patriarchy. Bly, rather than attempting the more difficult task of integrating this shadow with the more human and intimate qualities that his idealised *Iron John* espouses, instead splits this dark side off and projects it onto the 'macho man' and the savage man. This enables him to subtly lay claim to those enormous benefits that we as men have derived from such behaviour, particularly in terms of power and material wealth, without having to own the darkness from which they have been derived.

What seems at first glance to be a deeply personal book becomes on closer examination strangely detached and impersonal. Bly's personal history and his own experiences of living through the developmental stages depicted in the story are fragmented and lacking depth. Much of the time he is talking about others or giving his interpretations. Although critical of others for sloppiness and lack of rigour, *Iron John* is no less guilty of confused and muddled thinking, lacking discipline and intellectual clarity. As a poetic vision, it offers flights of illumination for the soul, but when brought down to earth and examined more closely a darker shadow emerges.

To reveal this shadow more clearly I wish to examine six themes that occur throughout the book and seem central to Bly's work. These are the themes of fatherhood, initiation, mythology and fairy tales, the 'soft' man, politics and the warrior. I believe that all of these themes are important and Bly's acknowledgement and exploration of them is both a significant contribution and of value. Yet too often they are treated in rather too simple and idealistic a way, ignoring the darker depths that these themes also embrace.

The theme of fatherhood runs as a constant thread through *Iron John*, yet Bly's approach to it seems both reactionary and idealised. He appears to adhere to a model of parenting whereby the mother is initially responsible for child care, and then at a certain age, usually around puberty, the father has to separate the boy from his mother and become the main parent in

terms of attachment. He gives many examples of this occurring in other cultures. The notion that a child can be brought up and be nourished and nurtured from birth by the mother and father together seems outside Bly's framework. The type of parenting both described and advocated in *Iron John* creates the very conditions of overattachment to mothers and distance from fathers that Bly recognises as problematic, yet he appears blind to this contradiction.

From my personal experience of having three children whose ages range from 3 to 18, I know that it is not only possible for both parents to bond equally with a young baby from birth, but that separation is then much less of an issue. By being attached to more than one parent the dependency on each becomes lessened. But sharing parenting means prioritising child care over work and ambition for a significant period of time, and this involves necessary sacrifice. A further consequence is that parental authority is shared between the parents and the father becomes less special and more ordinary. In particular it means being involved on a daily basis with all the anger and 'boundary pushing' that children are constantly directing towards those individuals who are responsible for restricting and caring for them.

The need for men to be involved with parenting from birth onwards, and to redefine the role of father to include being a parent and nurturer from the beginning, rather than merely being a protector and provider, is not one that Bly acknowledges. A significant number of men have been doing just this for many years now, yet *Iron John* reflects little of this. Instead the book harks back to an idealised time when mothers' and fathers' roles were segregated and separate, a time that allowed fathers to avoid the sacrifice of parenting and to maintain their position of detached authority within the family.

This idealisation and selective interpretation of the past is further reflected in Bly's approach to initiation, which is muddled and misleading. He fails to differentiate between two very different types of initiation, mixing them inappropriately to suit his arguments. The first of these types is what can be called collective gendered initiation, which consists of a formal and traditional ritual that each boy has to pass through. The function of this is to separate him from his mother and give him a collectively defined male identity. It takes no consideration of him as an individual, instead imposing a socially defined identity upon him that demands a conformity reflected in collective allegiance and obedience within a rigid gender role. In the book Bly shows a great deal of admiration for this form of initiation.

The second type of initiation is very different. This is best described as a shamanic initiation. It is not concerned with the socialising function of col-

lective initiation but rather with the spiritual and psychological development of the individual. It requires an internal recognition from the initiate of his calling and the process is informed in considerable part by the initiate's own experiences including dreams and visions. The separation that takes place in such a process is not merely from his mother and family but from the very ground of his being, with the very real danger of becoming psychotic. Relatively few individuals have ever experienced this form of initiation and the guidance given was individual and spiritual rather than collective and political.

Bly's muddling of these two types allows him to claim that by going through a collective initiation men will become more independent individuals. In fact whilst it may result in them becoming independent of their mothers, they become in turn passive and dependent upon a collective approval based upon the prevailing cultural stereotypes of men. This is what appears to have happened in much of the part of the American men's movement that has derived from Bly. Here macho stereotypes and blatant misogyny revolve around the rallying call of mens rights and gender segregation. Although Bly openly disowns and condemns much of this, it is easy to see its roots in *Iron John*.

Bly's political naivety is further reflected in his attitude to myths and fairy tales. He claims that 'ancient stories are a good help because they are free of modern psychological prejudices.' Whether even this is true, he ignores the fact that they are steeped not only in the prejudices of the time they were originally written but also that they will have been subsequently coloured by those prejudices of the intervening years as they were passed down. The development that takes place in *Iron John* unfolds in a distinct social framework, reflecting the political values of the time in which it was set. These values included the subordination of women, slavery, racism, religious intolerance, a strict hierarchical structure built upon wealth and power, and the acceptance of violence as a means of obtaining what you wanted, particularly through warfare. The psychology of the story includes and reflects these values.

Unfortunately, by turning a blind eye to the historical framework and romanticising the stories, the prejudices become enshrined rather than recognised and challenged. If we wish to work with myths as reflecting deep psychological truths we must be fully aware of the political values that they are embedded in. We need to recognise their prejudice and incompleteness as guides as well as their richness and psychological depth.

This political naivety and some of Bly's attitudes towards women are re-

vealed further when we examine his claim in *Iron John* that men today have become soft as a result of being too connected with their feminine side and that they therefore need to re-connect with their masculinity. Setting aside for the moment whether this is true or not, it is worth examining his definition of this feminine side of men. In *Iron John* this appears to be in the main defined as being passive, lacking vitality and being unable to be assertive, the masculine thus representing active, assertive vitality.

This representation in fact is not so much a description of masculine and feminine as a recapitulation of the stereotypical qualities socially assigned to men and women. These so called feminine qualities are those that women were, and to an unfortunate degree still are, supposed to identify with and embody in our culture. This expectation of women to be passive, unassertive and lacking in vitality has been part of the means by which they have been kept as subordinate to men, for by internalising these life denying qualities women become participants in the everyday reinforcement of their lack of equal status. By identifying these as feminine, Bly subtly reinforces the very sexism and inequality that he claims to abhor, attempting thereby to give it some archetypal and essential validity that easily becomes a justification of men's superior status.

The identification of basic human qualities such as assertiveness, vitality and being active with any gender is problematic and unnecessary. Although Bly and others may state that feminine and masculine do not denote man and woman, this is an intellectual statement that denies the deeper emotional identification and resonance between man and masculinity, woman and femininity.

An interesting point to be made here is that in Bly's earlier book, *A Little Book of the Human Shadow*, whilst still denoting the soft passive qualities as being feminine he states that what is missing in such men is their witch, another feminine quality, whose value lies in her assertiveness and who also embodies activity and vitality. In the interim he has effectively removed these qualities from the feminine and set up a polarity between what becomes the 'life giving' masculine and the 'life denying' feminine. He attempts to avoid this in *Iron John* by describing the 'soft' passive qualities as 'life preserving', but this is nonsensical. You need to be able to be active, vital and assertive to preserve life, as any parent could acknowledge.

The second question that arises is whether Bly's claim that men in general have become 'soft' is true. As has been pointed out by Mick Cooper in *Achilles Heel* issue 12, there is little evidence to support this. The vast majority of men seem far from acknowledging any value in being 'soft', let alone

behaving in such a way. My own personal experience has been that it is only in the New Age, therapy and anti sexist sub cultures, which together make up a rather small fraction of the male population, that men are generally found to be soft in the way Bly describes. My experience of men during years spent working in the business world, in being involved in community politics on council estates, and in my current work as counsellor for men who behave violently, is that they are far more identified with being hard than soft. As a generalisation I would say that most men are still cut off from feelings other than anger and rage, avoid any acknowledgement of vulnerability, and still expect to be the dominant partner in relationships with women.

My own history has more in common with these men than with those Bly describes. I have had to shift from aggression to assertion, learn to express my pain and anxiety as grief and fear rather than rage and withdrawal, and accept relationship, intimacy and compromise over independence, distance and selfishness. This has made me neither passive nor guilty, but I have become more vulnerable, more human, more warm and more willing to say sorry when I am in the wrong. This willingness to be vulnerable is a softness I value and is not only vital and alive but an essential part of my assertiveness. My experience of working with men is that these vulnerable qualities are what are missing, often alongside an inability to be assertive rather than aggressive. Becoming more feminine or masculine does not come into it, broadening their human qualities and experiences to become more inclusive does.

A generalisation I would make is that the majority of men have not gone soft but are confused about their identity as men. This seems to be a reflection not only of the changing status of women but also of a more fluid and educated society which renders rigid gender roles increasingly irrelevant and even dysfunctional. With men's identity and status so bound up with their gender role rather than their personal sense of self this confusion and uncertainty is understandable. But it needs to be tolerated and explored so that a more genuine sense of self as a man can emerge, rather than being fled from in a desperate attempt to recreate a bygone age of certainty.

In *Iron John*, Bly seems unable to tolerate this confusion, which appears to be reflected in his political views. There is a longing for certainty and dominant leadership running through the book, and there are several occasions when he makes derogatory remarks about alternative political approaches. His reactionary attitudes to parenting and women have already

been touched upon, yet the absence of race and homosexuality as significant factors in *Iron John* is equally telling.

Whether eliciting positive or negative responses, both race and homosexuality exert enormous influence on the political landscape of America. Yet there is scarcely a mention of them in *Iron John*. The workshops that Bly runs also seem to be almost exclusively white and heterosexual. But then, how would such a story in such a setting speak to a black or gay man? If it spoke to them at all, it would probably be in a very different way to the interpretation Bly gives. For if there is one thing we ought to have learnt by now, from gay men in particular, it is that it is not masculinity but masculinities that we need to be addressing and that this diversity has to be acknowledged.

Bly himself, whilst criticising the New Age and therapy movements for not being more politically involved, seems happy to run his workshops on those same circuits, charging high fees that render them immediately exclusive and privileged. Capitalism does not appear to be on the agenda for questioning and those who do not have the financial means are ignored. The giving of a few bursaries in a group of over a hundred men seems an example of political correctness rather than political awareness, all surface and little substance. In this he mirrors the marginalisation that takes place in society as a whole whereby white, affluent heterosexuality is the model for all men. He seems to prefer to ignore this problem rather than struggle with what are very difficult and challenging issues. In this his shadow looms large, a veritable reactionary Mr. Hyde exploiting that which his liberal Dr. Jekyll condemns.

Perhaps where this split is most marked is in Bly's romanticising of the warrior. He attempts to put all the dark parts of the warrior into the soldier, leaving the warrior as some kind of golden ideal who fights and even kills, yet in an almost bloodless and honourable way. Although abhorring guns and modern weapons which are only fit for soldiers, Bly appears to condone and admire hand to hand combat with swords. He seems to have no notion of the terrible damage swords and knives can do, that such combat results in limbs being hacked off, bodies being pierced and ripped, blood, gore, enormous physical pain and often death. These harsh consequences are ignored behind a romantic idea of honour and respect. There is no empathy for the dead or wounded or for their children, wives and families. In fact these men appear unconnected to close others, seeming to be separate men fighting separate men. Such combat becomes as clean and clinical, detached and impersonal as any example of modern warfare, the only difference seem-

ing to be the respect and honour the combatants show each other as they hack themselves to death!

This romanticising and split seems to be rooted in Bly's personal history. Bly says of himself that he was not in touch with his warrior energy when he was a child and a young man. This lack of experience as a youth of 'being a warrior' seems to have affected him profoundly, with the unfortunate result that he has compensated by romanticising and advocating 'warrior' qualities without understanding what they actually mean. The ability to protect oneself and others is an important one to have regardless of gender, but equally it carries a potentially grim and dark consequence with it. The burden of damaging and perhaps killing another human being even in self defence is a heavy one to carry, and has little to do with romance and triumph. Rather it casts a dark cloud over the heart that needs to be slowly and painfully dissolved in human relationship, with a residue perhaps always remaining. Bly is right when he states that the soldier avoids facing this by his detachment and rationality, yet his view of the warrior is equally dangerous and detached with a similar denial and avoidance of this darkening of the heart.

Amongst the shadow I have laid bare there does of course lie my own, for in part it is the darkness in my own heart that enables me to see Bly's. Since I was a child I have been aware of my ability to kill and my wish to wreak vengeance on those who crossed me. I have been both harsh and violent at times with people who I perceive as having damaged either myself or those close to me. My own long standing love of mythology was never simply rooted in the magical and spiritual qualities evoked. The threads of vengeance, conquest and power that pervade many of these stories were equally attractive.

The shadow I carry within is not merely unfulfilled potential and unexpressed pain that needs transforming and healing. It includes a grinning demon who delights in others' misfortune, a messianic angel of light with a ruthless and self righteous demand for purity, a slavering wolf with a hunger for blood and flesh, and a grim faced man who derives sadistic satisfaction in the brutal destruction of everything warm and human. And yes, some, though by no means all, of this grim faced man in particular I see in the figure of *Iron John*. Projection it certainly is, but I believe that I have demonstrated that there are substantial 'hooks' to my projections in both Bly and the book.

Yet it is of no more value to be blinded by this darkness than it is to be blinded by the light of idealism. They need to be recognised as inextricably linked. The darkness and density of the shadow cast by *Iron John* is a direct

consequence of the richness and light that pervades the book. There is much of value and beauty in Bly's writing and a deep love of men resonates throughout. I recognise a genuine wish to address the conflict between men and women honestly and a desire to heal the damage that men and women alike have experienced both as children and in relationship. His failures as demonstrated in my criticisms and others are not a cause for dismissing either Bly or *Iron John*. Rather by naming the shadow contained therein a deeper and broader understanding becomes possible. The book then becomes less important for the answers it offers but more so for the questions it raises. And for that Bly deserves respect and gratitude.

# Soft Males and Mama's Boys: A Critique of Bly

TERRY A. KUPERS

ONE MUST CERTAINLY ACKNOWLEDGE ROBERT BLY'S contribution to the evolving men's movement. He has helped bring men together to share their stories and their feelings, to explore their "shadows," to re-awaken their vitality, their respect for elders, their need for spirituality and so forth. These are important contributions. And clearly, judging from the popularity of his appearances and tapes and the sales of *Iron John*, his message has struck a deep chord within a large number of (mostly white, middle class and middle aged) men.<sup>1</sup>

## THE POSITIVE CONTRIBUTIONS

Some of Bly's formulations are quite useful. For instance, when he instructs men on the need to finally forgive their fathers and get on with their lives, he brings us a step closer to making psychotherapy terminable. He believes men must resolve leftover conflicts with their fathers if they are to be whole. Men need to acknowledge their fathers if they are satisfied with the way they were raised; if their fathering was not optimal they need to grieve for the father they never had and then make amends with the disappointing one who exists; or, if their father is not alive, they can forgive him for his shortcomings and honor his memory. Bly's advice is quite sound, *if* it is well-timed. Some men, even at midlife, have never gotten in touch with their anger toward and disappointment in their fathers; for them, forgiveness would be premature. But the suggestion that men grieve and forgive serves

to short-circuit the kind of endless resentment that makes therapy such an interminable project.<sup>2</sup>

And Bly says some important things about male individuation. For instance, in Bly's (1990) telling of the story of Iron John, the wildman is captured in the forest and locked in a cage in the center of town.<sup>3</sup> A boy is playing with a golden ball. When the ball rolls into the cage, the boy asks the wildman to return it and he refuses—unless the boy will free him from the cage. The boy protests he does not have the key. The wildman retorts that the key is under his mother's pillow. In other words, if the boy is to get in touch with the wildman deep within, with his desires and his power, he must break with his mother. There is a valuable truth to discover in the story—as long as we can somehow avoid the misogynist and politically reactionary conclusion that mothers (and women) are ultimately to blame for men's sense of unfreedom. Unfortunately, Bly offers no words of caution here.

I will mention one more example of Bly's useful "pearls" for men. He and Michael Meade claim that "the male mode of feeling" is very different than the female mode, for instance men are not as interested in face-to-face discussions of personal matters, preferring instead to stand shoulder-to-shoulder facing a common task or adversary.<sup>4</sup> The point is valid: men do have different ways. When women writers mock male shoulder-to-shoulder relating and imply that face-to-face relationships are the only kind that are truly intimate, they alienate men who might otherwise listen to what women are trying to tell them about sharing and intimacy. But, at the same time, shoulder-to-shoulder intimacies can be rather limiting, and men would do well to learn more about the face-to-face variety.

## THE IMPLICIT POLITICAL MESSAGE

In spite of Bly's useful contributions, his message contains some alarmingly regressive implications. For instance, the evolving men's movement, even while refusing to support a traditional notion of the "real man," is beginning to construct hierarchies and categories of deviance of its own. Bly's intolerance of "softness" in men is a prime example. The basic idea is that certain men are "Mama's boys" or "pussy whipped," meaning they were too tied to their mothers as children, and as adults they are too tender, too emphatic, too interested in women's issues. But against what standard is this "too" measured? Of course, the standard is a new version of that familiar old concept, the "real man." Traditionally, a "real man" is strong, brave, indepen-

dent, relatively unemotional, unflinching, *and properly distanced from the female perspective and from identification with women.* The new concept, more acceptable to sensitive men, is that a “real man” gathers with other men, tells his story, talks about feelings, plays drums, takes part in primitive dances and rituals, *and is properly distanced from the female perspective and from identification with women.*

Bly's (1982, 1990) notion of “soft males” fosters stigmatization. He begins by describing the “soft males” of the seventies:

They're lovely, valuable people—I like them—they're not interested in harming the earth or starting wars. [In the 1982 interview, Bly added “or working for corporations”—perhaps a corporate executive talked him into removing that clause from the 1990 book.] There's a gentle attitude toward life in their whole being and style of living. But many of these men are not happy. You quickly notice the lack of energy in them. They are life-preserving but not exactly life-giving. Ironically, you often see these men with strong women who positively radiate energy. (1990, pp. 2–3)

Bly believes that the man who wishes to be liberated from the bonds of the traditional male image must traverse two further stages of adult development. First he must get in touch with his feminine side, his “interior woman,” and second he must get in touch with the wildman inside him, the “deep male.” In order to accomplish the second step, the man must resolve certain issues with his father, and go to other men for help finding his way. The male who is attuned to the issue of gender equality has traversed the first stage but not the second.

I agree with Bly there is another step men must take, and I agree that men must talk to other men about this, not just to women. But I do not think it is merely a matter of distancing women and getting in touch with the “wildman” within, the source of life and power that has been repressed in the “soft male.” I believe Bly takes a wrong turn here, attempting to delineate what ails men without looking to gender relations. He thinks there is something innate and universal about (straight) masculinity that can be understood without reference to the experience of women and gay men, and without reference to historical change or to the kinds of domination that frame the experience of both genders.

Bly is blaming and devaluing women when he repeatedly accuses mothers of smothering sons. He rarely mentions the mother's role in nurturing and raising the son. Juxtaposing this observation with Bly's emphasis on forgiving the errant father, it seems fair to conclude there is a significant bias against women and against dependency on women.

When asked by Bill Moyers in a television interview if the phenomenon of men's gatherings in the 80's and 90's is not an outgrowth of the women's movement of the 60's and 70's, Bly makes light of Moyers' suggestion and insists the men's movement developed independently. He seems concerned lest his masculinity seem reactive to women, so he has to devalue women and refuse to acknowledge their contribution to a heightened gender consciousness. Meanwhile, he rarely mentions the fact that men oppress women and says nothing about the need for men and women to join in the struggle to put an end to sexism. In fact, in the Moyers interview, he says that women are unhappy mainly because they, like men, did not get enough of their fathers' attention. What about sexual oppression, exclusion from positions of power, unequal pay, rape and other forms of sexual oppression? Bly is silent. In addition, Bly practically ignores the experience of gay men (see Murray, in this volume).

Bly colludes in the disturbing tendency for sensitive men to move on from the stage of supporting women's struggles to evolve a new, more "sensitive" and "spiritual" form of sexism. For instance, with so much focus on avoiding passivity and feeling powerful, too little attention is given to the need for men to admit to weakness, painful emotions and dependency needs, and to develop the capacity to tolerate these qualities in others and to nurture.

I was in a leaderless men's group for five years in the early seventies, at the beginning of what is now called the men's movement, and I readily admit the group I was in and many others like it were formed by men who had a deep respect for the women who were demanding their rights. We not only did not want to be left out, but also we believed we had much to learn from the women's precedent—and we struggled to evolve ways to transcend the male posturing that had kept us apart and isolated us until that time. Men's groups of that era typically began with discussions of men's problems relating to women. The successful groups eventually turned to the problems men have relating to each other, and solutions to those problems often led to improved relationships with women as well. Many of the men at gatherings I have attended come from similar backgrounds, or attend men's events because the women in their lives encourage them to do something about their alienation from their own inner life and from other men.

#### LEARNING FROM WOMEN

Let us assume for a moment that the women's movement is generally correct, and a significant part of what ails our society is uncontrolled male pos-

turing; for instance, men cannot back down from a fight, not on the street, not in the competitive world of business and not in the international arena where they regularly challenge each other to wars. And let us assume for a moment that what is needed is more emphasis on qualities that are popularly held to be feminine, such as the capacity to nurture and care about the fate of others, to work cooperatively with others instead of always competing, to respect and protect natural resources including our bodies and our rain forests, to be open about feelings and include feelings in our decision-making process, and so forth. Then the last thing we would want to do is stigmatize men's willingness to admire women for these qualities and to learn as much as they possibly can from them.

Here I risk jumping into the middle of a large debate about gender differences, essentialism and social constructivism. Essentialism maintains that there is something different about women, something innate and universal. If there are feminists who take this stance (I do not know any who would admit they do), this would have to mean something better than what is innate and universal in men. The other side holds that our gender roles and gender relations are socially constructed and change with history—and therefore there is reason to hope and to struggle for differently engendered, and thereby improved, social relations.

The debate about essentialism vs. social constructivism goes astray in implying that just about anyone who theorizes about sexual differences is guilty of essentialism. For instance, Katha Pollitt claims Carol Gilligan is an essentialist.<sup>5</sup> Of course, it would be better for Gilligan to restrict her generalizations about women to the subgroup she studied—largely white and middle class—but I doubt that Gilligan actually believes we live our gendered lives outside of culture and history.

At public workshops and lectures I am frequently accused of generalizing, or creating a stereotype, when I talk about gender. The accusation implies that I am guilty of essentialism. I always try to caution readers and audiences that I am speaking mostly about men like me, and that I do not find it useful to think in biological and universal terms about psychology and human relations. But I do generalize. For instance, I believe that men, in general, tend to dread disclosure of their dependency needs. Of course I can only generalize about white middle class men in the nineties in the U.S.A., but I also wonder about the degree to which this generalization characterizes men of different classes and races.

Am I trying to establish an ageless, universal notion about men, or am I attempting to find words to speak to a large number of men who know ex-

actly what I mean when I refer to men's fear of confessing dependency? Of course not all men possess the quality I am describing. Many readily admit their dependency needs to their intimates, while a certain number of women tend to deny their dependency. But how can we talk about gender without generalizing about gender differences at some point? We must be able to talk in the abstract about gender differences without implying a timeless, universal, gendered human essence. It would help if, at each level of abstraction, we continually tested and qualified our generalizations. Generalizations about gender are always provisional and subject to change as we move on to more sophisticated levels of analysis.

When we are ready to move on past the debate about essentialism *vs.* social constructivism, another question emerges: As women in large numbers enter public life and rise to the top of hierarchies that are currently reserved for men, will they bring with them their feminine ways (the capacity to be open about personal things while still getting the job done, the capacity to make friends and collaborate on projects, etc.) and thus serve to ameliorate some of the vicious competition and ruthlessness that currently characterize the workplace and public life; or will the women who rise to the top, selectively, more resemble men in their ways? (To be consistent, social constructivists must agree that a woman can become as cutthroat and merciless as any man.)

I think the jury's still out on that question, and the verdict depends on the success of the feminist struggle and all the other struggles that aim to transcend social domination. Meanwhile, it does seem clear that given current gender relations in middle class American society, women disproportionately carry the burden of nurturing—their children, men, each other—and doing various other peaceful and nature-respecting things. Other women in other places might have very different ways, but median contemporary American middle class women's ways seem to contain important clues about how we might solve some of the world's present problems—for instance war and ecological disaster. "Male" proclivities—including competition, concern about status in hierarchies, isolation, obsessional steadiness of pace and the use of women to enlarge one's ego—have led to our current political predicament. Perhaps a shift in the balance so that women have more of a share of power would lead to a more just and equitable society. Perhaps this hope is shared by the unprecedented number of voters who are electing women to important offices today. The hypothesis seems to be that women's larger sense of connection with others and their greater capacity to nurture prepare

them better than men to cope sensitively and cooperatively with the nation's and the world's problems.

In this context, calling men Mama's boys, soft males and pussy whipped because they listen too much to women is quite counterproductive—the wrong male qualities are being stigmatized. It is precisely the men who admit to the strong influence of women—the men who do not feel a strong need to “dis-identify” with women at every opportunity—who can contribute most to changing gender relations and devising ways to keep in bound the greed and violence that are rampant in today's world. According to Bob Blauner, “Men in the movement are likely to have grown up closer to their mothers than to their fathers. Therefore there are a sizable number of “Mama's Boys,” and the denial of this reality contributes to the movement's flight from mother—this is because we accept the male prescription and want to fulfill the criteria of adequacy in the new men's movement.”<sup>6</sup>

#### THE PROS AND CONS OF “SOFTNESS”

What, precisely, does Bly mean by “soft men”? On the one hand, he seems to be referring to men who have a highly developed feminine side, who have a deep respect for women and their power, who prefer connectedness and nurturing over combat and competition, and who eschew traditional male pursuits that involve cruelty, misogyny and homophobia. To the extent Bly devalues these qualities in men, he is leading us down a false path. He also seems to be referring to men who are passive, unformed as individuals, entirely reactive to others' wishes and demands, and so frightened of anger and combat that they tend to back down and disavow what they stand for in the face of strong opposition. Here is where Bly has a point, this kind of “softness” is very limiting. Sam Keen offers an alternative to this kind of softness: “The historical challenge for modern men is clear—to discover a peaceful form of virility and to create an ecological commonwealth, to become fierce gentlemen.”<sup>7</sup>

But why should we apply the point exclusively to men? Women who are passive, unformed as individuals, entirely reactive and afraid of their anger and strength are also quite limited human beings. This kind of “softness” is not good for either gender. In other words, when Bly links “softness” in men with excessive or prolonged connection to women, he makes two errors. First he stigmatizes certain “feminine,” nurturing qualities in men. And second he assumes that passivity and an inability to stand up for oneself are

only problematic in men. In other words it is more acceptable for women to be passive and not entirely formed as human beings.

There is another way that Bly's link between closeness with women and softness in men misses the mark. Bly implies that if men would stop being "soft" they would stand up to the women who have gained so much power in recent years, and doing so would make men feel powerful again. This message appeals to many men who feel inadequate while they perceive women gaining power in our society. But this is a message of backlash.<sup>8</sup> The reason men feel powerless and inadequate is not that women have taken their power away. Shifts in the economy, high unemployment, plant closures and massive lay-offs, higher taxes for the middle and lower classes with fewer social services, racism, homophobia, a crisis in health care, inflated insurance premiums and other unfortunate social developments over the last fifteen years have made it more difficult for men to feel adequate and powerful. Bly allies with ultra-conservative forces when he blames the plight of the American male on the emergence of powerful women in the public arena.

Finally, Bly's use of the term "soft" reflects another underlying assumption: that men's ways are strong and powerful while women's ways are "softer" and powerless. I do not accept that assumption! Cooperation, concern about the plight of others, respect for nature and a host of other qualities we associate with women today are the ingredients for a greater power than men now have. For instance there is the power to make the personal political, to meet together and talk personally while at the same time making plans to change the social arrangements, the power to save the environment by rationally disposing of our waste products, and the power to avert nuclear annihilation.

I have discussed the need for men to stand up to the women in their lives in order to be able to resolve some of the tensions that regularly arise in heterosexual couples, and sometimes men must work through unresolved conflicts regarding their mothers in order to develop their capacity to stand toe-to-toe with women as adults.<sup>9</sup> But this is not the same as saying women are to blame for men's feelings of inadequacy. If there is to be social progress, men and women must stand together against the wrongs of a patriarchal culture. Otherwise, power would be left to those who are more competitive, greedy and ruthless. Men and women must be anything but "soft" (in the sense of passive, reactive and unwilling to stand up for their interests) if we are to redraw the lines that constrict gendered behavior. But the right balance of sensitivity and toughness will not come from stigmatizing men who are deeply connected with women and the feminine within.

## CONCLUSION

I agree with Bly's critics when they protest the sexism and homophobia that are implicit and unexamined in his message. I cannot go along when these same critics poke fun at the large number of men who gather at men's events seeking new rituals, a new kind of connectedness with other men and a new burst of spirituality in their lives. The social alienation that drives these men to seek alternatives to their "keep-them-close-to-your-chest" everyday life is the same social alienation that progressives and pro-feminists are struggling so hard to change. Let's recognize potential fellow-travellers. Men who drum because they would like more rhythm in their lives, men who tell their stories around campfires because they would like to be known by other men, and men who want to hug other men and establish rituals of joy and of sorrow—these are all men who might as easily grow to understand that the antidote to their alienation is not ultimately contained in the magic of their primitive forest gatherings. Rather it requires that straight men ally with women and gay men to radically alter our gendered social relations. Meanwhile, radicals could use some rhythm too, and some celebration of our manliness.

## NOTES

1. Robert Bly, *Iron John: A Book About Men* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1990).
2. Terry Kupers, *Ending Therapy: The Meaning of Termination* (New York: New York University Press, 1988).
3. See also Robert Bly, "What Men Really Want," interview with Keith Thompson, *New Age* (May 1982): 30–51.
4. Robert Bly, *The Male Mode of Feeding* (Audiotape: Pacific Grove, Calif.: Oral Tradition Archives, 1989).
5. Katha Pollitt, "Are Women Morally Superior to Men?" *The Nation* (28 December 1992): 799–807.
6. Robert Blauner, "The Men's Movement and Its Analysis of the Male Malaise" (Unpublished manuscript, 1991).
7. Sam Keen, *Fire in the Belly: On Being a Man* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 121.
8. Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War on American Women* (New York: Crown, 1991).
9. Terry Kupers, "Feminist Men." *Tikkun* 5(4) (1990): 35–38; and *Revisioning Men's Lives: Gender, Intimacy and Power* (New York: Guilford Press, 1993).

# Psyche, Society, and the Men's Movement

CHRIS BULLOCK

THERE ARE SIGNS OF DECLINE in the men's movement. In my local alternative newspaper, the section that used to contain at least a full page of men's events now has barely two or three listings. My friends in other cities tell me the same story: declining numbers of men's groups, great difficulty in raising money for anything to do with men's projects. (Canada's White Ribbon campaign, a high profile men's movement against violence towards women, recently announced a major funding crisis.)

Probably the biggest sigh of relief will come from those happy to see the demise of the mythopoetic men's movement, that part of the men's movement associated with the American poet Robert Bly and also associated, in the popular media, with images of naked men drumming in the woods and turning themselves into macho savages. This hostility to the mythopoetic men's movement is not just a matter of television jokes about wild men and wimps. Feminists (of both sexes) have been persistently concerned with what they see as a 'mythopoetic' distortion to the *social* dimension of men's and women's lives, especially to the power differential between men and women.

In this article I hope to open a dialogue between the mythopoetic men's movement and its feminist social critics by looking at a central theme in Robert Bly's writing on men—the understanding of men's wounds. I focus on Bly because he is the “indisputable star of the men's consciousness movement,”<sup>1</sup> because he is the writer on men's issues from whom I have learned the most, and because his is the name that comes up again and again in Kay Leigh Hagan's *Women Respond to the Men's Movement*,<sup>2</sup> as the feminist writers in that collection define the branch of the men's movement they find most threateningly oblivious to questions of power and social structure. My

way of proceeding will be to outline briefly some of Bly's treatment of the theme of the wound in *Iron John* (1990) and elsewhere, followed by an examination of the feminist social critique of this treatment of men's pain, and then to evaluate both the feminist and the mythopoetic perspectives on men's suffering.

In the Grimm Brothers story on which *Iron John* is based, as the young male hero of the story releases the Wild Man from a cage in his parents' palace, he receives a wound to the finger. Bly describes this wound as an initiation wound, an outer wound that reminds the bearer of his inner wounds, that is, of the damage to his inner sense of value and significance. In contemporary men, these inner wounds can come from shaming or beating by parents, being betrayed by older men, or enduring competitive and superficial male relationships.<sup>3</sup> However, being wounded is not a simply negative experience; though the culture tells men that "a wound that hurts is shameful," "[w]herever the wound appears in our psyches . . . is precisely the place [from] which we will give our major gift to the community" (p. 42).

A common response to wounding is what Bly calls "ascension" (p. 33), that is, rising above the pain by becoming very intellectual, very successful, very cheerful, or very special in some way that takes a man away from his body and his feelings. Correspondingly, the healing of the wound requires a return to the experience of pain, a return to things left 'below'; it requires what Bly calls the descent. Descent is the movement from a false cheerfulness to grief, seen as "a door to male feeling."<sup>4</sup> It is the decision to "follow the grief downward" at one of the "little turns" in conversation (p. 14). It is "taking the road of ashes," accepting failure and humiliation. It is moving back to a valuation of physical labour, and thus the physical in general.<sup>5</sup> It is confronting the shadow, that dark "part of our personality that is hidden from us."<sup>6</sup> It is "going down to that missing water, the unconscious."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, at one point in *Iron John*, Bly claims that allegiance to the much-discussed figure of the Wild Man simply "amounts to a trust in what is below" (1990, p. 224).

This, then, is (in broad outline) Bly's view of men's wounds. It is clear that the contributors to *Women Respond to the Men's Movement* do not hold that view in great esteem. The most dismissive comment in the collection comes from Margaret Randall; after comparing Bly's ideology to Reagan's defence of America's Vietnam adventure and to Bush's defence of the invasion of Iraq, she argues that Bly's theory of the wound is one of the "poverty-builds-character or abuse-makes art doctrines . . . [that] nurtures sickness

itself as a source of power."<sup>8</sup> Gentler, but equally dismissive, is Barbara Kingsolver's admonition that

if there is kindness in us, we will not belittle another's pain, regardless of its size. When a friend calls me to moan that she's just gotten a terrible haircut, I'll give her some sympathy. But I will give her a lot more if she calls to say she's gotten ovarian cancer. Let's keep some perspective. The men's movement and the women's movement aren't salt and pepper; they are hangnail and hand grenade.<sup>9</sup>

The criticism of the mythopoetic approach to men's wounds most evident in *Women Respond* is, however, a criticism of that approach's "social amnesia" (to use a term from Russell Jacoby). This case is put so eloquently by Elizabeth Dodson Gray that it seems worth quoting her comments at length. Gray claims that Bly fails to be

clear about the role of the patriarchy as a systemic repressive phenomenon, causing boys and men to bury their feelings and become remote father figures who cannot express love.

Bly apparently does not see how, generation after generation, patriarchy has coerced us all so that men are reared by women, ignored by fathers, and then want to flee women in order to "discover their true masculinity." These social roles that patriarchy designs, coerces and perpetuates *cause* the very inner wounds Bly describes so eloquently and seeks to heal.

Bly tries nobly to lance men's inner wounds. But he does not perceive their root cause in the power system of patriarchy. So he is helpless to interrupt this process as the generations roll on.<sup>10</sup>

I do not find all these different feminist critiques of Bly on men's wounds equally pertinent. The comparison of Bly with Reagan and Bush, and the association of his views on the wound with a Horatio Alger-like glorification of poverty, seem very misguided, given Bly's long-standing anti-Republicanism and his vocal opposition to both the Vietnam and Persian Gulf wars. The claim that the mythopoetic approach ignores the social basis of men's wounds, however, needs serious attention and careful evaluation. It seems to me it would be a mistake for me to pretend to be able to evaluate this claim without involving my own gendered and social positioning. So what I propose to do is to return to the theme of wound and ascent/descent, this time writing the persons of Bly and myself into the picture, and then exploring what a social analysis of this theme can and cannot offer, from my own particular vantage point.

The theme of ascent from and descent to the wound has a special poi-

gnancy for Bly. He has often spoken and written of the pain he received from his father's withdrawal into alcoholism and of his response to this pain: his cheerfulness as a child, his "longing for purity, 'to be above it all,' not to be involved" (1990, p. 58). As I noted earlier, for one who has 'ascended' in this way, descent is essential and it seems that Bly underwent his descent during the three years in New York which he spent "being mostly blocked depressed and poor" (Solataroff, p. 271). This theme also has a special poignancy for me. I grew up in a family where my working-class father was remote through age and illness, and, in any case, generally sent me to my middle-class mother for decisions and guidance. The atmosphere of the family was one of worry about the present and anxiety about the future. I responded by trying to become an 'intellectual,' going away to University, escaping to another country. In the mid-seventies, Ph.D. freshly completed, I sank into a major depression, a frightening voyage into darkness with no guide to make me aware of what the meaning of descent might be.

In seeking to understand the social origins of this pattern of ascent and descent, I came across a description of the *petit bourgeois* family by the English social psychologist David Smail which resonated powerfully with my experience of family life. For Smail, the *petit bourgeois* family's position "perched on a ledge a little way up the social pyramid" produces

[r]igid conformity to narrowly ideal standards and denial and repression of emotions, perceptions and values which do not meet them, resentful respect for authority and uncritical acceptance of social institutions, breed[ing] an atmosphere . . . which, not surprisingly, is one of the most psychologically mutilating in which one can find oneself.<sup>11</sup>

The *petit bourgeois* family is not universal, but it has a special typicality at the present time in that

It is in this stratum, and those close to it, that the course of development most typical of our society is perhaps most obviously to be found—the transformation of a lively and promising human infant . . . into an emotionally constricted, competitively hostile adult. . . . This is the great inertially stable backbone of our society, the guardian of its values and the target of its mass media. . . . (P. 117)

I find this social and class analysis of my experience valuable in a number of ways. First it helps curb any tendency I might have to assume my experience is universal, to translate *petit bourgeois* male into world being. It thus serves the project that feminism has found so important: the elimination of the equation between white Western masculine and the universal. Second,

it serves the almost opposite function of translating, to use a phrase from C. Wright Mills, my private trouble into a public problem. If this pattern of experience is not universal, it is not solely personal either, but possesses a social typicality. Besides averting a collapse into self-blame, this insight also provides a social basis for Bly's claim for wound and community; if many people are wounded as a result of the petit bourgeois family, then those who acknowledge this wound are surely of potential service to others in this situation. Third, I find Smail's description of petit bourgeois socialization an excellent description of gender socialization, of the making of "emotionally constricted, competitively hostile" masculinity. From this description I understand how men with only a little power might nevertheless use that power against those with less power than they have, which most often (but not always) means women and children. Thus it helps me understand better the occasional unexpected emergence of authoritarianism in my own work and personal life.

Social analysis is not absent from *Iron John*. Notably there is Bly's claim that the replacement of an agricultural society by an industrial society has weakened the "bonding between father and son, with catastrophic results" (p. 94). This argument seems valid but lacking in sharpness. Does this argument refer to all fathers and all sons equally? Is the son of a blue-collar father more affected than the son of a managerial father? What about the effect of the industrial revolution on the role of mothers? The claim lacks sharpness because it lacks the reference to power and class, and because it lacks discrimination among the universal, the socially typical, and the particular; both this reference and this discrimination I take to be necessary to critical social analysis.

Thus, I am led to acknowledge the justice of feminist claims like Margo Adair's that "It is taboo to name power. . . . Nowhere in the pages of *Iron John* is the subject raised" (1992, p. 56). And I hope I have shown, through brief comments on the petit bourgeois family, that critical social analysis has a contribution to make to the understanding of themes which are obviously close to Bly's heart. And yet, having defended the value of the analysis of class and power for understanding men's issues, I now want to qualify this defence by acknowledging that Bly's mythopoetic analysis provides me with something which the tradition of critical social analysis recommended by many of the contributors to *Women Respond to the Men's Movement* cannot provide. To explain what this is, let me focus again on the theme of men's wounds.

In *Taking Care* (1987), from which I drew the description of the petit

bourgeois family, Smail argues that our society tries to distract us from pain and distress, but their presence keeps us in contact with what is really going on. Thus, "Our most reliable guide in the formulation of our conduct . . . is the private knowledge of pain . . . pain . . . calls us back from disembodied reverie" (p. 141). To put this in gendered terms, if, as Elizabeth Dodson Gray argues, "patriarchy as a systemic repressive phenomenon . . . caus[es] boys and men to bury their feelings" (p. 163), then these buried feelings, and especially the feeling of pain, become the appropriate starting point for men's awareness and transformation. Now, my point is that, while social analysis promotes an understanding of "patriarchy as a systemic repressive phenomenon," the paradox is that in the condition of ascent, intellectual understanding is more often a vehicle for avoiding pain rather than for experiencing it. Certainly for me, understanding the general contours of my childhood experience was and is not enough to put me in contact with that experience, to allow me to experience it with feeling and body sensation. To allow pain to act as a "guide for conduct," I need to feel the pain, and yet my way of enduring my childhood years was to avoid feeling this pain. To understand a background or a social condition but not to feel it is, in my view, to remain in the state Smail calls "disembodied reverie." To escape from "disembodied reverie" requires, I would claim, not only understanding cognitively where pain comes from but also experiencing that pain with bodily and emotional depth, a depth that Bly's work points us towards.

To explain what I mean by depth, let me expand on some of Robert Bly's comments on men's wounds. In *Iron John*, after that part of the story in which the young boy has dipped his finger in a sacred spring to ease the pain of his wound, Bly comments: "If we are to live in this story rather than merely observe it, we have to ask ourselves 'What wound do we have that hurts so much we have to dip it in water?'" (1990, p. 31). To prime the imagination, he lists some injuries from the father, climaxing in a brief retelling of an African story in which a boy fails his father and the father strikes him with an axe handle. He then lists some shaming comments from mother, comments like "'You're very frail, you know; you shouldn't play with those boys. . . . You're too big for your britches'" (pp. 30-31). Finally there are wounds delivered from older men and from peers: the lies told to young soldiers before they went to Vietnam, the absence of older men in the lives of gang members, the wounds from having only superficial barroom conversations with other men (pp. 32-33).

It would be hard to make a discursive generalization from these details; instead of supporting the development of an intellectual argument, they act

as particulars inviting the reader to identify and descend into his or her own experience. Just possibly nothing on Bly's lists catches fire with individual readers, but the range is broad enough to make this unlikely. For me, the comment on frailty sinks deep; it is a conditioning comment that I've never before thought of as an injury. Nor had I thought of bar conversations as wounding, despite the bleakness I remember feeling on many walks home. At the start of *Iron John*, Bly justifies calling on fairy stories by claiming that "The images the old stories give . . . are meant to be taken slowly into the body. They continue to unfold, once taken in" (1990, p. ix). This process of slowly entering the body happens, I believe, not just with the images from the story of *Iron John*, but also with many of the other images that Bly offers during the book, including these images of wounds received from parents and others. It is this entering into the body, engaging the feelings, that I am calling *depth*.

Depth, as I am describing it, is an appeal to the embodied reader, and it is this appeal that I find lacking in social analysis with its inevitable employment of "ideal-typical procedures."<sup>12</sup> Notice that I am speaking of procedures here and not of content. In his very interesting review of sociologies of the body, Chris Shilling defends sociology from "accusations that it has adopted an entirely disembodied approach to its subject matter" by pointing out that classical sociology has at least focussed "selectively on certain aspects of human embodiment."<sup>13</sup> But this is to make a claim about matter (content) as a defence against a charge that also seems to be about manner (approach). On the level of content, there are important distinctions to be made between, for example, theorists like Michel Foucault who argue a "view of the body as only existing in discourse" (cited in Shilling, p. 198) and those who, like Giddens and Shilling, find this view of the body reductionist. However, all these discussions, like the recommendation that men simply adopt a critical social understanding of patriarchy, belong to the body of critical social science with its "cognitivist perspective."<sup>14</sup> And Brian Fay is correct, I believe, in arguing that cognitivism has a hard time describing the "somatic knowledge" that is an essential part of assimilating a culture (p. 149).

The difficulty social analysis has in dealing with "somatic knowledge" lies, I would argue, in its commitment to "external description" and to "psychic distance, the existence of a rigid barrier between observer and observed."<sup>15</sup> These terms come from historian Morris Berman, who claims that "Academic discourses generally lack the power to shock, to move the reader. . . . [because they] fail to address the felt visceral level of our being . . ." (p. 110).

Berman contrasts the assumptions of these discourses with the earlier almost universal assumption—evident, for example, in the pre-Homeric Greek concept of *mimesis*—that “participating consciousness” is necessary for knowledge (p. 112). Social analysis, one could say, often “gets written with the mind holding the pen. What would it look like, what would it read like, if it got written with the body holding the pen?”<sup>16</sup>

My answer to this question is that analysis “written with the body” might very well look like *Iron John*. Throughout *Iron John* there are passages like the following, where Bly shifts from expository definition to a directly participatory rhetoric:

Religion here does not mean doctrine, or piety, or purity, or ‘faith,’ or ‘belief,’ or my life given to God. It means a willingness to be a fish in the holy water, to be fished for by Dionysus or one of the other fishermen, to bow the head and take hints from one’s own dreams . . . to eat grief as a fish gulps water and lives. (1990, p. 38)

Interestingly, just as I was about to connect “participating consciousness” with the bodily and emotional depth I find in Bly’s work, I noticed that Berman makes the connection himself. He records Bly’s comment that a “twinge in his gut” told him a certain line belonged in a poem, and says that while he doubts that “‘gut twingeing’ can serve as an adequate methodology for historians. . . it’s [not] a bad start” (1989, p. 118). He then goes on to claim that with mythology and storytelling “the body and its concomitant emotions are immediately engaged, along with the mind” (1989, p. 118), and to examine the contribution these modes could make to the discipline of history.

In Berman’s view, mythology and story are not history but they are not separate from history either, and this kind of relationship is exactly the kind of relationship I am trying to establish between critical social analysis and mythopoetics in their understanding and portrayal of men. So, on the one hand, it should be clear that critical social analysis and mythopoetics are not the same thing; one provides an activist analysis of the social and historical structures in which both men and women participate, while the other provides a vehicle for evoking the state of things in men’s psyches and bodies, viewed from the perspective of “participating consciousness.” The gap between the two perspectives is obvious from some of the comments on men’s pain in *Women Respond to the Men’s Movement*. From the perspective of critical social analysis, men’s pain may well look like the pain of a “terrible haircut” or a “hangnail” (Kingsolver, p. 40), experienced by a “dependent ap-

pendage of . . . social power relations."<sup>17</sup> From the perspective of "participating consciousness," pain is pain and to learn its lesson, men must "find again their interior lives which for so long have been largely ignored by them" (Gray, p. 162). However, on the other hand, it seems to me that the perspectives are not separate from each other, and, indeed, that to dwell exclusively in one perspective invites trivialization of the 'loss of father bond' or the 'men's pain as hangnail' variety.

This sense of incompleteness in the social analytical and mythopoetic approaches seems to suggest the falsity of methodological separations among body, psyche, and society, and to argue for the need of an integrative approach. In searching for a model for such integration, Morris Berman finds in the work of Gregory Bateson an encouraging image of the possibility of integrating analytical and participational modes:

In a Batesonian framework, as opposed to archaic consciousness, we can actually focus on the circuit, not just be immersed in it. . . . The hope is that we can have both *mimesis* and analysis, that the two will reinforce each other rather than generate a "two cultures" split.<sup>18</sup>

Yet when I contemplate the integration of social analysis and mythopoetics, instead of a sense of satisfaction, I find myself in a state of disquiet, which comes from a growing unease with the way that I myself have tackled this discussion. I have tried to describe the different contributions to the understanding of men that can be made through the "external description" of social analysis and the "participating consciousness" of mythopoetics. Still, though I have been trying for balance, and though I have written myself into the discussion in a couple of places, my main mode of argument seems clearly to be much more that of external description than that of participating consciousness. In a discussion focussed on the subject of wounds and damage, I have allowed a glimpse of my family background but have said very little of the wound that resulted from this background, and the damage I believe I have done as a result of it. I notice that David Smail, though he talks of pain as a guide to conduct, speaks little of his own pain. And that's just the point; even the most revisionary forms of social analysis do not revise the avoidance of vulnerability, the avoidance which seems to me to be so central to conventional masculine socialization.

The lesson I learn from my own practice is, then, that when social analysis and mythopoetics are brought together, the "ideal-typical" procedures of social theory will almost inevitably dominate the partnership. Robert Bly shows his awareness of a very similar problem in an article on the initiation

of the rider (approximately the ego), the horse (approximately the body), and the hawk (the transpersonal or spiritual aspect of the person); he concludes his discussion of the initiation of the horse with the comment that he “prefer[s] not to use psychological jargon in order to define the horse more clearly—that would merely be to ignore the whole problem by letting the rider control the argument.”<sup>19</sup> The rider will control the argument because, as Berman points out, modern academic discourse refuses participating consciousness, and because currently prestigious theories that focus on society, language, ideology and power, whatever their other contributions, intensify rather than diminish this refusal.

However if approaching the body and psyche in men with the “ideal-typical” procedures of sociology involves “ignor[ing] the whole problem,” so, too, does avoiding the issue of power and offering sweeping generalizations instead of differentiated social analysis. In searching for a way in which mythopoetics could make a contribution to critical social analysis without being rewritten by its partner, I came across a discussion of the relationship between depth psychology and socio-political understanding in Andrew Samuels’ *The Political Psyche*:

The central features of depth psychology . . . may also be the ways and styles in which it should make its contribution to social science. Not only saying something *about* irrationality, emotion, personality, creativity, morality—but saying something *with and through* these thematics, and with and through dream, fantasy and passion.<sup>20</sup>

If I translate his argument into the terms of my discussion, I come up with the following: the contribution of mythopoetics to social analysis may be to discuss issues of irrationality, emotions, the body, and so on in men in ways that not only say something about these topics, but say something with and through these thematics and with and through image, myth, and the passion of participating consciousness.

When I began this article, I was hoping to establish a dialogue between mythopoetic and feminist social perspectives. Specifically, I hoped that my discussion of the theme of men’s wounds and pain would lead to a clearer sense of the differing contributions that each of these perspectives could provide and to a proposal for a closer working relationship between the two. If I still find a difficulty with this last part of the project, I do not think it is simply because I recognize justified feminist suspicion of mythopoetic obliviousness to class and power. It is also because I see men, as well as women, as a shifting territory where the unconscious, the emotions, the sensations,

the experience of social situatedness, the use and abuse of power all relate but are not identical with each other. I can just about imagine a way of writing that would do justice to this territory, that would move between *mimesis* and analysis, that would be sometimes imagistic and exploratory and sometimes linear and explanatory, but I, for one, can't yet do it. What I can do is conclude that mythopoetics point to an essential part of this project, and its loss would most likely move us back to a discourse that is entirely *about* men. Such a discourse is inevitably incomplete. Thus, I view the decline of interest in mythopoetics, if decline it is, with much more gloom than most of my academic colleagues.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This paper began in a series of conversations with my friend Dr. Max Innes, whose responses have been very valuable to me but who, of course, bears no responsibility for what I have done with them.

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# Cultural Daddy-ism and Male Hysteria

DAVID M. WEED

There is a proverb which says, A pig may fly, but it isn't a likely bird.

Augustus De Morgan, *A Budget of Paradoxes*

THIS ESSAY HAD ITS GENESIS AT 2 A.M. near the beginning of a cold April a couple of years ago. A week earlier, my wife had brought home a library copy of Robert Bly's *Iron John: A Book About Men*.<sup>1</sup> I had opened the book a few times at random and had become more troubled each time at Bly's notions of masculinity. Then one evening I read the Preface before going to bed, which was, I suppose, rather like eating a mental pepperoni pizza: I woke up a few hours later thinking about it—and feeling angry. I was just then becoming familiar with the early anthologies on masculinity such as *Men in Feminism*<sup>2</sup> and *Engendering Men*<sup>3</sup> and studies such as Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies*.<sup>4</sup> Academic texts all, they had seduced me into thinking that nowadays masculinity must be written as a “progressive” story, which deconstructs and undermines “traditional masculinity”: that set of historically received (though also historically variable) assumptions about men's gender role and gendered power that determines, for the most part, both the textual and political reality of contemporary Western culture. Bly's book challenged me with a popular, retroactive vision, which shook me out of my reverie of happy theoretical consensus. It also, however, reinforced for me the importance of gender politics as an everyday cultural practice: if academic studies of masculinity cannot work their way outside the “ivory tower,” then any understandings that we gain are no more than empty signifiers. We may discuss, for example, the seduction, simulation, and breakdown of the unity of the male subject, but cultural forces embodied by agents

such as Bly ideologically reproduce a masculinity that has embedded within the real dangers of the history of patriarchy.

In a sense, I understand how it feels to be politically disoriented, positioned on the margins of a culture that continues to reproduce traditional masculinity. Despite general claims of sympathy with feminism, the “men’s movement” has established itself, ironically, as the caretaker of those ideological constructions of men and women against which feminists have battled most adamantly. Its radical conservatism, behind its mask of progressivism, shows that profeminist men need—for now, at least—to force a plurality of politics: a sense of “men’s movements.” One of our first tasks, therefore, must be to show why the “mythopoetic” vision of masculinity must be discredited. Not only does Bly reproduce a species of traditional masculinity (though, because it is threatened, a hysterical version of it), but he does so on some disturbing grounds, ranging from a misuse of psychoanalysis to a misunderstanding of the history of the forces that have shaped contemporary masculinity. “Popular culture” is Bly’s main social target, because it has made men “soft.” His fear of the feminization of contemporary men leads him to propose a “mythic” version of masculinity, which seems designed to suppress or at least provide male regulation of that dangerous femininity:

It is in the old myths that we hear, for example, of Zeus energy, that positive leadership energy in men, which popular culture constantly declares does not exist; from King Arthur we learn the value of the male mentor in the lives of young men; we hear from the Iron John story the importance of moving from the mother’s realm to the father’s realm; and from all initiation stories we learn how essential it is to leave our parental expectations entirely and find a second father or “second King.” (Pp. ix–x)

Bly wishes to shore up what he sees (erroneously) as a masculinity beleaguered by women, especially through their threatening sexuality, among the generation of men that he positions as his “cultural sons.” This essay, therefore, serves as a step toward disputing the “cultural father” of patriarchy, an anti-Oedipal, anti-text to help serve as an antidote to *Iron John*.

First, I want to sketch one of the major problems with Bly’s notions of gender. Bly’s answer to his recurring complaint that men, young men in particular, have become soft, weak, and feminine is that they must recapture a sense of their own power and masculinity through the cultural “reservoir” of “fairy stories, legends, myths, hearth stories” (p. xi). That he sees men as powerless is, of course, both inaccurate and dangerous. He marks a cultural disjuncture between traditional masculinity and what he implies, derisively,

is “New Age” masculinity, whose main fault is that it has become the victim of an “active feminine” in women. In fact, there has hardly been a rupture: “man” is still “king of the road.” He owns public space and may use it as an arena in which to rape, steal from, and generally attempt to reify women as victims. The oversight appears as only one way that Bly ignores our political and cultural reality in order to promote his fantasies.

Those who accept Bly’s version of endangered masculinity will do so because they already know other versions of this story. Men may *feel* powerless, but that feeling, encoded into men by their culture, allows them to rationalize and justify misogynistic practices. Throughout men’s lives, history and culture have trained them to translate sexual difference into male power. Society’s “discourses of sexual difference” are

complex and heterogeneous sign systems that encode—and enforce—differences between the sexes. . . . Anatomy is not destiny, but biological differences between the sexes have, throughout human history, been translated by social institutions into codes of behavior and law that privilege men over women irrespective of class.<sup>5</sup>

By misunderstanding the social and historical implications of Bly’s program, men may feel entitled to reproduce the misogyny for which *Iron John*, as a modern monument to misogyny, stands. We must not allow men to walk ignorantly into the same old stories of masculinity, applauding on the way, as does the reviewer for *Fortune*, who calls *Iron John* “an antidote to 25 years of strident feminism. . . . It’s also dumb. But better dumb than numb. Go, Bob!”<sup>6</sup>

The cheerleading misogyny of the *Fortune* reviewer bothers me less than the more insidious misogyny of *Iron John* itself, in which Bly attempts to disavow his project’s antifeminist stance. He generally does so obtusely, by gratuitously tossing “and women” into his text at odd and usually inappropriate times. He makes a similar move in relation to homosexual men, whom he mentions—condescendingly—once, in his Preface, by saying that “this book speaks to heterosexual men but does not exclude homosexual men. . . . The mythology as I see it does not make a big distinction between homosexual and heterosexual men” (p. x). To be both serious and facetious, however, the boy in the “Iron John” tale that serves as Bly’s key to masculine mythology does not become Iron John’s lover, but rather reaches the end of the story in a traditional heterosexual dénouement of marriage to the king’s daughter. The sudden disavowals of difference always serve most strongly to condemn the rest of the text by creating monstrous ironies. In this essay,

my eventual focus will be discussion of my problems with Bly's attempt to define his and my masculinity. I also want to examine two more of Bly's disavowals: the first because it most clearly highlights the problem of men trying to recapture (as though it were ever lost) traditional masculinity, and the second because it holds the key to Bly's hysteria about his position as a man in contemporary culture.

The first disavowal concerns Bly's elision of the power structure in patriarchy that has allowed and even tacitly promoted violence against women. Near the beginning of his book, Bly argues that, to stop men from being "soft" and "receptive," they need the "ability . . . to shout and be fierce." Then he disavows the power relationship that such behavior suggests: this ability, he says, "does not imply domination, treating people as if they were objects, demanding land or empire, holding on to the Cold War—the whole model of machismo" (p. 27). He also disavows the violence of fierceness by calling violent men "stuck in the warrior mode," the cure for which—in a point to which I will return—becomes male mothering and a ritual homosocial bond (p. 191). Bly's disavowals, within the framework of *Iron John* itself, supposedly counteract the swords, war, wounds, and fighting that Bly repeatedly reinscribes as models of "the masculine." Bly desires to separate the rituals of masculinity from everyday social reality; he fails to recognize, however, the extent to which those rituals inform and mold reality. Such rituals have been analyzed as "mythology" by Roland Barthes<sup>7</sup> and as "ideology" by Louis Althusser<sup>8</sup> and others. In all cases, the writers have made clear that such social rituals are not disconnected from but rather are part of the fabric of material reality. Bly elides the question of violence in other ways, too: for example, he skips discussion of the part of the "Iron John" tale in which Iron John kills men and dogs. Such omissions within the confines of his book, though questionable, may be innocuous, but on a cultural level, such pretended innocence shows how thoroughly Bly's conscience lies in the realm of the fairy tale. The grim(m)ness of the fairy tale lies in the pretense that we can reproduce an innocent masculinity based on metaphorical violence because we intend it to remain metaphorical.

To band together two of Bly's favorite figures from the Western literary tradition as examples, we can examine Zeus, whose "positive male energy" represents "male authority accepted for the sake of community" (p. 22), whom Bly wants to recuperate for the modern mythopoetic male, and William Butler Yeats, whom Bly fondly quotes—yet never, of course, from "Leda and the Swan," where we see "positive male energy" played out "for the sake of the community." Zeus, in the form of a swan, rapes Leda, whose

union will give birth to Helen and Clytemnestra. Yeats figures the rape as the “annunciation that founded Greece”: “A shudder in the loins engenders there / The broken wall, the burning roof and tower / And Agamemnon dead.”<sup>9</sup> To try to re-legitimize “male authority,” the patriarchal glue that, for Bly, holds Western culture together, he presents that authority as innocent of any wrongdoing: he wishes us to ignore the rape, war (starting with the Trojan War inaugurated by Helen’s beauty), and murder (Clytemnestra, in murdering Agamemnon, performs a symbolic castration) engendered at the same mythic level he piously invokes. Bly uses myth selectively to rewrite Western cultural history, attempting to convince us that—to move from one bird to another—patriarchy is walking and quacking but isn’t a duck.

Bly presents us with a bowdlerized version of patriarchal history, then follows with a certainly duplicitous move. I have mentioned one of Bly’s readings of history because I want my concern about the serious issues that Bly’s text raises for women not to get obscured in my own reading of Bly’s text. Because Bly and I share positions as white heterosexual men—though our positions differ quite markedly beyond those broad political categories—my reading of the book, which concentrates on reading it from those positions, cannot have cultural implications equivalent to readings that women and other men may provide. I may be politically opposed to Bly, but I cannot fear him precisely because he reinscribes my position at the apex of a cultural hierarchy. Rather, my work may serve a better function—in a turn on Bly’s subtitle, *A Book About Men*—as a paper for men. Such a reaction to Bly becomes an intricate matter, to which I will finally return, in that men have to find a way to reject Bly’s vision that will equal breaking with the history with which Bly remains consistent: a history that pretends to be for our manly good but that must strain to argue its innocence to assuage its guilt over preserving manhood at the expense of others—primarily women.

Bly’s second disavowal concerns his use of psychoanalytic configurations of “mother.” Given his penchant for mythology, his use of Jungian archetypes comes as no surprise, but more challenging and odd are his readings of Sigmund Freud. That his reading of Freud is neither particularly deep nor current indicates why *Iron John* becomes in many ways a straw target: he seems occasionally aware of but unable to use fruitfully anything that has happened recently in feminist or psychoanalytic theory. He seems to understand, for example, poststructuralist notions of identity: he opens his first chapter by mentioning that the “identity of the American man has not been constant . . . over decades, or even within a single decade” (p. 1). But he also takes repeated pains to base masculinity in genetics, hoping to naturalize

the old stories of masculinity: "Men receive the warrior gift . . . from impersonal warrior mansions high in the genetic heavens" (p. 191). If, on the level of the nature of masculine identity, *Iron John* becomes laughable as it strains to posit a definitive masculinity, then his use of psychoanalysis becomes a more serious matter. His interpretation of Freud's version of the father's role becomes so unproblematic, and the mother's role becomes so overly vilified, that he manages, incredibly, to outgun Freud in the matter of misogyny.

"Mother" becomes the main scapegoat for everything currently "wrong" with American men; "wrong" translates into contemporary men's failure to conform to traditional masculinity—their naiveté, softness, and reluctance to wield the phallic power that Bly constantly employs as metaphor. His fear that women have come to dominate men appears in the way that Bly chastises the contemporary "strong or life-giving" women that he pretends to praise. Contemporary women choose "soft men to be their lovers" so that they can become mothers; the soft men are "in a way, perhaps . . . their sons" (p. 3). If he occasionally praises women, noting their capacity to nurture or their "marvelous" role as mothers—and even these compliments, in the context of contemporary feminism, appear backhanded and patronizing—such praise amounts to no more than another disavowal, an attempt to mask the repeated passages that bespeak men's castration anxiety. "Keith," for example, who has been "closer to women than to men" and who "works with women and [is] alert to the concerns of women" dreams that he runs with a clan of she-wolves: they all arrive at a riverbank and, as they all look in the water at their own reflections, he sees that he has no face (p. 17). The dominant-woman-as-mother is not the only target for Bly's misogyny—as we will see, he includes "feminized" men—but he makes it clear that women must (again) bear the blame for men's feminization because of their desire to castrate them: in this case, by robbing "Keith" of his face. Bly's book is largely a primer for men to learn to dominate their mothers, and he appears to intend that lesson as a means for them to learn to dominate all other women. *The Odyssey* becomes a primary mythic legend for Bly's retelling of the way men are supposed to display their phallic power: Odysseus must "lift" his "sword" when he approaches Circe, "who stands for a certain kind of maternal energy" (p. 4).

Bly makes man's main obstacle to his phallic masculinity (allegedly only mythic) battle with "the dark side of the Great Mother," who, in "ordinary life is an enraged woman" (p. 77). Bly discovers his poetic language in describing her: she is "the black darling, the one with boar tusks coming down

from her lips . . . the Rageful one, the Dark side of the Moon, the Ogre who lies on the back side of the moon with bat wings and ripped-apart birds” (p. 77). (Should we wonder that he meets so many enraged women?) The mother’s role continually becomes an attempt to steal or to diminish male phallic power: if the mother wounds a man through her “possessiveness,” he feels “inadequate and too small” (p. 72).

Bly’s “Mommy-bashing” finds perhaps its most troubling component in the way that it rewrites the Freudian Oedipal drama. According to Freud, the boy must undergo a tremendous psychic battle to overcome his fixation on his mother. Bly erases the boy’s Oedipal feelings for his mother, however; the problem becomes, not the boy’s, but the *mother’s*. “Too much mother” means, for Bly, a “psychic incest” in which the mother’s clinging, smothering desire becomes all-important, as though, in terms of the Greek drama, the fault lies solely with Jocasta rather than with Oedipus as well. Bly’s fear of but respect for contemporary woman lies in her “emotional richness” (p. 186): of course he finds her traditionally feminine “emotion” most praiseworthy. As a mother figure, however, woman’s “feelings” allegedly create a pressure on the boy—her “psychic incest”—which, again in covertly sexual terms, make the boy feel “shame over his inadequacy” (p. 185). The union, on a “feeling” level, between mother and son is always caused by the mother: “American mothers sometimes confide details of their private lives to their small sons, details that might better go to adults their own age” (p. 185). Bly’s ultimate horror over Mother’s sexuality occurs in one of Bly’s imaginary scenarios, when the young boy yells that he wants to “let the Wild Man out!” and Mother responds, “Give Mommy a kiss” (p. 12). Thus, for the boy to give up desire for his mother becomes a simple matter, because, Bly tells him, it’s all his mother’s fault. He can feel comfortable with himself, Bly suggests, because his sense of shame derives from the woman who has tusks hanging from her lips: an image implying that mother’s tusked vagina threatens to penetrate him with her sexuality and emotion.

Compared to Bly’s use of “Mommy,” “Father” merits little invective. That American culture has “Too Little Father” (p. 93)—again the man’s role becomes one of (loss of) phallic power—is, of course, Bly’s point. In psychoanalytic terms, however, Bly practically erases the boy’s perception of a competition between himself and his father over the mother. Bly notes at one point that, “for thousands and thousands of years,” the Oedipal drama played itself out because fathers and sons lived “in close—murderously close—proximity” (p. 19), but the idealized relationship between fathers and sons never again carries any other force than a positive one in *Iron John*. All

of his overdetermination of the sexual tension between mothers and sons becomes minimized when he discusses fathers and sons. Bly quotes Bruno Bettelheim, who

noticed . . . that in most traditional cultures Freud's version of father-son hatred doesn't hold. The wordless tension, which he assumed to be universal and based on sexual jealousy, was, in Bettelheim's opinion, true mostly in Vienna in the late nineteenth century. (P. 93)

Curiously, Bly has no other problems with universalizing Freud. His use of Bettelheim seems understandable, however, considering that, for Bly, father and son have no reason to be jealous of each other, since all the sexual tension derives from the mother anyway. Because, at heart, Bly's prescription for our culture lies in reinscribing "plenty of father" (p. 93), he occludes any psychic difficulty in the relationship between fathers and sons, making, as we will see, the ritual, homosocial union between father and son the "happily ever after" of *his* fairy tale. "Plenty of father" makes the father the agent of a "body-on healing" (p. 93) of his son: a healing necessary because of the implied sickness of all those "female frequencies" (p. 94).

We need, therefore, to question why Bly proposes such a radically retroactive, misogynist vision. In other words, what does Bly want? Bly says he is looking for contact, perhaps, with his own father (p. 24), but that answer only mystifies the way he positions himself within his text. In terms of *cultural* filial relations, Bly notes that, during his twenties and thirties, he fulfilled the Oedipal role of the son: "I attacked every older man in the literary community who was within arrow range, and enjoyed seeing the arrows pass through his body, arrows impelled by the tense energy bottled in my psyche" (p. 23). Bly's apprehension that his position as "son" has passed places him now, he suggests, in the position of a cultural father. The reason for his occlusion of any psychic turmoil between the father and the son becomes clear when we look at how *impenetrable* Bly wants his current position as cultural father to be. That the traditional father, also embodied in the figure of the king, becomes the real hero of *Iron John* should not be surprising. But fathers and kings—those men (and of course it is men) "in . . . position[s] of power" (p. 22)—must, for Bly, occupy positions of unquestioned authority. Sons, of course, must obey, must not assume that power equals corruption and oppression (p. 22). The Greeks become his model because they "understood and praised a positive male energy that has accepted authority" (p. 22). Our culture, Bly says, has a "hunger for the father," which "transmutes into a hunger for the King" (p. 103).

Bly figures the “King” as traditionally masculine: scopophilic from “his room high in the castle among the air and sunlight” and a force of dominating mental power who “suggests solar power and the holy intellect” (p. 105). Most important, the king represents a nostalgia for a coherent male subjectivity and for visible masculine power. He sheepishly pines for the Middle Ages: “I am not saying that the king-killing was an error,” he notes, but he also figures the end of kingship as the source of our political and psychological distress, because “our visual imagination becomes confused when we can no longer see the physical king” (p. 109). Bly longs for a masculine representative who “has arrived at unity; he is undistorted, unmingled . . .” (p. 105).

His reading of the male subject indicates how thoroughly *Iron John* participates in contemporary male hysteria. Bly’s work appears as a testimony to

[t]hat fateful point where the specular coherence of unitary male subjectivity shatters, and what remains is but the violent residues of the death of the old male cock. Crash male subjectivity . . . as the hysterical sign of the fatal breakdown of the symbolic order of the unitary male subject.<sup>10</sup>

Bly has to wave his phallic weapons at Mommy and her stand-ins out of fear that his power won’t be recognized. The phallus cannot be hidden any longer, he implies: only hysterical phallic exhibitionism can restore men to power. Bly’s men’s movement is about power, of course, as Susan Faludi notes in *Backlash*.<sup>11</sup> In her section on Bly, in fact, she gives us a portrait of the artist as hysterical male subject: he shouts, scowls, and paces during a lecture, sticking his face in that of “a frail, elderly woman” and yelling into the microphone (pp. 310–11). Faludi’s portrait finally shows egotism and insensitivity. The mention of non-violence (Faludi records that one man in the audience mentions Gandhi) becomes one of the “weak ideas” of “soupy philosophers” to Bly (p. 311). Bly’s book and his public self as an extension of that work appear emblematic of contemporary “crash male subjectivity.” The problem lies not only in that subjectivity’s realization of its lack of masculine coherence and unity but also in its sense of the historical fracture that has caused the crash. Bly implies that popular culture has been the sole, and more important (though also historically inaccurate), the recent, demon that has attacked “the respect for masculine integrity” and is “determined to destroy respect” for “Zeus energy” (p. 23). Bly’s misreading of the history of masculinity in popular culture—his belief that the generation of men that follows him is the first one to suffer the allegedly debilitating effects of ef-feminacy—lends a note of alarm to *Iron John*. His misinterpretation has

arisen, it seems, from his attempt to gain access to a patriarchal power that his culture has promised (particularly through its myths, legends, and fairy tales) but (so it appears to his crash male subjectivity) has not delivered. In other words, if younger men, because of popular culture, are suddenly not *really* men, then he has no one over whom he can wield his authority. In his attempt to legitimate his position as father, therefore, he tries to mend the breaks between his sons' and his own "masculine" subjectivity: the father's authority must be unquestioned, and his relationship with his sons must be only a lesson in the reproduction of a perfect, unthreatened, and "healthy" masculinity.

Indeed, a homosocial bond between father and son, in which the father asserts his dominance, becomes Bly's ritual prescription—his book's happy ending. In the "boar ritual," which Bly derives from *The Odyssey*, the "grand-fathers" wound the son and leave a scar. Even though "[i]t seems" to Bly that the wound "is not specifically a sexual wound" (p. 216), at other places in the book, which I mentioned earlier, the boar becomes part of the Great Mother figure, who has "boar tusks coming down from her lips" (p. 77). In the section about the "boar ritual," Bly tries to disassociate the boar from his notions of femininity, but he cannot escape making the two analogous. He calls the boar a "he," but the images associated with it are feminine: the boar is a figure of "the terror of impetuous forces in nature, such as floods, firefalls, waterfalls, wind-weather"; "he" is also associated with the "new moon" (p. 212; see also Theweleit). Bly does not directly associate the boar ritual with his idea that men need "male mothering" (p. 190), partly because he seems to need to distance himself from the sexuality and "femininity" present in the boar ritual. Bly appears alternately to need but to be unnerved by the proposition of occupying the position of the mother. The need to occupy the "masculine" and "feminine" parental roles also appears to be part of his male hysteria. In essence, Bly's project—his fantasy, perhaps unconscious—is to make motherhood safe by eliminating those dangerous women from it. The project seems partly to terrify him, however, because of the sexual undertones of the homosocial bond.

His compulsion to co-opt the position of mother for men but to shy from the "femininity" that such a move implies is also symptomatic of the anathema that Bly reserves for any traces of the feminine within the masculine, a move that appears to begin innocently enough. He says that there is "something wonderful about . . . the practice of men welcoming their own 'feminine' consciousness and nurturing it"—though we could question the irony in his tone, the way he makes those "feminine" words "wonderful," "wel-

coming,” and “nurturing” appear somehow swarmy—but then he adds, “yet I have the sense that there is something wrong” (p. 2). Within a page, he has challenged men by questioning their virility in terms that suggest sexual dysfunction: the “soft male” has “little vitality to offer” (p. 3). Curiously, Bly also displays a trait that occurs frequently in misogynist texts. The man who hates women also hates men who exhibit any traces of femininity: gender traitors are serious criminals. Gender-reversal among “younger men”—his cultural sons—preoccupies and terrifies Bly. He claims that the traditional roles of a “passive feminine” and an “active masculine” are being reversed: women are “coming out into activity just as the men are passing them going the other way, into passivity” (pp. 60–61). Though he attempts to praise women for their “coming out,” he eventually must repeal women’s power in order to re-establish male authority. Men, he suggests, must out-active the active woman to insure patriarchal dominance, particularly in the home. For Bly, men’s “passivity” takes root in the domestic sphere, where the man becomes a mouse in his refusal to stand up to his wife. The “domestic front” thus becomes the battleground in which men must learn to wrest power from women (Faludi, p. 310). Bly’s portrait of contemporary men as victims to their wives and mothers leads Bly to analyze domestic situations in ways that have dangerous implications. For instance, the child who has suffered from incest, Bly says, “can do nothing about it” (p. 147). True enough, but Bly also suggests that the child remains a victim as an adult, feeling the “confusion of shame” (p. 148) partly by repeating the abuse. Bly ignores that the adult’s role in incest, however, is no longer as victim but as *victimizer*.

His patronizing attitude toward those “soft males,” who are “lovely, valuable people—I like them” (p. 2), rhetorically weights his work in order to let Bly position himself as “the man,” the definer of masculinity. From my position—in my mid-thirties, I suppose I am one of those “lovely, valuable” younger men he challenges—I question his denigrating portrayal of his “unmanly” cultural sons. Ironically, as a textual embodiment of a cultural father, Bly appears more intellectually foolish than the popular culture that he derides for its representations of fathers as fools and more boyish than the generation of men whose masculinity he questions. In the first case, he somehow supposes that popular culture (if, indeed, it is even feminizing to men as he indicates) can supplant thousands of years of patriarchy in Western culture: Dagwood Bumstead supposedly usurps Odysseus as the model for masculinity. In the second case, he continually derides popular culture,

at one point calling it “Disneyland culture” (p. 81), while trying, ironically, to base his model of masculinity on a fairy tale.

From my position, however, I do have to recognize the potential for my critique to become merely an Oedipal drama, in which I attack an older man in the literary community. To begin to refute that narrative, I want to mention the few parts of *Iron John* with which I agree, notably the section entitled “Learning to Shudder” (pp. 84–86). And one sentence of Bly’s in particular stands out: “Eventually a man needs to throw off all indoctrination and begin to discover for himself what the father is and what masculinity is” (p. 25).

I like that sentence because it works against the very indoctrination that the rest of *Iron John* proceeds to enact. I don’t agree that individually, as men, we can make that discovery: culture is too complex to suppose that men, as “free agents,” can make discoveries about masculinity outside its parameters. Thus, a “men’s movement,” as a political movement that investigates the cultural forces—particularly masculinity itself—that act upon men, seems to me, in essence, a good thing. Bly, however, has gotten us started on the wrong foot: his work points uncomfortably and awkwardly backward, and it stinks of a history that has attempted to keep women beneath it. Thus, simply to “kill” Bly critically cannot be the answer. That tactic is part of a violent cultural heritage of which Bly represents the most recent agent. We need, perhaps, to disinherit him. We need to refuse to accept his patrimony by understanding the seriousness behind the grim(m) fairy tale and by recognizing the injustice involved in accepting such an inheritance, which keeps us, as men, in power at an awful cost to ourselves and others.

Bly’s book can be helpful, but only if it can be used to show how many of our problems stem from its ideology of masculinity. In these days of feminist backlash and the hysterical male, we must combat the powerful drive to recuperate “the old male cock.” The drive shows up continually in *Iron John*: for example, Bly writes of a man who, one day while meditating, “saw a man of light at the end of the corridor, nine feet tall with a spear. The man of light approached and said, ‘If you don’t make something of your life, I will take it from you’” (p. 92). Fears about phallic size and the equation of size with power—“nine feet tall with a spear”—don’t just get played out in Bly’s fairy tales and anecdotes. According to research by the Kinsey Institute, American men figured the average length of an erect penis to be ten inches.<sup>12</sup> Tania Modleski may be right that “the father” must be “frankly confronted and the entire dialectic of abjection and the law worked through or else the project to beat out (or write out) the fathers is doomed to failure.”<sup>13</sup> But the

most intense pressure lies in making sure that any reformulation of the law does not rewrite itself along the lines of the old model, or the father indeed *will* "at any time . . . emerge from hiding with a vengeance" (Modleski, p. 70). The move will never be easy to make, but at least we have "fathers" such as Bly to make traditional masculinity look ridiculous under scrutiny.

I want to end with one piece of mythology Bly relates that might hold some hope for our future:

Ancient Celtic myth has an image for the end of patriarchy. . . . Eagles sit on the top branches of the sacred tree, with dead animals underneath their claws. Rotting bits of flesh fall down through the branches to the ground beneath, where the swine eat them. (P. 122)

In Bly's reading of the myth, men are the swine, and they are starving (p. 122). He does not interpret what the eagles represent, and thus his reading doesn't make particular sense. It seems to me that the eagles represent patriarchy itself as a system. Men, then, may be the pigs (chauvinist pigs?) who have had to eat the rotten meat that the patriarchal system has dropped. If men recognize the eagles and the meat for what they are, then they have two alternatives: to pretend that the meat tastes good or to stop eating. At any rate, the image allows us to see the absurdity of patriarchy, a system which so distorts men's vision that we believe that pasting eagles' wings on pigs we will be able to fly.

## NOTES

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# Iron Clint: Queer Weddings in Robert Bly's *Iron John* and Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*

MARK SIMPSON

In the seventies I began to see all over the country a phenomenon that we might call the 'soft male'. Sometimes even today when I look out at an audience, perhaps half the young males are what I'd call soft. They're lovely, valuable people—I like them—they're not interested in harming the earth or starting wars. . . . But many of these men are not happy. You quickly notice the lack of energy in them. They are life-preserving but not exactly life-giving. Ironically you often see them with strong women who positively radiate energy.

US men's movement guru Robert Bly<sup>1</sup>

Listening and talking little was the one non-convict in the group, Harris Breiman, a specialist in the men's movement who made contact with the prison through the movement council he runs in Woodstock . . .

'It's the warrior notion of the youngsters,' said Mr Velez, 37. 'So much focus on being a warrior. When I was first on Rikers Island [the prison], you had to have the right walk, the right display of aggression'.

As the group focused on prison swagger, Mr Harris cautioned that 'the warrior can have a positive direction, too. The warrior in and of itself is part of what we are. If you give away the warrior energy you're going to be a passive victim.'

*New York Times* (23 February 1993)

IN HIS BOOK *Iron John* (1990), a Jungian mythopoetic allegory-with-commentary extravaganza based on the Brothers Grimm fairytale 'Iron Hans', the poet and self-styled spiritual leader of the US men's movement Robert Bly has argued that the problem facing men today is that they have become too soft, too concerned about their 'feminine' side. They are, he says, too eager to please women, with the result that they are out of touch with the 'deep masculine', the 'warrior' who is an essential part of their psyche, making them miserable, passive and unsure of their identity. The story of Iron

John is interpreted by Bly as an instruction on how to reclaim that 'deep masculine' and the male energy that is said to go with it.

The story tells of a wild man covered from head to foot in hair (whose rusty iron colour gives him the name 'Iron John') who is kept in a cage in the courtyard of a castle. The key to the cage is kept by the Queen under her pillow. The young prince, playing in the courtyard, loses his prized 'golden ball' through the bars of the cage. Iron John persuades the boy to steal the key and release him in exchange for the return of his ball. But once Iron John is released, the boy is frightened of being punished by his parents and runs off to live in the forest with Iron John. Their partnership does not last, however, and the boy returns to civilization (in fact a kingdom adjacent to his parents') disguised as a peasant. Nevertheless he is able to call on Iron John's assistance from the edge of the forest whenever he needs it, and in this way wins great battles and eventually the hand of the princess.

Bly stresses the timeless, pre-Christian origins of the story and offers it as an antidote to what he sees as the present-day dearth of images of 'real men' in popular culture and the prevalence of 'stereotypical sissies like Woody Allen—a negative John Wayne.'<sup>2</sup> It becomes apparent that Bly's obsession with ancient narratives of manhood is a liking for a kind of heritage masculinity, an Olde Worlde natural virility with added bran: 'One of the things we do is to go back to the very old stories five thousand years ago when the view of a man, what a man is, is far more healthy.'<sup>3</sup>

In effect Bly is telling us that the 'unhealthy' soft men, constipated on their modern diet of processes, domesticated manliness are in *sore* need of a change in their intake of role models; what is needed is the raw *fibrous* manhood of Iron John (© Robert Bly Bakeries Inc.) to restore their 'authentic' regular maleness and relieve them of their haemorrhoidal 'feminine' condition.

To restore his strength, Bly suggests, the soft man must stop taking his cue from 'mother', ignore the negative John Waynes and 'descend down into the male psyche and accept what's dark down there':<sup>3</sup> get in touch with the 'wild man', the 'hairy man': release Iron John from his cage.

Bly's ideas, which may appear bizarre and even comical to an English readership, have gained a remarkable popularity in the United States. Since the mid-1980s tens of thousands of American males have attended weekends in the forest based around his Wild Man masculinity and the 'need' to counteract the 'feminization' of modern men. As *Iron John* became a best-seller, the American men's movement went mainstream and gained respectability, its representatives often consulted on the burning men's issues of the

day and even involved in prisoner rehabilitation schemes (Bly's ideas are shamelessly employed to explain the opposite phenomenon of 'soft men': the violently non-feminine behaviour of maladjusted males, suggesting that they are overcompensating).

American popular culture too began to show evidence of being influenced by these ideas, most notably Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992), which is analysed below and compared with the Bly philosophy as told in *Iron John*. The two texts are examined alongside one another not simply to demonstrate the permeation of Bly's ideas in American popular culture but also to illustrate their remarkable *symmetry* with the work of Eastwood (a masculinity 'guru' from an age before the men's movement) as well as the secret of their appeal and the reason why they will probably not export well: their intimate connection, not to 'ancient' conceptions of manhood, but to the New World and the American Western tradition.

*Unforgiven* features Clint Eastwood as William Munny, a widowed Kansas pig farmer struggling in the 1880s to raise his two children single-handedly and live by the values which his dead wife, a strong Christian, instilled in him—putting his murderous past as the 'meanest sonofabitch in the West' behind him. We see him trying unsuccessfully to separate his pigs which are dying of fever. Into this scene of uneasy domesticity rides an impetuous young man by the name of The Schofield Kid (Jaimz Woolvett). In awe of Munny's reputation as a gun-slinger he tries to persuade him to be his partner for a contract killing in Big Whiskey, Wyoming, a revenge killing of two cowboys for 'raping and killing a prostitute' (in fact her face was slashed). Munny refuses. 'My wife,' he says, covered in pig shit, looking tired, old, and defeated, 'cured me of my sinful ways.'

Munny has become a sad, soft man, trying to please his dead wife. The boy rides off disgusted: 'You're not William Munny!' he shouts, rejecting this 'negative John Wayne'.

Munny looks at his dying pigs (are they dying of shame?), his hungry children and his filth-covered clothes and realizes his failure as a 'soft man'. Finally the need to feed his children sends him out after the Schofield Kid and his disowned past. But he still has not 'accepted what is dark down there', he is still in thrall to his dead wife: he is still without masculine energy. So we see him fail to hit a single bottle when practising with his revolver and his horse shies away from him when he tries to mount it, causing him to fall flat on his back (the horses, like the pigs, instinctively *know* when their master is a weak, soft male). His young son looks on ashamed.

Mounted at last—but looking very *queasy* in the saddle—Munny looks up Ned Logan (Morgan Freeman), his black partner from the bad old days and persuades him to join him while Ned's Indian wife looks after Munny's children; the pair of them catch up with the Kid and ride on to Big Whiskey.

In Big Whiskey the fragile Munny has caught a chill as a result of the heavy rain during the ride (and quite possibly his Christian refusal to partake in the cockle-warming liquor the other men drink to keep the rain out). True to the memory of his wife he remains downstairs in the saloon while the other two visit the whores upstairs. In swaggers Sheriff Little Bill Daggett (Gene Hackman) with his deputies. He has heard about the bounty and is determined to keep hired guns out of 'his' town. Daggett demands and gets Munny's weapon and then proceeds to kick seven shades of shit out of him. Munny does not resist Daggett's boot as it drives into his chest and stomach. Later, he is found by his partners and carried away to a barn where the whores nurse him. 'I can't believe he didn't do anything,' exclaims The Schofield Kid.

Munny still has no energy, he is still passive, he is without his 'golden ball', because he has yet to steal the key from under his wife's pillow, escape her power and set his wild man free. In Bly's words:

We see more and more passivity in men. . . . If his wife or girlfriend, furious, shouts that he is a 'chauvinist', a 'sexist', a 'man', he doesn't fight back, but just takes it. . . . If he were a bullfighter he would remain where he was when the bull charges, would not even wave his shirt or turn his body, and the horn would go directly in. After each fight friends have to carry him on their shoulders to the hospital.<sup>4</sup>

In 'hospital' Munny develops a terrible fever and nearly dies. But when the fever breaks and he recovers, it transpires his skills and self-assurance are returning; he has begun to accept his 'true' nature; and with that acceptance comes his *virility*. With The Schofield Kid and Logan he corners the partner of the cowboy who mutilated the whore. Munny asks Ned to do the shooting because, as we know, he is now such a poor shot. Ned only manages to wound the boy and, hearing his moans and pleas, cannot bring himself to finish him off. Taking Ned's rifle Munny kills the boy—with one shot. He has become a killer again and a *man*. But his restoration is still not complete: he shows far too much compassion for the boy, allowing his friends to bring him water before murdering him. It takes another 'fever', another 'kicking', to send him into the very darkest depths of his psyche.

That 'kicking' comes in the form of Ned's death. Distressed by the killing

of the cowboy and his loss of nerve, Ned tries to return home to his wife. He pays dearly for his attempt to renounce his past and his 'warrior' inside. On the way he is captured by a posse and handed over to Daggett who tortures and then kills him.<sup>5</sup>

When Munny hears this he is grief-stricken but instead of showing it he finally takes the elevator ride to the basement of his psyche and embraces whole-heartedly its darkness. He rides into town, single-handedly killing Daggett and most of his deputies, ordering the quaking survivors to bury Ned's body which has been propped up in an open coffin outside the saloon with the sign 'This is what we do to assassins' around his neck. They obey him, now recognizing him at last as William Munny, '*the meanest sonofabitch in the West*'.

In terms of the film's development he is finally restored as 'William Munny', having decided to embrace his dark destiny; in terms of the audience's relationship to the film he is Clint Eastwood again, a reassuring Good Bad Guy, replacing the tormented, ineffectual, *embarrassing* Good Good Guy; and for Bly he is a soft man made hard, a Woody Allen self-doubting figure transformed into John Wayne, no longer life-preserving but life-taking and thus life-giving (it is the destroyer, the warrior who has the power to grant life just as surely as to take it). He is imperfect, certainly; pained, definitely, but he is an authentic man, no longer trying to please women, true to *himself*. As Eastwood himself has said, 'Munny gave her his word that he wouldn't pick up the guns, but it's what he knows; it's the accident of who he is.'<sup>6</sup>

In his preface to *Iron John* Bly goes out of his way to reassure that his masculinism does not present a threat to women.

I want to make it clear that this book does not seek to turn men against women, nor to return men to the domineering mode that has led to repression of women and their values for centuries. The thought in this book does not constitute a challenge to the women's movement. The two movements are related to each other, but each moves on a separate timetable.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately the 'separate timetables' are very much in conflict: there is only room for one train on Mr Bly's railroad, something that he is not afraid to admit out of print. At a two-day lecture at the Jung Centre in San Francisco he harangued a mixed audience shouting, 'There's too much passivity and naivete in American men today. There's a disease going around, and women have been spreading it. Starting in the sixties, the women have really invaded men's areas and treated them like boys.'<sup>8</sup>

Women *are* the problem. It is women's influence and power that must be destroyed in order to free Iron John and save the 'soft' men. Bly's 'ancient', 'healthy', 'warrior' masculinity is one that women will recognize as not so very ancient or healthy at all; just the social imperative for male dominance/ domination at any cost ('If you give away your warrior energy you're going to be a passive victim'—i.e. a 'pussy') that they only very recently began to roll back. Bly's prescription of how men should escape the 'power of mother's bed' is also familiar: employ the threat of violence. In his book he advises men to show women 'the sword', being careful to add, 'But showing a sword does not necessarily mean fighting. It can also suggest a joyful decisiveness'—the joy of a bully, in other words.<sup>9</sup>

The bully's power, as any woman or man who has suffered under one will tell, does not rest upon his *use* of his fists, so much as the threat of them. This seems to be what Bly is encouraging men to do. But of course the threat of violence eventually has to be backed up by something more substantial than 'mythopoetics'. According to Susan Faludi, at a 1987 seminar Bly revealed just what 'showing the sword' meant. A man in the audience complained, 'When we tell women our desires they tell us we're wrong.' 'So, then bust them in the mouth,' Bly instructed. After someone pointed out that this promoted violence against women Bly modified his statement, 'Yes. I meant, hit those women verbally!'<sup>10</sup>

Bly's *Iron John*, for all its careful prevarication and prefaces, its airy-fairy 'mythopoetics' and its earnest scholarliness, is really a paean to male violence: 'show the sword', 'get in touch with the wild man', 'accept what's dark down there', 'bust them in the mouth!'

*Unforgiven*, made by a director/actor famous for his use of violence to achieve his ends, is a better story than Bly's *Iron John* and better told. Somehow a lesson in violence comes across better as a taciturn visual tutorial from The Man With No Name than the wordy, flighty 260-page volume written by a soft-bodied, white-haired, cravat-wearing poet trying on Whitman's clothes and playing with Hemingway's hunting rifle.

What is interesting about Eastwood in *Unforgiven* is the way in which, like Bly, he seems anxious to present violence no longer as a Spaghetti Western hedonistic experience, but rather as something fated: in place of the Spaghetti Western we now have the Gothic Western. 'Violence always hurts,' he told the *Guardian*. 'The new thing about *Unforgiven* is the way it hurts the perpetrators too.' Violence is no longer celebrated for its fun but for its 'nobility', its 'human tragedy'.

And like Bly's book, *Unforgiven* has a preface that appears to pre-empt any reading of the film as misogyny. At the beginning of the film a young prostitute has her face slashed for laughing at a cowboy's penis. The sheriff initially wants to horsewhip him but the brothel-owner demands compensation instead: 'After all, it's my property that has been damaged.' Daggett orders the cowboy to hand over his horses to the man. But the prostitutes refuse to accept this male 'justice' and decide to pool their savings to hire a gunman who will dispense their *own*. 'They might ride us like horses,' vows the whore 'mother'. 'But we'll show them we're not horses.'

But this nod to feminism, as in *Iron John*, is rapidly taken over by the internal logic of the plot of a film that demands that women be characterized as 'the problem'. Initially treated sympathetically, their grudge against the cowboys turns to vindictiveness. They refuse the attempts of the slasher's cute young partner to make amends by keeping his best horse from the brothel owner and offering it to the scarred girl instead. In fact the first cowboy killed is the nice boy, whose agonizing death Logan cannot stomach. Women, whether Madonnas (Munny's wife) or whores, bring trouble into this Wild West world, trouble between men and trouble with men: 'there's a disease going round and it's spread by women' (and it kills pigs).

This is why Bly's famous weekends in the forest are men-only affairs. Forget Odysseus and the Iliad; the age-old 'universal' myths of manhood that he lays claim to in an attempt to legitimize his philosophy, are as local, as close to hand, as *American* as the myth of the Western. Bly's *Iron John* is nothing more than a bad Western: 'bad' because it looks to Europe to 'authenticate' a mythology that is as home-grown as John Wayne and Huck-leberry Finn. The 'healthy man' that Bly looks for in high-falutin' translations of fancy European folk-tales and Greek myths is right on his doorstep in good ol' American chaps and stetson, thumbs hooked over his gun-belt, chewing baccy. Eastwood, in his leathery, old-timer way, knows this, and that is why he won Best Picture and Best Director from the Academy Awards for his retelling of this myth.

Both men are American romantics (but give me Eastwood's grim romanti-cism any day over Bly's lush prose trying to be plain), in love with the wild-erness Eros, an Eros founded on the exclusion of women and the 'pure' love of male for male, the object of which is, as Leslie Fiedler put it, 'to *outwit* woman, that is to keep her from trapping the male through marriage into civilization and Christianity. The wilderness Eros is, in short, not merely an anti-cultural, but an anti-Christian, a Satanic Eros.'<sup>11</sup> The Queen must be outwitted and the key stolen from under her pillow to allow the Wild Man

to escape from the cage of marriage and civilization and flee with him into the forests. Bly's emphasis on the pre-Christian status of his myths is a belief in their pagan/Satanic power to roll back the 'feminization' of man in Western Christian civilization, in the same way that in the Western the frontier is 'unsettled' and beyond the rule of law; Bly looks to the past while the Western looks to the horizon to achieve the same ends. (Of course, the Hollywood Western also looks to the past: the horizon is that of nineteenth-century America before the closure of the frontier.)

In *Unforgiven* the pure love of male for male, the romance of the West, is that of 'partners': it is taken for granted that *both* cowboys, rather than just the slasher, should pay the penalty: the bond between such men is closer and even more indissoluble than marriage. This is also the story of Munny and Ned: Ned leaves his wife the moment his old partner comes riding by.

And as so often happens in American dreams of the wilderness, the 'partner' sought by the white man 'lighting out for the territory' is black. For once 'civilization is disavowed and Christianity disowned. . . . The wanderer feels himself more motherless child than free man. To be sure, there is a substitute for wife or mother presumably waiting in the green heart of nature: the natural man, the good companion, pagan and unashamed—Queequeg or Chingachook or Nigger Jim.'<sup>12</sup> Ned is Munny's first port of call on leaving his farm. Ned appears to agree to his request only because his old flame has asked him to, rather than out of any real desire for the bounty. In the tradition of masculine passion denoted by its very understatement the film makes clear their deep and 'pure' love for one another, one that is unspoken but fought to the death for.

This is precisely what Munny is prepared to do when he learns of Daggett's killing of Ned (whose own death can be read as a punishment for turning his back on Munny). This is the diabolical denouement of this Western: in embracing 'what is dark down there', calling Iron John from the edge of the forest, Munny is making a Faustian pact. Munny rides into town at night and sees Ned's corpse propped up in a coffin outside the saloon lit by flickering candles, ghastly and satanic: As Fiedler points out, 'the dark-skinned companion becomes the 'Black Man', which is a traditional name for the Devil himself'. In avenging/saving Ned, Munny is making an infernal vow, putting him forever outside the reach of his wife, Christianity and civilization. He is Huckleberry Finn, determined not to give in to Aunt Sally's threats and reveal the whereabouts of his beloved Nigger Jim, embracing damnation.

'All right, then I'll *go* to Hell' . . . It was awful thoughts and awful words, but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never thought no more about reforming. I shoved the whole thing out of my head, and said I would take up wickedness again, which was in my line, being brung up to it, and the other warn't.<sup>13</sup>

'It's what he knows, the accident of who he is.' The Faustian pact is a 'queer' marriage. Munny is Ishmael clinging to Queequeg's coffin in *Moby Dick*, saved but damned by Ned's corpse, married to him forever in a way that the living Ned would not or could not allow; it is a marriage that puts Munny forever outside civilization, sends him to Hell—but in his own way.

But however 'queer' the marriage, it must never be physically consummated: the diabolical, pagan homosocial world of men is atoned for in the 'purity' of their love for one another. Ned's death guarantees the chastity of Munny's marriage to him.<sup>14</sup>

Likewise in *Iron John* the preface tells us that 'Most of the language in this book speaks to heterosexual men but does not exclude homosexual men.'<sup>15</sup> In fact *all* of the language speaks to heterosexual men; homosexuality is as *necessarily* invisible (but always present) in the world of Bly as that of Eastwood's West; 'the past' is used as a circumvention of the irresolvable problem of homo-desire: 'It wasn't until the eighteenth century that people ever used the term homosexual; before that time gay [*sic*] men were understood simply as part of the community of men.' In other words, 'I deal in timeless mythologies of masculinity and since homosexuality is not timeless I shall ignore it.'

As usual Bly employs disingenuousness dipped in an 'inclusive' aniseed liberalism to throw his enemies off the scent. Despite the claim to a 'universal' myth, he makes a very clear distinction between homosexual and heterosexual men. His whole mythology, like that of the West, depends upon it—but only to *exclude* homosexual men. Bly's masculinism and the tale of *Iron John* depend upon the implicit myth of 'pure love' between men: explicitness—i.e. actual homosexuality in general or the homosexual in particular and especially—threatens to bring it low and spoil it for everybody. This wilful blindness becomes laughably clear in Bly's analysis of the ending of the *Iron John* story:

The young man's father and mother were among those invited to the wedding, and they came; they were in great joy because they had given up hope that they would ever see their dear son again.

While all the guests were sitting at the table for the marriage feast, the music

broke off all at once, the great doors swung open, and a baronial King entered, accompanied in procession by many attendants.

He walked up to the young groom and embraced him. The guest said: 'I am Iron John, who through an enchantment became turned into a Wild Man. You have freed me from that enchantment. All the treasures that I own will from now on belong to you.'<sup>16</sup>

What could be clearer? The real romance of the story has been consummated. But Bly, the expert mythologist and translator, cannot recognize a queer wedding when he sees one. The ending tells us, he writes, that we need not only to 'free ourselves from family cages and mind sets' but also to free 'transcendent beings from imprisonment and trance'. Yes. . . . But what about the symbolism of the wedding scene, the embrace, the sharing of worldly goods? And any child could tell you how you turn a frog into a prince. 'I think that we have said as much as is proper here about the Wild Man,' is Bly's final word on the matter. Perhaps Bly should be less concerned about 'transcendent beings' and work on freeing himself from his own 'imprisonment and trance'. His insubstantial analysis reveals the bogus notion that is at the very heart of Bly's credo: 'descend deep down into the male psyche and accept what is dark down there' is a call to end repression if it is anything at all—and yet Bly's interpretation of the most crucial scene in the whole Iron John story is itself a lesson in disavowal, a refusal to accept 'what is dark down there'.

The end of the Iron John story shows that, just as in the Western, the overriding romance was homosexual: 'woman' has been outwitted again, prevented from 'trapping the male through marriage into civilization and Christianity' even at the very moment of the boy's readmission into the family ('they had given up hope that they would ever see their dear son again') and holy matrimony: instead of the bride, Iron John comes through the 'great doors'. Freed from his enchantment by the boy's love, Iron John is 'tamed'; he loses his hair and becomes a baron (in effect he turns 'white') and thus can return to civilization to join the boy, to save him from it in the nick of time.

The ending also demonstrates that Iron John is more than just an aspect of the boy's own psyche, as Bly would have it. The romance has been a mutual attraction of opposites: the soft boy's attraction to Iron John's toughness and *Iron John's attraction to the boy's softness*; in the end the romance had the effect of both giving the boy just enough 'wildness' and giving Iron John just enough 'civilization': a perfect exchange, a perfect couple. Thus the

ending appears to balance the incompatible: marriage and queer romance, familial acceptance and masculine freedom, civilization and the forest.

But this is just a fairy tale. In the 'real' world of adult literature and cinema these opposites cannot be reconciled and the resolution must be darker: there can be no 'queer wedding' or Fiedler's 'holy marriage of males'. Instead there is the usual fatal sublimation: the dark-skinned Queequeg dies but lives on through white Ishmael's love for him, adrift in an endless blank wilderness of ocean; black Ned dies but lives on through white Munny, an outlaw cast adrift in a wilderness of crime.

## NOTES

1. Robert Bly, *Iron John* (New York: Vintage, 1992), p. 2.
2. Quoted in Susan Faludi's *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1991), p. 340.
3. Bly, *Iron John*, p. 6.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
5. 'An intelligent man with no stomach for killing, despite his proficiency with a rifle, his distaste for the job at hand is obvious and his reluctance to participate ultimately proves his undoing.'—production notes.
6. The production notes offer this succinct and revealing description of the Munny character: 'William Munny is a complex, taciturn man whose perspective is tempered, not only by his past, but by the love for his late wife and his children. He becomes caught between who he was and who he is, struggling with the knowledge that he can make himself solvent by calling upon the very darkest elements of his personality.'
7. Bly, *Iron John*, p. iv.
8. Faludi, *Backlash*, p. 345.
9. Bly, *Iron John*, p. iv.
10. Faludi, *Backlash*, p. 345.
11. Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Stein and Day, 1962), p. 212.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 352.
14. In *The Eiger Sanction* (Eastwood, US, 1975), Eastwood gave us an unambiguous example of his attitude towards homosexuality. In it he plays an expert mountaineer and part-time CIA operative whom a mincing queer villain, complete with a lapdog by the name of Faggot, tries to have killed. Rather than demean himself by killing such a monstrosity he merely leaves him out in the desert to die—he lets *nature* wreak its revenge on this freak. Even heterosexual men cannot be trusted. Another

character, a friend of Eastwood's, oversteps the limit of friendliness; 'Don't go sloppy on me,' Eastwood warns disgustedly. So it comes as no surprise to learn later that he is the enemy agent Eastwood has been looking for all along.

15. Bly, *Iron John*, p. v.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 232.