

Towards Collective Healing A Critical Study in Selected Poems of Robert Bly

Asst. Lect. Asawer Hameed Rasheed

College of Islamic Sciences\ University of Diyala

Email: m.asawirhameed@uodiyala.edu.iq

نحو الشفاء الجمعي : دراسة نقدية في قصائد مختارة لروبرت بلاي

م. م. اساور حميد رشيد

كلية العلوم الاسلامية / جامعة ديالى

Abstract

It is common knowledge that post-modern human society has been suffering from a collective spiritual crisis for ages. Due to losing sight of the bond that is supposed to connect one's inner self with the external world, human society has fallen into a state of collective soullessness and disharmony. The study at hand aims to explore Robert Bly's tendency to play the role of a poetic healer through analyzing the theme of healing in selected poems of his in the light of the Jungian theory of the collective unconscious. Since poetry has a long history of being utilized as a means of raising awareness and cultivating healing, it is the safety boat that is hoped to clear up the spiritual disunity that has imbued human society and subjected its individuals to a lifetime of spiritual poverty. The Swiss psychiatrist, Carl Jung, has theorized that all humans share a level of unconsciousness called the collective unconscious. Exploring the mutual psyche is crucial when it comes to understanding what causes this spiritual crisis and achieving collective healing. Keywords: healing, spiritual crisis, poetry, collective psyche, society.

المستخلص

من المعروف أن المجتمع البشري ما بعد الحداثة يعاني من أزمة روحية جمعية منذ زمن بعيد. نتيجة لنسيان الرابط الذي من المفترض أن يجعل الذات الداخلية للإنسان متصلة بالعالم الخارجي ، بات المجتمع الإنساني في حالة من فقدان الروحانية والتناغم الجمعي. نظرا لما للشعر من تاريخ طويل من حيث توظيفه كوسيلة لنشر الوعي والتشجيع على الشفاء يعتبر الشعر قارب النجاة الذي من المؤمل ان يخلص المجتمع من الانفصال الروحي الذي غمر افراده وجعلهم عرضة للعيش في فقر روحي دائم. وضع الطبيب النفسي السويسري ، كارل يونغ، نظرية تقترح أن جميع البشر يتشاركون مستوى من اللاوعي يُسمى باللاوعي الجمعي. يعتبر استكشاف اللاوعي الجمعي امرا مهم لفهم سبب هذه الأزمة الروحية وتحقيق الشفاء الجمعي يهدف هذه البحث إلى دراسة ميل الشاعر روبرت بلاي لأداء دور الشاعر المعالج من خلال تحليل مفهوم الشفاء في قصائد مختارة تبعا لنظرية يونغ الخاصة باللاوعي الجمعي. الكلمات المفتاحية : الشفاء ، أزمة روحية ، الشعر ، اللاوعي الجمعي ، المجتمع.

Introduction

Ever since the creation of human society, people have been exploring what it means to be whole with the outside world. The idea that maintaining good health requires one to be connected and in harmony with the external world goes back to the beginning of human history. However, it was not until modern times that human society seemed to lose sight of how significant the union of self with the world was and therefore an era of global spiritual crisis was given rise to. Starting from modernism and creeping into postmodernism, this spiritual crisis has left human society in a miserable state of collective soullessness and dismemberment of body, mind, and spirit (Allen & Sabini, 1997). Being unable to wash away the dreadful marks that the two major world wars and the subsequent upheavals have left on human consciousness, an atmosphere of inertia, loss of vitality, depression and disease has pervaded postmodern life. Postmodern collective culture portrays an individual as a sufferer who is trapped in a

constant conflict with the self and losing touch with his “origins and traditions...even losing all memory of his former self” (Sabini, 2005, p.182). Refusing to acknowledge this collective suffering and wishing to numb it have resulted in moving modern individuals further from deep connection with soul and into a meaningless society that sentences its individuals to a lifetime of emptiness. However, to escape this vicious pattern of suffering, healing the soul and making whole has become the motto of the postmodern world. In a society that’s frequently swept over by waves of nihilism and existential depression, collective healing, that is a process by which communities come together to acknowledge, process, and recover from shared traumatic experiences (Saul, 2013), is a top priority. Psychologically, healing is defined as a “a positive, subjective, unpredictable process involving transformation to a new sense of wholeness, spiritual transcendence, and reinterpretation of life” (McElligott, 2010 , p.257). It is universally acknowledged that poetry has a therapeutic impact that can help its writers and readers relieve their intense negative feelings and reach a state of emotional stability. “Poets set names to wounds” (Edelman, 1981, p. 215), thus they help the sufferers of these wounds understand what plagues them and feel less alone in their plight. Robert Bly’s Poetic Perspective on Healing Robert Bly (1926-2021) is widely regarded as one of the greatest American award-winning poets whose central contributions to American poetry make him one of the legendary contemporary poets. A part from being a poet, Bly played various cultural roles such as editor, satirist, theorizer, critic, translator, regionalist, theorist and iconoclast, and mainly tackled every social issue that the contemporary literary scene was focused on in his literary works (Molesworth, 1975). Being interested in psychology, especially the way the conscious mind and the human psyche function, Bly believed that poetry was, in essence, energy which would rise from the poet’s psyche that he said describing what makes a true poem; In the true poem, both the form and the content rise from the same place; they have the same swiftness and darkness. Both are expressions of a certain rebellious energy rising in the psyche: they are what [Jacob] Boehme calls "the shooting up of life from nature to spirit." (Bly, 1984, p. 147). Bly’s description of poetry as an expression of specific psychological energies suggests that his poetry is not only rooted in deep intimate feelings, but also psychological in essence. Being interested in depth- psychology, Bly co-developed a poetics of deep psychological images called “deep imagism”. Deep imagism is a school of poetry that is mainly preoccupied with Spanish and French surrealism, elemental description of the natural world, Jungian archetypes and visionary emotional states (Richman, 1986). Having a keen desire to tap into the realms of the human unconscious, Bly tries to discover what troubles it and deal with it. Since Bly defines a good poem as a poem that has the power to heal, he wrote poetry that addressed psycho-spiritual issues and suggested solutions to overcome them. This desire to write healing poetry cultivated his practice of writing “leaping poetry”. In 1975, Bly published a book of essays entitled “Leaping Poetry”. The book introduced an unconventional way of writing poetry that was regarded either excitingly novel or threatening by the majority of American poets during that time. Bly defines leaping poetry as a kind of poetry in which the poet takes “a jump from a known part of the mind to the unknown and back to the known” (The Ohio Review, 1973, p. 26). Through taking a poetic leap, Bly aims to bridge the gap between the unconscious and conscious mind, thus transfers the complex unconscious thoughts that cloud the mind to the conscious psyche where they can be addressed and solved (Bly, 2008). Bly calls the leap that bridges the known with the unknown as a journey through which poetry travels between these two worlds (Bly, 2008). He regards this journey as a healing process that reveals the energy and knowledge of the unseen realm and uses them to create healing images of individual and collective psychic balance. Bly’s concern about writing healing poetry seems to be related to him being deeply influenced by the writings of W. B. Yeats that he says in an interview in 1980: I met an old shaman once. His name was W.B. Yeats. I met him in his books. He stood for values completely different than those that I had understood before then, and one of those was that poetry was written in solitude (Bowman, 1989, p. 46). A shaman is a person who “acts as intermediary between the natural and supernatural worlds, using magic to cure illness, foretell the future, control spiritual forces, etc” (Dictionary.com, n.d.). Like Yeats, Bly chose to immerse himself in solitude for a couple of years in New York after reading some works of Yeats (Greasley, 2001). Calling Yeats a shaman and following his advice concerning the poetic benefit of solitariness highlight Bly’s tendency to write a kind of poetry that has a healing impact, similar to that of Yeats. Bly aims to play the role of a healer whose words do not only heal his own psyche, but also inspire the collective healing of his audience's psyche. He pours out his wish to reach a collective spiritual balance in his major collection of poems “Sleepers Joining Hands” that he states: I see in my own poems and the poems of so many other poets alive now fundamental attempts to right our own spiritual balance, by encouraging those parts in us that are linked with music, with solitude, water, and trees, the parts that grow when we are far from the centers of ambition (Friberg, 1977, p. 144). To achieve individual and collective recovery, Bly imbued his poetry with deep

images of paradoxical things such as images of light, that symbolize rational consciousness, alongside images of "the black side of intelligence" (Bly, 1972, p. 8) to acknowledge the unseen or less known side of things. He used "the fantastic freedom of association . . . from ancient art" (Higgins, 1980, p. 13) which he called "the psychic ability to fly" to make his poems journey and depict other realms (Bly, 1972, p. 8). In addition, Bly was at the forefront of "the revival of the poetry reading" (Nelson, 1984, p. 49). Being a keen reader of the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung's body of work, especially his theory of the collective unconscious, Bly knew how rewardingly therapeutic practicing oral poetry could be, therefore he did numerous readings to connect with his audience on a spiritual level and bring in collective healing (Qais & Mohammed, 2020). In his book, Selected Poems, Bly actually expresses his admiration of the power of oral poetry that he states: I experienced for the first time in my life the power of spoken or oral poetry. A briefly lasting community springs to life in front of the voice, like a flower opening--it can be a community either of excitement or of feeling. The community flowers when the poem is spoken in the ancient way--that is, with full sound, with conviction, and with the knowledge that the emotions are not private to the person speaking them (Bly, 1986, p. 62). Acknowledging the suppressed emotions of the crowds, his readings sustained the process of communal healing that he was performing through his written poetry. Wearing caftan with beads and dancing in his readings, Bly's performances seem shamanic. His employment of musical instruments such as dulcimer and bouzouki (Nelson, 1984) resembles the way a shaman uses drums and rattles to prepare for the trance. In shamanism, experiencing a trance means achieving an ecstatic awareness that goes beyond the physical senses and functioning of the ordinary mind (Eliade, 2004). It is noteworthy that Bly mentions the term "trance" in his book, "Selected poems", when he cites W. B. Yeats again to articulate his opinion on poetic meter that he says: Yeats had no doubt; the function of meter ... is to put us into a trance, so that we can approach one of the far places of the mind; and the poet accordingly chooses the particular rhythm appropriate to the trance he wishes for the reader and for himself. (Bly, 1986, p. 88) Bly's words show his inclination to be a shaman-like poet and pinpoint that he writes poetry for the purpose of collective healing. He once straightforwardly expressed how significant it was for him to write such poetry that he said: My feeling is that poetry is also a healing process, and then when a person tries to write poetry with depth or beauty, he will find himself guided along paths which will heal him, and this is more important, actually, than any of the poetry he writes (Fitzgerald, ed., 1989, p. 183).

The Theory of The Collective Unconscious **The Collective Unconscious**

theory is one of the Swiss psychiatrist's, Carl Jung, most evolutionary works that have actually broken new grounds in the field of psychology. It is the hallmark of the Jungian school of psychoanalysis and part of his theory of the psyche. The theory of the collective unconscious suggests that the human psyche is composed of three levels; the conscious, personal unconscious, and collective unconscious (Shelburne, 1976). In an essay published under the title "The Structure of the Unconscious" in 1916, Jung introduces his theory of the collective unconscious for the first time to the public. Jung became preoccupied with developing this theory that he published four essays on the collective unconscious over a time span of three years from 1916 to 1919. Being an eager reader of religious and mythological studies, Jung noticed that all legends, myths, and stories seemed to be striking similar as if they were all derived from one common source. After further reflection on this matter, Jung came to believe that these myths and stories were expressions of one shared source of knowledge and termed that source "the collective unconscious". He suggested that this collective unconscious was inherited and shared by the whole human species. According to Jung, the collective unconscious is different from the personal unconscious for the latter is shaped by personal experience (Jung, 1966) This vast spiritual heritage resurrected in each individual brain structure, Jung theorizes, voices itself through personal consciousness. The contents of the collective unconscious belong to mankind in general and are what form the collective or common psyche. Jung intensifies the importance of the collective unconscious by stating that: "Consciousness grows out of the unconscious psyche, which is older than it, and which goes on functioning together with it, and even in spite of it." (Jung, 1969, p. 281) The thoughts and images that the collective unconscious bears, although may not be known by humans, are believed to project themselves in times of crisis. Moreover, the collective unconscious, according to Jung's theory of the unconscious mind, is mainly consisted of two different parts, namely, the instincts and the archetypes. The instincts are the primitive unlearned impulses that one is born with and are the natural system responsible for generating and promoting psychological motivation (Jung, 1966) The archetypes, Jung believes, are simply the ancestral memories that all humankind unconsciously share. These memories, which Jung calls archetypes, find their way out of the collective unconscious through dreams, literature and art in general and represent themselves as universal themes using those mediums of expression. There are four main archetypes that Jung encapsulates in his theory of the collective unconscious; the persona, the shadow, the anima, and the

self. The persona is the social mask that a person wears to adapt to the cultural norms of his/ her society and fit in. The shadow archetype is the opposite of the mask archetype in the sense that it embodies the socially inappropriate and destructive instincts buried in the unconscious mind. The anima or animus symbolizes one's gender identity and roles, and portrays the gender-related traits that each sex has of the opposite sex. The self is the last archetype and the most significant one as it represents the universal human struggle to find an integrated sense of identity and satisfaction through submitting to the cycle of purpose and accomplishment. The importance of those four archetypes lies in the Jungian belief that they are part of the collective experience of living and the collective psyche (Jung, 1969). Journeys of Healing: A Critical Analysis of Selected Poems of Robert Bly. Journeying lies at the core of Robert Bly's poetry. Believing that "All poems are journeys" (Bly, 1986, p. 88), Bly has written leaping poetry to make his poems journey into various realms and convey paradoxical ideas. A critic, Richard Sugg, claims that Bly's "most enduring poetic theme is the importance of the inward journey and his entire career thus traces his devotion to the geography of that dark region and to understanding the inward causes of external events" (Sugg, 1986, p. 3). All things considered, this section involves a psycho-critical analysis of Bly's poems; "Driving Toward the Lac Qui Parle River", "Moving Inward at Last" and "Frost Still in the Ground". "Driving Toward the Lac Qui Parle River" is one of Bly's early poems that convey the theme of healing. Published in 1962 in his first volume of poetry "Silence in the Snow Fields", "Driving Toward the Lac Qui Parle River" represents Bly's journey towards unwrapping what disturbs the collective psyche. Bly begins the first stanza of this poem with an image of a car ride across the Minnesota landscape that he says; "I am driving; it is dusk; Minnesota." It is dusk at which Bly's journey has started. Dusk is the time of the day when Bly writes many of his poems due to his belief that "man's unconscious opens" at dusk. In deep image poetry, the image of driving conveys a sense of descent into the landscape or the psyche, thus Bly's entering to the landscape marks his descending into the unconscious realm. As he proceeds in his journey into this realm of awareness, Bly feels the soybeans "breathing on all sides" and notices that "Old men are sitting before their houses" and "The moon rising above the turkey sheds". These images of "soybeans", "old people" and "the moon" above the turkey sheds emphasize that the worlds of plants, human and animal are all connected and unified (Bowman, 1989). According to the Jungian theory of the unconscious, the moon symbolizes the inward journey into the darkness of the unconscious. The image of the moon marks Bly's entrance into the realm of darkness (Burke, 2014). In the second stanza, the vast bright world of the conscious starts shrinking and the pace of the poem becomes quicker; "The small world of the car \Plunges through the deep fields of the night,". Bly's journey into the unconscious mind is characterized by fear and isolation as he is journeying alone into an unknown realm. In this stanza, the car becomes a metaphor of Bly's psyche (Piccione, 1969). The way the car plunges into the fields and the sound of the crickets penetrates the car demonstrate the interconnection of the human and natural worlds. The plunging of the car into the fields depicts that the human psyche is united with nature and therefore healing is given rise to. In the third stanza, Bly concludes his poem by returning to human community that he says; "few people talking low in a boat". After intermingling with nature, darkness and solitude, Bly's view of the human world changes. The human world now shimmers and is imbued with moonlight and lamplight. The images of the bridge, grass, and people being illuminated indicate that Bly's inward journey has brought in the healing and awareness that humans collectively need to improve the quality of their lives (Bowman, 1989). "Moving Inward at Last" is one of Bly's eminent leaping poems that reflects part of Bly's investigation of what seems to be troubling the collective unconscious mind. "Moving Inward at Last" was published in Bly's prizewinning work, "The Light Around the Body", in 1967. As the title suggests, "Moving Inward at Last" refers to one of Bly's attempts to dive into the inner world of the psyche in search of knowledge and energy that can bring in collective healing. It supports his claim that poetry needs to move away from the head and turns into the body (Richman, 1986). Bly starts this poem by setting the mythic imagery of a bleeding bull that he says; "The dying bull is bleeding on the mountain!". This image refers to some sort of a primitive ritual, thus indicates the poet's leap into the ancient mystic realm. It is noteworthy that, thousands of years ago, sacrificing an animal as a religious ritual to purify the tribe was a common practice performed by several cults, most distinguishingly, the Roman Mediterranean cult. The idea that the bull is bleeding on the mountain proposes that the suffering of the tribe is crystallized (Bowman, 1989). Bly proceeds in his poem by journeying his imagery from the public realm to the private one that he says; "But inside the mountain, untouched/ By the blood,/ There are antlers, bits of oak bark,/ Fire, herbs are thrown down." By referring to antlers, Bly draws on a masculine archetype to create an image that represents male energy, strength and fertility (Bowman, 1989). According to the theory of the collective unconscious, masculine energy "animus", and feminine energy "anima" both coexist as aspects of every human's soul and are vital archetypes of the

collective unconscious (Jung, 1969). Mountains, as Bly suggests, symbolize pure spirit. The image of the sacrificed bull reflects a ritual similar to the one that ancient tribes performed to seek rain (Bowman, 1989). The existence of the masculine energy, which is related to judgment and drought, without its feminine counterpart results in making the collective psyche suffer from spiritual starvation. Bly introduces the feminine aspect of the collective unconscious in this poem in the following lines; When the smoke touches the roof of the cave, The green leaves burst into flame, The air of night changes to dark water, The mountains alter and become the sea. (Moving Inward at Last) The cave is associated with feminine energy since it, Jung believes, represents a place where the birth of a new world occurs (Ran, 2011). The same thing applies to the "dark water" and "the sea". Through making the imagery in this poem leaps from the physical world and the masculine energy (the mountain) to the spiritual world and the feminine energy (cave), Bly masterfully highlights what causes suffering to the collective psyche. The image of the dying bull on the mountain portrays that the masculine energy is separated from its feminine counterpart, and therefore causing the collective unconscious to be imbalanced (Bowman, 1989). However, the image of "the smoke", Bly suggests, indicates that a leap has occurred. Bly concludes the poem by portraying a transformation from the masculine imagery of the mountain and air to the feminine energy of the water and sea, thus denoting that the balance between these two energies has been restored. Bly's "Moving Inward at Last" conveys a healing message that encourages the readers to heal their inner wounds for they cannot heal on the outside without healing on the inside first. Another poem in which Bly explores what disturbs the balance of the collective psyche and causes it distress is "Frost Still in the Ground". "Frost Still in the Ground" is published in Bly's major poetic work "This Tree Will be Here for a Thousand Years" in 1974. In "The Two Presences", which is the prefatory essay of "This Tree", Bly actually emphasizes his aim to write healing poetry by voicing the purpose of writing the poems included in this volume that is "a union of inner and outer," self and nature (Bly, 1979, p. 10). Bly starts his poem, "Frost Still in the Ground", with the image of himself walking in the fields and observing that "the frost is still in the ground." His observation of the outer world moves into the inner world of the psyche by using the simile "It's like someone just beginning to write, and nothing has been said!". Through the use of simile, Bly transforms the physical frost and the fields into the poem, thus makes his outward journey across the fields accompanied by an inward journey into the world of the unconscious. He proceeds by referring to "The shadows that come from another life gather in folds around his head." which signify that the poet's worldly presence is accompanied by an otherworldly presence of his inner connection with nature. These two presences refer to the interconnecting realms of man and nature. Bly introduces a persona that is part of his reflection on this scene of frosty fields. This persona around which the shadows from another world gather refers to the spiritual connection between man's life and nature (Bowman, 1989). Although the poet is cognizant of this other life, he is unable to express what it is like that he says; "...What I have to say I have not said." Bly ends his inward journey with the unconscious psyche by comparing the snow water to a living thing that "glances up at the new moon", thus emphasizing the idea of reflection that lies at the core of the poem. The metaphor transforms the moon, which signifies the numinous otherworldly energy that he cannot articulate, to water that is part of this worldly life and vice versa. Bly ends the poem with this deep image; "In its lake the serpent is asleep." to make his poem leap one last time to the inward realm. The serpent, Jung believes, represents "the earthly essence of man that is not conscious" (Carl Jung, The Red Book, p. 180). Through using this image, Bly illustrates the connection between the primal survival energies represented by the serpent and the healing spirit of nature that is represented by water (Bowman, 1989). Although the serpent is asleep, it is infused in water which means the unity between man and nature has been eventually restored.

Conclusion

The spiritual health of the post-modern society is a matter that has not really come under the spotlight until recently, although its deterioration has started to show on its individuals for years now. To prevent spiritual poverty from demolishing everyone's life, Robert Bly wrote leaping poetry that could pinpoint what caused this spiritual plight and inspire collective healing through journeying into the collective psyche. To achieve healing through his poetry, Bly uses paradoxical images of darkness and light, masculinity and femininity, past and present, and human and nature to journey out of rational consciousness into the earth, the body, and the spirit. In his poems; "Driving Toward the Lac Qui Parle River", "Moving Inward at Last" and "Frost Still in the Ground", Bly manages to highlight that post-modern individuals have lost touch with their inner selves and nature. They represent Bly's attempt to make his readers reunite with their inner selves and the outer world through journeying into unseen realms in search of spiritual unity. In these three poems, Bly relies on employing leaping images of

unity and balancing contrary energies to implicate the readers in his vision of tribal recovery. These poems lure the readers into a place where healing is being performed, thus inspire them to heal collectively.

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