

A Man in Love with the Setting Stars

An Interview with Robert Bly

Robert Bly welcomed me at the Alexandria Hotel during the literary festival in Molde, Bjørnsonfestivalen, one rainy day in August, and generously spent two hours discussing poetry in spite of the jet-lag he suffered from after the long journey from his home in Minneapolis. In the interview Bly shares his opinion on recent American poetry, on the significance of solitude, and on the ways in which his own writing has changed through the years. He also presents exclusively for the readers of American Studies in Scandinavia three new, unpublished poems due for publication in April, 2001, and reflects on the new forms of his most recent poetry.

Q: *You were Guest Editor of the 1999 edition of The Best American Poetry. In the Introduction you claim that what you refer to as "heat" "has been missing for some years from our English. ... We are fighting a front-line action against the cooling of language." You refer to this "heat" as a "mysterious quality" of some poetry. Is this diagnosis related in any way to the one you made years ago, when you reflected on the absence of the unconscious in American poetry?*

A: Yes, I think so. But the situation now is different. There are 250 poetry workshops in the United States, and they each graduate two to six poets every year with a degree in poetry – registered poets, so to speak, so there are a thousand registered poets sent out every year! A *thousand* every year! The good part of it is that there is an incredible interest in writing poetry in the United States now. The bad part of it is that most of the poetry written is very bad. So when a young person goes into a bookstore

and picks out ten volumes, all ten may be bad. There used to be only fifteen well recognized poets in the whole country; and perhaps five out of ten books would be fine. Now you really have to know your way around to keep up your respect for poetry.

Q: *How was it editing all that new poetry?*

A: I was the first one "outside the establishment" that edited a book in that series, and I chose quite a few poets that had never been honored in that particular way. You'll find quite a few poets from the Middle West, the mountain region, and the Far West. The book has in general been well received. Because of the Vietnam War, the Men's Movement and my various unaccepted views of poetry, it took a bit of bravery on the part of the series editor, David Lehman, to ask me to do the choosing.

Q: *A lot of the published writers in Norway have taken courses at the university and have also attended workshops. They are sometimes criticized for not developing individual voices.*

A: The University of California asked me a while ago to do a course in creative writing. And I said, "First you'd have to build fifteen small huts up in the mountains. I'd want students to live for six months in utter solitude. And if there are any foot tracks to and from the hut, they flunk."

Q: *That did not result in a course, then.*

A: No. One man did write to me and said, "I wonder if my girlfriend could stay with me ... We're not married." (Laughs). My attitude is that you can't develop an individual voice without solitude. Joining a workshop won't do it.

Q: *That brings to mind your many comments on the importance of solitude for and in your writing. You have been quoted a number of times on your statement that everyone that seriously intends to become a poet should spend at least two years completely alone. To a lot of young people I know that sounds frightening. So many I know at my age are afraid of spending time alone. Afraid of what they might confront.*

A: Well, maybe the taste for solitude begins when you're very small. When I was three, four and five years old I loved to go out and sit by a tree. I was brought up on a farm, so that was easy. But I think that being in front of a television set takes away possibilities of that kind, because a television set is not nature! I've always believed that human beings are happiest when they can go back for brief periods ten or fifteen thousand years. If I'm lucky, and alone for one week or two weeks, I end up ecstatically happy. (Laughter). I'm very disappointed if I hear someone knocking on the door. Hamsun understands that. In *Pan*, Glahn is living in a little house in the woods, and every morning when he steps out, he sees beside the path a certain stone –remember that? Every day this stone has a different expression on its face. That's his companion, this stone. I have a little cabin on Moose Lake, which is north of Minneapolis, and I try to be up there a few days every month, totally alone. Sometimes that's agreeable to my wife. Sometimes not! Sometimes she likes to be alone too. But I still have that feeling that the deepest joy that comes into a human being does not come when they're with other people. It comes when he or she is alone in nature.

Q: *But what if you spend a lot of time alone in the city? That's a different kind of solitude, is it not? In an introduction to your early poetry in Selected Poems (1986) you write: "If we stay too long in solitude during our twenties, we are in danger: The old man who lives inside the young man may become a derelict, entirely cut off from community, family, sexual love, nature and spirit." That refers to the years you spent in the city in your twenties, doesn't it? Reading your poetry, from the early poetry to the more recent, I sense that solitude was something you were thrown into when you were younger, but something you really need and draw upon, and have come to choose when you've become older:*

A: That's right. I was very poor in my twenties. I felt when I was in my twenties that if I went the social road, then I would get ruined, because my dishonesty, which is natural to me, would come out more.

Q: *So you might not be true to yourself, and that would damage your poetry?*

A: That's right. But the danger is that you can become isolated then, you can become an old man ... When I was in my twenties I was living in New York and I often didn't talk to anyone for a couple of days at a time. And sometimes the only people I would see would be derelicts. There was one man who lived in some old shelter down on the Bowery, and I was living on 59th Street, and every day he would walk all the way up to 120th, begging, and turn around and come back. And I would go out for my one meal a day about four o'clock and I'd often meet him coming down like that. All he needed to make was 75 cents a day. But he'd have to walk all the way up in order to make that. I thought that was strange, that we would meet. It had some kind of meaning to me: I was in danger of becoming that kind of person. That was probably why I wrote that about the danger of solitude in *Selected Poems*.

After about three years of that, I went to see my old teacher Archibald McLeish at Harvard. And he said, "You really look thin! What are you doing?" And I said, "I'm not eating very much." He tried to get a grant for me, being administered by the poetry workshop at Iowa. That fell through, but since I was already there by that time, I took a job teaching. I was so frightened. I couldn't even stand up in front of my desk for three weeks! But that was a blessing anyway, because the students sort of pulled me out. They knew I was very weird. But they pulled me out and helped me. After two years of that sort of blessing, I got married and moved to the farm in Minnesota. That was a very good time. I wrote *Silence in the Snowy Fields*¹. I was able to take the solitude I had in New York and sort of mix it with the childhood place where I was born. And that's a very good mix.

Q: *When a poet or a writer turns his attention to something new, the poetry that comes out of it seems to receive quick labels by critics and students, doesn't it? Some people would connect solitude with a kind of apathy, and see the poetry that you wrote at the time of the Vietnam War in the light of this: "Well, then he came out of his solitude and became a political poet for a year."*

1. *Silence in the Snowy Fields* (1962) is Bly's first collection of poetry.

A: Yeah, right. Well, some people get very nervous if you're not occupying a spot in society. Thoreau for example refused to pay tax and went to jail. Emerson came to see him, and speaking from the social point of view, asked: "Aren't you ashamed to be in there?" And Thoreau answered, "Aren't you ashamed to be out there?"

Q: *Thoreau seems specifically to deny any quick labelling, doesn't he? People have referred to him as an environmentalist, a radical, a philosopher, a pacifist ... When he really was none of these, or all of them. A solitary figure of complexity.*

A: In every serious American writer, I think there is something of the American Indian. The Native American young men would spend time in utter solitude – their teacher would tell them how to do that. The older men would take a young man out, put him into, maybe a cave in South Dakota, and the young man would stay there until his animal helper came. Such a helper could be a bear or an eagle ... Psychologically, that is fantastic! It breaks the social hold completely. The young man would receive a connection with some wild animal. They didn't receive their "real" name until they'd met their animal, and the real name would not be a description of how they were in the tribe, but how they were with their animal. You remember Crazy Horse. I think that Thoreau in a way was an Indian ...

Q: *You edited a collection of texts by Thoreau.*

A: Yes, I did. What I wanted to do was to find the places in his writing where he talked about one subject, and put it in prose on one page, and a poem on the facing page, to show that his prose actually had more poetry in it than his poems.

In Thoreau's time, the model for poetry was still Wordsworth. In Wordsworth, who is wonderful, one detail from nature will be abstracted so to speak in thought. But that wasn't right for Thoreau's poetry. In prose he was able to stick to nature.

Do you know Thoreau's prose essay on the war between the black and white ants? It is fantastic, a genuine prose poem observing black and white ants fighting. It is all short detail, observed, not thought about. In

his model of a poem, he didn't have a permission to do that. It was William Carlos Williams who later gave that permission.

Q: *That's interesting, what you say about the attention for detail. I felt that attention for detail when I read Yeats the first time.*

A: What are you seeing in Yeats?

Q: *I see a gift for writing and a brilliant mind but a sort of unfulfilled personal life, and this enters his poetry. Such beautiful poems!*

A: He's an absolute genius. Yeats has had a great effect on my life. I took a course in Blake and Yeats in college and it was astounding to me to realize how much Yeats could bring into a poem: theology, history, philosophy, mythology, personal grief. Incredible! All in a single poem. I wanted to do that.

Q: *How would you relate that possibility to what you have referred to in several essays as mind-obsessed poetry – putting everything you learned inside a poem, like Pound or Eliot did? There is a tremendous attention to detail in that kind of poetry, isn't there? Reading Eliot at the university I first thought ... Wow! This is in Greek! And that's in Latin! And in Eliot there is theology, history, philosophy, like you mentioned with Yeats ... But not so much of the personal grief. Your poetry spoke to me in yet a different way, more directly. You did not seem to dive into an entire tradition to bring over a feeling or a mood, and did not do it by way of reference.*

A: In recent poems I try to bring in some historical events, and do that in such a way that the physical circumstances will be strong enough, so it won't seem "mind-obsessed." Some of these poems will appear in my next collection, *The Night that Abraham Called to the Stars*.² The poems long to contain or carry enough grief or sorrow so that ideas can be present "in solution" so to speak.

2. *The Night Abraham Called to the Stars* is due for publication in April, 2001.

A MAN IN LOVE WITH THE SETTING STARS

Q: *So there's a balance there.*

A: Yes. And I can refer to thinkers such as Newton and Francis Bacon without losing the grief.

Q: *And myth?*

A: Yes, myth, and history. *Silence* in *the Snowy Fields* is fine, and I still like that book, but there is very little history in it. And in *The Light Around the Body*³ there is history, but also a lot of judgment. The kind of history the poems describe has to do with capitalism etc. But in the new poems I've tried to avoid judgment.

One stanza goes:

Arithmetic has failed to bring order to our sorrow.
Newton is not guilty, because the man who
Invents the knife is not responsible for the murder.

Q: *I have had a look at some of the new poems, and they seem to present your readers to a gallery of persons in which you find Abraham, Aristotle, Tennyson, Mahler, and figures from fiction, such as Madame Bovary.*

A: There are all kinds of figures in there from intellectual or cultural history. I want to be able to say to younger poets that poetry doesn't mean that you remain only private. Aristotle and Newton are very important characters, and they belong in our poems, because they are part of the whole history of ourselves. Blake did that too in his poems.

Q: *He built his own mythological framework.*

A: Yes, he did, and it turns out to be almost entirely gnostic. A great deal of religious and cultural thought took place in Rome in the third and fourth centuries A. D.

3. *The Light Around the Body* (1967) is Bly's second collection of poetry.

Q: *Your new, unpublished poems were originally going to be published in a collection titled *The Man in Love with the Setting Stars*.*

A: Yes, and that was ok, but it made me seem a little heroic, so I decided to change it to *The Night Abraham Called to the Stars*. The story I tell about Abraham's disappointment represents that moment in human history when people at last realized that the stars were not God. The Jews and after them the Christians "forgot" so to speak that moment, but the Muslims preserved the story in the Koran.

Q: *What are these new poems like formally?*

A: They are variations on the Islamic *ghazal* form – that word is an Arabic word, and it originally meant "love poem." But after centuries the *ghazal* has become the major poetic form of the entire Muslim world, written in Persian, in Turkish, in Urdu.

One characteristic is that every stanza is self-contained; it's a little poem of its own. So the mood of the poem can change with each stanza. A stanza is made of two lines of about eighteen syllables each, making a total of about thirty-six syllables. In English it's difficult to sustain the energy of a line beyond twelve or fourteen syllables, so I've chosen a three line stanza of roughly twelve syllables per line, so the total is again something like thirty-six syllables. The idea is that one should be able to say whatever one has to say on a given subject in thirty-six syllables. And the landscape changes as you go through the poem.

Q: *So it's like walking.*

A: That's right. One stanza can be inward, the next stanza political, the next stanza religious. The reader has to learn to jump from one little poem to the next.

Q: *Leaping.*

A: Yes, that's right, it's a form of leaping. Also, in contrast to our way of writing poems, the subject of the poem is never stated. The reader has to figure out what's holding the stanzas together. If the writer is not good the



day he or she writes the poem, it won't be a poem. But if all goes well, there will be a mysterious, unspoken thing in the poem.

Finally, in the classic ghazal, the last word of every stanza is to be the same word. They don't have only a sound repeated, but a whole word. You'll notice that in the "Amen" poem here, and in "The Difficult Word."

Three poems from *The Night Abraham Called to the Stars*

THE NIGHT ABRAHAM CALLED TO THE STARS

Do you remember the night Abraham first saw
The stars? He cried to Saturn: "You are my Lord!"
How happy he was! When he saw the Dawn Star,

He cried, "You are my Lord!" How destroyed he was
When he watched them set. Friends, he is like us:
We take as our Lord the stars that go down.

We are faithful companions to the unfaithful stars.
We are diggers, like badgers; we love to feel
The dirt flying out from behind our back claws.

And no one can convince us that mud is not
Beautiful. It is our badger soul that thinks so.
We are ready to spend the rest of our life

Walking with muddy shoes in the wet fields.
We resemble exiles in the kingdom of the serpent.
We stand in the onion fields looking up at the night.

My heart is a calm potato by day, and a weeping
Abandoned woman by night. Friend, tell me what to do,
Since I am a man in love with the setting stars.

SAYING AMEN

There are people who don't want Kierkegaard to be
A humpback, and they're looking for a wife for Cezanne.
It's hard for them to say, so be it. Amen.

When his disciples came on a dead dog, they all held
Their noses. Jesus walked closer and said:
"What beautiful teeth!" It's a way to say Amen.

If a young boy leaps over seven hurdles in a row,
And an instant later is an old man reaching for his cane,
To the swiftness of it all we say Amen.

We always want to intervene when we hear
That the badger is marrying the wrong kind of person,
But the best thing to say at a wedding is Amen.

The grapes of our ruin were planted centuries
Before Caedmon ever praised the Milky Way.
Praise God, Damn God are all synonyms for Amen.

Women in Crete loved the young men, but when
"The Son of the Deep Waters" dies in the bath,
And they show the rose-colored water, Mary says Amen.

THE DIFFICULT WORD

The oaks reluctantly let their leaves fall,
And hesitatingly allow their branches to be bare;
And the Bear spends all winter in separation.

The beauty of marriage is such that it dissolves
All earlier unions, and leads man and wife
Together to walk on the road of separation.

It's a difficult word. The thought frightens us
That this planet with all its darkening geese
Was created not for union but for separation.

Suppose there were a dragon curled inside each drop
Of water, defending its gold. It's possible
That abundance has the same effect as separation.

We all felt union when we swam in the loopy joy
Of the womb; but when our lips touched
Our mother's breast, we said, "This is separation."

It is my longing to touch the skin of horses,
To smooth the feathers of birds, and touch rough linen
That has led me to spend my life in separation.

Q: *The poem "The Night Abraham Called to the Stars" was actually published along with six other new poems translated into Norwegian in Helge Torvund's collection of translations, Morgondikt (1999). So it came out in Norwegian before it will come out in English.*

That book proved to me that your poetry sounds well translated into "nynorsk." I've often wondered if it has anything to do with the deep vowels? When reading nynorskpoeetry I'm always struck by the dark and deep vowels, and reading and listening to Torvund's translations of your poems made me feel that way, as did Olav H. Hauge's earlier translations. I wondered if you could make a short comment on the nynorsk translations of your poetry? How do they sound compared to your originals?

A: I think you're absolutely right. I felt a great sinking down when I read Torvund's Norwegian, a sinking down into purple ... I like that very much. And yes, I think it has to do with the vowels.