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Review Article

In Iron John's Slosly Swamp, There Is a Bitterly Cold Undercurrent

Iron John: A Book About Men. By Robert Bly. 1990. New York: Vintage, 1992. Pp. 268. Paper, \$14.00 US.

The usual criticism of women these days focusses on their alleged inattention to their children's needs. A woman's pursuit of a career, so the argument runs, results in the breakdown of the family, an argument favored by right-wingers and the moral majority. But for those women who have successfully managed family and career, there is Robert Bly, American poet and winner, in 1968, of the National Book Award for Poetry, who will certainly dampen any sense of success. In *Iron John* Bly argues that for sons over twelve, or perhaps it is over two, or earlier—"One could say that the father now loses his son five minutes after birth" (21)—the mother is bad news. "Mother love" cripples. Among other things, Bly worries about "certain kinds of intellectual conversations proceeding from her rationalist mind that the unconscious mother indulges in with her teenage son." He continues,

We are aware of a disturbing rise in the number of sons who report sexual abuse by mothers, as well as by fathers, uncles, and older brothers; but the culture still does not take seriously the damage caused by psychic incest between mother and son. . . . Much sexual energy can be exchanged when the mother looks the son directly in the eyes and says, "Here is your new T-shirt, all washed." (185)

This nonsense should not be taken seriously, except that so many do. *Iron John* is "a serious, groundbreaking book" (Solotaroff 274); "a transforming book" (Schmidt 593), offering "reassurance" (Bemrose 66); "Mr. Bly's book is important and timely" (Csikszentmihalyi 16). That so many applaud the book's advice without interrogating its context, makes *Iron John* a dangerous book. That, and other things.

Bly believes that "manhood doesn't happen by itself." "A boy becomes a man . . . only through the 'active intervention'" (15) of an older man, a mentor who guides the boy into manhood. This advice is transfused through the Grimms' tale "Iron John," making the preachy palatable. Bly moves back and forth between tale and present day circumstances—"men in crisis." Along the way, many other tales, poems, anecdotes, and statistics get told. "Iron John," an eight-staged story, recounts the Wild Man's leading the prince-turned-pauper into adulthood. The boy's father has caged the troublesome Wild Man, a swamp-dweller, responsible for the disappearance of some of the king's subjects. The boy, stealing the key from beneath his mother's pillow, frees the Wild Man and the adventures begin. These adventures, or stages in development, include: life with the Wild Man, the period of ashes and kitchen work, tending the garden, warriorhood, and a ritualized festival leading to marriage and kingship. Guided throughout by Iron John, the boy takes on the energy and initiative of the Wild Man. The tale is entertaining; the advice is sound. Of course, boys need the company of male elders. How unfortunate, then (and how surprising), that one phrase in the tale—"the key is under your mother's pillow"—advances the anti-feminist tone of this work.

Even if it weren't offensive on that head, *Iron John* is unpleasant reading—boring and chaotic. Written in a style somewhere between a self-help manual and poetry, *Iron John* adopts a folksy tone: "Let's see what we've learned so far" kind of approach, as if it were a manual on fixing bathroom plumbing. Indeed, in one of the book's many metaphors, "children turn into copper wires" (171). Sometimes these homely metaphors are affectedly coy:

When the father-table, the groundwater, drops, so to speak, and there is too little father, instead of too much father, the sons find themselves in a new situation. What do they do: drill for new father water, ration the father water, hoard it, distill mother water into father water? (93)

With all this plumbing, it is little wonder Iron John comes unstuck from his pond.

The book, however, lacks the clarity of a do-it-yourself repair guide. Bly introduces and repeats phrases that never get clarified as if repetition conferred authority. What anyway are "women's values," and how do you know when you have had too many of them? Distinctions are similarly asserted but never secured. There are times when "wild man" seems a good deal like "savage man," although Bly insists that they are different. Lacking rigorous distinctions, the book "swamps" us in the mythopoetic imagination so that, as Csikszentmihalyi says, "one [feels] nostalgic for the simple-minded clarity of the scientific approach . . ." (16). Bly could have made greater use of the "Logos-knife" (169) that he himself recommends. Metaphor, myth, literature are all instrumental in this self-help manual, but when literature is an instrument serving thesis, as it is in this case, the effect is reductionist. Hamlet, we are told, is "stuck" on his mother (How about that criminal uncle for a mentor?), and Ophelia is reduced to an aspect of Hamlet: "We could say that some sentimental girl inside Hamlet, here called Ophelia, has gone mad at this clumsily performed move [to the father's world] and will 'die'" (88). Perhaps this bias—girls are merely aspects of boys—explains why girls do not need the careful mentoring that boys require: "A girl changes into woman on her own . . ." (87). Girls as well as boys need the father, and both children need the tutoring of the elders of both sexes, but as Jill Johnston points out, Bly's "only concern here [absentee fathers in relation to daughters] is the damaging effect of such deficits on 'the daughter's ability to participate . . . in later relationships with men'" (1, 28).

Bly begins *Iron John* by outlining three historical stages—macho man, soft man, and wild man. Through the fairy tale "Iron John," Bly explores this third possibility—the wild man. Soft man is really quite unhappy (3); wild man must correct the soft man's problems. Responsibility for this softening rests with the feminists, who wanted sensitive men. This is a straw dog, straw bitch, I should say; what women actually wanted, and still want, is not men who easily weep, but fair men and just practices in gender relations.

Feminism, Bly argues, reconstituted the world, creating the new couple—softer men and harder women (3). The terms, of course, are phallic; women have appropriated phallic power, and power must be

reclaimed. The new woman is described elsewhere in the book as "fierce" and as "warrior" (151), and since fierce warrior is one of the forms, or stages, of the truly initiated man, it is not difficult to see that Bly's real worry is not "soft men" but "hard women." Bly sets out to remind us what men and women are supposed to be. He does this by staking out (Solotaroff 274) and fortifying the territory of the male identity. Men need to recover the twenty-thousand-year-old heritage (230) of "'natural brutality'" (66). Natural is supposed to make the "brutal" all right, but as we all know, often what is passed off as "natural" is really a cultural construct. In the "natural," that is in the traditional order of things, men are hard and women are soft. To ensure male identity, boys must be kept safe from the contamination of mother love: "When women, even women with the best intentions, bring up a boy alone, he may in some way have no male face, or he may have no face at all" (17). Readers who can get beyond the patronizing tone in this passage will appreciate Bly's lesson on how things "naturally" ought to be.

Essays on and reviews of *Iron John* have focussed, thus far, on the book's message for men; this is not surprising as it is sub-titled, "A Book About Men." Bly is seen as a "spokesman" for "the men's movement" (Solotaroff 270). *Iron John* is "an important text for anyone trying to make spiritual sense out of contemporary male development" (Schmidt 593), but the book also has a good deal to say about women. The urgency in Bly's voice as he advises men on the need for the father, arises out of an equally urgent warning about the danger of the mother. It is time then to examine further Bly's view of women.

Bly contends that men have been enervated by the feminism of our era. Reading women's gains as men's damage, Bly renders recent cultural changes significant only to the extent that these affect men. The putative deleterious effects of feminism in recent decades—man's supposed softening—is equated with centuries of female powerlessness. "You think you have suffered, well look at what's happened to us," or as Neil Lyndon, British broadcaster and writer, puts it: "'Men are suffering from systematic disadvantages . . . [which] represent a body of grievous, institutionalised discrimination'" (qtd. in Dougary 16). In terms of sexual oppression, the twentieth century belongs to men. Bly writes:

We know that nineteenth-century men characteristically failed to notice female suffering. *The Madwoman in the Attic*, by Sandra Gilbert and

Susan Gubar, describes how strong that suffering was. In this century, men have added another inattention: they characteristically failed to notice their own suffering. (71)

Bly's book is stirred by the emergence of the "strong" woman (3), the "fierce" woman, but Bly does not engage with this figure. Instead, he tackles the mother. Although Bly claims that it is not necessary to lay "a lot of blame on the mother" (187), he does. *Iron John* is riddled with assumptions about maternal behavior, referring, for example, to "the possessiveness that mothers *typically* exercise on sons" [emphasis mine] (12). Boys need "more hardness than she could *naturally* give" [emphasis mine] (17). The mother's ascensionism imparts to the boy, Bly implies, a contempt for physical labor. D. H. Lawrence, learning too late an honor for his father and his father's work, is Bly's example here:

The children of his [Lawrence's] generation deduced that their fathers had been doing something wrong all along, that men's physical work is wrong, and that those sensitive mothers who prefer white curtains and an elevated life are right and always have been. (20)

"Women's values" (20) are equated with "white curtains," with prettiness, and include a deprecation of physical work. In the household I live in, a mother taught sons to handle an axe, glaze a window, and dig a garden. Children, of course, must see work done, but work is not gendered. There is not man's work and woman's work. This notion that work and "values" are gendered widens the gender gap. Supposing a mother does "male work," should a boy avoid imitation because the work has been done by a woman, out of "women's values"? And if that were not confusing enough, there is, Bly tells us, "male initiation, female initiation, and human initiation" (x). A life could be used up just getting through all that initiation.

If the work of women is a useless example for maturing boys, women's feelings, particularly the mother's feelings for the father, cripple masculinity: "when the son is introduced primarily by the mother to feeling, he will learn the female attitude toward masculinity and take a female view of his own father and of his own masculinity" (24). In Bly's view of marriage, the mother cannot help but present a negative image of the father—marriage is imbricated with competition, with vicious-

ness—so that the mother imposes on the son a "wounded image of his father." Throughout the work, Bly assumes there are sides in marriage—not a couple, and not a couple raising children—but sides, as in a debate, or a war. In the household I grew up in, my mother, the mother of five sons, passed on to her sons her feelings of respect, even veneration, for her husband, and he communicated the same about her. It is absurd to contend that mothers "naturally" undermine the image of the father, and it is equally absurd to deny a child exposure to the mother's feelings. Is he to be deprived knowledge of one half of the human race? But Bly imagines mothers so irresponsible as to impose their adult pain on their children: "When at five years old he sat at the kitchen table, his mother may have confided her suffering to him, and he felt flattered to be told of such things by a grown up . . ." (64; see also 186). The mother who "confided her suffering" to her son is responsible for his becoming a "naïve man," one who often lacks "'natural brutality'" (66).

Mother's work is a useless model to the male child; her feelings destroy his masculinity; her pain leads to his naïvete; and worse, her protection of him is numbing. The "Iron John" fable suggests, says Bly, "that a mother's protection, no matter how well intentioned, will not do as a substitute for the father's protection" (67). Bad news that for all those single mothers trying to raise sons, but second best just won't do! Perhaps the numbness of mother and child has more to do with the fact that "[f]ifty-seven per cent of single-parent families headed by women live below the poverty line," a figure recorded in the 1992 report of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (Mittelstaedt 5).

In the "Iron John" tale, when the boy takes the key from under the mother's pillow, escaping her civilizing force (11), her possessiveness (12), the mentor, or male mother, enters the landscape (36), and in his presence, a "hint will come to us as to where our genius lies" (41). Favorably reviewing Bly's book, John Bemrose says, "And with women taking on jobs that used to be held solely by males, it is no longer possible for a man to define his masculinity by occupations" (66); enter the "male mother," a new role for man, one which restores exclusivity.

In the company of Iron John, the prince, like any boy in the company of his mentor, learns about his genius (his gold finger); his acceptable instincts (his gold hair); and an intelligence in nature (his eyes reflected in the pond). When the boy leaves the forest and Iron John, he enters the

"ashes" stage, the way down is the way out. The place of humiliation, of *katabasis* (70), for the prince is kitchen work (oddly enough, this is where women spend a good deal of their lives). To go through "ashes" is to give up the "safe life promised to the faithful mother's son" (88). In initiation, the naïve boy, the comfort-loving boy dies. Unless the boy sheds the "earthly, conservative, possessive clinging part of the maternal feminine" and identifies with the king father, he will believe he is a defective male (100). In the "Iron John" fable, the kitchen boy has occasion to serve at the king's table, but making a mistake, he is fired, well, not actually fired, but relocated to the garden. All boys, Bly extrapolates, long to live with the king. To do so, they must honor the father's clear and helpful side (118), but this is difficult as "something in the culture wants us to be unfair to our father's masculine side . . . assume he is a monster, as some people say all men are" (119). "Some people" have made fathers seem smaller (122), resulting in a world with "too little father" (122). Similarly, "[f]orces in contemporary society recently encouraged women to be warriors, while discouraging warriorhood in boys and men" (151), and although these agents—"some people" and "forces"—remain vague and undefined, it is clear that woman's advance implies man's diminishment. As Jill Johnston points out, Bly's "program for men, as defined in *Iron John*, depends strictly on women playing their traditional roles at home" (28). One wonders, then, if Bly doesn't actually mean to put the statement—"A man who cannot defend his own space [be a warrior], cannot defend women and children" (156)—the other way around. Being a warrior depends on women staying in their "natural" place, in need of defence. Men aren't going to be able to play out the "Iron John" story unless women stay in place, at home. But why should we play out an ancient folk tale at all, and if this one, why not, let's say, "Bluebeard"? When my son, at three, was read the "Frog Prince" at nursery school, he tried to translate that story into action. If the princess, throwing the frog at the wall got a prince, he was sure that by throwing his cat at the wall, he would get something even better. Folk tales, fairy tales, are not the eight steps to deliverance, either from boredom or debilitation.

By the time a child in our culture is twelve, he "will be crippled by shame" (162), his warrior weakened, stunted, or killed off. The mother's insistence on "improper intimacies," or the father's "improper belittling"

(148) causes shame, or "[t]o be without a supportive father" is "to be in shame" (198). Mythologically, the boy's shame is a lamed horse; only the Wild Man can provide the magnificent mount which the boy needs for the battle; in our culture, only an older man, a mentor, can work to prevent further shaming (163). The boy, indeed the adult man, must raise a sword in battle to cut "his adult soul from his mother-bound soul" (165). The warrior "can teach us how to hold boundaries" (173) against too much merging, how to hold in oppositional tension the distinction between genders (172), and although Bly assures us that "living in the opposites does not mean identifying with one side and then belittling the other," a paragraph later, he says, "More and more women in recent decades have begun identifying with the female pole, and maintain that everything bad is male, and everything good is female" (175), a fairly sweeping, condemnatory, and erroneous statement about his "opposite."

The encounter with the mentor, the awakening of the warrior within, enables the boy to replace his addiction to harmony (177) and safety with a vigilant look-out for shamers (178). The mother is chief among shamers. One's personal mother is receptive or transparent to the great mother, who "doesn't want the boy to grow up," who wants to keep him "locked up" (183). It is at this stage that Bly introduces the most offensive of ideas—"psychic incest between mother and son" (185). "Psychic incest" occurs in intellectual conversations between mother and son, or as an earlier quotation illustrates, in the passing of a clean T-shirt. "Marian Woodman," Bly tells us, associates these dangerous intellectual conversations between mother and son with the "'false phallus.'" Is intellectual tutoring the prerogative of men? Who will accept, even for a moment, that bright women should silence their ideas, their learning, their language in the company of their sons?

That boys must have male mentors, that grown men must get in touch with the wild man within, is the tactic of regrouping. Using poetry, fairy tale, myth and personal story, General Bly attempts to rally the forces in a palisade which he believes to be besieged. Bly's *Iron John* is an insidious expression of the backlash because it pretends to approve women's gains in recent decades, but in fact, *Iron John* is oppositional and the opponent is woman, in particular, the mother. Using the fairy tale, Bly shows that woman is fine in her place, and her place comes at the end of the tale. She is the well-deserved reward—the king's daugh-

ter—at the end of the male quest: "Give me your daughter as my wife" (258): *mine* and *yours*, and therefore owned. *Iron John* more than affirms the patriarchy; it shores it up. It sets up an exclusive, elitist world of boys and men, relegating women to the earliest stages of childrearing, and denominating them dangerous if they are participants in the later stages of a boy's development. As rewards, they are fine.

Bly devalues and contaminates "mother love," ignoring the fact that women learn to be mothers from their own mothers, a heritage equally as glorious, not to mention useful, as that passed from fathers to sons. Moreover, a mother's love is inclusive, not exclusive, and wide-ranging; it requires neither swamp nor desert for its expression; does not wait upon a developmental clock; is ignorant of stages; cherishes daughters as well as sons. In reading *Iron John* one cannot help but be struck by a similarity between Bly's mythic images ("Riding the Red, the White, and the Black Horses," for example) and those in Revelations. As I read this book, I remembered a particular image in Revelations: "And when the dragon saw that he was thrown down to the earth, he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male child" (13: 13).

In making the case for the boy's deepening need for male elders, it was not necessary to deprecate mothers and traditionalize women. *Iron John* is a reactionary book, and, I believe, a dangerous book. In insisting that a boy move from "the mother's house to the father's house," it proposes a diminished, an either/or, world.

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