

Verses of Despair (Robert Bly's Poetics between Idealism and Naturalism)

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Abstract

The Vietnam War generated a major outpouring of American antiwar poetry that served as a powerful medium of expressing dissent and disillusionment with the war. One of many American poets who extensively contributed to the antiwar poetry movement during the war is Robert Bly. While Bly's poetics are often appreciated for their revolutionary fervor, there exists a subtle and concealed naturalist streak in his poetry that deserves further exploration. The scholarly marginalization of such an aspect of his literary legacy undermines the richness and complexity of Bly's poetic vision. This paper seeks to identify moments of rupture that challenge Bly's idealized poetics of antiwar stance, moments that strike a naturalistic chord that capitalizes on the pessimistic belief that the world and politics are outside of one's own control. Through a naturalistic theoretical framework, the paper looks closely at two of Bly's lesser-known poems: "The World is a Confusion of Three Worlds" (1960) and "The Approaching War" (2003), written respectively in reference to the Vietnam and Iraq Wars. The significance of this study lies in deepening our understanding of the breadth and width of Bly's poetics and politics, illustrating the potential and limitation of his antiwar stance and rhetoric. It also helps rectify the prevailing misconception that naturalism is irrelevant in the late twentieth century's evolving literary styles of expression.

Keywords: Robert Bly, naturalism, determinism, Vietnam War, Iraq War, "The World is a Confusion of Three Worlds," "The Approaching War"

1. Introduction

In the sphere of American literature, Robert Bly's poetry holds a prominent position, renowned for its powerful investigation of antiwar sentiments. His poetic voice is one that resounds with a ferocious critique of war, probing into the complexities of human conflict and the profound repercussions it entails. The 1960s proved to be a transformative decade for Robert Bly, catalyzing his transformation from a relatively unknown poet to a leading voice in the American antiwar movement. With a deep-seated antiwar stance, his poetic style shifts from personal, introspective, nature-infused lyrics to explicit political and social commentary.

A comprehensive examination of the critical literature on Robert Bly's body of work—as the literature review will show—elucidates in depth the multifaceted dimensions of his antiwar discourse. Various studies highlighted Bly's use of mythology, deep imagery, mysticism, international poetry and indigenous cultures, and psychology to explore the political, symbolic, and archetypal aspects of his works. While it is widely acknowledged among these scholars that Bly's antiwar poetics do not conform to one movement or tradition, his naturalist attitude towards the subject of war remains surprisingly marginalized. This paper seeks to identify moments of rupture that challenge the poet's idealized picture of antiwar poetic revolution, moments that strike a naturalistic chord that capitalizes on the pessimistic belief that the world and politics are forces beyond human control. This paper does not endeavor to provide a comprehensive and perceptive investigation of Bly's antiwar poetics and politics. Rather, it only extends the available discussion by exploring a unique aspect of Bly that does not adequately receive due recognition. More specifically, it looks closely at two poems: "The World is a Confusion of Three Worlds" (1960) and "The Approaching War" (2003), written respectively in reference to the Vietnam and Iraq Wars.

Drawing on the theory and philosophy of literary naturalism, this paper seeks to argue that Bly's treatment of the subject of war in the two poems acknowledges the timeless persistence of war, evoking the past to indicate the limits of individual choice and free will in the face of the larger forces at play in history and society. While it is not entirely correct to assume that Bly is committed to a consistent naturalistic worldview in all his poetry, it is safe to argue that there does yet seem to be a thread of predestination in the two poems understudy. The significance of this paper is two-fold: first, it ultimately works towards deepening our understanding of the breadth and width of Bly's poetics and politics, illustrating the power of his antiwar stance and rhetoric.

Second, it helps rectify the prevailing misconception that naturalism is not relevant in the twenty-first century (Beyer, 2011). Naturalism, since its inception, has been in a constant state of evolution, so, too, has the need for it. It is of vital importance to recognize its relevance to the changing times and the ever-evolving literary styles of expression.

2. Literature Review

This section weaves together the perspectives of multiple scholars, casting light on the nuanced interpretations and critical analyses that have contributed to the overall comprehension of Robert Bly's antiwar poetics. His engagement with the antiwar movement, and the incorporation of myth, mysticism, international poetry and indigenous cultures, and depth psychology redefine his antiwar poetics, allowing him to critique the war more explicitly from diverse angles.

Several critical studies focus on Bly's formative years and early experiences of rural life which find expression in his poems, where he uses the tranquility and rhythm of nature as a counterpoint to the destruction of war (Gioia, 1987). His time serving in the U.S. Navy during World War II and living through the Korean War intensified his aversion to war and violence. In exploring the poetics of Bly, one can hardly overlook the recurrent theme of nature in his works. Bly often used natural imagery and symbolism to articulate his critiques of war, thereby adding another dimension to his profound political statements (Quetchenbach, 2000). The orderliness and delicate harmony between various elements of the natural world depicted serve as a symbol of the harmonious interconnectedness that violence disrupts. The studies suggest that this contrast serves as a poignant reminder of what is at stake in war and, in Bly's way, a plea for peace. Bly's incorporation of nature as a symbol of resistance in his antiwar discourse is distinctive and layered. Similarly, his early experience at Harvard University also had a substantial influence on his antiwar sentiment (Nelson, 1984). His exposure to literature and philosophy, particularly the works of the Romantics, Transcendentalists, and Modernists, provided him with the intellectual grounding to critique war and violence.

Bly's involvement with the Men's Movement in the late twentieth century has been studied by scholars for its deep interconnection with his antiwar poetics (Fox, 2004; Mechling & Mechling, 1994). As an influential figure in the Men's Movement, Bly sought to redefine masculinity and encourage emotional openness, a paradigm shift that significantly informed his poetic endeavors. These studies have argued that Bly's Men's Movement activities were a natural progression of his antiwar poetics, converging on a shared goal: challenging violent masculinity and war-prone societal norms that uphold violence and war.

Through both his poetry and his activism, Bly advocates for a societal shift toward peace, understanding, emotional maturity, and openness. Bly's fascination with the Jungian psychological landscape does not limit itself to the exploration of the shadow but often incorporates the focus of individuation, a core Jungian concept referring to the integration of the conscious and unconscious aspects of the self. This process was employed as a tool not only to critique war and advocate for peace but also to explore the unconscious roots of such violence (Fox, 2004; Mechling & Mechling, 1994). Bly's poetics are, therefore, a blend of psychological exploration and political commentary.

Bly's work as a translator has garnered significant scholarly attention, with researchers noting how his translation activities opened him up to a global perspective on war, peace, and the human condition (Bell, 1983; Hoagland, 2011). His translations, much like his original poetry, provide a subtle yet profound commentary on war and its ramifications, reinforcing his standing as a steadfast critic of violence and conflict. They serve as a tool of empathy, allowing readers to examine their own preconceived notions about the other and experience perspectives different from their own to counteract the dehumanization often associated with wartime propaganda. By bringing the voices of foreign poets in the like of Pablo Neruda, Cesar Vallejo, and Rumi, among others, to an English-speaking audience, Bly effectively promotes cross-cultural understanding, a factor that scholars argue can mitigate conflict and war (Bell, 1983; Hoagland, 2011).

In examining the role of empathy in Bly's antiwar poetics, scholars have identified its crucial function as an effective bridge connecting the reader to the lived realities of war, often through the expression of collective grief. However, scholars have different opinions on the purpose empathy serves in his poetry. On one hand, Bly's deployment of empathy serves to humanize the dehumanized, restoring a sense of individuality to the often-faceless victims of war, as well as helps to disrupt the abstraction of war, making its visceral reality palpable to the reader (Kizuk, 1997). On the other hand, Bly's empathetic approach undoubtedly risks oversimplifying the complex realities of war, potentially reducing the victims to objects of pity rather than complex individuals (Harris, 1992). Empathy alone cannot capture the intricacies of war, which often involves complex political, social, and economic factors.

Examining Bly's antiwar poetics and politics, critics consider the fusion of the political and the personal. Bly was not just a passive observer of the world around him; he actively engaged in antiwar activities while concurrently crafting powerful antiwar poetry (Harris, 1992). The Vietnam War provides a remarkable case in point. Known for his fierce opposition to the war,

Bly co-founded the American Writers Against the Vietnam War, and actively involved in antiwar demonstrations, and used poetry readings as a platform to vocalize his dissent. This direct engagement with the socio-political issues of the day added a layer of authenticity and immediacy to his poetry (Harris, 1992). This externalization of war is balanced with his deft use of the personal and the intimate to internalize war as a personal crisis (Bowman, 1989). Exploration of loss, grief, and the corrosion of human dignity in the face of war provides a more intimate perspective on the consequences of conflict, thereby underscoring the universality of suffering caused by war.

Bly's antiwar poetry is rooted not only in the socio-political but also in the mystical. This unique fusion is reflective of Bly's belief that poetry has the capacity to transcend the material realm, unveiling deeper truths about human existence and the universe (Amjad et al., 2021). In the context of his antiwar poetry, this mystical orientation allows for a profound exploration of war's existential implications beyond its mere physical horrors, scrutinizing its impact on the soul and the spirit (Amjad et al., 2021). Bly navigates the space between objectivity and subjectivity, between witnessing and feeling, a desperate attempt to search for resilience and healing potential.

Another strand of literature sheds opposite light on Bly's utilization of silence. In one respect, Bly's utilization of silence is used as an indictment of the collective deafness to war's horror (Bibby, 1993; Kramer, 1983). Such silent gaps are spaces for Bly's reflection, enhancing the emotional impact of his antiwar messages. In another respect, equating silence with peace could signify a dangerous indifference or ignorance toward the ravages of war (Messer, 1988). Bly's exploration of silence is not merely a stylistic choice; it is a potent tool that serves a dual purpose: to create spaces for reflection and to underscore society's collective negligence towards the brutal realities of war.

Several scholars have explored Bly's unique treatment of mythology in his poetic discourse for metaphorical and symbolic exploration. Bly utilizes mythological motifs with archetypal figures to provide a distancing effect, allowing readers to grapple with the harsh realities of war through the safety of symbolic representation (Harris, 1992). Conversely, Bly's use of mythology acts as a tool to unify human experiences across cultures and historical eras, thus emphasizing the pervasiveness and timelessness of warfare's devastating effects (Bowman, 1989). Both scholars agree that by using mythological imagery, Bly challenges the narrative of war as a heroic, mythic endeavor, instead presenting it as a destructive force that alienates individuals from their humanity and connectedness to the world.

To fully appreciate the depth and evolution of Bly's antiwar sentiments, some studies trace the arc of his work beyond the Vietnam War period. Scholars have argued that Bly's later works exhibit raw emotion and a profound and nuanced understanding of the destructive impacts of war, often characterized by an introspective approach to war and its aftermath, deepening sense of grief and loss (Bibby, 1993; Libby, 1972; Bowman, 1989). His post-Vietnam poetry is not overtly political, yet it is no less critical of war. Bly's safe distance from the realities of conflicts and wars is symbolic of the comfort of ignorance or reflective of the internal struggles within himself to daringly confront the harsh realities of war (Harris, 1992; Kramer, 1983).

This shift in perspective aligns with Bly's broader evolution as a poet, from a vocal antiwar activist to a more reflective observer of human suffering and the human condition. It also points to a maturity in his understanding of war, wherein he acknowledges not just the immediate horrors of war, but also its far-reaching, long-term implications. Bly's ability to adapt his poetic expression to engage with the changing realities and understandings of war is a testament to his exceptional poetic prowess and enduring commitment to antiwar advocacy.

3. Theoretical Framework

In his article "Naturalism and Poetry," Chris Beyer (2011) proposes that naturalist verse tradition is at odds with the major currents of twentieth-century modern poetry. There is a confirmed consensus amongst literary theorists that naturalism is not only distinct from poetry but exclusively reserved for prose and fiction. Beyer argues that modernist poets who were contemporaries of the naturalist novelists seek to capture the essence of the human experience through innovative techniques and unconventional forms that are inimical to the naturalist mode. Although very few poets could claim the title of naturalist for their poetry, Beyer does not disqualify the genre from naturalist influences. Considering the flexible nature of the exact definition of naturalism, Beyer argues that the naturalist tradition throughout its history has been noted for its ability to adapt to new currents of ideas and expression while retaining a core of naturalism.

This belief is echoed by Donald Pizer in his book *American Literary Naturalism* (2020a). Pizer asserts the strong connection between the naturalist impulse and the continuing tradition of naturalism among successive generations of American poets to exaggerate the seriousness of challenging times in America—whether in the spirit of economic and social crisis or of existential crisis. Each generation of poets incorporates the social and intellectual concerns of the age into this tradition or impulse: Freudianism and Marxism during the 1930s and the Vietnam War in the

1960s. Both Beyer and Pizer affirm that naturalism is based on the interplay between a constricting social and intellectual climate and the consequential poor quality of life, both on the outside and the inside (Pizer, 2020a; Beyer, 2011).

Beyer contends that naturalist poetry is caught between two conflicting impulses. It embraces an unyielding materialism that delves into the physical aspects of existence while possessing a strong idealist drive that inclines poets towards pursuing transcendent aspirations (2011). These two impulses create a complex dynamic within the poems of naturalist poets as they attempt to reconcile their worldly observations with their longing for the spiritual or the divine. The intense materialism, on the one hand, leads to a sense of determinism where the natural world is seen as subject to fixed laws and unalterable patterns. Idealism, on the other hand, hints towards restoring a belief in the possibility of transcending the limitations of the material world. The tension between the allure of the ideal and the constraints imposed by material circumstances creates a romantic dilemma that propels the poets forward to an ideal that remains perpetually out of reach (Beyer, 2011).

Having said that, naturalism, under the most (un)favorable interpretation, is always realism with a fusion of fatalistic determinism (Pizer, 1993b). It portrays a worldview firmly grounded in a stark and unvarnished representation of reality. Unlike other artistic treatments that delve into the mind, personality, and reflective consciousness, naturalist poetry focuses on the condition and environment in which individuals exist, presenting them as mere pawns in a larger deterministic system. The reductive approach portrays individuals driven by base instincts, biological impulses, and external forces beyond control. Psychological complexity is not granted, and individual narratives often take a back seat to the objective reality they are immersed in.

Beyer, in his attempts to draw a connection between naturalism and poetry, posits that naturalist poets render the unbridgeable divide between the natural and the cultural spheres humans have found themselves in (2011). There is a stark contrast between humans' living realities and the natural harmony that engulfs their existence. Despite the immense grandeur and beauty of the universe, it exhibits no desire to foster any human philosophical enlightenment (Beyer, 2011). The natural world in the naturalistic poem functions, as a result, not as a symbol in and of itself; it only functions as a reminder that, in the grand scheme of things, the universe seems indifferent, and the reality of existence is insignificant (Beyer, 2011). This indifference lies in the universe refusal to conform to humans' preconceived notions and expectations. By embracing the reality of suffering and loss, naturalist poets reject any "metaphysical consolation" which often provides temporary

comfort, striving for a more honest and authentic understanding of existence (Beyer, 2011). Such skeptic and agnostic portrayal of life, as Beyer asserts, often leads naturalist poets to the formulation of “faux theology” that is not based on traditional religious beliefs or doctrines but rather on personal musings and reflections (Beyer, 2011).

While it seems easy to assume that naturalist poets lose their vigor and desire to challenge the great struggles of the time, not all naturalist poets succumb entirely to this detachment; they remain passive spectators and chroniclers of public affairs in a way that is clinical (Pizer, 1993b). Naturalist poets share with scientific and philosophic naturalism a desire to observe and document sensory details and a refusal to be swayed by wishful thinking (Beyer, 2011). They avoid the easy trappings of anthropomorphism or sentimentalism and instead strive to maintain an impartial perspective on the world’s complexity and limitations.

Due to the movement’s genesis in the practices of narrative and prose, discussions of naturalism had always been characterized by a tendency to treat it as a foreign invasion with little connection to the values and cultural expressions of American poetry. However, throughout history, poets have used the genre to delve into the deepest recesses of the human condition, exploring the constraints that limit humans’ possibilities and freedom. From physical imprisonment to metaphorical confinement, poets have depicted the struggles faced by individuals trapped in circumstances beyond their control, evoking a sense of suffocation and longing and highlighting the limitations imposed on the human spirit.

4. Analysis

“This World is a Confusion of Three Worlds,” (1960)

“This World is a Confusion of Three Worlds” is a contemplative poem that delves into the complexities and contradictions of the modern world. The title of the poem captures the confusion and disarray that exists within the realms of politics, nature, and urban life, ultimately raising questions about the coexistence of different worlds and the struggle to find balance and meaning within them. Bly deeply contemplates the phenomenological nature of human experience, in which each person must reconcile the juxtaposition that exists between the internal self and a broader, universal reality that exists beyond the self.

The world Robert Bly describes in the poem is one of hidden politics, where power dynamics lurks a shadowy presence that permeates the air. The opening images of dark figures of politics hovering like birds of the night cast a foreboding shadow upon the city of New York (Bly, 1960, line 1-2). Their presence is felt but unseen, their influence far-reaching yet subtle.

They lurk in the shadows, waiting for the right moment to strike, leaving a trail of destruction in their wake. The unusual association of birds with darkness suggests that the presence of politics in the world is not always aligned with the ideals of freedom and progress. In a flat style of expression, the speaker continues the unsettling intertwining of the politically ominous and naturally the ordinary. The image of the boy stretching to his mother as the new trees in the backyards of New York flutter in the gentle breeze is only one example of many others where citizens are unaware of the dark figures that engulf ordinary existence (Bly, 1960, line 3-4). Bly capitalizes on the interplay of innocence and experience, dark and light of the true complexities of life unfolding which is indicative that not everything is as it seems. The trees and the birds shine brightly the colors of life but only they are presented as façade from which darkness lurks.

In the second stanza, the speaker rushes past the moment of symbolic awaiting of danger that the first stanza depicts to total serenity in the natural world. The time stands still, and the political world fades into insignificance. The chirping of different birds blends harmoniously, creating a mesmerizing melody that transcends time and space (Bly, 1960, line 5). The speaker seems to embark on a journey where the tiny bells of China represent the delicate and fleeting moments of beauty and peace that can still be found amidst the chaos. This juxtaposition highlights the contrast between the natural world and the man-made environment. It is as if nature has found a way to defy the urban landscape and create a peaceful oasis within the urban jungle. The stanza's purely aesthetic quality makes its political relevance ambiguous. It focuses on sensory details and creates a subjective experience for the speaker, making it difficult to attribute any specific political meaning to it.

The moment of potential "peace" the second stanza conveys soon is undervalued in the final stanza. The tiny bells of China ring to call to solitude and contemplation, in a tiny mountain house nestled among green leaves soon creates a discordant sound of the traffic like the noise of the Hundred Years' War (Bly, 1960, line 12). The sudden intrusion is a reminder that in the most tranquil of settings, the modern world finds a way to intrude. The jarring contrast between the quiet tranquility of the bells and the noise of the traffic highlights the relentless intrusion of modernity into every aspect of life. Peace, if there is ever such a thing, is a fleeting illusion.

The speaker in the poem does not assume a position of authority. His tone is non-judgmental and open to different perspectives. The speaker dwells on the aftermath, the rebirth of war-thought that negates the previous openness. The shift in focus allows for a greater sense of anxiety of a war soon coming in a manner that engages the broader implications of one's existence.

The speaker's concern is not solely with self or victimization, but with the broader consciousness available to humankind. Robert Bly, the poet, is pressured to acknowledge the collective destiny that transcends individual boundaries. His words, imbued with personal introspection, serve as a conduit for the fears and anxieties that reverberate within the collective consciousness. The lyric self's vulnerability and proximity to the horrors of war necessitate a recognition of the interconnectedness of all historical events.

The poem whispers no secrets, there is a cosmic tapestry unfurled, larger than a mere individual. It is a confusion of three worlds to uncover the reality that lies beneath. The revealed meaning of the poem seems to hold no power, and determinism reigns supreme as a relentless force guiding each human action and shaping every turn of history. The easy lyrics suggest no room for choice, only that people receive history's giving. It is a poem that captures the essence of pain where agency is an illusion and a mere distraction and a futile struggle against the repetitive historical tide. It is not hard to deduce that the speaker is reduced to a mere spectator and witnesses to the grand spectacle of life's mysteries. Bly's voice is one that is not commanding but one that requires surrender and submission where protest is not a redeeming possibility, and thoughts are paralyzed, and political actions are meaningless.

“The Approaching War,” (2003)

Robert Bly's second poem “The Approaching War” directs its focus to the impending Iraq war following the terrorist attack on New York City and what was inevitably to become years of futile conflict similar to that of the Vietnam War, which led to many deaths and few resolutions. Unlike the first poem which seems a little resistant to a more determinist strains, “The Approaching War” goes to extreme lengths to mourn the loss of innocence and depict a world reality that is tainted and enveloped in a veil of darkness and despair, giving in entirely to bleak pessimism. Written forty-three years apart from each the other, the initial quiet, reserved and reflective tone of the first poem is overshadowed by the latter tone of resignation and hopelessness in the second poem. The poet presents a somber outlook on life, emphasizing the recurring patterns of suffering and the inevitability of mortality, the relentless passage of time and the cyclical nature of existence.

The title “The Approaching War” has a profound effect on the overall mood of the poem. It evokes a sense of foreboding, creating a sense of urgency and anticipation. The first stanza opens with the metaphor of a horse fixated within a stable instead of allowed to roam free (Bly, 2003, line 1). The speaker builds on this metaphor using the crashed plane and its shadow that lingers under its wings for thirty years in the desert to further symbolize the lingering presence of tragedy

(Bly, 2003, line 2-3). Both the horse and the plane become monuments that stand as a testament to the fragility of life. Their mere existence serves as a reminder of the fleeting nature of existence and the tragedies that can strike at any moment, leaving a lasting impact on the world. Such imagery provides more questions than answers. Their insistent presence seems to defy logic and reason. The once sleek and majestic body of the plane now lay contorted, and decaying is a testament to the forces that had shattered its structural integrity. Time here has a way of elongating sorrow, stretching it out night and day, evoking a haunting feeling of the past in a way that is eerie and still.

In the second stanza, the speaker challenges the traditional perception of art as timeless and transcendent. Wondering about Rembrandt's creative power of his pens touching the page and the rapidity with which "so many Dutch barns fly up," the speaker emphasizes that art is useless and limited and not being employed as a conduit for the human spirit to evoke emotions, stir the soul, and ignite a spark that transcends the boundaries set by time (Bly, 2003, line 4-5). It is not that art does lack purpose, but it is about its inability as a cultural medium to change a single thing overnight or that its impact is always necessarily tangible or immediate. This sentiment is even emphasized as the stanza shifts to the many nights earth has pulled down (Bly, 2004, line 6). Earth has experienced its fair share of nights for so long, where the darkness takes over.

The third stanza moves from art to animals to construct a corrupted image of humanity. The imagery of a hog hanging upside down portrays vulnerability and impending danger (Bly, 2004, line 7-8). When the war is about to approach people like a knife approaching a hog, the speaker receives it passively. The fact that humans are just reduced to hogs awaiting their death challenges the idea of what makes a human truly human. In a world where it becomes difficult to determine where the human ends and the animal begins, free will and personal responsibility are illusions. In war and the killing of hogs, the loss of dignity is a common theme. Both situations highlight the ethical complexities of causing harm to others, whether humans or animals.

Such an unanswered search for meaning and purpose continues to the fourth stanza. The speaker here turns to historical reality in a way that seems alarmingly submissive. The weight of history is likened to a physical weight that presses down upon individuals, exerting its force upon individuals anew, metaphorically bending them over (Bly, 2003, line 11).

Just as humans have always been bent by the weight of history in the past, they very soon will find themselves bending once more under the weight of its legacy. The wait for the next time when individuals find themselves facing similar challenges is not long.

The imminent nature of this impending hardship creates a palpable sense of foreboding and unease through the chilling image of individuals submitting their head to the chopping block (Bly, 2003, line 12). The weight of history cannot be easily resisted or overcome; it exerts a constant pressure, exerting a gravitational force on individuals and leaving them feeling helpless and overwhelmed, inducing in them total surrender and submission.

The speaker's futile search for meaning is further emphasized in the fifth stanza. The captivating imagery of a Drupad singer, his voice carefully curated and effortlessly delivered, patiently waiting for the next breath serves as a profound reminder of the vastness of the universe and the insignificance of human existence (Bly, 2003, 13-14). It is a sad reminder that while human existence is important, the universe can continue to flourish and evolve even without them. Human presence is a mere footnote in the grand scheme of the cosmos. The mere observation that "the universe can get along without us" highlights the temporary nature of human existence and the insignificance of individual actions in the grand scheme of things (Bly, 2003, line 15). Without us, the universe would continue its war.

In the final stanza, the speaker gives in entirely to his position not only as an individual but also as a poet. In such a world where the divine remains a distant whisper in the poem, the speaker is left to seek solace in his limited understanding. He comes to the realization that even his words carry no weight. Every time a new poem is born, it is forgotten soon after. The speaker's mind is a labyrinth, filled with hidden doors. He searches for meaning, but only finds confusion, for his thoughts are a kaleidoscope, shifting and rearranging. The speaker is "forgetful," a wanderer in the realm of words, writes and paints pictures, only to delete them moments later, for in his mind, time stands still, trapped in a never-ending loop (Bly, 2004, line 16).

One of the most striking aspects of this poem is its refusal to engage in any specific political considerations. The theme of the futility of hope is continuously emphasized. Readers are left with the realization that, despite the universe's impressiveness, it has no interest in furthering human philosophical enlightenment. The poet transcends any contemporary issues or debates, instead embracing a universal perspective that transcends the boundaries of time and place. The poem's message is one of universal suffering and acceptance, leaving the reader with a sense of humility and introspection.

Robert Bly's divergence from revolutionary poetics is noticeable in the two poems above. War's excess puts at risk Bly's poetic imagination and leads to fatigue and disengagement from public affairs. Subtlety is lost and his war poetics proves not to be immune to the relentless images

of destruction that permeate the historical reality. In both poems, what is depicted is a world of politics and a historical reality that move not in arbitrary ways but also in ways that are indifferent to individual's aspirations. It is a political and a historical reality that is only capable of making errors.

Robert Bly's later naturalistic approach to war poetics is not fragmentary—although this could be contested—it is much safer to assume that Bly approaches politics empirically. Bly observes centuries of continuous wars with a sense of introspection, attempting to make sense of the contrasting elements and the cacophony of experiences. The effect of this process is the absorption of the individual as an atomized unit into a vast dehumanized network of exchange. The consistent feeling is disillusionment with the past, present and future as Bly grapples with the loss of meaning and purpose of modern life. Rather than taking for granted the existence of transcendent truths or divine mysteries, Bly laments the chaotic nature of the modern world, giving in to the ultimate belief that history does not progress but regress and that social institutions hinder rather than promote peace.

Bly's naturalistic poetics holds that the experience of history is a continuous flow of moments, and these moments are not distinct or self-contained event. It is not caught in the patterns of progress and decline. All there are eternal principles, fixed and not subject to change. The future does not exist independently of the present moment. In fact, he eliminates any notion of truly novel historical phenomena. This limitation on novelty stems from the fundamental interconnectedness of all historical events. Every event, no matter how newly apparent, can be traced back to the underlying causes set in motion at earlier times. Casting such a deterministic strain of history augments a sense of helplessness in Bly as his role as a poet is reduced to a witness to the events unfolding, spectator-like, a mere commentator of the apocalypse whose own speculation about the imminent presence of war is fueled from pre-existing and forever existing fears of an always approaching war.

By means of consulting a historical memory, Bly's poetics rely by default on historical consciousness which contributes to moral-ethical stance. Bly's poetry serves as a catalyst for self-reflection and for questioning the plausibility of moral values. The question worth asking here is what inherent moral responsibility comes with this knowledge of history. Given the regularity of cultural patterns and life patterns that extends beyond any individual's limits of birth and death, Bly's poetic imagination is at risk and simultaneously at work. Although hope is fragile and uncertain, a poem, how ineffective politically, rises as a defiant flame to question prevailing

attitudes and defy structures that seek to confine. As Bly finds himself to become part of a temporal whole larger than that of his personal life, writing consciously and historically is the only necessary. History, particularly, the history of war, resists change, and war history incessantly repeats itself, or weighs people down leading to a sense of loss, a threat to the identity of people, civilians, soldiers, and activists. The poetic imagination serves to redirect the blame off oneself and towards breaking silence founded on fears.

The two poems fit neatly within the naturalist impulse to describe the forces that constrict human life. In both poems, evil and war overshadow everything else good. A void exists, devoid of meaning and purpose. Good and evil, side by side, coexist, yet never finding their proper balance. The universe seems either incapable of, or more likely, uninterested in providing a consistent and coherent theology or metaphysics. Bly's naturalistic poetics is emphasized as there is no urge for readers to confront the forces that constrict their lives or offer an option of how to strive for a world where peace and love prevail. It only serves as a reflection on the uncontrollable human condition and individuals' limitations.

5. Conclusion

This paper aims to identify instances of rupture that challenge the poet's idealized vision of antiwar poetic zeal, moments that strike a naturalistic chord that capitalizes on the pessimistic belief that the world and politics are inherently flawed. The analysis has demonstrated a gradual rupture in Bly's revolutionary poetic vision between the Vietnam War and the Iraq War. The contemplative tone of the first poem is replaced by a darker tone in the second. The final descent into complete pessimism is a result of melancholic fatigue of a lifetime witnessing of successive wars. The growing strain of naturalist agnosticism and skepticism running through Bly's two poems instills in readers a sense of Bly's perpetual spiritual questioning of history and politics' resistance to change. If nothing else, war for Bly is nothing but a *natural* fact and any attempts to avoid is rather futile.

While Bly's naturalistic viewpoint seems impartially honest and refreshing, it has detrimental limitations on the overall impact of his poetic activism. Faced with the daunting task of addressing the inevitable cyclical nature of political history on the eve of the Iraq War, his disillusionment with the ability to facilitate political change through poetic influence is noticeably contrastive to his earlier belief that poetry can be utilized as a powerful medium for activism, capable of mobilizing communities and igniting collective action.

Succumbing entirely to a naturalist outlook and views could only contribute to a sense of resignation and a desire to withdraw.

The present study recommends a retrospective evaluation of well-known antiwar poets who find themselves grappling with the ever-changing political, historical, and social landscape. As it becomes harder to connect the art form of poetry with a desired social change, it is expected that other poets shift towards a more isolated and introspective form of expression, coming perhaps to the realization that personal growth and transformation is a much worthier pursuit than trying to change the world, as many of them were accustomed to do in earlier decades. It is crucial to further explore the ways in which antiwar poets have adapted their perspectives and approaches to activism over time.

6. References

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