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The Transcendentalist Tradition in Robert Bly's Poetics

Xinyi Xiao
School of Foreign Languages, Guangzhou College of Technology and Business

Author Note
The author declares no conflicts of interest to disclose. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Xinyi Xiao, School of Foreign Languages, Guangzhou College of Technology and Business, Guangzhou, Guangdong 510850, China. Email: xiaoxinyi237@foxmail.com

Abstract

The academia has traced the cultural roots of the poetics of Robert Bly, a leading figure of the American "Deep Image" school, to foreign sources, such as European Surrealism, psychological unconscious theories, European mysticism, and Chinese Daoist philosophy. However, an examination of Bly's own poetics reveals his emphasis on nativist consciousness and solitude, highlighting intricate connections with transcendentalism—a cornerstone of American indigenous culture. This discovery will contribute to a deeper understanding of Bly's poetic spirit and its place within modern and contemporary American poetry.
Keywords: Robert Bly; Transcendentalism; sense of native culture; solitude

1. Introduction

The American scholar Joyce Peseroff (1986) wrote in the *New York Times Book Review*, referring to the contemporary poet Robert Bly, born in Minnesota, as a transcendentalist. (pp. 89-91) This article was published in 1986, more than two decades after Bly first emerged on the literary scene. This timing is quite meaningful and thought-provoking for Bly. Since the beginning of his poetic career, he has been hailed by critics as a leader of the "deep image" or "new surrealism" school for

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initiating a new poetic style. To some extent, Peseroff's label of Bly as a "Transcendentalist" actually represents a redefinition of the poet's creative style. Coincidentally, Bly expert William V. Davis, in his 1992 edited collection *Critical Essays on Robert Bly*, cited another critic, Richard Sugg, to propose a redefinition of Bly, arguing that "Bly emulates Thoreau in his belief in the integral relationship between the individual psyche and the body politic, and in his concomitant willingness to engage at the psychospiritual level the political issues of his time." (1986, p. 292) Unfortunately, neither Peseroff's effort nor Davis's call seems to have garnered much resonance or attention from the academic community. It is worth mentioning that Peseroff's article only analyzed and discussed three of Bly's poems — "Three Kinds of Pleasure," "After Working," and "Unrest"—in terms of their themes, without mentioning "Transcendentalism" in the article's body. The specific content of the article appears to have almost no connection with "Transcendentalism."

For a long time, in terms of influence studies and correlational research, most scholarly work on Bly has focused on modern psychoanalysis, particularly Jung's theory of the unconscious, Chinese Daoist aesthetics and classical poetry, Western surrealist poetry, and mysticism such as Boehme's poetics. Apart from the brief mentions by the two aforementioned scholars, the connection between Bly and Transcendentalism, or the influence of Transcendentalism on Bly, remains a gap in academic research. In fact, we find that traces of Transcendentalism can be seen in Bly's personal life philosophy, poetic ideals, and the essence of his poetry.

2. Sense of Native Culture

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Transcendentalism is an important source of American cultural independence and one of the cornerstones of American culture. Its founder, Ralph Waldo Emerson, proposed that American literature and culture should be rooted in the nation's own soil. His speech "The American Scholar," delivered in 1837 at the Phi Beta Kappa Society in Cambridge, Massachusetts, has been hailed as the "Declaration of Intellectual Independence." (McQuade, 1981, p. 25) Decades after the founding of the United States, Emerson observed that American independence was merely geographical and political; culturally and spiritually, America was still dependent on Europe. American writers, thinkers, and scholars were too timid in the face of European culture and history, afraid to step beyond established boundaries. In the presence of European literature, America was merely a passive listener and imitator. Emerson sharply criticized, "Various motives, various prophecies, various preparations show that the confidence in humanity's unmanifested powers belongs to the American scholar. We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe. The spirit of the American freeman is already suspected to be timid, imitative, tame." Thus, at the end of his speech, he passionately called out: "We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds." (Emerson, 2014, p. 20) Emerson emphasized "intuition," calling it "the primary wisdom," through which "all things find their common origin" and which is "the universal, dependable, original self."(Emerson, 2014, p. 62) Transcendentalism placed such importance on intuition to satirize the prevailing neoclassicism in American culture at the time, which took European classical traditions, especially ancient Greek and Roman

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literature and art, as its models. In the preface to *Nature*, Emerson asked, "Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us?" To some extent, Transcendentalism injected a vibrant and powerful gene of nativist consciousness into the formation and development of American culture. Influenced by it, many young American writers began to turn their gaze to their own homeland, rooting their creations in their native soil. Writers like Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Edgar Allan Poe emerged, renowned for their distinctly American characteristics and styles.

Bly was born in the 1920s. During his military service, he developed a passion for poetry by chance. After leaving the army, he returned to university, immersing himself fully in poetry study, creation, and translation while at Harvard. At that time, the American literary scene was swept by waves of enthusiasm for seeking creative inspiration in Europe, led by figures like Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. Eliot's essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" fueled this trend. Eliot himself highly revered classicism, emphasizing the value and necessity of cultural tradition and literary history in shaping a poet's consciousness. He believed that the external form and internal wit of classical poetry were the perfect elements of poetry. He proposed that the evaluation of a poet must be measured within a historical framework: "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists... I propose to use this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism." (Eliot, 1994, p. 3) Thus, Eliot

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emphasized that poets must adhere to tradition and cultivate historical consciousness through reading. He even argued, “For any poet who wants to continue writing poetry after the age of twenty-five, this historical sense is nearly indispensable. This historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence. This historical sense compels a poet to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.” (Eliot, 1994, p. 2) Eliot not only practiced this view of tradition in his poetry but also gave up his American citizenship to become a British citizen to be closer to tradition. Both his poetic advocacy and his personal political identity had a significant impact on the younger generation of American poets. Bly could not help but satirize this: “In the 1900s, America was considered to be vulgar, and corrupt; those (referring to Eliot, Pound, etc.) who felt that ‘corruption was not compulsory’ ... They meant intellectual corruption to a certain extent ... Europe called them away. Pound went to Europe, Eliot went to Europe, Cummings went—Cummings came back, Hemingway came half-way back...” (Bly, 1980, pp. 54-55) “American poetry resembles a group of huge spiral arms whirling about in space. Eliot and Pound are moving away at tremendous speeds. Marianne Moore and Jeffers are driving into space also.” (Bly, 2008, p. 243) Bly called Eliot and Pound’s departure a “wrong turning” in American poetry. Of course, this “wrong turning” was not only about poets distancing themselves from their homeland but also about their poetic spirit; Eliot and others anchored their poetic

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spirit in the poetic traditions of Europe. Bly also valued tradition. He extensively and systematically studied not only European poetic history and culture but also deeply explored Latin American poetry, Chinese poetry, and Islamic poetry. It was through this broad and profound comprehensive study and research that Bly solidified his poetic beliefs. He regarded Transcendentalism as the ultimate destination of his poetic spirit. He said, "When you look at other literatures, it becomes obvious that unless a poetry can come directly out of the ground of the country, it will never last." (Bly, 1980, p. 55) Here, Bly essentially reiterated Emerson's earlier call for American literature to return to its native soil. In an interview in 1966, Bly discussed several contemporary poets—William Stafford, Tom McGrath, and James Wright—and believed that their success was related to their creative return to their homelands. Stafford's poetry largely stemmed from his birthplace, Kansas; McGrath's from his hometown, Dakota; and Wright's from his native Ohio.

Bly hailed from Minnesota, his homeland, where he spent most of his life. From his poetic texts, we can sense the poet's intense connection to his native soil: there are quiet and profound fields, stubble fields emitting the rich scent of earth, scattered and lonely telephone poles, and swirling snowflakes that are cold and yet imbued with a hazy beauty in winter. The darkness, dusk, corn, ash trees, and more all permeate the poet's heart. In his works, they are not merely simple, vivid images but evoke a vivid and three-dimensional sense of concreteness. Readers feel as if they are in Minnesota, sharing the landscape with Bly. It can be said that Bly's personal creative practice vividly illustrates the seemingly intangible but inherently symbiotic

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relationship between poetry and native soil. The natural environment, cultural geography, political climate, and economic ecology of the homeland subtly shape the poet's individual psychology and spiritual realm, providing a continuous source of inspiration and material for creation. In turn, poetry plays an irreplaceable role in constructing the external landscape and internal qualities of native culture. "I am driving; it is dusk; Minnesota. / The stubble field catches the last growth of sun. / The soybeans are breathing on all sides." (Bly, 2018, p. 9) This is one of the most classic expressive styles in Bly's poetry. In a sense, he seems to borrow narrative techniques: character, time, and place—the three essential elements of narrative. However, Bly's poems are mostly lyrical, brief in length, leaving little room for narrative. The poet emphasizes the presence of place because of the inseparable kinship between place and the poet. "There has been light snow. / Dark car tracks move in and out of the darkness. / I stare at the train window marked with soft dust. / I have awakened at Missoula, utterly happy." (Bly, 2018, p. 23) The poem "In a Train" consists of only four lines, but the poet deliberately ends with the place he is in, reminding readers—and indeed himself. The essence of poetry is often elusive, not requiring grand visions, but it can transport us to a place imbued with sacred meaning.

As the snow grows heavier, the cornstalks fade farther away,

And the barn moves nearer to the house.

The barn moves all alone in the growing storm.

The barn is full of corn, and moving toward us now,

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Like a hulk blown toward us in a storm at sea;

All the sailors on deck have been blind for many years. (Bly, 2018, pp. 30-31)

"The barn" is a frequently recurring place in Bly's poetry—a specific location in his homeland that holds special memories for him. The poet often uses it to illustrate the indelible emotional relationship between himself and the barn. The barn "moves closer," "moves all alone"—it is a living, breathing entity. In the poet's works, the barn, like other elements of his homeland, haunts him. They not only accompany him in the real world but are also deeply connected to him in the artistic field of poetry. This poetic practice precisely illustrates his aesthetic philosophy: the integration of native life and art makes it possible for artistic life to sustain itself through continuous self-regeneration.

Bly's nativist consciousness is not limited to his native Minnesota but extends to the entire nation, encompassing American geography, history, politics, economy, and other fields. His National Book Award-winning collection, *The Light Around the Body*, vividly represents the diverse ecology of American political culture. Meanwhile, *The Man in the Black Coat Turns* and *Loving a Woman in Two Worlds* depict the myriad facets of American popular culture in colorful detail.

3. Solitude

Eliot believed that "no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone." (Eliot, 1994, p. 3) In other words, artists, including poets, form a communal entity, and no individual poet can isolate himself from others. Therefore, he argued that poets must read literary history to establish connections between the individual

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and others, the individual and society, and to find the texture of poetry in history and tradition. In contrast, Bly insisted, “You cannot be a writer unless you are willing to sacrifice something. To go off and live by yourself for two years is sacrificing very little.... You have to find out who you are before you can even write one word that is of any value;” (Bly, 1980, pp. 53-54) Clearly, Bly believed that anyone aspiring to write poetry must first distance themselves from any community, examine themselves, and clearly understand their individuality and differences from others. After gaining fame, Bly repeatedly emphasized the importance of solitude for a poet. We know that solitude is often a psychological concept, but in Bly’s poetic philosophy, for a poet, solitude must also be a tangible, physical test—that is, living alone.

As early as in 1966, Bly discussed the meaning and value of solitude in an interview, saying, “It’s been interesting that people of fifty years ago who went off into solitude often went to Europe for that solitude. It has become clear in the last few years that ‘American earth’ and a certain fresh solitude are no longer considered incompatible.” (Bly, 1980, p. 54) From Bly’s half-jesting remark, it is not difficult to see that, on the one hand, solitude is a necessity for poets in any era; on the other hand, for American poets, especially those of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, America seemed to lack the climate and soil for solitude. Many important poets, including Pound, Eliot, and Cummings, went to Europe to seek and experience the atmosphere of solitude. Bly’s so-called “fresh solitude” is clearly relative to America, a relatively young nation. Bly’s reference to “American soil” has a metaphorical meaning, alluding to America’s cultural roots and historical traditions.

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Therefore, why, for Bly, did American soil suddenly become closely associated with solitude?

On July 4, 1845, Independence Day, inspired by Emerson's ideas, Thoreau abandoned communal living and moved to a simple cabin on Emerson's land by Walden Pond to experience a solitary life. This legendary period of solitary living lasted until September 1847—two years and two months. During this time, he meticulously recorded his state of solitude, personal observations, emotional changes, experiences, and psychological construction, later compiling them into the book *Walden*, published in 1854. The book was hailed by *The New York Times* as "a treasure of American literature," and the magazine *Times* listed it among "the classics that shape readers' lives." Academics generally regard it as a representative work of Transcendentalist philosophy. For the American public, Thoreau's *Walden* is akin to a religious scripture, offering a model of personal cultivation and spiritual elevation. Thus, *Walden* holds pioneering significance in the construction of the American national psyche. The fifth chapter of the book is specifically devoted to the theme of "Solitude." Through his personal practice of solitude, Thoreau concluded, "I find it wholesome to be alone for the greater part of the time. (Thoreau, 2009, p. 149) "The sun is alone**,** except in thick weather, when there sometimes appear to be two, but one is a mock sun. God is alone—but the devil, he is far from being alone; he sees a great deal of company; he is legion." (Thoreau, 2009, p. 150) Thoreau endowed the sun and God with the quality of solitude, thereby cloaking solitude in a sacred, religious aura. Thus, through Thoreau's exemplary personal practice and his culturally enlightening

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classic Walden, solitude gained unprecedented universal value: it can enhance one's philosophical wisdom of life and cultivate poetic sensibilities.

As mentioned earlier, Bly advocated that to become a poet, one must learn to live alone for at least two years without engaging with others. (Bly, 1980, p. 53) Although Bly did not explain the basis for his two-year recommendation, and science cannot provide corresponding evidence, we cannot help but connect Thoreau's two-year solitary experience at Walden Pond with Bly. In 1971, during an interview with scholars Jay Bail and Geoffrey Cook on the topic of the "historical tradition of solitude" in America, Bly said, "And America tried to go in that way a hundred years ago, with Thoreau, and with Whitman, and with Emerson." (Bly, 1980, p. 6) What about Bly himself? After graduating from Harvard in 1950, Bly did not immediately enter the workforce like most people. Instead, he found an abandoned hut in New York. Unlike Thoreau, who sought solitude and quiet in the secluded lakeside woods, Bly placed himself in a metropolis, experiencing solitude in a "great hermit in the city" manner, delving deep into his inner self through solitude. Years later, Bly recalled, "when I was in New York at that time there was no... there wasn't any community. There were no communes, there was no one to go to." (Bly, 1980, p. 14) He stayed there for over two years. Richard Sugg, a critic on Robert Bly, from Florida International University commented: "If the Harvard years were Bly's introduction to the vocation of a poet, then the years in New York immediately after Harvard were the time of Robert Bly's testing the strength of his vocation, as well as of his discovering the lifelong subject of his work. New York, Bly feels, taught him the need for a poet

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to pursue his ‘solitude’.” (Sugg, 1986, p. 6)

For Bly, solitude and poetry are inseparably linked. First, solitude is a guarantee, or prerequisite, for poetic creation. He admitted that he had opportunities to teach at universities, like many other established poets, ensuring financial stability. However, he unhesitatingly rejected such opportunities. He said, “And another thing is, of course, the solitude--the link between poetry and solitude. Solitude is simply impossible in a university. They pay you to talk, not to be silent.” (Bly, 1980, p. 18) Second, solitude is an important theme in poetry. Bly’s debut and representative work, *Silence in the Snowy Fields*, contains 44 short poems divided thematically into three sections: “Solitude,” “Awakening,” and “Silence.” The section on solitude includes 11 poems, and the poet deliberately placed this section first in the collection. Incidentally, in Bly’s *Collected Poems* published in 2018, he placed “Eleven Poems of Solitude” at the very beginning of the book, highlighting the significance and status of the theme of “solitude” in his poetics. Looking at the entire *Silence in the Snowy Fields* collection, we find that, besides the first section, the other two sections also reveal a strong sense of solitude. It is no exaggeration to say that Bly’s entire literary career revolves around the theme of “solitude.” For Bly, “solitude” as a poetic theme is largely a medium for interpreting poetic aesthetics, observing the world, expressing the inner self, and exploring life—a perspective that aligns closely with the core spirit of Transcendentalism.

Bly’s poetic creation has a typical individual characteristic—environmental description. Although his poems are mostly short, sometimes only three to five lines,

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they rarely lack descriptions of scenery. For example, the poem “Three Kinds of Pleasures”: "The darkness drifts down like snow on the picked cornfields/ In Wisconsin: and on these black trees/ Scattered, one by one, / Through the winter fields--/ We see stiff weeds and brownish stubble, / And white snow left now only in the wheeltracks of the combine.” (Bly, 2018, p. 3) Unlike the fresh, joyful, and bright environments in the poetry of British Romantic poet Wordsworth, the scenes in Bly’s works reflect a Thoreau-like clarity, serenity, and solitude. They seem to engage in equal dialogue with humans, even sharing a spiritual connection. “It is a willow tree alone in acres of dry corn. / Its leaves are scattered around its trunk, and around me, / Brown now, and speckled with delicate black, / Only the cornstalks now can make a noise.” (Bly, 2018, p. 5) “I sit alone surrounded by dry corn, / Near the second growth of the pigweeds, / And hear the corn leaves scrape their feet on the wind.” (Bly, 2018, p. 8) The harmonious relationship between such scenes and humans in Bly’s work is familiar to us from the "Solitude" chapter of Walden. This kind of environmental writing highlights the significance Bly advocates for solitude or living alone: only in solitude or loneliness can one fully integrate into the surrounding environment, contemplate all things, and form an ecological field where everything is interconnected. Then, with an equal stance, one can engage in dialogue and communication with all things, sensing one’s own vibrant vitality.

In Bly’s poetry, we find that solitude not only allows us to maintain harmonious communication with the external world but also enables us to communicate with ourselves constantly, delve into our inner being, engage in

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self-dialogue, and thereby remain clear-minded and independent. This is a key reason why academia refers to Bly's poetics as "inward poetics." (Xiao, 2010, p. 3) In a sense, this is the ultimate goal of Bly's advocacy for solitude—a perspective highly consistent with the life philosophy of Emerson and Thoreau's Transcendentalism.

There is a solitude like black mud!

Sitting in the darkness singing,

I cannot tell if this joy

Is from the body, or the soul, or a third place!

When I wake, new snow has fallen,

I am alone, yet someone else is with me,

drinking coffee, looking out at the snow. (Bly, 2018, p. 72)

These are the final two stanzas of "Six Winter Privacy Poems." It is evident that solitude brings the poet boundless joy from the depths of his soul—a realization of the wonder and richness of existence through solitude. The poem "Return to Solitude" shares a similar beauty. The last line reveals the discovery after returning to solitude: "Trees, perhaps, with new leaves." (Bly, 2018, p. 4) This symbolic expression metaphorically suggests the hope and future that solitude offers us.

4. Conclusion

For a long time, the academia has traced the cultural roots of American "deep image" poets, including Bly, to European surrealism, modern psychological theories of the unconscious, European mysticism, and Chinese Daoist philosophy. However,

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from Bly's personal poetics of nativist consciousness and solitude, we find intricate connections with Transcendentalism, which is a cornerstone of American indigenous culture. Clearly, native culture is also an important source of Bly's poetics, as he consistently emphasized that poetry does not last unless it comes out of the soil of its own country. In fact, this applies not only to poetry but to all artistic creation. Therefore, valuing and developing native culture remains an important mission at all times.

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