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“The Frog-Poet”  
Approx. 1,590 Words

## **The Frog-Poet, or Faithful Robert**

I was determined to begin this account of the poet Robert Bly’s latest Denver performance in the same spirit Bly himself brought to the state: *There was once a poet who came from the North, where many thousands of years before the sea had tossed in its fathomless bed.* But I realized, as soon as the words were down, that more was involved in Bly’s “evening of music, poetry and fairy tales” than my Grimm opening could suggest. For Bly (in his public persona, at least) always aspires to the mental clarity and swiftness of an archetypal guru-gadfly like Blake or Eckhart, but he always falls back into the swampy exuberance of Whitman and Boehme. As a result, he is both exciting and irritating, revelatory and obscure by turns — in short, a thoroughly American writer.

Bly has been combining music with poetry for a number of years, reciting his own poems and those of other writers to the tranquil strains of a zither-like instrument. Lately he has traded in his zither for a mandolin, which he plays with the same semi-skilled enthusiasm. “Stories always began with music,” he tells the 700-plus crowd in the Houston Fine Arts Center at

Colorado Women’s College, “to let the audience know what they’re being transported to a different place and time. He strums the mandolin a moment, humming a vague, meditative tune. “That’s it, see. No more twentieth century America.”

Bly then proceeds to tell the famous tale first transcribed by the Grimm brothers, entitled “The Frog Prince, or Faithful Henry.” His telling is fluid, if a bit erratic. There’s the king’s young daughter who loses her golden ball in a well that lies halfway between the castle and the dark forest. After she’s wept awhile beside the well, a frog appears; the frog offers to retrieve the ball “if you will love me and let me be your companion and play-fellow, and sit by you at your little table, and eat off your little golden plate, and drink out of your little cup, and sleep in your little bed.” The princess agrees like a shot, but when the frog tosses up her ball she stands him up and heads merrily back to the castle.

Hearing’s not reading, so I won’t finish the story just yet. Instead, I want to jump ahead to Bly’s interpretation of it, according to which the tale — and all fairy tales, for that matter — is not for children, but for adults, and carries sophisticated information about the spiritual growth of human beings. The first portion, retailed above, describes the spiritual loss that happens to everyone as they grow toward adulthood. Bly suggests the loss is inevitable, part of the process, and that the first step toward restoring the lost spiritual integrity (or “self” or “soul” or whatever word works best for you) is to seek help from the frog. The frog (at this point Bly begins inserting phrases like “of course,” assuming we all know who Marie-Louise von Franz and Joseph Campbell are) stands for something like the gut-level understanding faculty: “intuition,” let’s say, or “body knowledge.”

See what I mean by “swampy?” And Bly’s handling of the audience doesn’t help, because he asks for reactions to the story then dogmatically rejects them all.

Enough. The princess is eating dinner that night with her father, when a knocking’s heard at the door. The frog sings a tune, asking to be let in, and the king tells his daughter she must honor her promises. So the daughter reluctantly lets the frog into the castle, lets him sit by her at her table and eat off her plate and drink from her cup. But when it comes time to sleep with the frog . . . well, this is a modest girl. She says no. The frog, less than a gentleman, threatens to tell papa that she’s not keeping her promise again, which angers the princess so that she hurls the frog against the wall. Whereupon he turns into — what else? — a handsome prince.

Much discussion arose at this point about the nature of promises, the limits of frog-propriety, the rejection of frog-forwardness, etc. Shouts from the audience. Bly yells, “What? Say it again!” Feet are shuffling, but nobody leaves. Everyone tries to get a word in.

By the time Bly reaches the end of the tale, the audience is a pleasantly simmering cauldron. Of course, the princess and the handsome prince marry, and the next morning a carriage arrives to carry them to the young prince’s kingdom. The carriage is driven by none other than Faithful Henry, who had been so unhappy about his master’s fate as a frog that he’d had three iron bands laid round his heart to keep it from bursting with grief. As the newlyweds are jouncing along, the young prince hears “a cracking behind him as if something had broken,” so he cries to Faithful Henry, “The carriage is breaking!”

“No, master, it is not the carriage. It is a band from my heart, which was put there in my great pain when you were a frog and imprisoned in the well,” Faithful Henry explains. Twice

more the cracking sound — and each time the prince thinks the carriage is breaking, but it’s only the bands springing from Faithful Henry’s heart because his master is set free and happy at last.

This is too much. Intoxicating! “Who is Faithful Henry?” Bly cries. The audience pelts him with suggestions, all of which he rejects. “You’re thinking like twentieth century Americans!” he chides. “Think mythically!” No use. “Forget it,” Bly sighs at last. “Faithful Henry is something we don’t have a name for. Trying to name it will only weaken its power as an image.”

Disappointment. Annoyance. Some of us feel cheated. Almost.

I see I haven’t mentioned that all along, in each stage of the story’s interpretation, Bly has been reading his own poems to us and the poems of others. “I have plenty of lost ball poems,” he said early on, “but not many frog-throwing poems.” Is there really a connection between the poems Bly reads and the fairy tale’s stages? In his mind, no doubt. And what would it mean to ask if there is an “in reality”? What matters is the way his arms wave as he reads, like tethered birds:

The energy leaves the wine, and the minister falls leaving the church.  
It will not come closer—  
the one inside moves back, and the hands touch nothing, and are safe.

The father grieves for his son, and will not leave the room where the  
coffin stands.  
He turns away from his wife, and she sleeps alone.

And the sea lifts and falls all night, the moon goes on through the  
unattached heavens alone.

(There is a noise of escaping breath from the audience. Most of us have *been* that moon!)

The toe of the shoe pivots  
in the dust . . .  
And the man in the black coat turns, and goes back down the hill.  
No one knows why he came, or why he turned away, and did not  
climb the hill.

These last lines Bly recites with a teeth-gritted fierceness. Who cares what stage of human psychic development they come from, such lines? All we can say is what Bly himself, sadly, must suspect: the man in the black coat is Faithful Henry, and he turns away and does not climb the hill because the frog-poet has not yet left his well. Perhaps the girl with the golden ball has not even come yet. Bly is 56 years old, and the tale is so far from ending. . . .

Toward the end of his reading, Bly moves away more and more from his own work — farther and farther from our own experience. He reads Kabir, Rumi, Mirabai . . . and there is the heady sensation of white wings sweeping over our heads. These are poets whose inner knowledge is so different from — and perhaps Bly is right, perhaps theirs is greater than — any Western writer’s, that their poems strike us as both simple and elusive. Not the dense, amphibious poetry that speaks to us so well. As Bly reads, a most peculiar melancholy pours out in his voice; a bemused and oddly joyful melancholy such as K. felt, contemplating the Castle. . . .

Have I fallen back into a swampy exuberance? No doubt. For aside from the odd idea, the flash of gold in otherwise common ore, one leaves a Bly performance with nothing but a Gatsby-esque longing. And if we admit that Robert Lowell’s description of himself (“I lean heavily on the rational, but am devoted to unrealism”) also describes Bly, we must admit that it describes us

as well. As Westerners and as Americans, we feel exiled forever from what might make us whole. But the Frog-Poet is there, who is also Faithful Robert, to insist that it isn't so.

*There was once a poet who came from the North, where many thousands of years before the sea had tossed in its fathomless bed. Now there were only lakes, stands of birch, roads thrown down among ragged pastures, snowfields brimming with the cold milk of winter moonlight. The sea had gone away and taken with it the soul of the North, but the poet could always hear it lifting and falling, not too far off. . . . “waves breaking on shores just over the hill. . . .”*