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ABSTRACT

In 1958 in their journal, "The Fifties," Robert Bly and William Duffy introduced North American readers and students to a number of European and South American poets who had developed an imagination variously described as "ecstatic," "surreal," "fantastic," "mythic," etc. That same year the American poet Donald Hall began to write poetry in a new way, with both eyes closed, guided by hunch and impulse. The first result was his poem "The Long River." The poem's compelling, almost dreamlike quality seems to be rooted in the prehistoric past, the unconscious underworld thought of today as dead and gone. May Swenson's "God" is also about the search for something big. The two poems, laid side by side, reveal the two great mythological substrata, identified by Joseph Campbell, upon which all religions are erected, the Bronze-Age mythology and the Syro-Arabian mythology. John Hollander's "The Great Bear" and Galway Kinnell's "The Bear" also illustrate these substrata. The first seems to articulate the failure of Syro-Arabian mythology to seize and transform the imagination, while the second poem discovers the old Bronze-Age mythology rising up out of the psyche in what is called a terrible waking dream. All four poems are about the quest for something usually signified by the word "God." The cultural surround out of which these four poems come is that of modern consciousness. The new imagination, variously demonstrated in all four of these poems is, then, the oldest imagination known. (TD)

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The Mythological Substrata of Some Post-Midcentury Poems

1

When Robert Bly and William Duffy began publishing The Fifties (later The Sixties) in 1958, they complained that most midcentury American and British poetry was hopelessly old-fashioned. They declared that Freud and Jung had effectively established unconscious association, rather than conscious reasoning, as the typical mode of thought, and that numerous foreign poets had begun mining this new territory, but that English language poets seemed blissfully unaware of this revolution quietly taking place in the rest of the world. To correct this ignorance, in each issue of The Fifties, Bly and Duffy introduced North American readers to a number of European and South American poets who had developed "an imagination, a content, a style...that has a magnificence of suggestion and association."

This imagination -- since then variously described as ecstatic, fantastic, intuitive, leaping, mystic, prelapsarian, prelogical, spiritual, surreal, unconscious, vatic, and visionary -- was experiential (the subjective feel of the experience) rather than intellectual (the objective meaning of the experience). Its modus operandi was to apprehend physically and/or intuitively, by a process not unlike that of osmosis or amoebic engulfment. Its primary concern was not to communicate an idea or to create a work of art, but to use language to explore areas of experience that lay beyond the reach of language. The poetry it produced was often so impervious to analysis that it was largely ignored by North American academics, critics, and

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poets. They wanted a poetry they could go to work on and make some solid sense of, not one that invited them to take off their clothes and jump in.

The same year that the first issue of The Fifties appeared, Donald Hall began writing a poem he was unable to finish for two years: "The Long River." A short poem -- only two of its twenty syllabic lines are more than four words long --, it took Hall a long time to complete because he was beginning to write in a way new to him and to most other North American poets. Dissatisfied, as Bly and Duffy were, with the all-too-thought-out poem, he was -- without fully understanding what he was doing - teaching himself to write with both eyes closed, guided by hunch and impulse toward an end he couldn't foresee:

> In recent years, I have come to accept the beginning of a poem, or even a whole draft, without the slightest clue to the subject matter. Words come to me heavy with emotion, and I accept them even though I have no idea what they are trying to tell me. The first poem I remember writing in this way is my musk-ox poem, "The Long River"....
>
> The process of writing a poem is a process of developing and shaping the words which the poem begins with, until finally, upon completion of the poem, or perhaps after completion, you can see what it is that you are expressing. The poem is a vehicle for self-discovery.

Hall talks about writing in something of the same way an archaeologist talks about excavating. A few fragments -- perhaps of pottery -- are found near the surface. They don't fit together and might not even be shards of the same pot. Slowly, carefully, with endless patience, one sifts through the topsoil. A few more fragments are unearthed. Perhaps two or three of them match perfectly. The process continues. With luck, many of the found parts can be fit together (and somewhere just about here the poet-as-archaeologist metaphor collapses) or are reshaped until a kind of wholeness emerges from them -- a wholeness that is not coherent in the way most conventional poetry is.

This way of writing is experienced as being a series of lucky finds, discoveries stumbled upon in the half-light. What is discovered are parts of something once whole, now scattered and sunk out of sight. "The poem," Hall says, "is a vehicle for self-discovery." That is, for the discovery of the self -- but not necessarily the self we identify as the I or ego. It is a subterranean self, almost an other. "What the poet is looking for," says Spanish poet Antonio Machado, "is not the fundamental I, but the deep you." This is what Hall began to uncover when he wrote "The Long River":

> The musk-ox smells
> in his long head
> my boat coming. When
> I feel him there,
> intent, heavy,
>
> the oars make wings
> in the white night,
> and deep woods are close
> on either side
> where trees darken.
>
> I rowed past towns
> in their black sleep
> to come here. I rowed
> by northern grass
> and cold mountains.
>
> The musk-ox moves
> when the boat stops,
> in hard thickets. Now
> the wood is dark
> with old pleasures.

The poem is apparently set in the barren northern lands of North America, where herds of wild musk-ox roam. Into this desolate wilderness, the water traveler comes gliding silently over the long river. The musk-ox "in his long head" smells not the man himself, but "my boat coming" -- and the water traveler can "feel" the musk-ox there: a physical presence, heavy as if with intention. Each senses the other in a way that seems as inward and intuitive as it is outward and sensory.

No detail of the poem is supernatural or surrealistic or even unusual, given the setting. But the night is white, the woods are deep and dark, and the oars are wings that carry the water traveler away from his sleeping human world and into an older, elemental world we usually characterize as precivilized. The end of the poem suggests, however obliquely, primitive nature religions -- a world in which animals are encountered as true others and not as mere beasts. The water traveler, rowing against the current, has traced the long river back toward its source. An ancient rift begins to close. "Now/the wood is dark/with old pleasures."

The poem's compelling, almost dreamlike quality seems to be rooted in the prehistoric past, the unconscious underworld we think of today as dead and gone. And what, exactly, is Hall trying to tell us about the long river journey? Mostly, he simply wants to evoke it -- to make us feel it.

Any further looking into the poem will probably do it violence. Still, it's hard not to look further. There is something more here -- not exactly hiding between the lines, but not exactly right there on the page either: an implicit belief that something big is going on, that it is no longer a part of our ordinary waking lives, and that the way back to it is to make a long journey up the long river, back to something we long ago left behind. The journey must be made alone and at night. At night because the journey's end exists as a place of permanent night (the unconscious, hidden always from the daylight eyes of consciousness). And alone because the journey is inward.

"The Long River" has spiritual implications -- yet it is entirely earthbound. The union (reunion?) it seeks is with something distant yet both in and of the world: an animal that seems to be more than just another animal. To the water traveler, the musk-ox assumes an almost mythical significance. But none of this is said. If it were, the whole poem might collapse. Instead, it illustrates the second hald of Mallarme's dictum: "To name is to destroy. To suggest is to create." The first half, the destructive power of outright naming, is demonstrated with a vengeance by May Swenson's poem "God":

They said there was a   Thing
that could not   Change
They could not   Find
it so they   Named
it   God
They had to   Search
so then it must be   There
It had a   Name
It must exist   Somewhere
The   Name
was   God
the   Thing
that could not   Change
They could not   Find
it   What is   Lost
is   God
They had to   Search
for what could not be   Found
What can't be   Found
is   Changeless
It is   God
The   Name
is clue   The   Thing
is   Lost
          Somewhere
They   Found
the   Name
The   Name
is   Changeless
          God

Like "The Long River," "God" is also about the search for something big, the biggest something of all. The journey here is through a labyrinth of glib tautologies and verbal cul-de-sacs. It ends in a kind of success predetermined from the beginning, not because the something big is encountered, but because, having been pronounced into being in the poem's opening lines, it is at last found, even in its palpable absence, to exist. "They said there was a Thing." And so there was. Because they said so.

The two-column typography of "God" suggests that "they" live in a shadowy world separated by a great gulf from the "other world" they yearn for, the world of eternal changelessness. If it were not for the gulf, their world would make sense. "They said there was a" would be followed by "Thing." The broken would be made whole. But the gulf is unbridgeable. The only kind of utterance they are capable of is

> They said there was a
> that could not
> They could not
> it so they
> it....

This is chaos without meaning or substance. It reaches out for something beyond itself -- the God that is lost -- but cannot find it. The world of phenomena can posit, but can never experience, the world of noumena. It knows only itself. Yet it hardly has a self to be known. What Gertrude Stein is said to have said of California might well be said of it: "There is no there there." There are, for example, no nouns to speak of -- only pronouns ("they" and "it'). They and their world, it appears, do not even exist nominally -- only pronominally. Nor can they act in any decisive way. All they have are auxiliaries ("could not") divorced from verbs or linking verbs ("is") whose links are missing. Like the Thames maidens in Eliot's The Wasteland, they can "connect nothing with nothing."

What they seek but can't find is all too visible to the reader of "God": the plane of existence revealed by the right-hand column of the poem. Even before reading a word of it, one can see that it is the product of a shaping intelligence; it has none of the erratically irregular line lengths characteristic of the world of "they." In this heavenly realm of Platonic essences, things exist: not only objects (nouns) and actions (verbs), all of them appropriately capitalized, but the thing itself -- the Big Thing. Moreover, although it does not make simple human sense, this realm is sufficient unto itself. If read slowly from top to bottom, this right-hand column says more than it seems to -- certainly more than the left-hand column does.

Both Hall's "I" and Swenson's "they" are after big game. Yet one is doomed to failure from the outset, and the other apparently succeeds. This difference in the endings of these two poems-in-search-of is prefigured in their beginnings; that is, in how they look for, or journey toward, what they look for -- which is largely determined by their unspoken underlying assumptions. These two poems are expressions of two different convictions about the nature of the sacred. I am not referring to what Hall and Swenson believe but to what their two poems, laid side by side, reveal: namely, that beneath what "I" and "they" say and do are two great mythological substrata so pervasive that all religions are erected upon one or the other of them.

Joseph Campbell describes these two substrata in Creative Mythology, the concluding book of his four-volume "science of comparative mythology," entitled The Masks Of God. Bronze-Age mythology (the foundation of all primitive nature religions) conceives of an Earth Mother out of whose body all life issues forth and back into whom all life is momentarily gathered, only to come forth again in new form. That is, the great mother is present in the world -- and, indeed, is the world: nature apprehended as a spiritual body. Her law is simply to live in accordance with the observed "way of nature." In contrast, Syro-Arabian mythology (the foundation of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) conceives of a Sky Father who is disembodied spirit, essentially absent from the world except for those rare miraculous occasions when he chooses to intervene by temporarily suspending certain laws of nature. His is a rule of law -- the revealed word -- requiring men to rise above nature in their obedience to the demands of the supernatural spirit.

Campbell contrasts the primary characteristics of these two opposed systems of belief.

1. At the center of those religions based on the Syro-Arabian order is the "mythic dissociation" of God from the world. His existence is prior to and exalted above that of his creation. He is the transcendent creator; it is only animated dust, mere creature. In the earlier Bronze-Age order, however, the mysterium tremendum is "transcendent of definition yet immanent in all things." It cannot be spoken. Indeed, it cannot even be comprehended, but it can be experienced in the world because it is of the world.

2. Above nature and therefore absent from the world, the Syro-Arabian tribal god can be known only through special revelation. Those chosen as worthy of receiving the revelation and those converted by the chosen gain entrance to the religion, "a communal religion inherently exclusive...for and of those alone who, professing the faith, participate in its rites." But in earlier Bronze-Age mythology, the aim of religion is to lead one to an experience of one's own identity-in-nonidentity with the groundless ground of all being. And since everything in the universe partakes of one universal order which is both natural (ever changing) and eternal (changeless), this revelation is "manifest in the universe (macrocosm) and every individual heart (microcosm)."

3. The Syro-Arabian order defines woman as being closer to the order of nature (perhaps because, like nature, she is a body from whose womb new bodies come into the world) and man as being closer to the order of the law. Hence, women, being unfit, are forbidden to function as clergy. Similarly, God, though bodiless and therefore sexless, is held to be patriarchal -- male -- and referred to as "He." He will accept no matriarchal goddess as superior to or even as equal to Him. When, as in Christianity, He wishes to enter

the natural order to save our souls from it, He comes, of necessity, through woman -- but He comes, equally of necessity, as man. He is born as His own Son. The notion that He could just as well have come as His own Daughter is unthinkable. But to a mind steeped in Bronze-Age mythology, the creative power (birth) which ties woman to the natural order also proves that she participates in the divine. Birth is seen as nothing less than a continuation of the original act of genesis. In religions erected upon this mythology, women play ritual roles. Indeed, all male gods are contained in and born from women. Hence, "the female power may be revered even as superior, since antecedent, to the male."

4. Finally, the specific myths (for example, virgin birth, resurrection) of religions erected upon the Syro-Arabian mythology are interpreted historically, not symbolically. That is, time-bound and place-bound: true only of the One Divine Person. They are not viewed as universal symbols of individual spiritual life -- or as metaphors that point toward experiences here and now available to anyone who wakes up to the life of the spirit. Yet in the apparently more sophisticated Bronze-Age mythology, the gods and their miraculous deeds are understood to be emblematic of the spiritual potential (virgin birth, resurrection) residing within each individual.

The differences between these two mythological substrata account for the differences between "The Long River" and "God." Hall's poem evokes the old Bronze-Age order. The journey back upriver toward the musk-ox is an enactment of the initiation pattern common to primitive religions: separation, a journey into isolation, because in order to prepare for a confrontation with the essential self, the initiate-to-be must be stripped of personal (social) identity; tribulation, a period of testing, relatively brief but usually intense, which may be either active (accomplishment) or passive (endurance), during which the identitiless one-who-is-no-one accomplishes or endures something beyond the capability of the previous (personal, social) self; revelation, a brief moment during which a vision, either miraculous or mundane, but drenched in emotion and pregnant with inarticulate meaning, is granted, as a result of which the initiate's spiritual life is bound to some aspect of nature; and, to come full circle, integration, a return to the tribe, after which the initiate recounts the accomplishment and/or tells the vision to certain older members of the tribe and is then given an adult (spirit) name symbolic of the initiate's newly gained mana or power.

In "The Long River," the separation stage has already occurred. The tribulation, suggested by the middle two stanzas, is the journey itself. The fact that it is described in almost hypnotic, dreamlike imagery is an indication of the inner readiness of "I" to undertake this journey. The revelation is imminent in the first and last stanzas. We do not see the the musk-ox but assume that "I" does; it is his vision, not ours. The existence of the poem (these words "I" speaks to us) may be an attempt at integration. If we are who he thinks we are, we will know what he has seen and what his seeing means -- for the same long river flows through us.

If we are "they," we will not know what to make of him and his musk-ox. To them, his river journey must seem trivial, self-indulgent even, in contrast to their earnest pursuit of God. Their journey, like his, begins with separation. But they remain plural; the realm of their experience and, therefore, their personal identity remain essentially communal. The separation they endure is not one of self from others but of self from God -- which is to say, of self from its own deepest impulses. He is, by their own definition, not here. Their tribulation is that they have doomed themselves to search for something they have defined as being unfindable. Their revelation is blind assertion:

It had a Name
It must exist Somewhere.

Since they discover only the nothing that is here but not the something that is not, no integration is possible, there being nothing to integrate. Their experience is essentially one of disintegration. Still, the concluding lines of the poem may represent something akin to vision:

They Found
the Name
The Name
is Changeless
God

They do not find God, but they do find "God." And so they do succeed.

2

In 1958, the same year that Hall began writing "The Long River" and Bly and Duffy began issuing The Fifties, John Hollander's poem "The Great Bear" appeared in The New Yorker. Eloquent, formal, and above all controlled, "The Great Bear" is an admirable example of the kind of poetry Bly and Duffy called for poets to turn away from in their pursuit of a new imagination. As a fully realized piece of work, "The Great Bear" is impressive. A bare-bones account of its content can't begin to suggest what it says or does. In it a man wishes to show some children the constellation Ursa Major, tries several common strategies to get them to see it, and fails each time. The poem is speculative, witty, allusive, and, throughout, human -- thanks in no small part to the knowing, avuncular narrator, who speaks in the first person plural. It ends by saying that the ultimate reason we fail to make the children see the Great Bear is simply that there is no bear.

What is apparently wrong with "The Great Bear" from the Bly-Duffy perspective is, ironically, that it is such an accomplished piece of work. It knows all too well where it is going and it gets there by what, on rereading, appears to be a comforting, reasonable kind of inevitability. There is little, it seems, that is daring or dangerous about the poem -- or ecstatic or fantastic or intuitive or any of those other qualities associated with the new imagination. It walks in the dark, but with both eyes open. It goes nowhere new and is, therefore, uninteresting. And yet it is a wonderfully slippery poem....

Nine years later, in 1967, as if in response to Hollander's poem, Galway Kinnell wrote "The Bear." Except for their titles and the fact that they are both after big game, the two poems are as unlike as they can be. They live in, or are written out of, two different worlds. The kind (or mode of existence) of bear pursued, and, subsequently, the manner of pursuit and its attendant risks, the physical and psychological terrain, and, finally, the success of the pursuit -- that is, the degree to which the bear is apprehended --, in all these particulars, the two poems differ. They differ in two other important ways. One is a paradigm of self-conscious, existence-granting perception, and the other stumbles into the psychomythological underworld. One seems to articulate the failure of Syro-Arabian mythology to seize and transform the imagination, while the other discovers the old Bronze-Age mythology rising up out of the psyche in a terrible waking dream.

The attempt, and subsequent failure, to make children see Ursa Major in Hollander's poem is symptomatic of the relative failure of revealed religion, particularly anthropomorphic Christianity, to compel belief in the twentieth century. That Hollander probably never intended his poem to bear such a great weight is likely. But the parallels between the transcendent Sky Father of Christianity and the great invisible sky bear of this poem are striking:

Even on clear nights, lead the most supple children
Out onto hilltops, and by no means will
They make it out. Neither the gruff round image
From a remembered page nor the uncertain
Finger, tracing that image out, can manage
To mark the lines of what ought to be there,
Passing through certain bounding stars until
The whole massive expanse of bear appear
Swinging, across the ecliptic, and although
The littlest ones say nothing, others respond,
Making us thankful in varying degrees
For what we would have shown them: "There it is!"
"I see it now!" Even "Very like a bear!"
Would make us grateful. Because there is no bear,

We blame our memory of the picture. Trudging
Up the dark, starlit path, stooping to clutch
An anxious hand, perhaps the outline faded
Then; perhaps, could we have retained the thing
In mind ourselves, with it we might have staged
Something convincing. We easily forget
The huge, clear, homely dipper that is such
An event to reckon with, an object set
Across the space the bear should occupy;
But, even so, the trouble lies in pointing
At any stars. For one's own finger aims
Always elsewhere; the man beside one seems
Never to get the point. "No! The bright star
Just above my fingertip." The star,

If any, that he sees beyond one's finger
Will never be the intended one. To bring
Another's eye to bear in such a fashion
On any single star seems to require
Something very like a constellation
that both habitually see at night;
Not in the stars themselves but in among
Their scatter, perhaps, some old familiar sight
Is always there to take a bearing from.
And if the smallest child of all should cry
Out on the wet black grass because he sees
Nothing but stars, though claiming that there is
Some bear not there that frightens him, we need
Only reflect that we ourselves have need

Of what is fearful (being really nothing),
With which to find our way about the path
That leads back down the hill again, and with
Which to enable the older children, standing
By us, to follow what we mean by "This
Star," That one," "The other one beyond it."
But what of the tiny, scared ones? -- Such a bear --
Who needs it? We can still make do with both
The dipper that we always knew was there

And the bright, simple shapes that suddenly
Emerge on certain nights. To understand
The signs that stars compose, we need depend
Only on stars that are entirely there
And the apparent space between them. There

Never need be lines between them, puzzling
Our sense of what is what. What a star does
Is never to surprise us as it covers
The center of its patch of darkness, sparkling
Always, a point in one of many figures.
One solitary star would be quite useless,
A frigid conjecture, true but trifling,
And any single sign is meaningless
If unnecessary. Crab, bull, and ram,
Or frosty irregular polygons of our own
Devising, or, finally, the Great Dark Bear
That we can never quite believe is there --
Having the others, any one of them
Can be dispensed with. The Bear, of all of them,

Is somehow most like any one, taken
At random, in that we always tend to say
That just because it might be there, because
Some Ancients really traced it out, a broken
And complicated line, webbing bright stars
And fainter ones together, because a bear
Habitually appeared, then even by day
It is for us a thing that should be there.
We should not want to train ourselves to see it.
The world is everything that happens to
Be true. The stars at night seem to suggest
The shapes of what might be. If it were best,
Even, to have it there (Such a great bear!
All hung with stars!), there still would be no bear.

The Great Bear was visible to the ancients. Indeed, they first saw it there and then generated the myth of Callisto to account both for its presence and for the fact that the Great Bear and the Lesser Bear are the only two constellations that never set below the horizon. Never touching the earth, they are always there, always visible to those who have been taught to see them. But when we, today, try to make children see "what ought to be there," their responses tell us that they are only humoring us -- that they do not actually see what we want to reveal to them, because "there is no bear." The absentee Sky Father so greatly transcends the world of immediate experience that he lies, inevitably, beyond all possibility of experience.

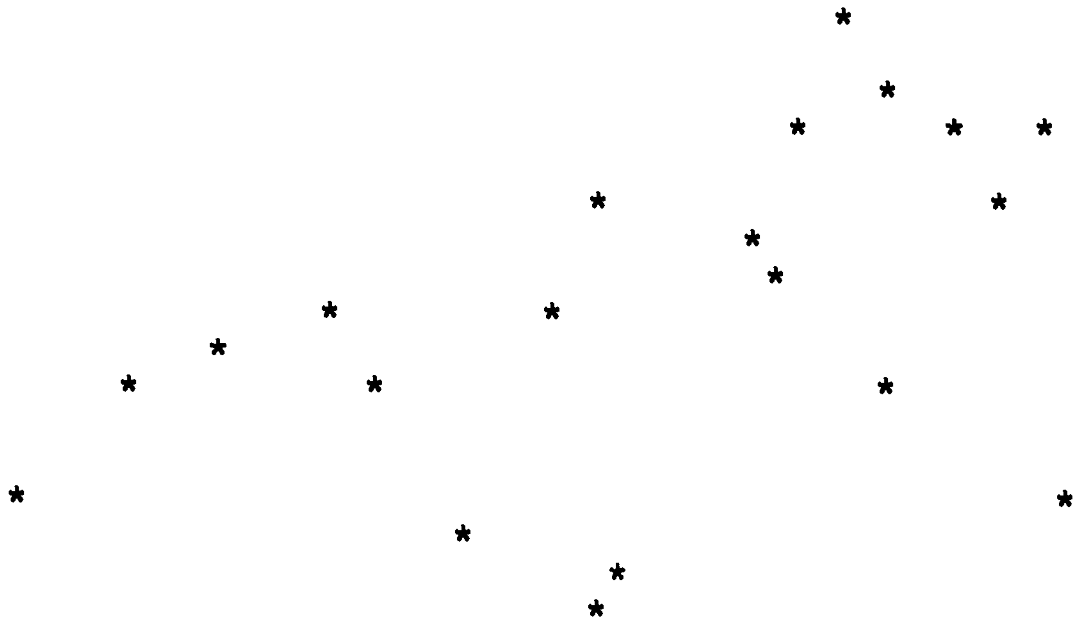
Failing to make the children see the Great Bear, we blame ourselves; if only we could translate into reality its image as revealed in the book; if only we we could more certainly bear it in mind. Then at least we could "stage/Something convincing" even if we don't believe it ourselves. The fact that we can't see the bear we know isn't there doesn't deter us. We want them to see it there, to believe it. So we try and fail and keep on trying.

Or we succeed, but only in creating a nonexistent bugbear or bogeybear to frighten small children with. Failing to make them see the bear, we at least succeed in making them afraid of it -- that is, we succeed in making them, like us, people who fear something that doesn't exist but who need this fear "to find our way about the path." So we believe in believing in it, and believe that because the Ancients traced a broken and complicated line of thought establishing its existence in the sky -- because of this, we believe that even in the broad daylight of the late twentieth century, it ought to be present to us. In and of and by itself, it ought to be present to us, -- and not merely because our cultural conditioning has educated it into us: "we should not want to train ourselves to see it."

Not wanting that, we must learn to live with what is, to "depend/Only on stars that are entirely there," rather than on those we might like to see there. "The world," said Wittgenstein, "is everything that is the case." That includes a lot. It also excludes a lot. The configuration of stars suggests shapes to us -- "The shapes of what might be." But "might be" is not "is." The world is everything that "is" the case -- not everything that "might be," or that we might want to be, the case. So we are forced to admit that

If if were best,
Even, to have it there, (Such a great bear!
All hung with stars!), there still would be no bear.

Like the Great Starry Bear, the transcendent Syro-Arabian Sky Father is also an all but perceptible absence. We simply cannot make Him out, though He was a palpable enough presence to our forebears. Out of this world, He is no longer the case. God, Nietzsche wrote in 1875, is dead. Or, retaining emeritus status, has retired from active service. Or, more likely, has simply moved away from modern and postmodern consciousness, leaving no forwarding address. In the twilight of the second millennium anno Domini, He is "some bear not there":



The new imagination that Bly and Duffy had called for and that Hall was discovering as he wrote "The Long River" and that is transcendently absent from Swenson's "God" and Hollander's "The Great Bear" is present, both hunter and hunted, in Galway Kinnell's "The Bear." The poem is narrated by an undefined "I," probably a man and possibly an Eskimo because of the primitive method he uses to kill the bear. The first four sections of the poem present a stripped-down but graphic account of his week-long pursuit of the slowly dying bear. The hunt also holds dangers for the hunter. Physically, he must endure cold, exhaustion, and near starvation. Psychologically, he must successfully pass through the stages of his initiation journey, as he wanders alone an an arctic wilderness, out in what Eskimo shaman Igjugarjuk called "the great loneliness," until he reaches the place (an inner station) where this world and another world intersect:

1

In late winter
I sometimes glimpse bits of steam
coming up from
some fault in the old snow
and bend close and see it is lung-colored
and put down my nose
and know
the chilly, enduring odor of bear.

2

I take a wolf's rib and whittle
it sharp at both ends
and coil it up
and freeze it in blubber and place it out
on the fairway of the bears.

And when it has vanished
ᵀ move out on the bear tracks,
roaming in circles
until I come to the first, tentative, dark
splash on the earth.

And I set out
running, following the splashes
of blood wandering over the world.
At the cut, gashed resting places
I stop and rest,
at the crawl-marks
where he lay on his belly
to overpass some stretch of bauchy ice
I lie out
dragging myself forward with bear-knives in my fists.

3

On the third day I begin to starve,
at nightfall I bend down as I knew I would
at a turd sopped in blood,

and hesitate, and pick it up,
and thrust it in my mouth, and gnash it down,
and rise
and go on running.

4

On the seventy day,
living by now on bear blood alone,
I can see his upturned carcass far out ahead, a scraggled,
steamy hulk,
the heavy fur riffling in the wind.

I come up to him
and stare at the narrow-spaced, petty eyes,
the dismayed
face laid back on the shoulder, the nostrils
flared, catching
perhaps the first taint of me as he
died.

I hack a ravine in his thigh, and eat and drink,
and tear him down his whole length
and open him and climb in
and close him up after me, against the wind,
and sleep.

5

And dream of lumbering flatfooted
over the tundra,
stabbed twice from within,
splattering a trail behind me,
splattering it no matter which way I lurch,
no matter which parabola of bear-transcendence,
which dance of solitude I attempt,
which gravity-clutched leap,
which trudge, which groan.

6

Until one day I totter and fall --
fall on this
stomach that has tried so hard to keep up,
to digest the blood as it leaked in,
to break up
and digest the bone itself: and now the breeze
blows over me, blows off
the hideous belches of ill-digested bear blood
and rotted stomach
and the ordinary wretched odor of bear,

blows across
my sore, lolled tongue a song
or screech, until I think I must rise up
and dance. And I lie still.

7

I awaken I think. Marshlights
reappear, geese
come trailing again up the flyway.
In her ravine under old snow the dam-bear
lies, licking
lumps of smeared fur
and drizzly eyes into shapes
with her tongue. And one
hairy-soled trudge stuck out before me,
the next groaned out,
the next,
the next,
the rest of my days I spend
wandering: wondering
what, anyway
was that sticky infusion, that rank flavor of blood, that poetry, by which I lived?

Kinnell's bear is in and of this world. Even before it is seen, it announces itself ("bits of steam," "lung-colored," "chilly, enduring odor") as a physical presence. Once this presence is detected, the pursuit -- the separation stage of the initiation -- begins. From the beginning, foreshadowings of the man-bear transformation to come (in parts 5-7) occur. Where the bear stopped to rest, "I stop and rest." Where the bear had to lie on his belly to cross weak ice, "I lie out." Like a bear using his claws, the hunter drags himself over the weak ice using his bear-knives. Even though hunter and hunted may be miles apart at this point, the psychic distance is minimal.

The initiation journey continues into its tribulation stage: "I begin to starve." But there is food. The eating of the blood-sopped turd is an act of Communion: "Take, eat; this is my body....Drink ye all...for this is my blood." There is no need for a doctrine of transubstantiation here; the body and blood are all too literally real.

In the taking of the bread and the wine, the true believer is infused with the spirit of Christ. So, without knowing it, in this more primitive version of Communion, man-nature partakes of bear-nature. Fleeing for his life, the great beast provides nourishment for his pursuer -- thus assuring the eventual success of the hunt. And on the seventy day, the hunt is over. The hunter watches the bear die, eats his flesh and drinks his blood, slits him open gullet to crotch, probably disembowels him, crawls inside, and falls asleep. Asleep in the gut of his kill, he is the full-term fetus shortly due to be born. But this man-about-to-be-born-from-a-bear is no normal birth. It is, like all miraculous births, virgin or otherwise, an outward, physical sign of an inward, psychic fact: life (the spirit) is born in the house of death (the body).

The last three sections of the poem trace this hallucinatory process: the revelation stage of the journey.

First comes dying. No escape through transcendence, no leaping free of the body, is possible. Yet near the end of part 6, as near the end of part 5, the word "dance" appears. The dance in part 5 is the danse macabre of the body -- the death agony. The dance in part 6 is the spirit-dance ("I think I must rise up. And I lie still") done to the accompaniment of "a song or screech" -- the song of birth, the screech of death.

The conclusion of this dream-vision-hallucination is hard to understand. The ambiguous awakening may be the bear's awakening from hibernation, from his terrible dream of death, or from his actual death. It may also be the man's awakening from the dream that begins after he sleeps inside the slit-open bear; it may be his physical rebirth as a bearcub; or it may be his spiritual attachment to an animal power. It may be any or all of these at once.

The poem ends by asking a question that is impossible to answer, primarily because the "I" at this point is multiple, shifting between three or four various "I's" of the poem. This "I" asks: What was that sticky infusion (I as bear; sticky infusion as conception, gestation, and/or birth), that rank flavor of blood (I as hunter; blood as the life that passed from dying bear to living man), that poetry (I as Galway Kinnell; poetry as a visionary mode of experience) by which I (I as bear, hunter, poet, and also reader) lived? The question is overwhelming. It does not ask to be answered -- and cannot be answered, except with silence.

So the poem, which began with death "in the old snow," ends with birth "under old snow." The cycle is complete. But in some late winter to come, another hunter will freeze a sharpened wolf rib in blubber. There will be another death, another birth....

3

All four of these poems are about the quest for something usually signified by the word "God." In two of them (Swenson's, Hollander's) the quest occurs in the context of Syro-Arabian mythology -- and fails. In the other two (Hall's, Kinnell's) the quest occurs in the context of Bronze-Age mythology -- and succeeds. Perhaps there is no necessary connection between the mythology involved and the relative success or failure of the quest. After all, one can succeed or fail in the context of either.

Cultural conditioning usually assures that most people succeed, regardless of the underlying mythology or its particular local manifestations. Yet here, in a ten-year period shortly after midcentury, are four poems which, for all their many differences, implicitly reject the dominant mythology of our culture. Each of these poems is, or would be, visionary. Each is an conscious or unconscious attempt to reach out toward something not encountered in the dailyness and busyness of everyday life. Each is an expression, directly or indirectly, of the new imagination Bly and Duffy called for nearly a third of a century ago.

What is this new imagination? Where does it come from? Why, at least in these four poems, does it show a decided preference for the primitive mythological orientation?

In Creative Mythology, the last volume of The Masks Of God series, Campbell says,

> The Christian is taught that divinity is transcendent: not within himself and his world, but "out there." I call this mythic dissociation. Turning inward, he would not find divinity within, but only his own created soul, which might or might not be in proper relationship to its supposed Creator....Just as in the Old Testament view a relationship to God could be achieved only through physical birth as a member of the Holy Race, so in the New, only through baptism (spiritual birth) into membership in Christ's Church; i.e., participation, in either case, in a specific social group. I call this the way of social identification....
>
> Unhappily, however, in the light of what is now known, not only of the history of the Bible and the Church, but also of the universe and evolution of the species, a suspicion has been confirmed that was already dawning in the Middle Ages; namely, that the bibical myth of Creation, Fall, and Redemption is historically untrue. Hence, there has now spread throughout the Christian world a desolating sense not only of no divinity within (mythic dissociation), but also of no participation in divinity without (social identification dissolved); and that, in short, is the mythological base of the Waste Land of the modern soul, or, as it is being called these days, our "alienation."

Something is hungry and begs to be fed. Something thirsts and must drink. The body and blood of the crucified Christ no longer nourish it. So it turns elsewhere. This turn is not to another revealed religion like Judaism or Islam, but inward upon its own myth-making capacity, its own willingness to make the difficult journey required in order to experience the mysterium tremendum that both is and is not of this world.

Campbell defines the Waste Land as "the land where myth is patterned by authority, not emergent from life; where there is no poet's eye to see, no adventure to be lived, where all is set up for all and forever." He interprets the Grail legends -- in which the sterile Waste Land presided over by wounded King Amfortas can be redeemed only by one who proves brave enough and virtuous enough to endure the quest and, thus, at its end, to be granted a vision of the Grail -- psychologically, in terms of an inner growth toward spiritual integration. Each of us, he would say, must go on that journey alone, must heal our own Amfortas wound (mythic dissociation, the dissolution of social identification).

The cultural surround out of which these four poems come, then, is that of modern (Waste Land) consciousness. No one of them is necessarily an intentional questions for a Grail. But each one is an attempt to see. In two of them, the seeing becomes, or comes close to being, visionary -- whereas in the other two no personal, individual vision is possible because "the myth [starry Sky Bear, transcendent Sky Father] is patterned by authority."

This emphasis on direct individual experience in both Hall's and Kinnell's poems is crucial. What is encountered is not experienced in the context of any religion. Religion is always communal; its goal is to create and maintain a community of shared belief. But what "I" experiences in "The Long River" and in "The Bear" is not communal. (In contrast, the experience that "they" and "we" try but fail to effect in "God" and in "The Great Bear" is.) The movement and geography of the two poems emphasize this: they both occur in the far north. One is a journey over water; the other, a journey over ice, frozen water. If water is a universal symbol for consciousness (e.g., "stream of consciousness"), then frozen water suggests frozen consciousness; that is, the unconscious: that long river locked somewhere inside, that vast frozen sea whose surface our daily lives barely skim. These two poems move toward an ultima Thule experience, using nature imagery to evoke an inner quest.

The new imagination, variously demonstrated in all four of these poems -- even Swenson's and Hollander's: for the failure of vision they record is the failure of Syro-Arabian mythology -- is, then, the oldest imagination we know of. Its fidelity to intuition and to the unconscious -- both to the Freudian personal unconscious, whose origins are fetal; and to that older underconscious, whose origins are prehistoric, prelinguistic, ultimately even prehuman. In any one poem, the concerns of this new-yet-old imagination may be frivolous, serious, or -- as in these four poems -- profound.

If Campbell is right in his psychological interpretation of the Amfortas wound, the new imagination may be our most nearly infallible guide (the blind leading the wounded) through the pathless forest, up the long river, over the bauchy ice.