

# Alchemy in Ontario

## Reaney's *Twelve Letters to a Small Town*

... I merely react—not necessarily in a positive, optimistic way, but with images and metaphors; and to hell with it, I don't care whether they're 'grids of meaning' or not; I'm going to grid away.

—JAMES REANEY (*Long-liners* 124)

James Reaney's *Twelve Letters to a Small Town* is a suite of poems first performed on CBC to the music of John Beckwith in July of 1961. Since it won the Governor General's Award for the best volume of poetry published in 1962, the critical response has been mixed. Some critics, including Ross Woodman, Alvin Lee, and Milton Wilson, see *Twelve Letters* as part of a pastoral tradition and others, such as Louis Dudek and Frank Davey, are uncomfortable with the apparent simplicity of Reaney's recreation of his rural roots. George Bowering admits that Reaney has finally begun in *Twelve Letters* "to make myth from local materials rather than spooning it on from the golden bowl of literary materials" (48), a point that Colin Browne elaborates in his perceptive article, "Reaney's *Twelve Letters*: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Boy":

His intent is twofold: to celebrate the mythic, archetypal, and anagogic potential to be uncovered in the local; and to identify the local as a source of poetry and liberation for the colonized Canadian imagination. (104)

In "The Canadian Poet's Predicament," Reaney argues that Canadian poetry "represents a distinctive vision but it cries out for more development, just as the poet's innermost self probably cries out for some ancestral pattern to go by" (288). The ancestral pattern he chooses for his *Künstlerroman* in poetic form is that of alchemy, which illuminates the theme, the form, and the method of *Twelve Letters*. In "The Influence of

Spenser on Yeats,” the doctoral dissertation that Reaney completed under Northrop Frye in 1958, Reaney wrote: “Alchemy, as we have seen, is one of the shaping disciplines behind Yeats’ evolution as a symbolic linguist” (188). The same can be said of the boy whom Reaney describes in the epistles directed to the town of his childhood.

Two books that were central to Reaney’s imagination at the time he was writing *Twelve Letters* were Herbert Silberer’s *Problems of Mysticism and its Symbolism* and Carl Jung’s *Psychology and Alchemy*, and it is their interpretation of alchemy that finds its way into the poems. In *Psychology and Alchemy*, to which Reaney makes repeated reference in his dissertation, Jung compares the imagination, which is central to “the process of individuation” (333), to the methods of alchemy: “the centre—itsself virtually unknowable—acts like a magnet on the disparate materials and processes of the unconscious and gradually captures them as in a crystal lattice” (Jung 207). Jung’s evocative language is echoed in Reaney’s description of the poetic process:

That’s how poetry works: it weaves street scenes and twins around swans in legendary pools. Let us make a form out of this: documentary on one side and myth on the other: Life & Art. In this form we can put anything and the magnet we have set up will arrange it for us. (*Alphabet* 1 [Sept 1960]:4)

Guided by Jung and Silberer, Reaney applies alchemy to the “individuation” of the artist, specifically the Canadian artist.

Jung admits that alchemy is not an exact science, if it can be called a science at all: “As to the course of the process as a whole, the authors are vague and contradictory” (228). However, those, like Josephus Quercetanus, who do establish a sequence of operations maintain that there are twelve steps or stages in the alchemical process. This explains Reaney’s choice of twelve letters which are not only epistles to the town that shaped him, but also letters of a shared alphabet, the alphabet of alchemy.

### **I. Aqua Mercurialis**

And by whatever names the philosophers have called their stone they always mean and refer to this one substance, i.e., to the water from which everything originates and in which everything is contained, which rules everything, in which errors are made and in which the error is itself corrected. I call it “philosophical” water, not ordinary water but *aqua mercurialis*. (JUNG 224)

In the *prima materia* of alchemy, often described as quicksilver, the process that enables transformation from leaden matter to golden mystery is

born. Appropriately, Reaney's first letter is an invocation "To the Avon River above Stratford, Canada." This river, like Wordsworth's Derwent, is the *prima materia* from which the poet is formed. The boy comes to know the river intimately as he moves over, under, and within its physical and metaphorical possibilities, a sacred initiation compared with God's presence as the first whirlwind (Job 38:1), the first rainbow (Genesis 9:13), the first snow (Psalm 147:16) and the first falling star (Revelation 9:1). The Canadian Avon, as distinct from its English counterpart, becomes the boy's muse, inspiring him to song while the flow of his own thoughts supplies the river at its source. His earliest wish, "To flow like you" (I.51) is, as Lee points out, an echo of the famous "Thames Couplets" of John Denham's *Cooper's Hill*:

O could I flow like thee, and make thy stream  
 My great example, as it is my theme!  
 Though deep, yet clear, though gentle, yet not dull,  
 Strong without rage, without ore-flowing full. (189-92)

It also inscribes the boy's desire to be initiated into the alchemical magic of transmutation and unification, to give form to the river that gives form to him.

The First Letter culminates with an allusion to the hermaphrodite which, significantly, does not appear in the first version of the poem published prior to Reaney's exposure to Jung. In alchemy, the philosopher's stone that has the power to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary is called the *rebis* (two-thing) or Hermaphrodite because it is complete in itself, a union of opposites in perfect harmony. As both the raw material and the goal of alchemy, the hermaphrodite represents the alchemical union of opposites, male/female, dry/wet, sun/moon, gold/silver, physical/spiritual, etc. (Jung 317-18) and is one of the most pervasive of all alchemical symbols. Two common representations, the *Uroboros*, or tail-eating serpent, and Mercury with his *caduceus*, a familiar medical symbol, shed light on Reaney's reference to "the hermaphroditic leech" ("leech" is archaic for "healer" [OED]). The dual nature of Mercurius, here associated with both the stream and the serpent, is the most explicit representation of the alchemical *coniunctio* or union of opposites that appear throughout the suite, including the King and Queen, the two-headed eagle, town and country, sun and moon, summer and winter, twin roses, and the joined figures of the Janitor and Granny Crack.

The quicksilver of the Avon becomes a "crystal lattice" that captures and

organizes the documentary and myth of the poet's world. This image of united dualities is at the heart of the introductory poem and the suite as a whole, providing as it does an emblem of a unified voice for a poet struggling to incorporate both the imported and the indigenous. By reinterpreting the "Avon" in a Canadian context, the poet imposes his own experience upon inherited words and inherited vision. He does not abandon either "stream" of his inheritance but combines them through the alchemical symbol of the hermaphrodite, and the alchemical process which he equates with the creative process. A few years earlier, Reaney had written of the "predicament" of the Canadian poet. "How can I hope to be worthy of the language I write in; I'd better not stay in Canada any longer. I've got to go over and join the more powerful angels on the other side of the Atlantic" (292). In *Twelve Letters to a Small Town* he discovers an alternative angel, the winged hermaphrodite that combines the imported and the indigenous, the cultured and the wild, the local and the universal, the experienced and the imagined. Possessed of this "rebis," he can transform his world into poetry.

## II. Squaring of the Circle

The squaring of the circle was a problem that greatly exercised medieval minds. It is a symbol of the *opus alchymicum* since it breaks down the original chaotic unity into the four elements and then combines them again in a higher unity. Unity is represented by a circle and the four elements by a square. The production of one from four is the result of a process of distillation and sublimation which takes the so-called "circular" form . . . . (JUNG 119)

In the Second Letter, the boy initiated into the Adamic task of naming participates in the very act of creation as he explores how indigenous raw materials are transformed into human structures, a process for which Lee suggests some winsome logic (42). The construction of the town as Reaney describes it is a rudimentary "squaring of the circle." The magic circle or mandala of alchemy is "squared" by the four rivers of paradise or four elements flowing from the center (Jung 123, 124). Reaney offers the streets of Stratford flowing into the Great Lakes and named for them. The boy learns how a town is built, or more accurately *grown*, adopting the garden and orchard as prototypes in accordance with the horticultural analogy so often employed by the alchemists. According to Jung, the imagination, what the alchemists called "the star in man" (265) and understood "as the real and literal power to create images . . ." (160), is one method of attaining the elusive stone. What might be dismissed as mere child's play is, in fact, training

in metaphor, a stage in the transformative process. In *Alphabet*, Reaney describes the belief he held as a child “that metaphor is reality” (1[Sept. 1960]: 3), a belief that was threatened as he grew older and ultimately renewed.

### III. Coniunctio

The king, clad in purple, with a golden crown, has a golden lion beside him. He has a red lily in his hand, whereas the queen has a white lily. (JUNG 275)

The nursery rhyme cadence that ends the Second Letter continues in the description of King William and Queen Mary that follows. These are, of course, actual historical figures, perhaps represented in the annual Orangeman’s parade by people in costume (just as the Irish river Boyne is the site of a famous battle for the Protestant cause in 1690), but the image of the King and Queen are also central symbols in alchemy; the *lapis* is the result of the “chymical marriage” between the two. Many illustrations of the royal pair appear in Jung’s *Psychology and Alchemy* including a 1550 woodcut of a king and queen in coitus as a symbol of the alchemical stage of *coniunctio*, which Jung interprets as “an allegory of the psychic union of opposites” (316). The opposites unified in this seemingly simple poem are many. An Old World celebration of the Protestant William III’s victory over the Roman Catholic James II is transplanted to the New World, but the symbolism of orange for Protestantism (through a chance association between the geographical reference in the King’s byname, Prince of Orange, and the colour) is imposed upon indigenous tiger lilies. The boy is once again wrestling with inherited stories, stories that, as Browne points out, encourage “factional retrenchment” in a New World setting (108). However, what the boy ultimately celebrates in this playful rhyme named for local flora is not factionalism, but rather spectacle, emblem, and language. As in alchemy, the result of this first union must perish, and be replaced by the true king and queen which are later revealed to be the Janitor and Granny Crack.

### IV. Nigredo

...then a union of opposites is performed in the likeness of a union of male and female (called the *coniugium*, *matrimonium*, *coniunctio*, *coitus*) followed by the death of the product of the union (*mortificatio*, *calcinatio*, *putrefactio*) and a corresponding *nigredo*. (JUNG 220)

The process of conjunction, or pairing of opposites, sets the pattern for a surprisingly bleak exploration of Stratford as it lives in the poet’s memory.

Through a series of thirty-six localizing prepositions, the poet presents many of the contraries that govern the life of the town. In alchemy, conjunction is followed by *putrefactio* or *nigredo*, pictured in etchings as a skeleton standing on a coffin. Of all the portraits of Stratford, the one presented in the Fourth Letter is the darkest, with reminders of death and decay at every turn: the sewage, the graveyard, the Crimean cannon, the “waste outskirts” (IV.17). Significantly, many of the symbols of *nigredo* are representations of Old World enmities and stratifications.

However, in the typographical and symbolic centre of the poem is the image of the “two-headed eagle” (IV.9) which holds special alchemical significance as a symbol of the hermaphroditic stone which, like the phoenix, reproduces itself. The way out of the darkness for the poet is to see, as the grammatical term in the title suggests, the components of his world in relation to one another, to find the moonlight that illuminates the blackness, angels in the wake of the war.

## V. Albedo

From this the washing (*ablutio, baptisma*) either leads direct to the whitening (*albedo*), or else the soul (*anima*) released at the “death” is reunited with the dead body and brings about its resurrection, or finally the “many colours” or “peacock’s tail” (*cauda pavonis*), leads to the one white colour that contains all colours. At this point the first main goal of the process is reached, namely the *albedo*, highly prized by many alchemists as if it were the ultimate goal. It is the silver or moon condition which still has to be raised to the sun condition. (JUNG 220-21)

The “whitening” stage in the alchemical process is represented by a poem that culminates in the images of winter, moon, and white bird. In the absence of wizards and centaurs, the school children are tediously encouraged to see the shape of their brain in imported systems of quantification. Any element of the natural world that manages to enter their fortress is quickly stuffed, codified and lost under layers of dust. The pattern established in the preceding letters suggests that the natural external world is the world of childhood, whereas the internal world enclosed by human structures belongs to adults. But fortunately, in the cloakroom, elements of the world of nature which have hitherto provided the raw materials for the boy’s imagination have been smuggled through the borders. Appropriately, the mythical figure who presides over this magical port of entry is “the old janitor” (V.21), “a curious question” (V.26) in an institution of answers, the only puzzle the boy cannot solve although equipped with all

the codes and formulas. More than a caretaker, he is referred to as “January man” (V.28) which suggests the season in which the boy’s epiphanic encounter occurs, and associates him with Janus, “the guardian god of doors and beginnings” (*OED*). The image of Janus, described as having two faces, one young and one old looking in opposite directions, is later amplified in the image of Janitor and Granny Crack revolving “back to back” as a compound angel looking down upon the town. This hermaphroditic image reveals the dual nature of Mercurius as both guide and tempter:

sometimes he was a ministering and helpful spirit . . . and sometimes an elusive, deceptive, teasing goblin who drove the alchemists to despair and had many of his attributes in common with the devil. . . . (Jung 64)

The Janitor presides over the young boy’s initiation into life’s mysteries represented by the white bird unlocked “upon the wave” (V.29). Reminiscent of Noah’s dove (Browne 112), and the one accompanying Christ’s baptism, the winged figure represents the release of the soul in the crucial refining stages of alchemy (Jung 192-93). The boy’s soul finds release from rote and routine but the training of the poet as alchemist is not yet complete. “If the main work was interrupted at the white stage,” writes Silberer, “instead of waiting for the red, then they got the white stone, the small elixir, with which the base metals can be turned into silver alone” (126).

## VI. Citrinatas

. . . the wanderer comes to those houses where people work alone or by twos. They work in a slovenly fashion. The alchemistic quacks are generally called “bunglers” and “messy cooks” by the masters of the art. These are the ones who do not work according to the “possibilities of nature,” which is, nevertheless, the touchstone of all right production. (SILBERER 132)

The “yellowing” was sometimes omitted as a stage in the alchemical process, but Reaney here employs it as an opportunity to describe those who would militate against life’s mysteries. The maiden aunts with whom he boards in town never move beyond the simple language and judgments of nursery rhymes and beast fables. Significantly, they live on a street named for King William who represents a colonial sensibility and reminds of Old World divisions. By not recognizing the garden in which they live, the spinsters allow the roses on the wallpaper to become as sere and repetitious as the life they lead. Because they feel compelled to reject the magical (Rider Haggard’s novel is about an immortal woman waiting for a reincar-

nated lover), in favour of the mundane, the spinsters' *hortus conclusus* becomes a sad parody of the rose garden of the philosophers, one of alchemy's favourite symbols (Jung 167). Only the boy dares to confront the "green smothered darkness" (VI.28) behind the cupboard, in the cloak-room, and within the secret kingdom of language.

## VII. Rubedo

The *albedo* so to speak, is the daybreak, but not till the *rubedo* is it sunrise. The red and white are King and Queen who may also celebrate their "chymical nuptials" at this stage. (JUNG 221)

In the Seventh Letter, the boy who has become the poet searches for a past for himself and his community in the "tea-coloured files of the town's newspapers" (VII.2). What he discovers at the center of it all is the "flower or is it a seed pod of all the words spoken at the / cross-roads of the town" (VII. 34-35). Jung writes:

The inside of the "golden flower" is a "seeding-place" where the "diamond body" is produced. The synonymous term "the ancestral land" may actually be a hint that this production is the result of integrating the ancestral stages. The ancestral spirits play an important part in primitive rites of renewal. (124)

The streets of the town intersect with the past and blossom into a history at once public and private, at once "heroic and infuriatingly tame" ("Canadian Poet's Predicament" 121). The past survives within the oral tradition, and the poet's world is inhabited by "figures" described by "ancestral voices" (VII.37) and those he himself has seen. Thus the "seedpod," like the philosopher's stone, is an image of potential, regeneration, and promise. The motley cast of characters who live out the drama of the town are described, but none so vividly as "Granny Crack," who, as "a spirit of the rural Ontario countryside" (Lee 47), becomes the alchemical partner of the town's Janitor.

Granny Crack is a central figure in Reaney's imagination who also appears in the poem "Winter's Tales" (1949), and in the plays *The Kildeer* (1959) and *Colours in the Dark* (1967). Harlot and harridan, she is at once the crack of doom and the crack of dawn. In the alchemical context she comes to represent the physical aspect of the hermaphroditic Mercurius:

It is of the essence of the transforming substance to be on the one hand extremely common, even contemptible...but on the other hand to mean something of great value, not to say divine. (Jung 128-29)

The frightened children see Granny Crack "as an incredible crone / The



spirit of neglected fence corners” (VII.65-66), a garden gone wild. Her own perception of herself is somewhat more lofty:

I was the mother of your sun  
 I was the aunt of your moon  
 My veins are your paths and roads  
 On my head I bear steeples and turrets  
 I am the darling of your god. (VII.69-73)

Granny Crack’s name suggests a multitude of meanings, from craziness to casual conversation (Browne 116-17). Like Johnnie Crack in Dylan Thomas’s *Under Milkwood*, she is the stuff of song and folk tale. She also resembles Yeats’ Crazy Jane who was called Cracked Mary in early versions of the poems that bear her name. (Reaney had just completed a dissertation in which he drew attention to the alchemical as well as occult dimension of Yeats’ poetry.) Like Crazy Jane, Granny Crack has an audacious power of speech, and an audacious sense of self, but in the final stanza of the Seventh Letter, the poet reveals that Granny Crack is only half of the equation that is completed by the Janitor. Body and soul, summer and winter, Sol and Luna, country and town are united together in the alchemical marriage, creating a hermaphroditic whole, a winged figure that is at once annunciator and guardian looking down upon the child’s garden. This recognition of his dual heritage is the poet’s empowerment.

### VIII. Multiplicatio

The red man and the white woman, called also red lions and white lilies, and many other names, are united and cooked together in a vessel, the philosophical Egg. The combined material becomes thereby gradually black (and is called raven or ravenhead), and later white (swan); now a somewhat greater heat is applied and the substance is sublimated in the vessel (the swan flies up); on further heating a vivid play of colors appears (peacock tail or rainbow); finally the substance becomes red and that is the conclusion of the main work. The red substance is the philosopher’s stone, called also our king, red lion, grand elixir, etc. The after work, is a subsequent elaboration by which the stone is given still more power, “multiplied” in its efficiency. (SILBERER 125-26)

Silberer’s description of the alchemical process is echoed in letters Three through Seven. The poet must now learn how to multiply his powers through a long apprenticeship.

The town that was recreated earlier in vegetable form is now recreated in musical form (Lee 46). The setting for this “formal” training should not go unnoticed, cluttered as it is with Old World artifacts, reminding us, writes

Browne, “of the desperation of the colonial imagination” (117). The composition emerges from the tensions between the regulatory metronome and the freewheeling rhythms of child’s play. A year in the town becomes a “Two Part Invention,” a counterpoint of natural rhythms and seasonal cycles juxtaposed against human structures and ingenuity. We see here, in its most rudimentary form—it is these passages that elicit the most disparaging comments from critics—the multiplication of the poet’s power, but he soon discovers that language, not music, is his true medium.

### **IX. Fermentatio**

The practice connected with this idea consists in putting some gold in the mixture that is to be transmuted. The gold dissolves like a seed in it and is to produce the fruit, gold. The gold ingredient was also conceived as a ferment, which permeates the whole mixture like a leaven, and, as it were, made it ferment into gold. Furthermore, the tincturing matter was conceived as male and the matter to be colored as female. Keeping in view the symbol of the corn and seed, we see that the matter into which the seed was put becomes earth and mother, in which it will germinate in order to come to fruition. (SILBERER 115)

In “Town House and Country Mouse” Reaney contrasts a familiar rural world of relatively unified wholes with a strange urban environment characterized by separation. The child submits to the passage from “here” to “there,” a process accompanied by the flowering of language. During his journey into town, the wheels of the boy’s red buggy whirl “against sheaves of blue chicory” (IX.29). According to the alchemists, unity is achieved in the golden flower, but Jung notes that the “golden flower of alchemy” can sometimes be a blue flower, “the sapphire blue flower of the hermaphrodite” (76-77). As a symbol of the mandala (Jung 99), the blue flower is associated with all the wheels and circles in the poem, most notably the seedpod of voices of the Seventh Letter that is here described as “the million leaning pens of grass with their nibs of seed” (IX.31). The circular journey between the two worlds of his childhood is appropriately accompanied by the indigenous music of nature heard in “the gamut of grass and blue flowers” (IX.65).

Nightmarish and chimerical, the town offers its own hieroglyphs and emblems to entice the boy’s imagination and contribute to the *fermentatio*, the germination of his poetic self. The town, initially defined in terms of the imported (streets named for dukes, gothic architecture, exotic birds) presents the danger of the rural being submerged in the urban (corduroy logs buried in gravel), while the countryside shows signs of the imported drowning in the indigenous (orchards gone wild), but the boy finds his model in.

the successful wedding of the two, a house defined by human culture united with a barn, an ark of animals and urges.

### **X. Exaltatio**

In this connection belongs also the ancient alchemic symbol of the philosopher's egg. This symbol is compared to the "Egyptian stone," and the dragon, which bites its tail; consequently the procreation symbol is compared to an eternity or cycle symbol. (SILBERER 116)

The philosopher's stone is exalted, or brought to a higher degree of potency, as the boy learns to interpret the voices of his community as poetry, to translate the pairings he observes into metaphor. The title of the Tenth Letter "Voices and Conjunctions" echoes that of the Fourth Letter "Voices and Prepositions." In the former poem, however, the grammatical part of speech to which the title refers appears throughout the poem, while in the latter, "ordinary conjunctions, in the grammatical sense, are not in evidence" (Browne 123). These conjunctions, it appears, are the "paradoxical union of irreconcilables" (Jung 139) at the heart of the alchemical process. Each stanza based upon a remembered fragment of conversation expands to include an image of *coniunctio* as well as a reference to the alchemical process. The town becomes the "philosophical egg" or circular vessel in which the masterwork is to be accomplished. Through this *matrix* of associations, the boy enters a symbolic universe where language assumes a peculiar power. He learns that words can be used to question, chastise, describe, disarm, convert, herald, and even pun in the face of mortality. Though in Reaney's poem, "The Yellow-Bellied Sapsucker," the old man with the two canes is God with Adam and Eve before him, here the mystery of the opening stanza is left unsolved. Equally mysterious is the final and most fearsome of the conjunctions, the dream figure of a man "with a clock in his belly" (which in alchemy represents immortality [Jung 172]) juxtaposed with babies "in their christening shrouds" (X.31) reaching out from the church yard. Here poetry, the art of anagogy, becomes the ultimate stay against extinction.

### **XI. Augmentatio**

After I had arrived at the gate of the garden, some on one side looked sourly at me, so that I was afraid they might hinder me in my project; but others said, "See, he will into the garden, and we have done garden service here so long, and have never gotten in; we

will laugh him down if he fails." But I did not regard all that, as I knew the condition of this garden better than they, even if I had never been in it, but went right to a gate that was tight shut so that one could neither see nor find a keyhole. I noticed, however, that a little round hole that with ordinary eyes could not be seen, was in the door, and thought immediately, that must be the way the door is opened . . . unlocked and went in. (SILBERER 5-6)

The poet has arrived at the penultimate stage in the alchemical process. But before he can successfully transform base matter into golden mystery, he must wrestle with inherited angels and, not surprisingly, the most daunting of these, for a poet born in Stratford upon Avon, is the other poet born in the other Stratford upon Avon. In the opening letter, Reaney has issued a challenge by insisting that the silver flow of his Avon, "does not taste English" to him (I.10). Though he insists upon an indigenous tradition, the inherited one cannot be ignored:

When you start to write a poem in Canada and think of the British Museum Reading Room you almost go mad because the great tradition of English literature, the glare of its brilliant modern representatives seems so oppressively and crushingly great. ("Canadian Poet's Predicament" 119-20)

A young Canadian poet seeking entrance into the rose garden of the philosophers is bound to be met with naysayers and doubters, but he persists in finding a way in, in staking out his peculiar territory. In all of his writing Reaney works toward the maturation of a Canadian and contemporary poetic which relates to, but transmutes, the original.

In contrast to the citizens of Stratford, Ontario, who merely plant the floral emblems associated with the various plays in their "Shakespearean Gardens," the poet illustrates how the plays themselves are emblems of actual incidents in the town. The town itself becomes a garden in which each individual carries symbolic value, as do the flowers in Ophelia's bouquet. The often poignant, always clever, connections drawn by the poet reveal that Stratford, Ontario contains tragedy and romance as genuine as any which inspired the bard, that our winter's tales are equally worthy of an audience.

Augmentation, the name for the penultimate stage of the alchemical process, is also a word used in heraldry to describe an honourable addition to a family emblem. In the opening poem, the boy adopts a coat of arms that combines the wild and the tame, and now he is ready to make his own contribution to the heraldry of his homeplace, and to do so with honesty and humour, insight and eloquence.

## XII. Projectio

The possessor of this penetrating Mercurius can “project” it into other substances and transform them from the imperfect into the perfect state. The imperfect state is like the sleeping state; substances lie in it like the “sleepers chained in Hades” and are awakened as from death to a new and more beautiful life by the divine tincture extracted from the inspired stone. (JUNG 285)

The final stage of the alchemical process is *projectio*. “In ‘projection’ upon a baser metal the *rebis* is able to tincture immense amounts of it to gold” (Silberer 126). In the last letter, “a poetic recapitulation of main images and themes from the whole suite” (Lee 50), the boy’s bicycle enables him to project his imagination upon his world and awaken its golden potential. As a union of two circles, the bi-cycle is yet another symbol of the philosopher’s stone. Possessed of the *rebis* or “two thing,” the boy can see into the heart of life and transform what he sees. Like the other vehicles in the suite, from red buggy to shark-fish car, the bicycle is a medium of both transportation and transformation. It allows him to unite his worlds, the rural world of his youth where nature speaks and legends come alive, and an urban future of speeding cars “filled with the two-backed beast” (XII.6-7). Sexuality, here expressed in the language of Shakespeare’s Iago, is one of many hieroglyphs waiting to be deciphered, one of many experiences yet to be named into existence. The poet who acquires the *rebis*, described by alchemists as both panacea and sanctuary, is protected in “a world of love and of feeling” (XII.31). He has indeed learned to flow like the quicksilver of the river that formed him—from youth to adulthood, innocence to experience, country to town, fairy tale to fact, local to universal, and back again.

As Lee points out, the turning wheels of the bicycle bring to mind the many other images of circles in *Twelve Letters* (51). The final letter itself is full of circular images ranging from the explicit (hoop, wheels, burs, and puddles) to the implicit—the hermaphroditic figure of coitus and the cycle of the seasons which echoes the cycle of human life.

Time and again the alchemists reiterate that the *opus* proceeds from the one and leads back to the one, that it is a sort of circle like a dragon biting its own tail. For this reason the *opus* was often called *circulare* (circular) or else *rota* (the wheel). Mercurius stands at the beginning and end of the work . . . He is the hermaphrodite that was in the beginning, that splits into the traditional brother-sister duality and is reunited in the *coniunctio*, to appear once again at the end in the radiant form of the *lumen novum*, the stone. He is metallic yet liquid, matter yet spirit, cold yet fiery, poison yet healing draught—a symbol uniting all opposites. (Jung 281-82)

The young poet's climactic assertion that "everything was / The bicycle of which I sing," echoes the alchemist's belief that the stone was the one in all and all in one. Mineral transmutations were the least of its miraculous powers. In fact, Jung contends that "it always remains an obscure point whether the ultimate transformations in the alchemical process are to be sought more in the material or more in the spiritual realm" (266). The unifying power of the imagination, or what Stan Dragland calls "the myth of coherence" (231), may be in doubt in this sceptical age, but, according to a character in Reaney's play *Colours in the Dark*, a world without it seems too dismal to contemplate:

Then if a flower is not like a star, and nothing is like anything else then—all the spring goes out of me. I used to take such pleasure in little things—images, stones, pebbles, leaves, grasses, sedges—the grass is like a pen, its nib filled with seed—but it all seems—lies. I can't go on. There seems no reason to go on living or thinking. (65)

The final image that rests with the reader is a visual one of a bicycle with seedpods as wheels which not only ties it back to the seeds in the rest of the suite, but captures the whole enterprise in a single icon, a human frame uniting bundles of natural potential, an imported structure made functional by indigenous components. In this final poem Reaney reveals that the imported and indigenous can co-exist—beautifully. In "The Canadian Poet's Predicament," Reaney writes:

If you just hole up in Canada and refuse to educate yourself you are going to be provincial. But if you flee the country, cut yourself off from your roots, you may end up not even being that. The solution seems to be that the Canadian poet has to stay in the country and at the same time act as if he weren't in it. It looks as if I'm saying that the Canadian poet has to be some sort of poltergeist. He probably has to be. (120)

In *Twelve Letters to a Small Town*, Reaney refines this image of a noisy and mischievous spirit into that of a compound angel, a hermaphroditic Mercurius who combines the best of all worlds, and guides the alchemist/poet to treasures untold. "The *prima materia*," writes Jung, "has the quality of ubiquity: it can be found always and everywhere, which is to say that projection can be made always and everywhere" (311), even in Stratford, Ontario. Reaney's poetry, here as elsewhere, is an expression of his conviction that Ontario, his home place, is "not just a heap of topsoil, parking lots, mineshafts and stumps, but a sacred place" ("An ABC to Ontario Literature and Culture" 2). To accept and celebrate the conjunctions that make us who

we are is the true solution to the predicament of the Canadian poet, and that of all Canadians wondering which stream of their inheritance to turn to for sustenance. If, as Dragland maintains, “Reaney is a teacher of citizenship in Canada and in the country of words” (231), *Twelve Letters* is one of his most important lessons. Through these poems and the alchemical principles that inform them, we learn how to sink our “claws into a locally coloured tree trunk and scratch [our] way through to universality” (*Alphabet 4* (June 1962): 3).

## NOTES

I am indebted to Richard Stingle and D.M.R. Bentley of the University of Western Ontario for setting me on my way and the readers at *Canadian Literature* for helping me to arrive.

- 1 “To the Avon River Above Stratford Canada” first appeared in *Canadian Forum* 30 (Feb. 1951): 255. The conclusion to that version reads as follows:

As some day I'll know  
 Your name  
 Your coat-of arms I do—  
 A shield of reeds and crayfishes  
 Thin mussel-shells and rushes  
 And muskrats and farmer's geese  
 And one of my three earliest wishes  
 To flow like you.

A reference to the river sounding “like old money, / The tiny silver nickels of my childhood. . . ,” excised from the later version, helps to explain the drawing of a coin that appears in the text of *Twelve Letters to a Small Town*, but may also be a gloss on Jung's discussion of the ubiquity of the gold that is the goal of the alchemical process: “It is part of the banality of its outward aspect that the gold is minted, i.e. shaped into coins, stamped, and valued” (78). Browne argues that “the drawings may appear ornamental, but in their own subtle way they comment rather profoundly, revealing a dimension left unspoken in the poems” (101). Significantly, almost every drawing represents a conjunction between an aspect of nature and a man-made object. This visually reinforces Reaney's theme of a hermaphroditic union between the indigenous and the imported, the wild and the tame. The drawing of the gas pump surmounted by the sun that appears at the end of the Ninth Letter and its companion drawing bear a striking resemblance to alchemical illustrations of the sun and moon that appear throughout *Psychology and Alchemy* (331, 387).

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