

A PROBLEM OF MEANING

Louis Dudek

BEFORE EVEN LOOKING AT the plays of James Reaney it might be good to remind ourselves that there is something drastically wrong with modern drama in general, and that this “something wrong” goes very deep into history.

I have a personal theory about this, a sort of ingrown idea that I have lived with for many years, and which I have never discussed with anyone, so that I don't know whether it would be taken as a quirky over-simplification or a reasonable description of the facts. It runs something like this: drama, philosophy and literature are intimately related in their historical development; drama and philosophy have their great moment following a historical decline in religion; the major period of drama then comes in the first century of this development, while a great age of philosophy accompanies and follows it for a century or so after the drama itself has declined. Philosophy is an analysis, essentially, of the religious problems, an attempt to retrench and to bolster up the declining religious order, to form a reconciliation between the old and the new — an effort in which the new inevitably triumphs. Drama is a demonstration of this same conflict in terms of human action, an attempt to define action successfully in terms of the historic tension — and this also fails. It follows from this theory that modern drama comes long after the great period of drama and philosophy; but then, this is something everyone knows.

At any rate, the pattern can be easily observed in the development of Greek philosophy and drama, and in the development in the Renaissance and the modern period. Greek philosophy from Parmenides to Epicurus covers roughly two centuries (500-300 B.C.), and it is related to a decline and a re-thinking in religious belief; Greek drama covers the first of these two centuries, from Aeschylus to Aristophanes. The great period of modern philosophy stretches from

Descartes to Hegel, also a period of about 200 years; and it follows the Reformation, the wars of religion, and the general disturbance of belief beginning with the Renaissance. The great period of drama falls in the first half of this period, at the turn of the seventeenth century in England and Spain, and in the middle part of that century in France.

It's as though the imagination, and then the mind, were stirred following a great shake-up in the deeper levels of belief. Greek drama was involved with the religious ritual manifestations of the divine in the actual, as all Greek art is the manifestation of the divine in human form; the stage was "a *theatron*, a show place for divine onlookers". The tragedies were "sacred plays, in which man raises himself to the level of the gods, plays too which bring the gods down from their heights." The progress of drama — if it can be called a progress, where the gods leak out — is toward secularization and a descent to naturalism from Aeschylus to Euripides. Greek philosophy, meanwhile, makes the divine, at first *bios* and then *nous*, less and less attainable; makes it eventually unknowable. And cerebration about how this transcendent "reality" can still be validated is the great problem. "In place of the world touched by the radiance of the divine," writes C. Kerényi, "there remained for the philosophers of the post-classical period, of whom Socrates was the first, a world merely visible. A world which was known and radiant, the Homeric and early classical world, had turned into one which was merely *seen*. It may have been full of beauty, but it was also full of impermanence."

The culmination of all this is found in "the sceptical turn finally taken by the Platonic school. The deity now could be formless, without contours, and without the intensity of a special event in which to show itself." Thus we foresee the end of major drama and the end of tragic "awe" as dramatic experience.¹

I believe that modern drama has gone through a very similar development. It began with all the presuppositions and beliefs of ritual Christianity behind it; it began as sacred re-enactment; and it has culminated in the secularism and naturalism of contemporary drama, with the moral and intellectual chaos that this involves. Counter-efforts to revive the drama, when they are radical enough, try to bring in the noumenal and the magical through vague backdoor strategies of so-called symbolism; but unfortunately the body of ideas and beliefs simply does not exist, as shared social experience, to make such theatre work. It has an air of absurdity. And this is where we come to James Reaney, our Canadian playwright, born in an evil time and in an ill country for dramatic productions or for the creation of a genuine dramatic literature.

CANADA HAS BEEN poverty-stricken in regard to dramatic productivity, much more so than in the novel and in poetry, because our religion, in the nineteenth century and since, has been a hand-me-down watered Protestantism, weaker even in its kind than the watered-down poetry and fiction of the colonial period have been (see, for example, the picture of old-time religion in Reaney's play *The Sun and The Moon*). And the philosophy or thought that might accompany any religion-in-transition has been almost entirely lacking. Even in this century, when the religious and philosophical questions are central to literature, whether in the plays of T. S. Eliot or Sartre, or Beckett, the typical Canadian farm boys of the literary community recoil from any direct contact with ideas and are resentful of any attempt to bring such questions into poetry or drama.

And yet, such vitality as there has been in the drama has come on a solidly-prepared ground of ideas. The plays of James Reaney and of Robertson Davies — as we can now see after *Fifth Business* and *The Manticore* — have a background of religious and philosophical concern behind them. The survey of philosophy in Reaney's "September Eclogue," in *A Suit of Nettles*, ends significantly with Heidegger and with games of magic taken from *The Golden Bough*; and Reaney's plays in general are shot through with a kind of religious-philosophical excitement that tells us there is much going on privately in that area. But he is a solitary exile in an empty land, almost unique in being troubled deeply and seriously with such questions; therefore his plays have a peculiar dislocation and feeling of unreality in the context of Canadian society, whether staged on the CBC or in the theatre.

Late as we are, the revival of drama which came in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century, with Ibsen and Shaw, then Maeterlinck and Yeats, provides the background for the intellectual content of Reaney's plays. Romanticism was a kind of doubtful religious reconstruction, and the Victorian order at the core was a sentimental, willed effort to hold on to old pieties and beliefs. The collapse of that order, as recorded in the *fin-de-siècle* and the modern movement, is like a miniature re-enactment of the great movements of religion and art described above — even when sand castles fall there is some dramatic impact — so that a minor resurrection of theatre accompanies the fall of the Romantic-Victorian world. The Canadian counterpart of this "happy fall", as a renewal of drama, has come way outside the time-frame, because we really had no religion or morality to speak of, in the first place, and if a few hearts and minds

have been stirred to feeling and thought, at long last, by the seismic movements of the twentieth century, it has taken nearly a century of time for the colonial Giant of the North to be so stirred.

This proposition that James Reaney's charming theatre is somehow a distant relation to, first, Bernard Shaw and, second, W. B. Yeats, may sound far-fetched, but I think it can help us to understand what is going on in the plays. In most of these plays of Reaney, as in the early plays and novels of Robertson Davies, Canada has at last come in for sharp social satire. It was naturally made for it, from the beginning, we suspect, but no playwright would have dared to undertake a full-scale satirical view of Canadian life before World War II. The soul has to be moved to satire by revulsion, and there must be a solid stone somewhere, on which the foot can lean while shaking off the muck. Reaney may be said to possess both these requirements: a major "criticism of life", and a strong intellectual conviction personally achieved. The satirical strain, however, is the lesser part of his purpose — I was going to say "lesser half", but it isn't anything like half — and the other part branches out rather discordantly from the first. This satirical part, however, is dramatically most reliable, and has the most dependable precedents, so that it tends to be theatrically more successful. The first act of several of his plays, as in *The Killdeer*, *The Sun and the Moon*, and *Three Desks* — the part of the play which is closest to social satire — comes off very well; both audience and critics are well pleased, and we seem to have the promise of a successful play. So R. B. Parker of the University of Toronto can write, a bit oddly, that Act I of *The Killdeer* — merely Act I — is "still Reaney's most successful drama".

But the second and third acts of a Reaney play take a radical turn into strange territory. As Alvin A. Lee notes in his analysis of *The Killdeer*, "With Act II the tone changes abruptly . . . the play moves into something close to dark conceit or allegory." In short, the play turns to the great romantic tradition, of transcendence, of magic, or religious implication, and here we are in the country of W. B. Yeats, Maurice Maeterlinck, J. M. Barrie and other visionaries of the "eternal return".

The satire itself springs from a very close personal response to provincial life: one has the impression of a very superior-minded young man cast by fate into a pathetic small-town environment and undergoing all the irritations of being forever trapped in a hen-house or a parsonage. "Oh Millbank, my poor silly little village — silly goosebrained ladies in white aprons. Millbank. Millbank."² All life is ultimately conceived in terms of this uncomfortable sense of misplace-

ment. One can trace this from the poem "The Upper-Canadian" in *The Red Heart*, to phrases like "the abyss we live in" in the production notes for *Listen to the Wind* and "I curse this street where it's increasingly difficult to find a green leaf," in *Colours in the Dark*.

The strange infantilism of Reaney's poetry and plays is somehow related to this sense of the absurdity of life. The unkindest interpretation of this aspect of Reaney is that the painful prison of provincialism pressing on the mind of the gifted poet has produced a kind of "arrested development", in which the language and the fantasy-world of childhood remains the only imaginative and vital reality for him and the one to which he perpetually returns. A more sympathetic literary account would relate this infantile strain to Blake's theory of innocence and the general romantic idyllic myth of childhood.

William Blake was perhaps the first poet in history to offer infantile inanity and childish doggerel as serious poetry, and this to the eternal confusion of literature, since in his work abominable poetry is bound up with the most profound and far-reaching ideas. To some extent I hold it against Northrop Frye that he has never pointed out the absurd rhetoric and horribly clotted verbiage in Blake's poetry, and he has praised this poetry as though it could be read on the same level of art as Milton, Spenser, or John Donne. It simply cannot, and never has been read with admiration as poetry.

He kissed the child & by the hand led
 And to his mother brought,
 Who in sorrow pale, thro' the lonely dale,
 Her little boy weeping sought. . . .

Little lamb
 Here I am;
 Come and lick
 My white neck;
 Let me pull
 Your soft wool;
 Let me kiss
 Your soft face. . . .

The delusion that this sort of thing is high poetry because it suggests an apocalyptic vision of the lost Eden has led James Reaney to write pages of similar nonsense: it has provoked Michael Tait's remark that "No one else has [Reaney's] capacity to write for the stage at once so badly and so well." Thus Reaney:

I must go away to abroad:
 When I returned uptown
 I met you and you knew me not,
 Your hair like flax tow . . .
 (*One-man Masque*)

I wish that I could change my name,
 The surname is so very lame.
 I would change my name to George
 And work all day at a forge . . .
 (*Night-blooming Cereus*)

Who knows, some of this bathos in Reaney may derive from hymn-book quatrains, the bane of so much English poetry, even as Blake's namby-pamby style derived from the same source; I understand that Reaney's family belonged to a minor fundamentalist sect of evangelical Protestantism.

Our Lord has prepared for us
 Houses in Heaven.
 How many rooms have they?
 They number seven . . ."
 "In the woodshed you'll notice
 Trees chopped up ready
 And fine dry split kindling
 For fires all so steady.
 (*Night-blooming Cereus*)

This seems to echo such church hymns as Charles Wesley's "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild/Look upon a little child . . ." and the mediocre rhyming and metrics of his hymns:

How wretched are the boys at school
 Who wickedly delight
 To mock, and call each other fool,
 And with each other fight.

If so, it is to take the Gospel teaching "Except ye become as little children . . ." much too literally. Also, it is one thing to write *for* children, as Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll have done — and as Reaney has in his specifically children's books — but quite another to be childish or stylistically insipid in a work written for adults. Such a performance can become quite embarrassing. To account for it, I would say that faced with an audience of mindless biddies and croquet intellects, such as we may have in Canada in the outlands, the poet has taken drastic

means to simplify. His philosophical outlook and his audience-relationship have combined to create a childish theatre. In this strange mixture lies the dilemma and the paradox of Reaney's career as a dramatist.

After all, one cannot put Reaney down as an idiot boy. The naive childlike style and childlike attitudes which are so recurrent in his plays are an affectation, perhaps with a secret self-indulgence, but nevertheless a conscious design aiming to simplify and to reach an indiscriminate audience. The plays could hardly occur on the stage in Paris or New York, though they might conceivably get there. They could only originate in a country like Canada, a hinterland as far as drama is concerned, where an audience in church basements and high schools must be gently prodded to participate in dramatics. The plays are conceived for a small parochial community — there is an aura of amateur theatre about the whole thing — and the audience, one imagines, is composed of children, nice pleasant provincial ladies, and placid hen-pecked husbands. The author naturally tries to involve such an audience and acting group in his enterprise with the greatest possible economy of means. He himself is a complete anomaly in that society — an abnormally gifted swan among the geese — and yet he is possessed of a democratic impulse (or is it an evangelical call?) to make his plays work for everyone, and to involve everyone who comes along in the creative performance. There is little or no theatrical machinery; having no theatre, and no props, we will do it with toothpicks and playing cards, and we will use amateurs and children as actors.

THE ULTIMATE AIM of this simplified kind of play, a collage of children's games (*Colours in the Dark*), or a fairy tale for adults (*Night-blooming Cereus*), or a pastime for a sick boy (*Listen to the Wind*), is anything but trivial and simple. By means of would-be unpretentious play, purporting to gratify the very simplest audience, Reaney intends to achieve the widest possible scope of meaning, interpreting all life from birth to death, all human history, and touching on the major questions of religion and philosophy. His aim, in other words, is epic, and his intentions are those of a major poet, although this is concealed in the trappings of the nursery and of childhood imagination. At one point the stage directions read, characteristically: "The centre panel changes to Durer's Adam & Eve. Dimly we realize that not only are we going through the hero's life and stories he heard as a child, but we are going through Canada's story — glacier and forest, also the world's story." (*Colours in the Dark.*)

At times one is reminded of James Joyce, as in the symbolism relating to transmigration of souls in *Colours in the Dark*; or again of T. S. Eliot, as in the conjunction of Jesus and Buddha in the same play —

Who was the Tiger? Christ.
Who was the Balloon? Buddha.

Much of the *One-man Masque* and *Colours in the Dark* reads like all the gists of *Finnegans Wake*, *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* rolled into a ball. The vast ambition of this philosophical conception, as it stares through the child's play of the surface, seems at odds with the quirky simplicity of the means adopted.

A little higher on the scale than the nursery or child's play I would place Reaney's regressive attachment to melodrama and the plot-patterns of the Victorian romance. Here at least, we might say, we have a breakthrough — from infancy to adolescence! *Listen to the Wind*, for example, makes use of Rider Haggard, an early enthusiasm of Reaney's, as a counterpoint to the "contemporary" setting of the play. So that we can have our cake and eat it, so to speak, as we enjoy a parodistic re-enactment of a Victorian melodrama while at the same time we remain realistically in touch with contemporary truth. Oddly enough, the contrast of worlds does give a heightened dimension to present-day reality, even though the Lucia-di-Lammermoor-like story is really a shoddy piece of soap-opera fantasy. Reaney in actual fact believes that the Rider Haggard story is "very powerful because of the patterns in it"; and Alvin Lee would probably say more specifically that it is "archetypal". "It guides you out of the abyss we live in," says Reaney — or at least it is supposed to.

The question, however, remains whether the melodrama is really worth its salt, whether it's good enough as a "pattern" of any deep meaning. It is, after all, a wild romance about perfidy, ideal love, greed, and the victory of purity and goodness over evil. A Victorian nightmare. Owen's "real life" situation in the play, in which he tries to reconcile his separated parents, represents an appeal for love to overcome the evil of his imminent death. The ambiguity of the alternative endings, sad and happy, is to leave open the possibility of either, as human choice — to refuse love and to cause death, or to love, forgive, and live in eternity. I feel that the parent-son relationship in the play is charged with deep feeling, but there is a comic-parodistic effect in the counterpoint of the Victorian novel and actual life — unless Reaney is more sentimental and melodramatic in earnest than we are able to be, and unless he believes that Ryder Haggard as a

counterpoint is equivalent to the *Odyssey* in James Joyce or *Tristan und Isolde* in T. S. Eliot.

In other words, the counterpoint of the epic and the trivial (Joyce and Eliot) is one thing; the counterpoint of the melodramatic or sentimental and the real is another. (So too, the combination of the high-philosophical and the infantile, in *Colours in the Dark*, presents a special problem.) Rider Haggard is a third-rate popular writer whose only real *raison d'être* here is that Reaney once read him as a boy. Since Reaney is interested in Yeats, Blake and Jacob Boehme, it is probably the false "psychic" and "supernaturalistic" aura of Rider Haggard's books that has fascinated him. There is no doubt some kind of elective affinity here, since Robert Louis Stevenson once described Rider Haggard as "a fine weird imagination," and no phrase could be more apt for Reaney himself.

Rider Haggard, however, is a spurious mystic or visionary of the psychic depths. In his lifetime he had nothing to do with mysticism, except for two occasions: he experienced some kind of hallucination during a mediumistic seance in his youth, and decided to have nothing more to do with these mysteries; and later in life, in a dream, he had a parapsychological communication from his dog. Apart from this, Haggard had no real interest in the supernatural; his religion was of a conventional kind. And the voodoo in his novels is merely the standard stuff of popular romance, as he himself described this kind of fiction:

The love interest, at least among English-speaking peoples, must be limited and restrained in tone, must follow the accepted lines of thought and what is defined as morality. Indeed it may even be omitted, sometimes with advantage. The really needful things are adventure—how impossible it matters not at all, provided it is made to appear possible—and imagination, together with a clever use of coincidence and an ordered development of the plot, which should, if possible, have a happy ending, since few folk like to be saddened by what they read.³

This is no better than some of our own Canadian Anglo-phonies of the nineteenth century, and as a good nationalist Reaney might just as well have taken one of those—*The Golden Dog*, or *Wacousta*. That Reaney should have been enthralled by Haggard, and should have made him the source of one of his most ambitious plays, must be attributed to a youthful literary fixation—like his love for the Brontë circle; in studying Reaney we must therefore be aware that we are pursuing private imaginative locales, of his childhood and youth, as poetic touchstones, rather than objective dramatic contexts. This fact accounts for a great deal of the eccentricity of his plays.

In other words, I see James Reaney's plays as essentially poetic or lyrical drama. The form of *One-man Masque*, which amounts to little more than a stage setting for a reading of Reaney poems — as does also a good deal of *Colours in the Dark* — reveals the strong lyrical bent of this drama. The interpretation of the plays should be directed to the poetic subjectivity of their method, and they should be studied in conjunction with Reaney's poetry, as Alvin Lee does in his somewhat too-mythopoeic study,⁴ although the ultimate goal will be a body of ideas, or a "vision", that will be objective and significant for itself.

WE'VE SEEN that the first stage of a Reaney play is likely to be in the satiric mode, with a good deal of Canadian attic-furniture and nostalgia for old Mariposa thrown into the plot. A sort of rural Betjeman. The odd thing in Canada is that the small town is likely to be remembered with a mixture of affection and withering scorn, or neurotic spite. And yet, in the end, it comes to represent life in general, for a poet like Reaney, and therefore the mode of satire and wit finally reveals a deep divorce from these realities, a vision of triviality and mediocrity in horrible dissolution.

It would almost seem that the inevitable course of development for a writer of a certain kind of social satire, if he doesn't get arrested at the stage of trivial discontent, is to move toward a deep concern with the "other world", the world beyond appearance. Mysticism, the supernatural, genuine religion or metaphysics begin to dominate in their later years in the work of writers like Wilde, Shaw, Aldous Huxley, Evelyn Waugh, Auden, E. M. Forster, as well as our own Robertson Davies, all of whom were light satirists at the beginning. I think this pattern of development may be useful to interpret the shift of a Reaney play, usually in Act II, from a fairly realistic satirical mode to a rocky fantastic irrational symbolism that sets the audience back on their heels.

Reaney himself describes this shift as hitting the "rapids":

You go smoothly along in an apparent realistic way, and then there is this big leap — which director, actors and audience have got to take, or is it just bad dramaturgy? and are they going to take it? Let me give an example. At the end of *Easter Egg* one night some one came up to me and said, "But no one ever feels he has to get married just because he killed a bat." The murder in *Desks*, the circle dance in *Killdeer* (well, the whole trial scene), the recovery of the "idiot" boy in *Egg* have all at one time or another produced a feeling of "rapids" with audiences and the occasional muttering actor. I'm still working on this; one

solution is to declare myself mad — I don't think the way other people do, and what to you seems melodramatic, surreal, arty, etc., etc., to me seems utterly *verismo* and Zola.⁵

Significantly, he adds that "after watching the Peking Opera at the Royal Alex one evening I decided to trying writing a different kind of play altogether. That is, a play where it's all rapids." The result of this decision was *Listen to the Wind*.

We see then how the "magical" ultimately takes over from the realistic and the satirical. The meaning of this magic element in modern theatre is not far to seek. It is the tradition of Symbolism. What was "grey truth" to W. B. Yeats, and the distrust of rationality and science, also the justification for mediumistic experiments and theories of the supernatural, is set aside to make way for a kind of vague charlatanism on the stage, confusing shifts, mysterious implications, gnomic expressions without context or connection. Madame Blavatsky is still instructing, though this is a church basement, a high school auditorium, or a college stage.

"I curse the discovery of fire. I curse Prometheus," sings the improvised chorus in *Colours in the Dark*. And in lieu of positive science, we have "angels on the bridge in the golden dray."

The impact of science on the imagination — and the whole business of Two Cultures — may be recognized in Reaney's opening editorial in his magazine *Alphabet*, No. 1, September, 1960:

I can remember about twelve years ago at Toronto feeling the final clutch of the so-called scientific world. Metaphors seemed lies. Poetry seemed to have no use at all. The moon looked enchanting through the trees on Charles Street, but the enchantment was really nothing but an illusion of clouds and fantasy covering up a hide-out pock-marked spherical desert."⁶

It was Blake who pulled him out of this sterile desert of scientific (or so-called scientific) reality: Blake for whom "The Atoms of Democritus/And Newton's Particles of light/Are sands upon the Red sea shore,/Where Israel's tents do shine so bright."

That the consequence of this recoil from science should be an extravagant absorption in symbols, myths, "the iconography of the imagination", without clear reference now as to the specific meanings conveyed by this language of icons and symbols, is characteristic of the entire Symbolist school from the nineteenth century on. Its theology is extremely vague, since the ruined theology which it attempts to replace cannot be sustained, at least not in the old way, and the new one has not yet been formulated. It would take a certain forthrightness of

thought, and a boldness with ideas, which, not being Greeks, we utterly lack. The last ditch stand is that witches' brew, an all-inclusive mythology, all-mythology-at-once as a key to existence. Northrop Frye's magnificent system rests on the premise simply that Total Mythology reveals something solid and permanent, the so-called "structures of the imagination". Ultimately, of course, Frye's systematization — his Key to all Mythologies⁷ — leads to a very definite meaning and application, namely a revolutionary Christianity, a radical humanism, and a reassertion of Christian values. These are not things one would want to oppose, but I think it is a somewhat dishonest argument to base such beliefs on "the nature of the mind", or on the presumed permanent "structures of the imagination", however they got there. In the past every kind of dogma and belief was at one time or another supported by that argument, but it has never stood the test of time.

Reaney's plays, like the mother lode itself, rather shyly gravitate toward a Christian affirmation, despite the complex and contradictory symbolism of his irrational play and fantasy:

A messenger of Hope, comes every night to me,
And offers for short life, eternal liberty.
(Listen to the Wind)

Leave the burning city
Leave this burning town
Destruction cometh — a sucking cloud
Your towers will tumble down . . .
(Colours in the Dark)

"Tonight — I'll begin the New Testament. I have the strength at last to write of Jesus."
(Ibid.)

These passages are like the fine declarative final speech of Mopsus in the November Eclogue, central no doubt to Reaney's poetry:

A sun, a moon, a crowd of stars,
A calendar nor clock is he
By whom I start my year.
He is most like a sun for he
Makes his beholders into suns,
Shadowless and timeless.
At the winter sunstill some say
He dared be born; on darkest day
A babe of seven hours

He crushed the four proud and great directions
Into the four corners of his small cradle.
He made it what time of year he pleased, changed
Snow into grass and gave to all such powers.⁸

WELL, IT SEEMS after all that this is not really “all mythologies”. All mythologies are being read as one mythology, the key we already had — a neat trick if you can work it. Yet this explicit interpretation read into Reaney’s plays would stiffen into a hard and fast creed what is still fluid and potential in his free imagination. He rides a Blakean horse that is not so easily stabled: it is the horse named “Boehme” in *A Suit of Nettles*:

What a pretty snow white horse tattooed with
stars, mountains meadows real sheep moving on them it
seems & fiery comets & ships in a harbour & little
horses dancing in a barnyard. This horse’s eyes — oh
the angelic aurora wonder of its gold red mane. Every
once in a while this horse’s colour completely changes.
People shy away then I can tell you! Storms break out
in the tattooed skies and a fiery fire burns in the eyes
However, it bubbles over — a light comes into his eyes
and the world changes back again.

And so it is. The plays are a strange and wonderful experience — though often an irritation — and they are a powerful contribution to the possibility of theatre in Canada. Much as I may disagree, having my own way of searching through the creation, I want to stand up to applaud a fine achievement. For my own taste, among the plays, I probably could do without *The Killdeer*, *The Sun and the Moon*, the *Three Desks*, and *The Easter Egg* — much as there may be interesting things in all of them — and I believe the best of Reaney’s theatre, pure Symbolism in the romantic vein of Maeterlinck and Yeats, is to be found in *Night-blooming Cereus*, *One-man Masque*, and the moving and impressive later plays, *Colours in the Dark* and *Listen to the Wind*. It is here that he suggests vast meanings and haunting other-worldly dimensions through the simplest verbal and theatrical techniques, namely through the symbolic interplay of action and the incantation of poetry. The experience he wants to arouse is given in the serious-humorous description of the flower in the stage directions to *Night-blooming Cereus*:

Above the village appears a vision of the Night-blooming Cereus opening in slow beach crashing swarming splendour and glory, a blossom larger than airplanes or zeppelins, four times really the size of the village, three times the size of Toronto, twice the size of Bethlehem and once the size of Eden. Then it fades as time comes back.

The difficulty of the plays remains. It is a difficulty which is both intellectual and sociological — hated words! — in that the problem of these plays is to discover, with precision and in detail (not always possible in such a case) what they want to say, and at the same time to reach an audience which is neither prepared for nor capable of any mental exertion. And it all goes back to “vision” — the Greek *theoria* — in which the divine was revealed in the epiphany of the theatre: except that we today are not quite sure of what we mean by the divine. In the meantime, the play — or “play” — is the thing, if only as a childlike way to keep things going. Reaney’s emphasis is definitely on the play.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The chief plays of James Reaney are available in four books now in print:

The Killdeer and Other Plays (Macmillan, Toronto, 1962).

Masks of Childhood (New Press, Toronto, 1972).

Colours in the Dark (Macmillan, Toronto, 1971).

Listen to the Wind (Talonbooks, Vancouver, 1972).

There are several plays for children also in print, and a collection entitled *School Plays* projected by Talonbooks, but I have not yet seen this last. A chronology of his work and a full bibliography is provided in the book *Masks of Childhood* and also in the detailed study by Alvin A. Lee, *James Reaney* (Twayne Publishers, New York, 1968).

NOTES

¹ Quotations in the above paragraphs are taken from C. Kerényi, *The Religion of the Greeks and Romans* (London, 1962), pp. 153, 28, 158, 146, 159.

² *The Sun and the Moon*, Act II.

³ H. Rider Haggard, *The Days of My Life* (London, 1926), II, 90.

⁴ Alvin A. Lee, *James Reaney* (Twayne Publishers, New York, 1968).

⁵ James Reaney, “Ten Years at Play,” in *Canadian Literature*, No. 41 (Summer, 1969), p. 59.

⁶ Editorial reprinted in Louis Dudek and Michael Gnarowski, *The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada* (Ryerson Press, Toronto, 1967), p. 197.

⁷ “Mr. Casaubon, as might be expected, spent a great deal of his time at the Grange in these weeks, and the hindrance which courtship occasioned to the progress of his great work — the Key to all Mythologies — naturally made him look forward the more eagerly to the happy termination of his courtship.” George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, Chapt. VII.

⁸ James Reaney, *A Suit of Nettles* (Macmillan, Toronto, 1958), p. 51.