

# THE LIMITS OF INNOCENCE

*James Reaney's Theatre*

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THE OCCASION of the following reflections was Mr. Alvin Lee's interesting two-part essay "A Turn to the Stage: Reaney's Dramatic Verse" in *Canadian Literature* nos. 15 and 16. In the first half of this study Mr. Lee discussed Reaney's characteristic themes and imagery and convincingly demonstrated the links between the early poems and the more recent plays. The second part dealt more directly with the plays themselves, and it was at this point that I found myself quarrelling with Mr. Lee's analysis. The assumption seemed to be that Reaney's plays, as plays, were on a par with the best of his lyric verse. Having seen, like Mr. Lee, stage productions of both *The Killdeer* and *The Easter Egg* I find this view inscrutable. The question surely is why, when Reaney's poetry — in particular *The Red Heart* — is so compelling, the verse plays should be so unsatisfactory. But here we have a difficulty, for Mr. Lee has identified any playgoer who resists Reaney's style of drama as a latter day Malvolio, whose reservations are a measure only of his own narrow spirit and stunted imagination. Well, I don't believe it, and at the risk of a wholesale denial of cakes and ale will attempt to assess Reaney's dramas from a somewhat different perspective.

Reaney has written a variety of works for the stage but only three plays in the strict sense: *The Killdeer*, *The Easter Egg* and *The Sun and the Moon*. To my knowledge only the first two of these have been performed and I shall confine my remarks in the main to them.

Unquestionably *The Killdeer* has real strengths. Reaney conveys with considerable power his vision of life in rural Ontario, its strange, often sinister enchantment, the desolate eccentricities of its inhabitants and their sudden acts of violence. At the centre of this world which is recreated with variations in both *The Easter Egg* and earlier in *The Red Heart* is, as Mr. Lee points out, the figure of a child, or child-man, threatened by the knowledge of evil, vehemently and ineffectually protesting his passage from innocence to experience. *The Killdeer* suggests a private, intense preoccupation with this transition. The depravity Reaney depicts in this play seems to serve as a powerful emblem for the dark side of adult life which all morally immaculate children must ultimately confront. In so far then as the action concerns Eli, the youth who plays with children's toys, *The Killdeer* revolves about its true centre. Moreover Mr. Lee's claim that "the play is held together by a carefully worked out pattern of interlocking images" is no doubt partly valid. Certain images of possession, demonic or benign, are clearly useful in extending the implications of the theme. (One thread of such imagery, the possession of son by mother, is dramatically most effective. There are no fewer than three "terrible mothers" in *The Killdeer* who by their hostility or the deviousness of tainted love damage their male offspring.)

However as certain Jacobean dramas illustrate most clearly (*The Killdeer* with its macabre violence and intermingled richness and confusion invites the comparison) a pattern of striking imagery, in the absence of plausible characterization and coherent action, is not enough to hold any play together. Structurally, in terms of plot line, *The Killdeer* is anarchic. Apparently Reaney has left unanswered in his mind such questions as whom the play is really about and what story it is he wants to tell. Crude matters, but audiences demand to be satisfied on them and quickly lose interest if they are not. In the absence of such elementary decisions the materials for three or four plays jostle and compete within the indeterminate confines of one large theme. Attention shifts, arbitrarily it seems, from Mrs. Gardner to Mrs. Budge, from Harry to Rebecca, from Eli to Madame Fay, each one of whom clamours for a play of his own. *The Killdeer's* lack of coherence becomes increasingly marked as its various strands, elaborated and developed, diverge. This centrifugal momentum culminates in a disastrous last scene in which contrary to Reaney's intention, which seems to be to present us with a decisive epiphany, the fragments of the action fly irretrievably apart and the playwright, having lost control, takes refuge in a kind of coy whimsy.

His complex story line faces Reaney with a number of subsidiary difficulties. Complicated plots as a rule entail complicated expositions and Reaney is too

inexperienced a playwright to present the mass of necessary information economically and dramatically. There are as a consequence long relatively static expository passages at the beginning of each act, and even the last scene of the play, during which a number of new characters appear unannounced, is not entirely free of them. This defect is related to the practice of giving us the word for the deed, of telling us in extended dialogue about events and motives rather than presenting them in the immediacy of dramatic action. (“I didn’t realize what Clifford was/Until I had married Eli and lived out there./For five years I’ve lived in what you’d call a house/But it was an inferno—”). Since the dramatist does not always calculate precisely enough what scenes from his sensational story will best hold the attention of an audience, one too often has the sense that the true centre of dramatic gravity is somewhere off-stage.

The characterization in *The Killdeer* betrays a comparable uncertainty of purpose. The characters for the most part move on two levels. Having conceived them in the context of the bizarre fantasy which pervades the piece, Reaney then attempts in a number of instances to demonstrate their truth to nature and invest them with the authority of humanity. This combination of fantasy and verisimilitude is precarious. It succeeds perhaps in the case of Mrs. Gardner and Harry; it fails with Madame Fay. In so far as this character exhibits the demonic artificiality of a sorceress from some latter day fairyland, she entertains; when, however, her “motivations”, Dostoyevskian in their complexity, are dissected (as in the last scene) she is an embarrassment.

*The Killdeer* then is a curious blend of inspiration and ineptitude. One underlying source of trouble is Reaney’s reluctance, or inability, to undertake the dramatist’s paradoxical obligation to be at once totally aloof from, yet totally committed to the characters and world he creates. Unfiltered prejudices obtrude, for instance, in the portrait of Vernelle whom the author despises, and in that of Rebecca whom he too clearly adores. More serious, however, are the subtle sins of detachment most in evidence in *The Easter Egg*.

The plot of this second play once again concerns the efforts of the false mother, Bethel, to hold her stepson, Kenneth, in bondage and obstruct his development. The latter is another of Reaney’s wise innocents, apparently retarded and helpless in the adult world but in fact possessing secret reserves of power. As in *The Killdeer* we are presented with a wholly benevolent and beautiful girl, in this case one Pollex Henry, who undertakes to protect this figure of innocence and introduce him as gently as possible to the realities of the fallen world. Two other characters complete the cast: Ira Hill, a doctor, and George Sloan, a clergyman. Their

courtships of Bethel and Pollex respectively provide a tenuous addition to the plot.

ALTHOUGH STRUCTURALLY *The Easter Egg* is much superior to *The Killdeer*, in other important respects it is a lesser work. In the course of its disorganized and leisurely progress *The Killdeer* offers moments of theatrical magic absent for the most part from *The Easter Egg* and for which a neat structure is no compensation. Only two scenes come alive on stage. In the first Pollex makes an effort to instruct Kenneth's mind and heart by a vocabulary lesson and by telling him the story of Anna Karenina whose death, to Kenneth's sudden horror, she attempts to illustrate with a toy train. In another strong scene, George Sloan, the ineffectual young cleric, tries to ask Bethel for the hand of her stepdaughter but, intimidated by Bethel's calculated misunderstanding and her sinister power, eventually proposes to her instead. The scene generates the mood of macabre farce which marks so much of Reaney's most effective work.

Aside from these episodes *The Easter Egg* is a dramatic fiasco. The exposition is exceptionally clumsy and the style of the dialogue is frequently laborious and uncertain. The characters by and large are a more self-consciously cultured group than in *The Killdeer* and Reaney seems at a loss to know what language to have them speak. As a consequence the accents of colloquial conversation mingle and collide with more formal verse rhythms. Another unfortunate feature of Reaney's dialogue in both plays is its lack of economy. As yet his sense of the precise moment to expand, or alternately to prune and condense, is very insecure. Most often he dissipates the impact of potentially powerful scenes by unnecessary elaboration. A case in point is the important interchange between Rebecca and Harry in the second act of *The Killdeer* which is marred because the crucial speeches are too diffuse, and opaque, to be effective in performance. In *The Easter Egg* there are passages which appear simply self-indulgence on the part of the playwright: for example Bethel's recital of the true story of Cinderella in the first act, and her interminable tale about a cow in a ditch in the second. In theory these speeches may be justified; in performance they come across as entirely expendable.

In this second work, as in *The Killdeer*, the various levels of action, naturalistic, fantastic, symbolic, fail to coincide. The confusion is most noticeable in those scenes which point up the portentous significance of the object (the body of a

dead killdeer, a glass egg) from which the plays take their titles. When these objects are finally exhibited, a central character in each case undergoes a profound and violent transformation. The recalcitrant Madame Fay suddenly confesses all and the simple Kenneth collapses on the floor only to be resurrected after a few moments full of adult understanding. Although these sudden reversals clearly serve exigencies of plot and theme, from the standpoint of realistic motivation they are incredible. Too easily Reaney, having assumed this standpoint, sacrifices recognizable human psychology to a preconceived and somewhat facile pattern of symbolic gesture.

But the cardinal weakness of *The Easter Egg*, as I intimated earlier, is in the playwright's relation to his material. If on occasion Reaney approaches too close to his imaginative creation, more damaging is his manner of remaining aloof from it. As Mr. Lee has emphasized, the character who attempts to elude the human predicament by clinging to a child's universe occupies an important place in Reaney's work. This figure is presumably a creature of that facet of the author's imagination which also stands bewildered and appalled by the manifold corruption of the adult world, ("blood, pus, horror, death, stepmothers, and lies"), which resists involvement in it and hence declines seriously to scrutinize it. There is a great deal of sensational violence in Reaney's plays but one is hard put to believe in any of it; not because of anything akin to the alchemy of the great dramatist who converts horror into pleasure, but because these murderous acts seem unreal, devoid of emotional resonance. At intervals, particularly in *The Easter Egg* one seems to detect behind Reaney's scenes of blood and death, the cold, half gleeful fascination of the child, insulated from shock by incomprehension. That is to say, there is nothing of authentic evil in these dramas, only the artifice of Grand Guignol. The spectator winces or laughs (laughter is, of course, the common alleviating response to this puerile genre) but remains untouched. This has repercussions on the immediate level of theatrical effectiveness. Since these plays tend to deny the reality of the evil acts they dramatize, the characters who suffer from such acts or attempts to combat them fail to command our interest or sympathy. Further, the vantage point of premeditated innocence from which these plays are conceived accounts, I think, both for their frequent lack of emotional continuity (in *The Easter Egg* the playwright repeatedly sabotages each mood as he establishes it) and for their periodic skittishness.

Mr. Lee dismisses an anonymous critic who suggested that Reaney was a lyric poet who had not learned the craft of the playwright. However, I suspect that

Reaney himself would agree that he lacks as yet some of the reflexes of the seasoned dramatist: a ruthless evaluation of dialogue for its stage effectiveness; the nice calculation of the point at which the interest of a potential audience may begin to flag and what to do about it; a sense of what actors may fairly be required to do. Reaney is certainly capable of writing good acting parts but too often his demands are scandalous. For instance, in each of his three stage pieces some unfortunate performer is obliged to fall on his face and grovel on the boards, centre stage. Sir Laurence Olivier in a superbly written scene from Anouilh's *Becket*, in a moment of transcendent fury, once almost brought it off.

One of the most important attributes of the dramatist is something I can only identify as the killer instinct; the perception of the point at which a scene must reach its climax and of the one thing to do when it does. ("Soft you, a word or two before you go . . ."; "I'm not a dime a dozen! I'm Willy Loman . . ."; *Enter Jack slowly from the back of the garden. He is dressed in deepest mourning.*) As yet I miss this unpredictable inevitability in Reaney's work and no appeal to the "rules of literature" which Mr. Lee makes on his behalf will satisfy in its absence.

Many scenes in Reaney's dramas have poignancy and charm and I agree with much that Mr. Lee has written in praise of them. But Canada hasn't many playwrights and we can't afford to bewilder those we have with indifference or contempt, or even panegyrics. I will concede, however, that of all Canadian dramatists, Reaney is the most difficult to evaluate justly. No one else has his capacity to write for the stage at once so badly and so well.