

# A TURN TO THE STAGE

*Reaney's Dramatic Verse:*

*Part II*

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ANYONE PRESENT at the opening of Mr. Reaney's first comedy, *The Killdeer*, will not easily forget the excitement it engendered in the Coach House Theatre where it was being staged by the University Alumnae players, under the direction of Pamela Terry. Through a dazzling array of poetic language, excellent acting parts, and bizarre psychological unravellings one soon realized that *The Red Heart*, that intensely private book of problems stated but not resolved, had come to the stage. The destructive Sundogs, with their laying waste of nature, had combined with the English orphan — and also with Jezebel, with the Whore of Babylon, and with Mallory's Morgan la Fay — to create Madam Fay, a cosmetic saleswoman. There was also the emerging boy poet, afraid to leave behind his toys and childhood games, because of the horror of the adult world, and wishing, "If only we could choose our fathers and mothers". There were enough dominating parental figures to keep small boys running down leafless lanes of fear forever. But other elements had combined with *The Red Heart*, and resolutions had been worked out.

There was a suspicion among some of the audience that even in the midst of its verbal brilliance *The Killdeer*, especially in its plot and in the widely varying moods evoked from the audience, showed too many signs of obvious manipulation by the playwright. One critic instructed the writer that this was a good example of what a lyric poet does when he dares put a work on the stage without having sufficiently learned the craft of the playwright. Mr. Mavor Moore, writing in the *The Toronto Daily Star*, had this verdict:

For when the history of the Canadian theatre comes to be written, I should not be at all surprised to find *The Killdeer* listed as the first Canadian play of real consequence, and the first demonstration of genius among us. . . . The great

thing is that the words Mr. Reaney has written for Miss Terry and her actors soar, spin, whirl and flash like nothing ever heard on our stage before. And he rips us open as people with a sort of jolly whimsy which may forever mark the end of the myth of the stolid, sober, inarticulate Canadian.

The first act of *The Killdeer* sets the theme, the necessity of the young freeing themselves of slavery to their parents, if they are to mature, and the extreme reluctance of the parent to let this happen. The protagonist is Harry Gardner, a very unpromising looking young man with acne, dominated by his fussy, pious, bossy mother. Her refrain is "I feel I don't know my boy's heart any longer", to which he replies, "When I'm asleep/Why don't you take off the top of my head/And put your hand in?/What could I show you/Mother, except yourself?" He believes that if he could only get married, he'd be all right, and the girl who is obviously the one for him, the egg-girl Rebecca from near the Huckleberry Marsh, does appear shortly. But certain complex matters make this union unlikely, at least for the present, and Act I ends with both Harry and Rebecca going to marry someone else. Act II shows the fatal consequences, and Act III restores sanity to what has by then been revealed as a very sick world.

The situation in the Gardner cottage is far from ideal, but Harry is well aware of his problem and is showing clear signs of rebellion. He resents bitterly his mother's reading his letters and diaries and bank book, and her examining his dirty linen. He has gone to a doctor about his acne without telling her, and as a result has learned he'll have to refuse his mother's cooking. He hasn't let her see him naked since he was sixteen. He has even gone to the prostitute, Mrs. Sow, but couldn't knock on the door, because he kept thinking of his mother with her white apron. Above all, Harry loathes Mrs. Gardner's parlour, the perfect image of her mind:

Oh Gosh! This room! This front parlour of yours!  
I think I'll go mad if I don't get one day  
Of my life when I don't come home to this.  
Why don't I run away? Because I'm afraid  
Afraid of the look on a face I'd never see.  
Dear old mother's face! This room, This room!  
These brown velvet curtains trimmed with  
One thousand balls of fur! Fifteen kewpie dolls!  
Five little glossy china dogs on a Welsh dresser!  
Six glossy Irish beleek cats and seven glass  
Green pigs and eight blue glass top hats and

Five crystal balls filled with snow falling down  
 On R.C.M.P. Constables. Two little boys on chamber  
 Pots: Billy Can and Tommy Can't. That stove —  
 Cast iron writhing and tortured curlicues!

Harry's situation is bad, but it is ideal compared with Rebecca's. It is Madam Fay, in the first scene of the play, who briefs Mrs. Gardner and the audience on Rebecca's background and on her own at the same time. This is so lurid that Mrs. Gardner, who has never used cosmetics in her life, buys several, just to keep the painted lady in the cottage and talking. The visitor reveals that she has a son, Eli, who is nineteen and hates her; she has left his upbringing to the hired man, Clifford, who, we learn later, has exercised a sinister hold over the boy ever since Eli's childhood. Years ago Madam Fay, married to Eli's father and having tried "to virgin up a bit before her marriage", ran away to Buffalo for a weekend with her sister's husband, Lorimer. As a result her husband shot Lorimer's family, all except a girl (we learn later that this is Rebecca) who since then has run the farm alone. The murderer of Rebecca's family is in the mental hospital at London, taking his bed apart and putting it together again, a suitable enough fate for the man married to the Whore of Babylon. Madam Fay travels the country roads in a pink Baby Austin with purple plush insides, selling Beauty, with the story of her past for bait when sales are poor.

When Rebecca arrives, later in Act I, to deliver Mrs. Gardner's eggs, she announces that she is to be married the next day to Eli Fay, this having been arranged by Clifford. By this time Harry, who is a clerk in the local Royal Bank of Canada, has been needed to fill an empty chair at the banker's dinner party. While there he got rather drunk, never before having been "tempted by alcohol", as his mother puts it, and in the rather confused events which follow he is proposed to by the banker's daughter, Vernelle. On returning home he hears of Rebecca's plans, realizes that he has lost her, having learned only that her favourite bird is the killdeer. Under his mother's prodding he returns to tell Vernelle that he will marry her.

Now all this sounds fictional in the extreme, and probably melodramatic as well, and it would be dull theatre fare if it were not set forth in some of the most exuberant, image-filled language an audience could ask for. The characters, stereotyped in abstract, have all the life that vital use of words can give them. To a high degree they are metaphorically conceived. As Harry, for example, changes and develops, there are several "I am you" equations: first he *is* his

mother, then Vernelle, and finally Rebecca. Similarly, Eli moves from Clifford to Harry, and eventually starts to break free of both.

In *A Suit of Nettles* the characters are birds with human natures, as in the traditional bestiary or as in the beast fable. In *The Killdeer* the characters are human with bird or beast characteristics. Clifford, an orphan like Madame Fay, is described as the cowbird which lays its egg in another's nest. His victim Eli is a bunny or lamb, and so on. There are dozens of such images. Mrs. Gardner, and her friend Mrs. Budge who has come to revel in the Fay story with her neighbour, are old hens, crows, and witches successively. Before Rebecca's arrival they try, with the help of elderblossom wine, to piece together the whole macabre tale read years ago in the newspaper. They dart about the stage — shrieking, cawing crows circling over bits of carrion:

Mrs. Budge: Is it a still-born calf down there by the ditch?  
 No, my dear, we had that last Sunday, nor is it —  
 Would to heaven it were, to end this thirsty  
 Curiosity — but it isn't. And still  
 The delicious unsavory rotting stink  
 Drives me on with my old black wings.

When Rebecca goes away, she leaves behind her two brown paper silhouettes of Eli and Clifford, the groom-to-be and the best man; she has taken these to town as measurements for the wedding suits. Almost struck silent by Rebecca's disclosure that she is marrying the son of the man who killed her mother and two brothers, the son of the woman who committed adultery with her father, Mrs. Gardner and Mrs. Budge drain their glasses of wine, seize the papermen, cry out that their partners are stark naked, and dance.

With Act II the tone and structure of *The Killdeer* change drastically. As the curtain rises, to the sound of a killdeer cry, Rebecca is being sentenced to hang for the murder and mutilation of Clifford. Several years have passed and the exuberant farce of Act I is far in the distance. The play moves into something close to dark conceit or allegory. Rebecca emerges as a sacrificial victim (Madam Fay calls her "a female Jesus"), having confessed to a crime she thought was Eli's. Harry, now a graduate of Osgoode Hall and married to Vernelle, a hard-bitten Mercedes Macambridge type, has returned to his home village to practise law. He is quickly involved in an attempt to rescue Rebecca from the consequences of her actions. To do so he manages to persuade the Jailer's wife, a Mrs. Soper, to let him into Rebecca's cell. There, in the erotic climax of the play, a child is conceived, and as Harry has planned, a stay of execution is granted until

after the birth of the baby, by which time a new trial has been arranged.

Act III is given over mainly to this trial, at which a sudden revelation of facts hitherto unknown by almost everyone exonerates Rebecca. The play ends with Eli making the first steps towards adulthood after many years of infantile regression. The two necessary divorces will be arranged, so that Rebecca and Harry can be married, and since it is they who have enabled Eli reluctantly to give up his toys, they are to be his foster parents.

Once again it is the poetry which carries through the structure to its conventionally arbitrary ending. The play is held together by a carefully worked out pattern of interlocking images. As with *The Red Heart*, *A Suit of Nettles*, and *Night-Blooming Cereus*, the central unifying symbol is in the title. Rebecca is the killdeer, the bird which cries out over towns just before a storm, the bird which will attract an enemy to itself to lead it away from the young ones in the nest. Eli is several times described as a bird who has not yet learned to fly. Through Harry's years of marriage to the vulture Vernelle, among the vultures of Osgoode Hall, he carries in his wallet a killdeer feather. As a child Madam Fay once killed the killdeer of her foster sister, Rebecca's mother, in an attempt to evoke hatred at least, since she felt unloved; hence Madam Fay's attempt at revenge, by stealing her sister's husband. Eli too, as a boy, found a dead killdeer in the pasture and was knocked down, kicked, and cursed by his mother when he showed it to her. As Harry slowly pieces together all this information, he is led to conclude that a dead killdeer, showed suddenly to Madam Fay in court, may break her to the point of telling what she knows of Clifford's death. And this is how it turns out, although what Harry and the court learn is not what they expect.

The killdeer bird has its symbolic opposite. In a semi-allegorical scene in Act II Harry fights for the life of the woman "sentenced on a Friday, to be hanged in September". Rebecca has seen her marriage to Eli as "love's solution to the puzzle of hatred", but like Branwell in *A Suit of Nettles*, Harry is convinced only slowly that hate does not win. To get to Rebecca, who will teach him this truth, he must defeat a Mr. Manatee, the hangman and the descendent of all the sterile destroying figures in Mr. Reaney's earlier works. Mr. Manatee craves the luxury of annihilating life and performs abortions on the soul by hanging his victims. His name *manatee* denotes marine animal, indicating that in the poet's iconography Mr. Manatee is the traditional image of the destroying sea-monster from bestiary tradition. He is also the brother of Death, and has a farm in a land of darkness:

Mr. Manatee: My farm was in the County of Night and grew nothing  
But fields of nightshade and bladder campion,

Gardens of burdocks. Mandrakes in the haymows.  
 I fed my cattle on such fare as made their udders  
 Run black blood and their wombs bear free martens.  
 I raised weasels in my henhouses and I  
 Set traps for barley but bred rats who  
 Ate the little pigs as they lay sucking the sow.

The hangman rejoices that the little bird, Rebecca, will swing into his noose without effort, "Like a pet bird with a broken wing that knows/You're going to help it."

Here the theme of sterility, part of the larger theme of growth and maturity, emerges most strongly. Against Mr. Manatee, Harry resolves to pit his phallic powers, believing that only a new life can serve as an adequate human weapon against the death principle. This is the core of meaning in *The Killdeer*. The tangle of perverted sexual patterns — oedipal attachments, adultery, murder, homosexuality, mutilation, and others — all come together in the figure of Mr. Manatee. In the context of the fertility theme these perversions *are* all death, annihilation, or the refusal to do battle against the evil which haunts the world like a destroying monster.

*The Sun and the Moon* and *The Easter Egg* have several by now familiar characters. The Effie-Rebecca figure returns, with her vision of a better world, and is especially important in redeeming the youthful male protagonist in *The Easter Egg*. There is a sensitive æsthetic youth in each play, reluctant or unable until the end to give up his childish fantasies and embrace the ambiguities of the adult world. And Madam Fay is back, changed but recognizable, as the woman deprived in her childhood of the necessary love to grow up and turned into a sadist preying on the weak.

As with *The Killdeer*, nine-tenths of the meaning of *The Sun and the Moon* and *The Easter Egg* lies in the poetic imagery. Any plot summary, then, is most unfair and I shall not mishandle these plays in that way, since they have not yet reached a live audience as fully produced works.<sup>3</sup> The fundamental conflict of *The Sun and the Moon* is between Christ and Antichrist, these being the deliberately planted connotations of the protagonist, the Reverend Kingbird, and his opponent, a Mrs. Shade. The action extends from Friday to Sunday and even includes a grisly but hilarious parody of the Resurrection, rather like something out of *Huckleberry Finn*. This is staged by a Mrs. Shade to convince a gullible congregation of her divine powers. On the most obvious level of meaning Mrs. Shade is just a disreputable itinerant come from Toronto, where she is an abor-

tionist, to Millbank, Ontario. On the metaphorical level she is a power of darkness, whose nightmarish proportions have to be dissipated by the end of the play so that the reality of a life beneath the sun can be revealed to a much chastened community. By this point Mrs. Shade's very existence is in doubt and she disappears, with a true Reaney flourish, on a raft across a swollen river. She has been a shadowy spectre from Reverend Kingbird's past, and like all shadows she has disappeared when the light of truth began to shine directly above her.

*The Easter Egg* purports to be, at least in part, a reworking of the Cinderella story, from the viewpoint of a stepmother, Bethel, who has a rather special interpretation:

Bethel: Oh I'd like to rewrite Cinderella.

THE TRUE STORY OF CINDERELLA BY ME!

Once upon a time, Kenny, there was a  
 Very decent lady with two pretty daughters.  
 She met this widower who had a little girl,  
 Ella was her name I believe. Ella had a rash  
 Which only a daily bath in ashes would cure.  
 The decent lady made her take this ash bath,  
 But did Ella thank her? Oh God no!  
 She let on she was terribly misused.  
 So, Kenny, the King gives a terrific ball.  
 Everyone was invited, but the decent lady said  
 No. No! Ella can't go because of this rash.  
 We don't want the court to catch this rash.  
 Ella carried on something frightful and  
 Of course managed to get to the ball.  
 Wearing her stepmother's shoes. She wore  
 A beautiful veil too, danced with the prince  
 And he caught the rash! So his father says,  
 "Whoever this shoe fits she shall be hanged!"  
 Well, the shoe belonged to the poor stepmother.  
 They strung up her daughters for good measure too and  
 Cinderella went off to the forest and became an awfully  
 Clever spotted old witch.

The basic structure of *The Easter Egg* is the same as that of *The Sun and The Moon*, a conflict between enlightenment, symbolized by the sun, and tyranny and ignorance, symbolized by the shadows in which Bethel would keep her victim Kenneth. The latter's escape from being "an attic child" is associated with entry into a green pastoral world of innocence where God is revealed. At the end, as

at the end of *Night-Blooming Cereus*, the clock which ticks towards inevitable death in all Mr. Reaney's writings, is at least momentarily defeated by Kenneth's new awareness of himself and the world. When he leaves forever the house of his captivity, to become a man instead of a shadow, he stops the clock, puts it face down, intending that it shall never go again.

The tendency of comedy is to include, to take into the newer and happier situation developing at its close as many as possible of the dissidents in the action. Mr. Reaney's comedies are no exception to this rule of literature. *The Killdeer* ends with a community in possession of all the facts necessary to live intelligently and happily, in contrast to what might have been, had these facts not emerged. Even Madam Fay gets, many years later, the psychological release she has longed for; when Rebecca sees what it is that went wrong in Madame Fay's childhood, she realizes instinctively what is necessary; she takes the woman's hands in hers and whirls her about in one of the happy childhood games the trouble-maker never played, because her mind was not filled

with a child's remembered and pleasant skies  
But with blood, pus, horror, death, stepmothers, and lies.

On one level she has seemed like a self-motivated principle of evil; on another she is the dramatist's way of keeping a good play going. In her own undeveloped mind she is simply playing an elaborate joke on the whole world. At the end of the play she is still spinning like a top, darting in and out of windows, but now she is as harmless as a top, because she has been revealed for what she is, a frustrated child.

Mr. Reaney's comedies demand of their audience, at least temporarily, a capacity to believe that the weapons of human consciousness — religion, art, thought, and love — can defeat all destructive powers. His plays are not for cynics, nor for those too sophisticated to let themselves play games if necessary to exorcise the black enchantments laid on them in childhood. The measure in which we feel these resolutions silly, or too far-fetched, is the measure of our own Malvolio-like nature. If the art of the comedy has done its work — and Mr. Reaney's plays have this art in abundant measure — our emotions of sympathy and ridicule have been raised and cast out, so that we should be able to say with Miranda, who knew only one of these emotions,

O wonder!  
How many goodly creatures are there here!



How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,  
That has such people in't!

FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> With the exception of *The Easter Egg* these works are being published this fall by MacMillan of Canada. *The Easter Egg* is to be the first production of The University Alumnae players in their third Coach House Theatre in Toronto.
- <sup>2</sup> Pamela Terry, director of *The Killdeer*, has pointed out that it was “the extremely workable *aural* readability of *A Suit of Nettles*” that alerted her to Mr. Reaney’s theatrical potential.
- <sup>3</sup> Mr. Michael Langham has read *The Sun and The Moon*, finding it “wayward, cruel, and beautiful”. His hope that it be given an early production so far has seen no results.

