

# A TURN TO THE STAGE

## *Reaney's Dramatic Verse:*

### *Part I*

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**T**HIS ESSAY OFFERS a description of the major writings of James Reaney, in an attempt to show something of his development as a verse dramatist. Until recently, Mr. Reaney, now thirty-six years old, was known primarily as a poet and as a writer of short stories. He is the author of a volume of poems entitled *The Red Heart* (1949), in which a youthful poet emerges as "an exile from the paradise of childhood". Nine years later he published *A Suit of Nettles* (1958), a long cyclical poem of satirical intention. His many other poems, published in various places, include a chapbook, *Twelve Letters to a Small Town* (1962), in which Stratford, Ontario, is described in a series of poetic reminiscences. Mr. Reaney's short stories are in several publications; there is a very funny one, "The Bully", in the World's Classics volume of *Canadian Short Stories* edited by Robert Weaver. Most important of all, for our present purposes, Mr. Reaney has in the last four years written several dramatic works: the libretto for a chamber opera (*Night-Blooming Cereus*), *A One Man Masque*, and three comedies (*The Killdeer*, *The Sun and The Moon*, *The Easter Egg*).

Since *The Red Heart* sets forth, in its rather uneven but powerfully imagistic way, several of the human figures, situations, and themes which later dominate the dramas, it is important to establish at this point something of the character of this germinal work.

The world of *The Red Heart* is clearly imagined; it is palpable, immediate, confining, and so far as it has an actual geographical location, it is a farm near Stratford, Ontario, or, in one cycle of poems, the larger area of the Great Lakes system. Urban Ontario, and the world beyond, are dimly apprehended mysteries perhaps to be explored in the future, after escape from "this dull township/Where fashion, thought and wit/Never penetrate". Most of the forty-two poems

are set in an old farmhouse, or in the garden, fields, and lanes immediately outside. Such a setting might have been idyllically pastoral, with happy family life, easy work, games, singing, and the beauties of nature much in evidence, but *The Red Heart* makes only vestigial use of an unspoiled pastoral ideal. The farmhouse is lonely and haunted, almost totally empty of human companionship, inhabited by an unhappy, imaginative child and by pink and blue wallpaper, banisters, staircases, mouseholes, wardrobes, closets, and a clock which "with ice-tones . . . strikes". Outside, in the humdrum green summertime, plump ripe plums hang, or fall from their tree's green heaven, like dead stars rushing to a winter sea. Spring must come to this garden, and summer clearly does, because plums do ripen and hollyhocks blossom, but there is little sense of nature in all her changing moods, especially her lighter ones. Autumn, dead gardens, lanes of leafless trees, dead leaves "languageless with frost", and winter — these are the seasonal symbols which quickly succeed any marks of a more benevolent or vital natural order. This is a world abandoned by Adonis, kept alive only by the beating of a child's red heart and by the emergence of a poetic consciousness.

The figure of the child varies considerably from poem to poem. At times it is "he", at times "she"; occasionally it is even "we", but most often "I", which probably suggests at least a rough analogy, if no easy equation, with the poet's own early life. The age of the protagonist ranges, not chronologically so far as the organization of the book is concerned, from the unborn state to young adulthood. But youth has a way of aging quickly in *The Red Heart*; as soon as there is even a rudimentary consciousness, the child is aware of time and death. In "Dark Lagoon" an infant has just come from the foetal world where the mother's heart was the distant tick-tocking of the chisel that would one day carve his name on a monument. The baby is still very young, but the poet describing him is rather old-mannish, prematurely disillusioned with the world of human experience. He has lived long enough to hear

The cry of "Eenie, meenie, minie, moe",  
By which children choose a loser in a game,  
And by which Fate seems to choose  
Which children shall be which:  
One-eyed, wilful, hare-lipped, lame,  
Poor, orphans, idiots, or rich.

In *The Red Heart* fate has chosen several ways of making children losers. The figure of the orphan recurs several times, and two poems are given over entirely

to its perspective. In "The English Orphan's Monologue" an angry, resentful hired girl, who feels herself enslaved on the farm where she works, sits by the stove in the evenings plotting her revenge, with a sadistic glee worthy of one of Browning's obsessed characters. She plans to get pregnant by the son Harry and get them both thrown out, a policy which might well continue the ugly problem described in a similar poem, "The Orphanage". Here the plain white, "cretinous" faces of children in yellow dresses peer through gray orphanage windows, thinking about the lust of the "young men who play hockey in winter" and "crawl over ghastly women" in the summer: "We are the answers/To those equations/In ditches and round-shouldered cars." But from such unions springs life, and therefore the possibility of all the dirty tricks an adult world can play on a child. The sense of deep offence at the sexuality of men and women, a theme which runs through much of the book, stems from the wretchedness of the child's experiences, all of which, of course, would have been impossible had he never been born.

On the whole the adult world comes off very badly in *The Red Heart*. When the child is not miserable in his isolation, he is haunted by a stepmother, or by some other figure of oppression and cruelty. In one poem he comes across an old woman who wants to buy his tonsils and fingers, so that with them she may mend the curry-combs she uses on two great black hounds and on a great black horse; he apparently escapes from this threat only to meet a sly fox in his den, "as charming and good-mannered/As the President of France,/But his kitchen-floor he's scrubbing/With a tub of blood." Children's blood, no doubt. Teachers in school are cold and authoritarian. There is also a rich man, giggling, in his luxuries and in the accoutrements of art, at the appalling working conditions of the proletariat:

Well . . . is it not all very beautiful?  
As you stand hungry in the rain  
Just look to what heights you too may attain.

God is just as bad, known only to the small boy as the one who will send a bear to eat him up if he swears.

There are two exceptions to these tyrannical adults. In "Pink and White Hollyhocks" pre-Raphaelite ladies, the blossoms on the green hollyhock spires, ascend intensely from July to September to the topmost rooms of their towers, and there lie down with their lovers, having blown out the pink lamps forever. The "dear fat mother" of the Katzenjammer Kids in the comics keeps only "fairly good guard" over the fat pies she bakes, thus showing that she at least resists the blue

Captain and the orange Inspector who notice the Kids only to spank them: "Oh, the blue skies of that funny paper weather!"

One might expect that a youthful world so seriously and continuously threatened as this would result in the writing of elegy, in a lament for a lost happiness; but Mr. Reaney, in his lyric phase, does not write elegy, even as now in his dramatic phase (if one may use these expressions), he does not write tragedy. There would seem to be several reasons for this. Already in *The Red Heart* there has developed considerable ironic detachment, which contrasts with the accompanying lyric sense of shock and longing following a premature loss of innocence. Irony is the death of elegy, because elegy requires a strong belief in ideals, in a faith that something better did once exist. The detachment is evident in the few poems he puts in the mouth of someone else, and also in that quite large group in which the attention is focussed on a third person or object. Several pieces are dialogues rather than lyrics, and dialogue objectifies, sets the artist at a distance, or out of the matter altogether. Even in the first-person lyrics, that is the majority of the poems, there is almost no self-pity; the situation described may be pathetic to the reader, but the victim has more interesting ways of fighting than simply bemoaning his personal fate. And since these ways generate several kinds of conflict, out of which drama later appears, it is important to note them before passing on.

The most elaborate compensation the child has for the deprivation of human love is a rich life of fantasy, some of it liberating but some of it simply an extension of horror already realized. In "The Clouds," the child sees a cloudy sky, metaphorically, as the wallpaper of a bedroom; out of this identification come others, fanciful and filled with interest for a child's imagination. But then he wakes from his reverie, and the poem ends on the disappointing thought, "They were only clouds". The longing for the metaphorical identification remains, however, the desire that the fantasies be true: "What are the clouds that sail by so slow . . . /If not that fancied wallpaper . . . ?" This is all innocent enough, but there are other poems filled with macabre imaginings. In "Dream within Dream" first he saw himself riding with a demon who ate human hair, then he woke up and killed a man, next he pushed a woman over a cliff, then he choked a vivacious gentleman, and finally he stabbed a girl.

Each time the face of the man became  
More like my father's face;  
And that of the woman, of course,  
Began to seem like my mother's,

As if I could have slain my parents  
For that foul deed that struck  
Me out of chaos, out of nothing.

The destructive fantasy, as a means of hitting back, is a theme which runs throughout the book. It may be treated playfully, as in "The Sundogs"; these animals of the Sun take puppyish delight in bringing the storms which will drown the crickets, set the killdeer birds crying, send shingles flying, and press the oats to the ground. In "Suns and Planets" the artist looks for the "thick autumn time" when a great wind will pluck Venus and Mars and grey Pluto like fruit to the ground. One of the children in *The Red Heart* wonders why he traces the letter A on a window-sill, because *his* name contains no A; he wonders why his mother looks at him so sadly, why his father stares, and why both flowers and weed avoid his fingers. When his feet become hooves and make his shoes pinch he does not let on, lest he be shot for a monster.

He wondered why he more and more  
Dreamed of eclipses of the sun,  
Of sunsets, ruined towns and zeppelins,  
And especially inverted, upside down churches.

Not until later does he learn that he is Antichrist.

To strike back is one possibility. To become an inanimate object, for instance a top on a string, is another possibility; then, after crazy spinning periods, one could have long intervals of peaceful rest. One can also withdraw into the past, regress, refuse to go on; this theme is especially persistent in Mr. Reaney's writings and is perhaps best illustrated in *The Red Heart* by the conclusion of a retrospective poem, "The School Globe". Wandering about alone in an empty school-room, the adolescent sees a faded globe as a parcel of his past childhood, a period of his life to which he would gladly return:

if someone in authority  
Were here, I'd say  
Give me this old world back  
Whose husk I clasp  
And I'll give you in exchange  
The great sad real one  
That's filled  
Not with a child's remembered and pleasant skies  
But with blood, pus, horror, death, stepmothers, and lies.

The meditative nostalgia of this piece is as close to elegy as we come, and the lines just quoted are a fit statement in miniature of the kind of existence struggled with in *The Killdeer*, *The Sun and the Moon*, and *The Easter Egg*. Through all his wanderings and experiences though, the bearer of the red heart has one overriding, if futile, wish:

wherever I go,  
Wherever I wander  
I never find  
What I should like to find;  
For example, a mother and father  
Who loved me dearly  
And loved each other so,  
And brothers and sisters with whom,  
In the summer, I'd play hide-and-go-seek  
And in the winter, in the snow,  
Fox-and-goose week after week.  
Instead I must forever run  
Down lanes of leafless trees  
Beneath a Chinese-faced sun;  
Must forsaken and forlorn go  
Unwanted and stepmotherishly haunted  
Beneath the moon as white as snow.

Failing in the search for a family, the red heart turns away from this world altogether and for a time becomes mistress of a golden lover, the Sun. The Sun, though, is eternal, and its cycle cannot be contained in the blood-filled dungeon of a human heart; like an autumn leaf from its branch the heart falls from life and the gold prisoner flies away. In the title poem of the book the question is asked, "Who shall pick the sun/From the tree of Eternity?" and the answer comes back, "It seems that no one can." The result is destruction for all things in the mutable world.

Each reaction of the child to the world of experience — fantasies, pleasant or macabre, vengeful striking back, metamorphosis into a top or something inanimate, withdrawal into the past, continuing the search for family, or aspiration towards the order of eternity — each of these reactions leads to a dead end, to the gray grave where all shall be trampled. Throughout it all runs the horror of the dark sensuality which brings the baby into the world. It is, then, a mark of the ambiguity of this early volume, that the one remaining possibility, one which emerges fitfully throughout and more insistently towards the end, is the love of

man and woman. At times its treatment is ironic and closely associated with themes of death. In "A Fantasy and a Moral" a young woman with ballooning breasts is wafted mysteriously to a demon lover who, unknown to her, impregnates her with a poisonous child:

So love, though measured breath by breath,  
May seem like walking in a summer dream,  
Visiting nowhere but pleasant places;  
So love does often lead a filthy way to Death.

A more romantic view of love appears, in enigmatic form, in "A Riddle":

We need no gloves,  
Our hands englove each other.  
We need no scarves,  
Our arms that purpose serve.  
We need no trousers,  
No overcoats, no hats,  
Ourselves do clothe each other  
Fully against all cold, wind and rain.  
What are we  
Who need no raiment  
Nor the help of weavers, hatters,  
Tailors, milliners, stitchers, glovers,  
To whom no winter matters?  
Answer: A pair of very loving lovers.

It is, however, in the poem entitled "To My Love" that one can see opening up most clearly the dimension which, in the plays, is to be set against those childhood attitudes we have been considering. By the age of twenty-one the poet has "devoured all substance", but he must not die until he "tries on" love.

Though I've devoured all substance  
In twenty-one years,  
I shall not, must not die  
Until, my Love,  
Like a fantastic white glove  
You my hand  
(Each finger for a special sense)  
Tries on  
Then dig my grave  
For I am ripe  
For senseless, languageless lifelessness.

*The Red Heart* is a book of beginnings, of attempts to handle large matters,

both poetic and existential. At times it is ironic and playful and at times it achieves a poignant beauty not easily forgotten. Above all it is filled with inventiveness and experimentation, with a willingness to strike out new and palpable images or unusual rhythms. If the result is irregular at times, and it is, this is because Mr. Reaney at this point has not yet achieved the close synthesis of emotion and intellect which is one of the really extraordinary things about his recent writings. In 1958, when he published *A Suit of Nettles*, the sartorial activity of "trying on" new experiences was left to the central goose character, Branwell, while the very knowing and sophisticated poet made use of literary and intellectual resources almost completely foreign to him nine years earlier.

IT IS NOT MY PURPOSE here to consider *A Suit of Nettles* at any length, primarily because it does not seem to me to be as immediately relevant to the plays as does the earlier work. It does represent an enormously disciplined imaginative effort, and the social or cultural reference of its satirical themes leads naturally to the communal interests set forth in the comedies. Two or three of the central characters also are very important. The tragic hero, if one can use such a term about a goose who can't quite become a swan, has been made to look ridiculous by a pretty goose who has rejected his love; in this sense, Branwell is about one step further on the road to adult experience than the speaker in *The Red Heart*. *A Suit of Nettles* is a decisively cyclical poem, each of its twelve pastoral eclogues being concerned with one month of the year. The main theme is that of sterility versus fertility and the scope is meant to take in "all the intellectual institutions of the age". The same irony which let the gods stay dead in *The Red Heart* now becomes militant, changes to satire, and sets forth visionary alternatives to the land of upturned privies. The purpose is to fertilize a dead land, by beating it with the Punch's stick of satire until the phallos blossoms, and until the "life and heart and mind-line" of the barnyard society have been thoroughly anatomized.

A mechanical clock ticked relentlessly through *The Red Heart*, in accordance with the idea that life is simply an awakening into death; time passes no less relentlessly in *A Suit of Nettles* and most of the geese are sacrificed for Christmas dinners at the end. Twelve months earlier Branwell, even though plunged in lover's melancholy, rejected a friend's invitation to embrace a Platonic idealistic



love and thus transcend all sensual life: “the heart-of-vampire sexual eye of ooze”. For Branwell the land to which this friend beckoned was “A round concrete continent of snows”; what he himself wanted was “offspring summerson autumnman winterage”, the whole natural life of man, the “world’s hot middle” rather than a “round cold sea” of sterility. His tragedy is not that his desires are wrong; simply that death has come so swiftly that almost none of his ambitions have been fulfilled. He would gladly go back into the barnyard because he “can’t see a path that leads between one’s Head & one’s body”. Branwell can’t, but his faithful female friend, Effie, can. Throughout the poem Effie has been cheerful, generous, full of inner music, and possessed of a strong belief in an after-life. For her self-sacrifice is no problem, because she believes it foolish to “Cling to this cramped stupid goosehouse world”; her desire is to throw off the suit of nettles of self and become the swan she is meant to be. For Effie life inside the ring, to which Branwell clings, is life inside “a crazed prison of despair”, and she urges him to go willingly with her into the world of the unspoiled pastoral. This is the world thought impossible to achieve in *The Red Heart*, and it is the one to which *Night Blooming Cereus* and the comedies lead.

There were two other compositions before a straight stage play emerged, the libretto for the chamber opera, *Night-Blooming Cereus*, and, what is in some ways a companion piece, *A One Man Masque*. The opera was done in collaboration with the Toronto composer, John Beckwith, and has already become somewhat familiar to a fairly wide audience. Commissioned by the C.B.C., it was first performed on a Wednesday Night radio broadcast early in 1959, and was staged, along with the masque, a little over a year later in Hart House Theatre. Ettore Mazzoleni conducted both performances and Pamela Terry directed the stage version. The libretto is subtle and sophisticated in execution, but its impact is simple and direct somewhat in the manner of Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads*; the music, as I recall it from two hearings, is almost always apt — groping, mocking, active, melancholy, or triumphant — as the words require.

I do not propose to discuss this opera and the masque in detail — this has been done just recently by Mr. Reaney in *Canadian Literature* — but their structural and thematic relationship to what goes before and to what comes after needs to be traced. *Night-Blooming Cereus* is unashamedly romantic. Its theme is one of human loneliness, appropriately symbolized by the Night-Blooming Cereus whose flower appears only once in a century (actually a Cereus blossoms much oftener, but that is unimportant). The time of the action is a Saturday night in late March and the setting is the village of Shakespeare, Ontario. Old Mrs. Brown,

the protagonist, is described as one who “could easily take care of granaries” or “plant and harvest a whole farmful of crops”, but who has to be content with the window-sill of a two-room cottage and “no harvest except a heart and mind filled with the delight of watching and waiting”. The great disappointment of her life is that years ago her only daughter ran away to get married and never returned. As we see her at her simple household tasks — eating, washing up, sweeping, rocking, sewing, and singing a hymn at her little organ — the theme of loneliness is given strong expression.

The simple plot, developed in three scenes, brings about the union of Mrs. Brown with her daughter’s daughter, Alice, come to ask of the old woman forgiveness for the long-lost girl who has recently died. Before this union takes place, however, four other people have become involved; they are the old woman’s guests, invited to witness the opening of the Cereus. As they wait, still un-introduced to Alice, whom Mrs. Brown thinks a ghost, each reveals something fundamental about himself or herself. There are Mrs. Wool, the local switchboard operator, Ben, the storekeeper’s son, and Barbara Croft, the village orphan. Mr. Orchard, the fourth and last arrival, unlike the others is revealed as complete in himself and therefore as somewhat mysterious. It is he who prepares the group spiritually for the miracle which takes place at the end. On the most obvious level, the representational one, Mr. Orchard is a gardener and a neighbour, but he quickly takes on connotations of a fertility spirit as he hands out packets of seeds from his plantation up at Sunfish Lake. As described by the librettist, this visitor “knows the mysteries of the writing in the hand, the fire in the branch, the dark lake in the head, the Saviour in the thigh.” The invited guests together form an abstract pattern: two older people of different sexes, apparently contented with their lives, and two younger people, very discontented, also of different sexes.

As the group drink tea together, the roaring of a midnight train shatters their conversation and then passes into the distance. The Connecticut clock signals the beginning of Sunday. At this point the mechanical tick-tocking world of actuality and human frustration is mysteriously left behind and the little community in the cottage experience a moment of revelation:

The clock stopped striking. Beside it stood a huge book, Mrs. Brown’s Bible. It too was a sort of stove, a harmonium, a clock and a thunderous train and in it the whole world burned and did not, spoke and did not.

A hymn is sung (“Oh sweet bird sing now/Of my soul’s new spring”), Mrs. Brown and Alice are quickly united, and the flower begins to open, each member

of the group seeing in it what he needs to see — a father and mother, a blacksmith's shop, a flower opening, the meaning of working in the earth, happiness and joy. The structure is completed by the singing of a chorale: "When I behold/All this glory/Then I am bold/To cross Jordan . . ./To call on God . . ./To end my story". Effie's vision triumphs.

The companion piece, *A One Man Masque*, takes a different route to the same revelation. Performed by the author himself in Hart House, and later on C.B.C. television by Jeremy Wilkin, the masque could be described as an anatomy of human corruption. In it the darker vision of *The Red Heart* and *A Suit of Nettles* returns to lay bare, in a series of stage images, a definition of human life in which the filthy road to death theme sets in stark relief the few flashes of human beauty. As the actor moves about among a motley array of props, the main ones being a cradle and a coffin, he recites sixteen monologues which contain the verbal substance of the masque. A selection includes the following: a baby who has just rescued the diamond of his mind from rats in his mother's womb; a principal of a boys' school whose interest in the boys is not academic; A Saint Hilda's girl reflecting on the annual erotic dating rituals of Trinity and Saint Hilda's; a golden foundling child, taken in and loved by the poet, only to become a prostitute; a hag, called Granny Crack, wandering over country roads, having long ago earned the name of "the burdock girl" for her role as a pigsty Venus. There are others, in this dissolution of the human form, but the most depraved is the last, a dwarf, who catalogues his achievements. Sold by his father, he became a court jester, and his jests, in their cruelty, have far outdone the jests of Lear's Fool. He has turned the young queen mad with lust, has created a Cain-Abel situation between the princes, has destroyed the servants' faith in angels, has degraded the swineherd, frustrated the elopement of the princess, and filled the court with lust. He has even set the four elements at war with each other and as a final annihilation of all created harmonies he had the minstrel's tongue cut off. Now the castle is empty, inside out, and he lives alone among the ruins, "the compressed cause of everything". He crawls into a manger, props up the dead queen's body, and calls for some shepherds to adore:

To the curious observant baby  
The humble and the royal bow  
Hush a bye my baby do, for see  
That spider on your mother's brow.

If *A One Man Masque* ended there with this parody of the Nativity, one might

well conclude that its sole purpose was to shock. But Mr. Reaney is writing satire and this means that his aim is moral, redemptive, as is the case with all serious satire. To take apart a rotting body is the work of a ghoul, unless some rational purpose is operating. The masque ends with Milton's Holy Ghost bird searching over an empty sea until it finds the cradle beside the coffin. It rescues the cradle, kneels beside it as a shepherd, and says:

I push the shore and kingdom to you,  
O winter walk with seed pod ditch:  
I touch them to the floating child  
And lo! Cities and gardens, shepherds and smiths.

Satire makes its moral norms clear. Here it is a question of creative work and civilization set against perversity and destruction. The Masque ends in the same place structurally as does *Night-Blooming Cereus*, with a vision of divine creativity, but to get there it goes a different road, through the kingdom of shadows and death.

