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Anthony Howell

Modernist Manqué

> And when upon your gentle breasts I lie
> (In due obedience to Nature's laws)
> It is in truth iniquity on high
> That they should open out in chests of drawers...
>
> ... Surrealist love! For God's sake change your form
> Back to the splendours of the classic norm.

These lines, taken from an early sonnet called 'Spleen', were written by Henry Reed in 1937. Clearly he had visited the International Surrealist Exhibition which had taken London by storm in 1936, with Sheila Legge stumbling around Trafalgar Square, her head covered entirely in roses, and Salvador Dalí nearly asphyxiating as he lectured inside a diving suit (rescued by David Gascoyne and a spanner!). To my mind, 'Spleen' betrays the anxiety Reed experienced when confronting modernism.

As a schoolboy in the late fifties, I could quote him. Reed was appreciated by us all. Even the non-literary minded knew 'Naming of Parts'. The poem was in *all* the anthologies. For boys, it has a fetching subject – for it deals with the parts of a rifle in a wartime lesson for enlisted men, but contrasts these details with those of the spring bursting sexily forth in the gardens nearby. When I was asked to write this piece, I set about finding a copy of his *Collected Poems* – my own being in storage since moving house. Waterstones didn't have a copy, nor did Foyles. It was out of print. John Sandoe's search proved fruitless. It wasn't available from the Poetry Library on the South Bank. I had to join the London Library to find it. Do boys still get to debate 'Naming of Parts' or subject it to the sort of

dissection favoured by I. A. Richards? Does anyone now, of a generation younger than my own, know of Henry Reed? I leafed through the edition I had at last secured. A question familiar from the past surfaced again. Had Reed written anything else of significance?

All too often, his verse remains mere verse because of his unwillingness to abandon 'the splendours of the classic norm', though these lack any reinvigorating sense of incongruity, mockery or paradox and prove as musty as the wardrobe for an abandoned production of *La Belle au Bois Dormant*. 'Norm' is unfortunately operative as the presiding spirit of the phrase it finishes off. Yet 'Naming of Parts' and a companion piece, 'Judging Distances', comprise two of the best modernist efforts of the twentieth century, both of them being at the same time war poems, or rather poems opposed to war. Blessed, or maybe cursed, with a remarkable facility as regards verse-making, Reed could martial the forces of sardonic irony to devastating effect, could make innovative use of repetition and collage, and hone up a finely attuned sense of parody – when he wanted to. Though trammelled in the high-flown, he was capable of evoking the voices of personae that were alien or even repugnant to the somewhat fey, butterfly persona he had chosen for himself.

The irony is apparent in the humorously prosaic 'Dull Sonnet' – another early work:

> I have always been remarkably impressed
> By the various sights and sounds of trees and birds
> Respectively; have always thought that words
> Could not express the beauties of the West
> With much exactitude...

This continues in a tone of witty, rather cold self-analysis. But the sonnet was preserved in a folder seemingly containing 'rejects' – not to be included in any collection. I sense that Reed was a poor judge of his own best qualities.

There's always been this notion of a poet finding his voice. It would be better to speak of a poet finding his tone. The tone of voice Reed hits upon for 'Dull Sonnet' may be cold, and it may be nonchalant, but it is, also, original, and imbued with a marvellous complacency – which is what the poem is about. On the other hand, the classic norm obliges one to write with a honking seriousness, an interminable reliance on a falling cadence that implies that everything is deeply felt – and felt in ancient Greece ages and ages ago. This is the tone that dominates a large number of Reed's verse dramas written for the BBC.

When he falls back on this rather empty and rhetorical verse-making, he comes across as a twentieth century Swinburne, wielding free-verse as Algernon wielded the stanza, and employing repetition of phrase to spin out the sonorousness for as long as possible, as in 'Chrysothemis':

> I cannot follow them into their world of death,
> Or their hunted world of life, though through the house,
> Death and the hunted bird sing at every nightfall.
> I am Chrysothemis: I sailed with dipping sails,
> Suffered the winds I would not strive against,
> Entered the whirlpools and was flung outside them,
> Survived the murders, triumphs and revenges.
> Survived....

In this passage 'world', 'death', 'hunted' and 'survived' get repeated, while 'sailed' and 'sails' is a near repeat, and, since the tone is that of the 'norm', this makes for fairly stultifying splendour. Were such poems all that Reed produced, he would be relegated to the second division, and decried as a mannerist; a poet trapped by his nostalgia for a redundant *poesy*, forever digging away at an over-tilled field incapable of bearing a robust crop. Reed may have been aware of this. Speaking of a field in a poem called 'Lives' he says:

You cannot cage a field.
You cannot wire it, as you wire a summer's roses
To sell in towns; you cannot cage it
Or kill it utterly. All you can do is to force
Year after year from the stream to the cold woods
The heavy glitter of wheat, till its body tires
And the yield grows weaker and dies...

Reed could use repetition in a more convincing way when he abandoned his classicism in favour of a terser, more narrative style, such as is used in 'Hiding beneath the Furze', a strong poem which becomes ever more melodic as the repetitions of the last line of each verse – 'And this can never happen, ever again' – increase, eventually doubling, sestina-like, when Reed makes it the first line of the last verse. His repetitions are particularly apt when he adopts the tone of some contemporary voice such as that of the bumbling, religiose C.O. with a mangled vocabulary and a tendency towards reiteration who addresses his men in 'Psychological Warfare'. Here Reed's gift of mimicry is allowed free rein. The poem is a joy from start to finish, encompassing hilarious prejudices against masturbation, colour and 'homo-sensuality' – as finely modulated as the dicta currently emanating from a certain office in Slough.

Reed's strength is apparent when he writes with 'no echo, and no shadow, and no reflection' (as he says in 'Morning'). He is capable of employing a powerful 'flatness' that owes more to Montale than to Leopardi, as in 'The Sound of Horses' Hooves' (which has the power of a good, quiet short story) or in 'Bocca di Magra'. His translations of Leopardi are fine, but Leopardi was an unhappy influence, for Reed is at his best when his symbolism is not symbolistic (in likely homage to Leopardi) but emerges without pretension from one image being juxtaposed against another. He achieves this through collage. But like so many English writers, he found the notion of collage difficult to embrace: it was, after all, 'a surrealist love'.

The problem is encapsulated in a poem called 'Three Words' – one of his finest works – when he finds that the words he 'had always used / In every poem were "suddenly" and "forever"'. He goes on:

> Perhaps in one of those many vacancies
> Of the shuttered mind, the eyes and mouth unsmiling,
> And nothing to say, the damnation of nothing to say:
> Perhaps it was then, as with pleading perhaps, the small
> word 'silent'
> Followed them...

'The damnation of nothing to say' is crucial to any understanding of modernism. It is akin to the notion, expressed to me once by John Ashbery, that there 'is no communication'. 'Three Words' addresses this crisis, and identifies the mannerist recourse to utterance favoured by *poesy* and divinities swathed in timely mists. Reed was at his most honest with himself in this poem, which picks up on the existential *angst* of the twentieth century. What can be said has already been said. Meanwhile God is dead, and we are left gesticulating in a world of irrelevant contiguity, a world without approved order or meaning, in the post-metaphysical era heralded in by Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* – where we must remain silent concerning that of which we cannot speak. It seems that Reed felt this most keenly in 1942, during his basic training in the Royal Army Ordnance Corps.

In the face of such *angst*, a modernist may take to collage. The technique enables one to utilise what has already been said and to shove it up against something else, thus bridging the omnipresent lacunae, and these bridges may come as violent adjustments or as seamless transitions. Pound and Eliot pioneered the method in England, and one can imagine Reed sitting in military lectures wrestling with how to use it. The tradition he had so longed to espouse was here exposed as a repository of blinkered institutionalisms epitomised by his sergeant major. This was not a time for

nostalgia, other than that of a genuine longing for peaceful reality, the Japonica glistening 'like coral in all of the neighbouring gardens' – as in 'Naming of Parts' – the 'apparent lovers... at a distance of about one year and a half' – as in 'Judging Distances'. But where Eliot placed fragments of 'great literature' on his shelf, Reed placed tone of voice next to inner meditation, bringing his capacity for mimicry to bear, as in 'Psychological Warfare', but adding to it an internal monologue informed by a contemporary and authentic lyricism at odds with the dull lecture on rifle maintenance or reconnaissance. In both poems, repetition is handled with expertise, manipulating the sense so that any statement is a reflection on the material that is alien to it. The two poems do, I hope, remain renowned – and the best of the set collected together under the title 'Lessons of War'. After these were written, I get the sense that Reed attempted to emulate their success, particularly in 'Movement of Bodies' and 'Returning of Issue' – both written after the war – and thus became a mannerist again, but this time by imitating himself.