Contemporary Writers of the English Language

Contemporary Poets
Contemporary Novelists
  (including short story writers)
Contemporary Dramatists
Contemporary Literary Critics

CONTEMPORARY
POETS
THIRD EDITION

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION
C. DAY LEWIS

PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION
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"The most ordinary people have the most extraordinary dreams, and in them have a capacity for understanding and adaptation far beyond their waking lives," Peter Redgrove has written in a recent review (Guardian, 12 April 1979). "Why do we so taboo the dream life when it is so plainly a continuum with the waking creative imagination?"

This continuum has always been a preoccupation of Redgrove's work, and most of his recent poetry has had the free associations, the astonishing, surreal proliferation of details, and the magical transformations of plot and image which we associate with dream. But even in his early poems, Redgrove was concerned to explore that tabooed interface where the ordinary domesticated ego feels both appalled and exhilarated by the sweeping energies of an exuberant and amoral instinctual world. The house, invaded by apparently alien forces which turn out to be an essential part of its being, is a frequent symbol of this process. In the fine poem "Old House," the richly kinetic verbs and boisterous syntax record such an invasion with ambiguous enthusiasm:

I lay in an agony of imagination as the wind
Limped up the stairs and puffed on the landings,
Snuffled through floorboards from the foundations,
Tottered, withdrew into flaws, and shook the house . . .

The man, trying to sleep, but afraid of it (as in so many of these early poems), seems at first to be threatened by a dark, deadly force, suffocating in the debris of the past ("Scale of dead people fountained to the ceiling"). But it's not the past but the future which terrifies, as the last line of each stanza indicates, speaking of a child not yet born, and his dread of bringing it into such a world. Only with the reassurance of the last stanza, which reduces his terror to a "silly agony" as his wife turns in her sleep and calls to him, does he learn "what children were to make a home for." In poem after poem this theme is repeated, in "Expectant Father" and "Foundation," for example, or "Bedtime Story for My Son," which turns, in the end, into a story aimed at reassuring the father as much as the child. The house seems to be haunted by the voice of a small boy. The poet hunts for the ghost, to no avail; his wife only smiles and warns, enigmatically, "I couldn't go and love the empty air." It becomes clear, finally, that the ghost is not the past, but the future pressing into existence: the voice comes "From the dead you are/that the Special Theory of Relativity originated in a wet dream of the young Albert Einstein,
in which he was riding through the universe astride a beam of light . . . Whether you think the story beautiful or ugly, possible or not, will depend on your knowledge of the true ways of the imagination."

—Stan Smith


PUBLICATIONS

Verse


Plays

“Chard Whitlow”) parodied T. S. Eliot with complete success. This too must be taken into account.

Henry Reed is a poet with a fine ear, a strongly disciplined sense of form, and passionate feelings. The personal poems, which will be considered first, are all the more effective because emotion is never allowed to get out of hand; Reed always eschews chaos. The title poem of his book is a good example of all his finest qualities. Here are its first two stanzas:

The flutes are warm: in to-morrow’s cave the music Trembles and forms inside the musician’s mind, The lights begin, and the shifting lights in the causeways Are discerned through the dusk, and the rolling river behind

And in what hour of beauty, in what good arms, Shall I those regions and that city attain From whence my dreams and slightest movements rise? And what good Arms shall take them away again?

Here is nostalgia without a trace of sentimentality. Every word is carefully chosen and placed. All this can be found in other personal poems where, by sheer artistry, the poet can communicate and, at the same time, keep the distance which all very good poems of human feeling must have if they are not to fall into bathos or formlessness.

“Morning,” “The Return,” “Outside and In,” and “The Door and the Window” all fall into this group of personal poems. The last named has the beautiful opening stanza:

My love, you are timely come, let me lie by your heart, For waking in the dark this morning, I woke to that mystery, Which we can all wake to, at some dark time or another: Waking to find the room not as I thought it was, But the window further away, and the door in another direction.

The sensibility which informs such poems as these is evident in a rather different way in the poems about the Army written during the 1939 war. Here, Reed displays irony as well as observation. There is a section entitled “Lessons of the War” which is composed of three parts, “Naming of Parts,” “Judging Distances,” and “Unarmed Combat.” In the first of these poems, the training of soldiers and the arrival of Spring are most dexterously and tellingly blended. The second stanza runs:

This is the lower sling swivel. And this Is the upper sling swivel, whose use you will see When you are given your slings. And this is the piling swivel, Which in your case you have not got. The branches Hold in the gardens their silent eloquent gestures, Which in our case we have not got.

All the futility of war is rendered in these lines. Nature goes on while men train in order to kill their enemy across the English Channel. The last lines of “Naming of Parts” complete what is, in its own very individual way, a most remarkable poem about war: “and the almond-blossom/Silent through all the gardens and the bees going backwards and forwards./For to-day we have naming of parts.”

Henry Reed always writes with a skill which conceals itself. This becomes more and more clear in the sequence called “The Desert” (also much concerned with war) and “Tintagel.” In the latter, this poet’s descriptive gifts are shown at their most intense. Part One, “Tristram” contains these lines:

### Other


Henry Reed, although he has published only one collection of poems, A Map of Verona, is a much underrated writer. He is better known for the highly amusing dramatic pieces he has written for radio than for his poems.

A Map of Verona divides itself fairly simply into four sections – poems written about the first World War, personal poems, dramatic monologues, and a sequence entitled “Tintagel.” Tintagel is also a comic poet, and he is certainly the only writer of importance who has (in
The ruin leads your thoughts
Past the moment of darkness when silence fell over the hall,
And the only sound rising was the sound of frightened breathing ...
To the perpetually recurring story,
The doorway open, either in the soft green weather,
The gulls seen over the purple-threaded sea, the cliffs,
Or open in mist ...

"Tintagel" also demonstrates Reed's ability to enter into the characters of others, which we find in the two monologues, "Chrysothemis" and "Philoctetes." In these poems, his highly-developed dramatic gift is clearly evident, especially in the matter of dialogue. Reed really brings Philoctetes to life in lines such as the following:

To my companions become unbearable,
I was put on this island. But the story
As you have heard it is with time distorted,
And passion and pity have done their best for it ...
... They seized me and forced me ashore,
And wept.

The poet is completely identified with Philoctetes and his plight.
Finally we must glance at "Chard Whitlow (Mr. Eliot's Sunday Evening Postscript)," Henry Reed's brilliant parody of the T. S. Eliot of Four Quartets. Here we have just two passages from what is not a long piece:

Seasons return, and to-day I am fifty-five
And this time last year I was fifty-four,
And this time next year I shall be sixty-two.

I think you will find this put,
Far better than I could ever hope to express it,
In the words of Kharma: "It is, we believe,
Idle to hope that the simple stirrup-pump
Can extinguish hell"

his is true parody, both uproariously funny and shrewdly ironic. Eliot's tone is perfectly caught, and Reed's mockery is not unkind but illustrates the ownership of a fine ear and a mastery of language.

Why such a good poet has written so little poetry is strange. The BBC has a way of inadvertently making its poet-employees either "dry-up" altogether or else produce a poem nly now and then (Terence Tiller is another case in point). But Henry Reed has written a multitude of poems that may well last; these are probably the war poems. His command over verse-forms and language is flawless. Perhaps, in old age, he will return to poetry again. It would be a loss to English literature if he did not.

—Elizabeth Jennings

Ishmael Reed comments:

Themes - personal, magic, race, politics; no particular verse form.

Ishmael Reed is a satirist who today is primarily a novelist, but like many other Black American writers he started his literary career writing poetry. Conjure is his first collection of