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CONTEMPORARY
POETS

THIRD EDITION

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

C. DAY LEWIS

PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

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PREFACE	page vii
EDITOR'S NOTE	xv
ADVISERS AND CONTRIBUTORS	xvii
CONTEMPORARY POETS	11
APPENDIX	1721
NOTES ON ADVISERS AND CONTRIBUTORS	1787

"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, deathly 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 comments, 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 just underneath both our skins," and the poem concludes, like so many of these early ones, on a carefully prepared note of discovery, educating man and wife into love, procreation and time, which carries, as its obverse, a grasping of the supersession latent in all fulfilment: "Plainly, this is how we found/That love pines loudly to go out to where/It need not spend itself on fancy and the empty air." It is the tension, in these early poems, between domesticity, responsibility, the worried, paternal ego in the hard-earned house, and the spawning, heady but anarchic powers of the instinct, which makes for their success. The emotional strain of keeping the spiritual house in order gives the poems a linguistic resolution and vigour and a sense of contained energies. But the strain also breeds those nagging, fretful ghosts that haunt the early works, lurking in corners, unused rooms and (in "Corposant") a mouldy larder. In "Ghosts," the realization to which the poem works in its last lines is that the terrace is haunted, after ten years of marriage, not by anything external, but by the "bold lovers" themselves, with their "hints of wrinkles,/Crows-feet and shadows," haunted, "Like many places with rough mirrors now,/By estrangement, if the daylight's strong."

Later poems, in losing this poise, succumbing too readily to the passionate impulse, have to try harder for emotional effect, sometimes lapsing into a flamboyant and vertiginous whirl of language and imagery, to communicate their sense of the vibrant energies of the natural world. "Lazarus and the Sea," in Redgrove's first volume, presages this development, initiating that theme of Orphic descent which is at times to overwhelm his poetry. Lazarus, dredged "Back to my old problems and to the family" out of "the tide of my death," is resentful of his saviour, feeling uprooted as if by some hostile judgment which charges him "with unfitness for this holy simplicity." An antinomian desire for return to such "holy simplicity" lies behind much of the later poetry. In his latest volume, *The Weddings at Nether Powers*, as the title suggests, the theme is still strong. In "Pleasing the Black Vicar" Redgrove

here speaks of wanting "to accept/The presence beyond the altar, beyond appearances," a wish that also lies behind the macabre yet strangely translucent parable of the Emperor who wishes to be flayed alive in "The Son of My Skin" (*Pieces for Voices*). A note to the latest volume tells us that "the poems descend, and return with something not thought or felt before." In a sense, this is not just a descent into the unconscious of nature, into dream and the lost continent of the carnal body; it is also a descent into the unconscious of language, which has always for Redgrove been corporeal, tangible, fleshly. In his poems we pass, as in "The House in the Acorn," through a series of opening and beckoning doors, losing ourselves in a more and more mysterious world where dimension and proportion are lost, a world where, as in "Dr. Faust's Sea-Spiral Spirit," "The roses have learnt to thunder" and "The plain pinafores alert themselves/And are a hive of angry spots," passing through the ritual mysteries of language as we pass through the metamorphoses of a nature where all is flux and entropy, creation and decreation, decomposition and renewal. In "The Case" Redgrove offers a line which sums up this double process, of discovery and return, where all changes and all remains the same: "It was like a door opening on a door of flowers that opened on flowers that were opening." In "Power" he tells us "We rose out of magma where power put his finger,/And the lines show." In "The Force" a mill-wheel which produces electricity from a mountain beck becomes a symbol of the relation of consciousness to its unconscious sources: "It trembles with stored storms/That pulse across the rim to us, as light."

Poems such as "The Idea of Entropy at Maenporth Beach," in which a girl in a white dress renews herself by a baptismal immersion in "the fat, juicy, incredibly tart muck" of the beach, and studies such as *The Wise Wound*, about menstruation, insist on recovering the rejected, the spurned and tacky origins of our being, restoring an image of the human as a living process of ingestion, excretion, sheddings, and growth, like the nature which is all flux and exhalation, wind, water, spore, and, in the title of one poem, "Nothing but Poking." Redgrove pursues this vision with a missionary zeal, even insisting, in the review cited above, "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

REED, Henry. British. Born in Birmingham, Warwickshire, 22 February 1914. Educated at the King Edward VI School, Birmingham; University of Birmingham, M.A. Served in the British Army, 1941–42. Teacher and free-lance journalist, 1937–41; Staff Member, Foreign Office, London, 1942–45. Since 1945, broadcaster, journalist, and radio writer. Address: c/o Jonathan Cape Ltd., 30 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3EL, England.

PUBLICATIONS

Verse

A Map of Verona. London, Cape, 1946; New York, Reynal, 1947.
Lessons of the War. New York, Chilmark Press, 1970.

Plays

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* * *

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 last World War, personal poems, dramatic monologues, and a sequence entitled "Tintagel." Reed is also a comic poet, and he is certainly the only writer of importance who has (in

"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 in all of 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:

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."

This 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 only now and then (Terence Tiller is another case in point). But Henry Reed has written a handful 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

one daughter by a previous marriage. Co-Founder of the *East Village Other*, New York, and *Advance*, Newark, New Jersey, 1965. Since 1971, Chairman and President of Yardbird Publishing Company; since 1973, Director, Reed Cannon and Johnson Communications. Guest lecturer, University of California, Berkeley, 1968, 1969, 1974, 1976; Lecturer, University of Washington, Seattle, 1969-70; Senior Lecturer, University of California, Berkeley; Visiting Professor, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, Fall 1979. Recipient: National Endowment for the Arts Grant, 1974; Rosenthal Foundation Award, 1975; Guggenheim Fellowship, 1975. Address: 8646 Terrace Drive, El Cerrito, California 94530, U.S.A.

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Verse

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Conjure: Selected Poems 1963-1970. Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1972.
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Bibliography: "Mapping Out the Gumbo Works: An Ishmael Reed Bibliography" by Joe Weixlmann, Robert Fikes, Jr., and Ishmael Reed, in *Black American Literature Forum* (Terre Haute, Indiana), Spring 1978.

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

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