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PREFACE

Donald Hair and Richard Stingle Remember James Reaney

“I Remember”—that is the title the *Globe and Mail* uses on its obituaries page for reminiscences about the dead. This piece ought to be titled “We Remember,” for while there have been many articles about James Reaney as poet and playwright and force in the theatre, we who were his colleagues in the classroom for many years remember him as a teacher. Here we want to attempt to define his creative spirit in teaching—no easy task for someone for whom one activity was constantly moving out into, or circling round to include, all his other interests, in the theatre, of course, but also in the visual arts and music, in philosophy and history. That layering of perspectives from different orderings of experience characterizes Jamie’s teaching. Northrop Frye, who supervised Jamie’s doctoral dissertation, said that “We build worlds out of words.” Jamie certainly agreed, but would expand the saying to “We build worlds out of words, out of music, out of pictures, out of marionettes, out of drama, out of sticks and stones, and so on.”

Every university offers a first-year survey in English, and every university offers a course or courses in Canadian literature. At Western Jamie was central to the development and teaching of both.

A great deal of Jamie’s creative spirit was bound up with the particular way in which the courses were offered—by team teaching—and by the unique way in which we practised that method in the 1970s. Elsewhere, team teaching really meant serial teaching: in any given course, an instructor would deliver several lectures on a topic or text and then disappear; then another instructor would come in and lecture on another text, and so on. With us, the whole teaching team, which might consist of anywhere from four to eight instructors, was present in every hour; we each lectured on some aspect of the text (alone, in pairs, in threes, and sometimes in symposia), so that every hour involved a number of voices with their different ways of reading the text; and as we became familiar with each other’s approaches, we began responding to each other’s analyses, and invariably carried on a debate about the text over coffee after class. The whole experience was scary—this baring of one’s academic soul to one’s colleagues—

and exhilarating, because we learned so much from each other. Never had literature come alive as much as it did in those classes.

At that time—this was about 1970—Canadian literature was very much in need of a new approach in the classroom. Only ten years before, when one of us—Hair—was an undergraduate at Western, Canadian literature was taught at the end of a survey course in American literature, and this pattern was the same for the parallel course that Stingle studied at the University of Toronto in 1945-46. Students then were haunted by nagging feelings of the inferiority and thinness of our literature. Where was our *The Scarlet Letter* or *Moby Dick*? Our poetry too seemed limited and derivative, and in our anthology lines like Bliss Carman's "Make me over, Mother April, / When the sap begins to stir" were an embarrassment. Jamie changed all that. He promoted a whole course in Canadian literature; the texts would be presented in their own terms and judged by their own standards, on the simple assumption that they mattered because they were ours; they would be linked informally to our history, geography, art and music; we would be constantly moving into the works themselves and out to their cultural context, through the use of Eli Mandel's collection, *Contexts of Canadian Criticism*. So the course in Canadian Literature and Culture came into being. Its official designation was English 138, and the story of its creation and its classroom realization in those early years needs to be written, with full documentation about the colleagues involved, their thinking about the shaping of the course, and their actual experience with a class of several hundred students in Middlesex College Theatre. What we remember most is the Copernican shift in attitude to Canadian literature that Jamie brought about.

The shift in attitude toward our texts was nowhere more evident than in our teaching of Richardson's *Wacousta*. The novel had been published in 1832, and it was the first Canadian novel in English written by someone who had been born and raised in this country. Jamie, for whom *Wacousta* became the subject of theatre workshops, a conference, and a play, taught us how to read that book. It was not to be judged by the standards of realism in fiction, for though Richardson knew the history of Pontiac's uprising and had stories about it handed down in his family, he chose romance as the mode to reveal the meaning of that history and to convey the lived experience of the time. Getting at both was not easy. The only text we had was a truncated New Canadian Library edition, and the sequel—*The Canadian Brothers*—was long out of print. Nonetheless, this story of feuding families through several generations from 1763 to the War of 1812-14 had an epic sweep to it that was as rich and defining for our culture as the Tro-

jan war was for Greece. Yes, Richardson used the conventions of European romance, like the perilous journey and the characters who were double-goers, but he saw them through perspectives like the baseland-hinterland divide that, as the historian W. L. Morton once remarked, “runs through every Canadian psyche.” For the first time we seemed to be seeing, and recognizing, ourselves.

Every lecture on a text in the course was supported by references to historical and economic contexts (by Innis, McLuhan, and Morton, for example), and accompanied by slides of relevant visual arts and by music as well. To enrich our use of all those contexts we added a fourth hour (called “The Third Hour” to disguise from the administration our pushing the boundaries of the three-hours-per-week pattern), and it was dedicated to visiting lecturers, historians like D. G. Creighton, geographers like John Warkentin, visual artists like Jack Chambers and Tony Urquhart, short-story writers and novelists like Alice Munro, Margaret Atwood, Robertson Davies, and Roch Carrier, dramatists like Michel Tremblay, George Ryga, and Herschel Hardin, and poets like Jay Macpherson, Phyllis Webb, Elizabeth Brewster, Paul Chamberland, Earle Birney, Al Purdy, and on and on.

We were conscious of yet another context for all this richness, and that was the increasingly confident expression of Canadian nationalism in the 1960s and 70s, part of it in response to the growing threat of Quebec’s separation. We were part of that expression, paying as much attention to Canadian literature in French as we did to Canadian literature in English. We like to think that that effort was not entirely in vain.

Jamie was also a central member of another team-taught course—a special section of Introductory English. It had the same rhythmic movement as English 138: outward to the cultural relation of poem or prose piece and to other modes of organization like myth, philosophy and history; and inward to the study of the structure of each work in generic, formal, rhetorical and metrical analyses.

Like so many such first-year surveys across the country, ours was shaped by the usual curriculum committee requirements: historical “coverage” and “representative” examples of different genres. That meant in practice the prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, one or two Shakespeare plays (a tragedy, a comedy), selections from *Paradise Lost* (a bit of Book 1, the whole of Book 9, the last lines of Book 12), *The Rape of the Lock*, some Romantic lyrics and Victorian dramatic monologues, and *The Waste Land*. It was a miscellany: a bit of this, a bit of that, with one Canadian work (usually a novel) thrown in. The idea that, when one moved inward, the texts might be related in fundamental ways, that one might find in dif-

ferent genres recurring patterns and perspectives, that literature might be a cosmos rather than a miscellany, did not enter into thinking about the course. Jamie and others in the teaching teams—there were many—changed all that.

Our pattern was borrowed from Northrop Frye. It was summed up in a diagram with heaven above, hell below, and our world in between, a turning world with our human experience sometimes rising toward heaven in wish fulfilment and sometimes falling toward hell and its frustrations and anxieties. It was Jamie who defined the truth that pattern could claim: “It’s a map of the human imagination,” he said, and each point on the circle was a perspective on human experience. Attaining heaven is the story of comedy; losing it is the story of tragedy; hell is the place for satire and irony; and whirling through the whole circle and ending up in heaven is the great inclusive narrative of romance. The diagram enabled us to teach any text and show how it used and combined those perspectives, always in complex ways and with purposes and effects unique to that text. Our goal was to bring our students to multiple ways of seeing.

In our anthology we introduced those ways of seeing with a diagram on a single page, four short poems arranged in a circle. Jamie, drawing in part on Frye’s graduate course in literary symbolism at the University of Toronto, chose those poems, and they worked brilliantly. Blake’s “The Sick Rose”—and its accompanying engraving, as Stingle showed—was an introduction to tragedy; Emily Dickinson’s hummingbird riddle (“A Route of Evanescence / With a revolving Wheel”), with its exuberant coming together of disparate elements, introduced the patterns of comedy; and Yeats’s “There,” where all things achieve a state of identity, stood at the top of the circle as the goal and end of all cycles. Jamie searched long and hard for a short poem for the opposite state, where all things are at odds with one another, and he happily found one in an obscure source: it was a Border ballad called “Tweed and Till of the Two Rivers.” We used those poems to teach students that the same subject could be shaped in different ways. The Blake and the Dickinson poems, for instance, are both about the penetration of a flower, but in Blake the worm’s “dark secret love” destroys while in Dickinson the hummingbird gives life and energy. Tragedy and comedy: two ways of seeing.

Our insistence upon seeing each work from varying and shifting perspectives owed a great deal to the evolution of Jamie’s own work. The individual and contrasting lyrics of *The Red Heart* (1949) and other early poems were more tightly related to each other in the wheeling cycles of birth and death, of modes and of tropes, in *One-Man Masque* which Jamie

acted out himself in Hart House Theatre in 1960. On that same stage, Jamie's first chamber opera, *Night-Blooming Cereus*, was also performed, with music by John Beckwith, beginning a partnership that was to result in so many subsequent works in which words and music were integrated. In this same period Jamie began, and continued for eleven years, his magazine *Alphabet: The Iconography of the Imagination*, in which his declared intention was to explore the relation between documentary and myth. These two linguistic orderings of experience must be fused, and fusion can be effected by the heat of the imagination. In 1958 he published *A Suit of Nettles*, another great pulsing cycle of poems, based on Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar* and written at the same time as he was writing his Ph.D. dissertation, "Spenser's Influence on Yeats," under the supervision of Northrop Frye. The voices of both the cycle of poems and of the thesis would sound through his dramas, his poetry, and the lectures of team-taught courses. The imagination, seeing from as many perspectives as possible, can free the mind from the bondage of the literal and of a single focus. As Eli says to his literalist mother in *The Killdeer*, "I don't want to see / what you see." All Jamie's plays and operas pivot on this moment when a mind is set free by the power of the metaphorical forms of the imagination. Such a moment was the goal of his teaching as well.

Poets are liars, he would say, and he would lift a lectern, and trope it, to prove his point: "This is a professor." He was, in one of those years, rewarded with a comment on a student evaluation of his teaching, a comment he always, bemusedly, cherished: "Professor Reaney exaggerates." It was the first step in building for his students a world of words.