

## Transforming the Universe

Thomas Gerry. *The Emblems of James Reaney: Magnetically Drawn*. Erin ON: Porcupine's Quill, 2013. 198 pp.

"A challenge facing anyone who attempts to articulate the meaning of James Reaney's work is that so much is involved, even though the work itself might at first seem uncomplicated" (9). This is the opening sentence of Thomas Gerry's book *The Emblems of James Reaney: Magnetically Drawn* and in the pages that follow he attempts to untangle the complex web of intellectual and artistic connections that inform each of ten emblems originally published in *Poetry* (Chicago) in 1969 and in *Armadio* in 1970 then reprinted in Reaney's *Poems* as "Two Chapters from an Emblem Book." Gerry's appreciative emphasis on the multi-disciplinarity and intertextuality of Reaney's art which ventures to "transform the universe into human shape" (11), makes this a worthwhile and timely contribution to Reaney scholarship.

Gerry begins by outlining what he considers to be Reaney's "visionary method" of creativity which relies on "a play box" of objects, wit, and education (specifically in the English Protestant emblem tradition), all informed by an enduring belief in the reality of metaphor. Gerry proceeds by pairing each of the ten "emblems" with other longer works by Reaney to which they are "magnetically drawn," a critical structure he defends by quoting Reaney's statement from *Alphabet*: "Let us make a form out of this: documentary on one side and myth on the other; Life and Art. In this form we can put anything and the magnet we have set up will arrange it for us" (3). The degree to which one feels Gerry is successful in applying a creative method (of building up or arrangement) to a critical process (of breaking down or analysis) will determine how each reader feels about this book as a whole. Further layers are added to this process by drawing attention to the intertextuality (including such well known influences as William Blake, Carl Jung, and Northrop Frye, and lesser known sources such as Rider Haggard) and visual inspirations (ranging widely from Meindert Hobbema to Haitian voodoo) for both the images and texts of Reaney's emblems. Gerry's efforts to explore how all of these might be used to illuminate the "emblems" under consideration result in a richly illustrated demonstration of Reaney's own desire to sink his claws "into a very locally coloured tree trunk" and scratch his "way through to universality" (108).

The book is less successful, however, when it comes to balance, tone, and extending the critical conversation. Gerry's method of "magnetically"

pairing the emblems with longer works can be convincing and illuminating, but sometimes seems arbitrary and unbalanced. In seeking “affinities that magnetically attract” the emblem entitled “The Castle” and the 1960 play *One Man Masque*, Gerry writes that both include the word “man,” both are hybrid forms, and both “present images of human life that emphasize the existence of contraries and the necessity of incorporating them into a unity” (42). These qualities could describe most of Reaney’s work, and do not necessarily make for a persuasive comparison. Asking which of Reaney’s other works are magnetically drawn to his emblem “The Last House,” Gerry admits, “The answer is, a lot of them” (161), but goes on to choose the opera *Taptoo!* for its inclusion of quotations and self-quotations. Exacerbating this problem of shaky connections is an apparent imbalance in his critical treatment of shorter and longer works. On the one hand, Gerry provides pages of context for the few words or lines of the emblem while, on the other hand, scurrying through some of the longer, more complex works to which he compares them. He excuses this imbalance by suggesting that “complementary excellent summaries” are provided elsewhere “permitting us to focus here only on the most relevant details” (132) by which he appears to mean those few that fit the patterns he has in mind. In any analytical study, the boundaries of what to include and exclude need to be drawn somewhere, but critical cherry picking can leave a reader feeling disoriented and dissatisfied. Such a discussion can begin to feel skewed, especially when couched in dismissive phrases like “Anyway, rather than get farther tangled in these details...” (29) or “That was easy enough” (87) or “By the way” (172). Details bluntly presented in bulleted lists do not leave much room for nuance. Often the contextual information Gerry provides is fresh and genuinely edifying, but occasionally just comes across as either unnecessary (e.g., identifying Wordsworth as “a Romantic poet who became England’s poet laureate” (81)) or far-fetched.

There is definitely a *mise en abyme* quality to much of Reaney’s work as his three whimsical paintings reproduced in full colour at the heart of this book reveal, but the clarity and coherence are reduced with each embedded image, and this is occasionally true of Gerry’s analysis. He rightly argues that “the emblem pries us away from our learned, habitual methods of understanding art and jolts us in the realm of imagination” (87). He also points out that the emblem is related to ekphrasis, a connection that serves him well in his discussion of “Egypt” which mentions the artist Meindert Hobbema by name. He also compares Reaney’s use of “simple, universal shapes” with the art of “Mondrian, Picasso, Chagall,

Klee, Kandinsky, and Riopelle” (116). It is therefore surprising that he seems to have missed that the five Emblems first published in 1969 might well be examples of ekphrasis related to specific works of modern art: “The Castle” a response to Paul Klee’s *Castle and Sun* (1928), “The Farm” to Joan Miró’s *The Farm* (1921), “Within Within” to Marc Chagall’s *I and the Village* (1911) and possibly *Blue Circus* (1950) which actually contains a green horse as well as a fish, and “The Tree” to Gustav Klimt’s *The Tree of Life* (1909). In the emblem “Within Within,” the line “In a fish a face looks out” may well bear relation to the biblical story of Jonah as Gerry argues at length, but it seems just as plausible that it alludes to the face looking out of the church (house of Christ/*ichthus*) in Chagall’s charming painting about how his village shaped his imagination, just as the “small town” of Stratford, Ontario shaped Reaney’s own. Though Gerry draws attention to the art of William Blake such as his 1795 portrait of Newton, he ignores other connections, such as how Blake’s engraving *Fertilization of Egypt* (1791) might illuminate Reaney’s emblem “Egypt.” Though biblical allusions are pursued at length, some of the most obvious examples of intertextuality are not explored. “The Last House” which Gerry expounds as an “emblematic announcement of the imminent coming of the Apocalypse” (159) could just as fruitfully be compared to the Grimm’s fairy tale of the Six Swans, in which the sister meets her six brothers in the last hut in the forest. The closing line of the final emblem, “I have found a river to the sea” along with its recurring images of sun and wind seem to beg for comparison with the passage in Ecclesiastes in which the circular nature of human existence is explored: “Every river flows into the sea, but the sea is not yet full.”

Gerry ends his eclectic journey through Reaney’s work by concluding that the silent gaps “between” and “within” his emblems “are clear appeals to us to see what we can make of them” (184). Gerry himself makes a great deal of them and invites us to do the same. His genuine enthusiasm for his subject is infectious and it is hard not to enjoy the sometimes bumpy but always scenic ride.

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