The poems of Henry Reed

Introduction and Notes
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DOUGLAS CLEVERDON ended his obituary of Henry Reed, published in the Independent of 11 December 1986: 'To sort out the chaos [of his manuscripts] will be a major task.' So it proved, but the task fell into the hands of Catharine Carver who, characteristically, converted a Herculean labour into a labour of love. From 'the Box' of Reed's literary remains, she sorted the publishable drafts and fragments from the all too many unpublishable, exhumed uncollections poems and translations from the yellowing strata of magazine cuttings, dated them all and collated published texts with the author's corrected copies, and drafted the notes for this edition. For this she deserves the thanks not only of the editor but of every reader of this book. Thanks are due as well to Ann Colcord, who provided valuable advice and assistance over Reed's translations from the Italian; to Dr Roger Savage for sharing his unrivalled knowledge of Reed's published texts; to Sarah Berg, who prepared the initial hand-list of the contents of 'the Box'; and to Susan Westwood for liaison with the BBC's archives.

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JON STALLWORTHY
Wolfson College, Oxford
October 1990

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INTRODUCTION

The author of 'Naming of Parts', probably the most anthologized English poem of the Second World War, has too often been held to be that and that only. Like Julian Grenfell, author of 'Into Battle', he is seen as the saddest freak of the literary fairground: the one-poem poet. This book gives the lie to that gross misperception.

Henry Reed was born, in Birmingham, on 22 February 1914 and named after his father, a master brick-layer and foreman in charge of forcing at Nocks' Brickworks. Henry senior was nothing if not forceful, a serious drinker and womanizer, who as well as his legitimate children fathered an illegitimate son who died during the Second World War. In this, he may have been following ancestral precedent: family legend had it that the Reeds were descended from a bastard son of an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century Earl of Dudley. Henry senior’s other enthusiasms included reading, but the literary abilities of his son Henry junior seem, paradoxically, to have been inherited from a mother who was illiterate. Born Mary Ann Ball, the eldest child of a large family that had migrated from Tipton to Birmingham, she could not be spared from her labours at home during what should have been her schooldays, and when, in her late middle age, her granddaughter tried, unsuccessfully, to teach her to read, she wept with frustration and shame. Mary Ann Reed had a remarkable memory, however, and a well-stocked repertoire of fairy-stories—told with great verve—and songs to enchant her children and grandchild.

A daughter, Gladys, born in 1908, was encouraged to make the most of the schooling her mother had not had. She was a good student and in due course became a good teacher, discovering her vocation in teaching her younger brother. Gladys played a crucial role in the education of Henry (or Hal, as he was known in the family, a name perhaps borrowed from Shakespeare's hero) and was to become and remain the most important woman in his life. He was not an easy child. On one occasion dismembering his teddy bear, he buried its head, limbs, and torso around the garden and went howling to his mother. She was obliged to exhume the scat-
tered parts, wash, and reassemble them for the little tyrant. At the state primary school in Erdington, he clashed with a hated teacher who pronounced him educationally subnormal. A psychiatrist was called in and, having examined the child, claimed to have detected promise of mathematical genius.

Moving on to King Edward VI Grammar School in Aston, Reed specialized in Classics. Since Greek was not taught, he taught himself, and went on to win the Temperley Latin prize and a scholarship to Birmingham University. There he was taught and befriended—as were his Birmingham contemporaries Walter Allen and Reggie Smith—by a young Lecturer in the Classics Department, Louis MacNeice. Reed had a remarkable speaking voice and a gift for mimicry (and for assuming the accents of a class not his own), and as an undergraduate, he acted in and produced plays, which may have led to his career in radio; in any case, for the rest of his life he delighted in the company of actors—partly perhaps because he was acting a part himself: that of the debonair, even aristocratic, literary man about town.

He gained a first-class degree at Birmingham in 1934 and wrote a notable thesis on Thomas Hardy, leaving the University two years later as its youngest M.A. Like most of his Birmingham contemporaries, he had so far lived at home, but was not a happy member of the household. Hal was ashamed of his parents, or so they felt, and only his sister Gladys had much sympathy for the elegant butterfly struggling to break free from the Brummagem chrysalis. There was another factor, though how much Reed's parents knew of this is uncertain: he had had his first sexual, homoerotic, experience when he was nineteen, and later had a tormented affair with a boy who developed paranoia. It was clearly time for him to leave home.

Like many other writers of the Thirties, he tried teaching—at his old school—and, again like most of them, hated it and left to make his way as a freelance writer and critic. He began the research for a full-scale life of Thomas Hardy, and his father financed a first trip to Italy. There he was taken to the ample bosom of a Neapolitan family he found more congenial than his own and would later celebrate in a radio play, Return to Naples (1950). Before he could himself return, Mussolini had to be overthrown, and in the summer of 1941 a Hal much less heroic than Shakespeare's was conscripted into the Royal Army Ordnance Corps. On 10 July, he wrote to his sister (now Mrs Winfield and the mother of a daughter, Jane):

We have begun our departmental training—which means that army training has to be concentrated into 5/8 of the day, and is therefore increasing in savagery. This blitztraining is, to my mind, absurd. The R.A.O.C. lost 10% of its personnel in Belgium, through being noncombatant. They aim, therefore, at making us combatant, in 9 weeks; at the end of that time we are expected to be able to shoot accurately, to manage a Bren gun, an anti-tank gun & various other kinds, to use a bayonet, to throw hand-grenades & whatnot and to fire at aircraft. I do not think the management of a tank is included in the course, but pretty well everything else is.

Our departmental training, some of which is an official secret, known only to the British & German armies, has consisted mainly of learning the strategic disposition of the R.A.O.C. in the field: this is based, not, as I feared, on the Boer War, but on the Franco-Prussian War of 1871. It is taught by lecturers who rarely manage to conceal their dubiety at what they are teaching. But it is restful after the other things, & we are allowed to attend in P.T. 'kit'. This is nicely balanced by the fact that we attend P.T. wearing all our 'kit', except blankets. (I will never call a child of mine Christopher.)

The same letter gives, incidentally, a clear view of the left-wing political position that Reed, for all his aristocratic fantasies, was never to abandon: 'I hope', he wrote, 'a good deal from Russia, of course, but rather joylessly: the scale of it all is beyond my grasp, & it is terrible to see a country which, with all its faults, has been alone in working to give the fruits of labour to the people who have earned them, thus attacked ...'

Reed served—'or rather studied', as he preferred to put it—in the Ordnance Corps until 1942 when, following a serious bout of pneumonia and a prolonged convalescence, he was transferred to the Government Code and Cypher School at Bletchley. At first he was employed as a cryptographer in the Italian Section, but was subsequently moved to the Japanese Section where he learned the language and worked as a translator. In the evenings he wrote much of his first radio play, Moby Dick, and many of the poems later to be published in A Map of Verona. It was not a life he would have chosen, but it had its compensations: security, time for his own work, and the start of an important—perhaps his most important—friendship.

Michael Ramsbotham was also a writer, five years younger than Henry Reed, and from a more privileged background. After
Charterhouse, from which he was expelled, he went up to King's College, Cambridge. At the end of his second year, in June 1940, he was called up and given a commission in the RNVR. His active service ended in September 1941, when he was posted to the Italian Section of Naval Intelligence at Bletchley. In 1943, he and Reed would sometimes escape the monotony of the canteen for a civilian lunch in Leighton Buzzard. The following year, they went on leave together twice to Charleston, a little fishing harbour near St Austell in Cornwall. Reed by this time had lost all trace of his Birmingham accent and acquired a somewhat Sitwellian manner. A quick wit and a staggering memory—especially for Shakespeare—made him an engaging companion.

On VJ Day 1945, he was demobbed. A few weeks earlier, Ramsbotham had suffered a nervous breakdown and went absent without leave, taking himself off to North Cornwall where, after a month or two, Reed joined him. Later both men were recalled to the Service. Reed, adopting Nelson's tactics, declined to see the signal, and the Navy let the matter drop. Ramsbotham was posted to the Staff of the Commander-in-Chief, Portsmouth, and during the following autumn and winter commuted, whenever he was off duty, from Portsmouth to Dorchester where Reed was living at the Antelope Hotel, continuing his research for the Hardy biography.

In April 1946, Ramsbotham was demobilized and they celebrated with a holiday in Ireland, the highlight of which was a happy fortnight as guests of Elizabeth Bowen at Bowen's Court. Returning to England in July, they briefly rented a house in Charleston, but soon moved to another rented house, Lovells Farm, in Marnhull, Dorset—Hardy's Marlott—where Ramsbotham worked on a novel while Reed reviewed fiction and poetry for the Listener and the New Statesman and worked on Hardy. His first and only collection of poems, A Map of Verona, dedicated to Ramsbotham, was published in London that year (1946) by Jonathan Cape, and in New York the following year by Reynal & Hitchcock. In January 1947 the two-hour radio adaptation of Melville's novel Moby Dick was produced by the BBC, and published the same year, again by Cape.

By February 1948, however, the atmosphere at Lovells Farm had become too emotionally claustrophobic for Ramsbotham and he walked out—leaving a note—but by April had returned, and the two set off for a long holiday in Cyprus. The following February, Reed rented Gable Court, a large sixteenth-century house with Victorian additions in the Dorset village of Yetminster, where he continued his research for the life of Hardy and wrote two fine verse plays about another poet whose work he was translating and with whom he identified strongly, Giacomo Leopardi: The Unblest (1949) and The Monument (1950). The year at Gable Court, for Reed the best of times, was followed by the worst of times. In February 1950 the couple split up, Reed leaving his Eden (as it would, increasingly, seem to him) for London, where he was to live for the rest of his life, apart from terms as a Visiting Professor of Poetry at the University of Washington, Seattle, in 1964, 1965–6, and 1967, and occasional trips to Europe.

Perhaps in search of an earlier happiness, Reed had returned to Italy in July 1951, heading for Verona, 'the small strange city' lovingly imagined in the title-poem of his first book:

one day I shall go.

The train will bring me perhaps in utter darkness
And drop me where you are blooming, unaware
That a stranger has entered your gates, and a new devotion
Is about to attend and haunt you everywhere.

A letter to his parents suggests that his prophecy had been fulfilled: 'It is a most lovely city,' he wrote, 'small enough for me to walk right across it in less than an hour; I had a letter of introduction to a friend of a friend & was in consequence well looked after & made much fuss of. My arrival was even announced on the radio, I learned with much delight later on.' It was a successful holiday and resulted in one of the best of Reed's radio plays on Italian themes, The Streets of Pompeii, awarded an Italia Prize in 1951. Much of his work for the BBC Features Department was commissioned and produced by Douglas Cleverdon, who wrote of him in his obituary (the Independent, 11 December 1986):

In these Italian pieces Henry Reed revealed his instinctive mastery of the art of radio. All his creative powers were brought into play. For he was not only a poet of great sensibility; he had also a lively sense of comedy and of the absurd, and a remarkable gift for dramatic invention. He could be extremely witty, both in his social life and in his radio writing; and the wit could overflow into satire and occasionally malice. Yet, though homosexual by nature, he had an extraordinary sympathy with women's most
profound emotions, and could portray them with tenderness and understand.

His scripts were rarely completed more than a day or two before rehearsals began, but he particularly relished the affectionate esteem in which he was held by the group of players who usually formed the nucleus of his cast. As he usually attended all rehearsals, this affection was enhanced during the later stages of his radio career, when the poetic content of his work was gradually overtaken by the hilariously satirical.

In the mid-Fifties, Reed made a major liberating decision: he abandoned the biography of Hardy, which for years had burdened him with guilt like the Ancient Mariner's albatross. That failed quest—perhaps related to the failure of his earlier quest for lasting love—played out a dominant theme of his radio plays:* from failure as a biographer, he turned to triumphant success in a radio play about a nervous young biographer, Herbert Reeve, engaged on just such a quest as he had himself abandoned. Reed's hero (whose name owes something to that of Herbert Read, the poet and critic, with whom he was tired of being confused) assembles a mass of conflicting testimony about his author, the novelist Richard Shewin. His witnesses include a waspish brother, his wife, two spinsters of uncertain virtue, and (the finest comic role he was to create) his business-like, dumb dead to the exuberantly vocal living composeress. The success of A Very Great Man Indeed (1953) prompted six sequels, the best of them The Private Life of Hilda Tablet (1954), in which Reeve is browbeaten into switching the subject of his biography from the dumb dead to the exuberantly vocal living composeress.

The modest income that Reed's work for radio brought him he supplemented with the still more modest rewards of book-reviewing and translation. The reviewing was to result in a British Council booklet, The Novel since 1939 (1946), and his published translations include Ugo Betti's Three Plays (1956) and Crime on Goat Island (1961), Balzac's Père Goriot (1962) and Eugénie Grandet (1964), and Natalia Ginzburg's The Advertisement (1969). Several of his translations found their way into the theatre, and in the autumn of 1955 there were London premières of no less than three. His own poems and translations of those by Leopardi continued for a time to appear, usually in the pages of the Listener. Douglas Cleverdon published a limited Clover Hill Edition of five Lessons of the War in 1970, and The Streets of Pompeii and Other Plays for Radio and Hilda Tablet and Others: Four Pieces for Radio were issued together by the BBC in 1971. In 1975 the BBC broadcast his anthology of Leopardi's poems in his own translations; a last relinquishing of work long pondered over resulted in 1974-5 in the publication of a handful of his poems in the Listener, with the elegiac love poem 'Bocca di Magra', perhaps written in the 1950s, as a final word. Over the years he had worked on (and seemingly completed two acts of) a three-act verse play about the false Dimitry; a long poem, called variously 'Matthew' and 'In Black and White', perhaps set during the American Civil War; a dramatic monologue, 'Clytemnestra', possibly as a pendant to his Sophoclean 'Triptych' in A Map; and a commissioned translation of the Ajax of Sophocles. He had drafted and all but finished polishing a translation of Montale's haunting Motetti. Reed's Who's Who entry for 1977 listed The Auction Sale and Other Poems among his publications, but no such collection ever appeared. Talk even at the end of the 1970s of a collected edition came to nothing. As a perfectionist, he could not bring himself to release what he must have recognized would be his last book until it was as good as he could make it, and it never was.

Reed greatly enjoyed his fifteen years with the BBC, his membership of the Savile Club, his London life and his frequent journeys to Italy (often on a BBC commission). But in his last decade, drink and self-neglect (his staple diet was Complan) increasingly undermined his always fragile health. His notebooks record a continuing and courageous struggle. At one point, he conducts an experiment:

I wonder if the difficulty difficulty of writing could be solved by drink alone
Now how much better am I writing?
Now how much better am I writing? Not much, it seems. But oh, for freedom from these adventitious aids.

Again, on 10 March 1985 he notes:

After the horrors and the reliefs of the last terrible weeks I have 'resumed' what seemed like a period of hopeful convalescence (though God knows it is very painful to move about & eyesight is at rock-bottom). The Income Tax, and my all but paralysed will about it, stand in the way. Yet prowling

---

round the three or four poems from the 50s I still want to finish occasional jerks forward do occur.

He became increasingly incapacitated and reclusive, but devoted friends never ceased to visit him in the Upper Montagu Street flat he continued to occupy, thanks to the generosity of a long-suffering landlady, until, removed to hospital, he died on 8 December 1986.

Reed’s poems of the Thirties—particularly the earlier sections of ‘The Desert’—owe something of their use of the paysage moralisé to the landscapes of Eliot and Auden. In ‘South’, the traveller of 1938 hears an unexpected voice:

‘But look more closely’, the landscape suddenly told him,

“What do you see?”

And he saw his life. He saw it, and turned away,

And wept hot tears down the rock’s hard cheek, and kissed

Its wrinkled mouths with the kiss of passion, crying,

‘Where is my love?’

This landscape of desire is, in every sense, unsatisfactory—not least because the nature of that desire is obscured by symbolic fog.

Very different is the landscape of 1942:

Japonica
Glistens like coral in all of the neighbouring gardens,
And today we have naming of parts.

The homely word ‘neighbouring’ disguises the fact that this is an extension of another symbolic landscape, the archetypal landscape of desire, that garden in which Adam named the animals. The presence of desire is felt the more strongly here for being shown hovering at the edge of consciousness, as the speaker himself hovers at the edge of the weapon-training squad. A second difference between the two poems is that of tone—the humour that now disguises the gravity of the subject. Reed had ‘studied’ to good effect during his basic training in the RAOC, and would later entertain his friends with a comic imitation of a sergeant instructing his recruits. After a few performances, he noticed that the words of the weapon-training instructor, couched in the style of the military manual, fell into certain rhythmic patterns which fascinated him and eventually provided the structure of ‘Naming of Parts’. In this and two subsequent ‘Lessons of the War’, the military voice is wittily counterpointed by the inner voice—more civilized and still civilian—of a listening recruit with his mind on other matters.

Countless poems of the First World War had carried titles and/or epigraphs in Latin. Reed followed Wilfred Owen, who in ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ had challenged and subverted that tradition, when he chose—and emended—a Horatian epigraph for his sequence. Horace wrote (Odes, 3: 26. 1-2):

Vixi puellis nuper idoneus
Et militavi non sine gloria

which can be roughly translated: ‘Lately I’ve lived among girls, creditably enough, and have soldiered not without glory.’ Slyly, Reed turns upside down the p of puellis (girls), to give duellis (battles). In this way exchanging girls for battles, he cunningly encapsulates in his epigraph the theme of the Lessons that follow.

A third difference between the two poems is the dramatic element that in ‘Naming of Parts’ counterpoints the two voices. At approximately the same point in each of the first four stanzas, the recruit’s attention wanders from the instructor’s lesson in the unnatural art of handling a lethal weapon, back to the natural world: branches, blossom, life as opposed to death. Plucked by the Army from gardens where, at this season, he should have been enjoying the company of his Eve, he sees the bees ‘assaulting and fumbling the flowers’: the military and sexual associations of those verbs reflecting the confusion in his mind. The hint of corruption, Innocence yielding to Experience, is confirmed by the double entendres, the rueful ironies, of the final stanza.

The dialectical opposition of two voices, two views of a landscape, is a strategy refined in two remarkable poems of Reed’s middle years. ‘The Changeling’ must have been written either shortly before or shortly after his expulsion from the Eden of Gable Court. A brilliantly condensed autobiography, it uses the changeling figure (from his mother’s fairy-stories) and the family legend of noble descent to articulate a troubling sense of doubleness: true self and false self. Bright landscapes darken until, as in all the best fairy-stories,
Love takes him by his hand,
And the child to exile bred
Comes to his native land.
And comes, at last, to stand
On his scented evening lawn
Under his flowering limes,
Where dim in the dusk and high,
His mansion is proudly set,
And the single light burn
In the room where his sweet young wife
Waits in his ancient bed.

The possessive pronoun, 'proudly set' to every item in this cat-
logue of Paradise Regained, begins to sound disturbingly over-
insistent when extended to 'his summer sky, . . . his first pale stars'.
He protests too much, masking a doubt that finally turns to de-
solate certainty:

'All this is false. And I
Am an interloper here.'

Reed's most ambitious exploration of the landscape of desire
occurs in 'The Auction Sale'. A Forsterian or Hardyesque short
story, set in the Hardy country he had recently left, it is told in a
voice as flat as if the speaker were reading from a country
newspaper:

Within the great grey flapping tent
The damp crowd stood or stamped about;
And some came in, and some went out
To drink the moist November air . . .

After the auctioneer has rattled off the opening lots, he turns to
something different, announcing 'There's a reserve upon this num-
ber.' A shrouded object is unveiled, revealing

The prospect of a great gold frame
Which through the reluctant leaden air
Flashed a mature unsullied grace
Into the faces of the crowd.
And there was silence in that place.

As the ordinary field of 'Judging Distances' had been succeeded
by one where

the sun and the shadows bestow
Vestments of purple and gold,

in the grey tent and leaden air of the auction sale there blazes a
scene as different as the language in which it is described:

*Effulgent in the Paduan air,
Ardent to yield the Venus lay
Naked upon the sunwarmed earth.*

The inner voice that, in the English silence, proceeds to detail so
lovingly the Italian landscape of mythologized desire can be under-
stood to be that of the young man who now bids against the
London dealers. As the figures mount, the grey voice and the golden
contrapuntally compete:

*Ardent to yield the nods resumed
Venus upon the sunwarmed nods
Abandoned Cupids danced and nodded
His mouth towards her bid four thousand
Four thousand, any advance upon,
And still beyond four thousand fifty
Unrolled towards the nodding sun.*

When, finally, the young man drops out of the bidding, he takes
leave of his Paradise Lost with an unvoiced elegy, and is later
seen—like Masaccio's Adam, but more tragic for being alone—
in the dusk,
Not walking on the road at all,
But striding beneath the sodden trees . . .
Crying. That was what she said.
Bitterly, she later added.
Crying bitterly, she said.

This fine poem was to prove prophetic. When in the 1970s the
author of *A Map of Verona* again sought out his 'city of a long-held
dream', it was too late. 'The Town Itself' is a love poem addressed
to 'my darling', but Verona has other things on her mind, and the
lover is unrequited:

I shall never be accepted as a citizen:
I am still, and shall always be, a stranger here.

Reed never abandoned his quest for the Great Good Place, and his
late manuscript poems provide a poignant record of dreams and
mirages encountered in the Waste Land. When he comes to ‘The
Château’, echoes of the 23rd Psalm tell us he comes from the valley
of the shadow of death. Standing outside the ‘great grey mansion’
(in my father’s house are many mansions’), he feels, not as the
Changeling felt outside his mansion, that he was about to come into
his own, but that his life has been going on elsewhere and otherwise:

surely beyond that great façade my life is being lived?
Lived, loved and filled with gaiety and ardour . . .

To reach it and take his place at ‘the starry feast’, he has only to
cross the last threshold, a step his imagination takes with an inten-
sity of vision that will stand comparison with the close of ‘Little
Gidding’:*

Surely there will be a signal? Inconspicuously,
One of the giant roses in the gardens around us
Will perhaps explode on to the autumn grass:
Something like that, perhaps. I know I shall know the moment.
And surely (and almost now) it will happen, and tell me
That now I must rise and with firm footsteps tread
Across the enormous flagstones, reach, find and know
My own and veritable door;
I shall open it, enter, and learn
That in all this hungry time I have never wanted,
But have, elsewhere, on honey and milk been fed,
Have in green pastures somewhere lain, and in the mornings,
Somewhere beside still waters have
Mysteriously, ecstatically, been led.

Italy, the setting of most of the late manuscript poems, was, after
Gable Court, the closest he could come to the Great Good Place on
earth, but to both he comes as a stranger or ‘Intruder’. The poem of
that title describes his return (a charged word in Reed’s lexicon) in a
double capacity: an earlier self and his own ‘noonday ghost’, whose
presence falls like a shadow between the speaker and the com-
panion he has just embraced. The spectre is said to be seeking

* The last of Eliot’s Four Quartets may even have been kindled in June 1941 by a
spark from Reed’s incendiary satire, ‘Chard Whitlow’, published on 10 May
1941.

Something I dared not say,
And bent in distress beside me
Ashen and anguished and lonely.

What he is seeking and why a noonday ghost should have ‘an aged
face’ we can infer when the speaker

. . . saw he was visiting again this place
A quarter-century hence
And pausing and hoping and sighing,
Recapturing a half or a third
Of what we were saying there now,
As though what we said had mattered,
There by the base of the fountain
Or at that pause on the hill-side
Where we always said our goodbyes . . .

Such goodbyes are clearly far from final, but this cunning inter-
weaving of time past, time present, and time future ends—as a good
ghost story should—with a leave-taking of another kind. After so
many sunlit Italian landscapes, the wintry English cityscape of
‘L’Envoi’, the manuscript poem in which Reed takes leave of his
reader, makes a contrast the more poignant for the genial tone of
the fable’s telling.

Randall Jarrell wrote that ‘A good poet is someone who manages
in a lifetime of standing out in thunderstorms to be struck by light-
ings five or six times: a dozen and he is great.’ By this criterion, or
any other, Henry Reed is a poet whom it is an honour to introduce
as he takes his rightful place at ‘the starry feast’.