

A Glasgow “this”

Tom Leonard, *access to the silence*,

etruscan books, £9.50, ISBN 1901538478,

28 Fowler's Court, Buckfastleigh, South Devonshire TQ11 0AA

Tom Leonard's new collection, *access to the silence*, is subtitled “Poems and Posters 1984–2004”. With the recent republication by etruscan books of Leonard's earlier retrospective collection, *Intimate Voices*, the full range of this remarkable poet's work is available in print for the first time. I don't think it's possible to overstate the importance of *Intimate Voices*: no book of poetry in the past fifty years has done more to articulate the experience of working, thinking, and simply *being* in the languages of working-class Scotland. My experience is that you don't meet people who have read *Intimate Voices*, you meet people who know *Intimate Voices*. Leonard's early poems, mostly in Glasgow speech, speak so precisely and with such a fierce, analytical wit that they transcend their status as poems and become part of the shared apparatus we use to think with. I don't know any other contemporary poetry of which that is so true.

The first thing to notice about *access to the silence* is that it contains no essays. While Leonard's larger collections have always included prose which helped to set the poetry in its larger contexts, its absence here seems appropriate to the book's title and themes. The poems are often grounded in the quest for a fundamental level of self which is either pre-linguistic or extends the concept of “language” to include the entire range of gestures and tics by which a person is known. Words are sometimes fragmented (as they often are, if you listen) or accompanied by paralinguistic signs to be interpreted in performance (the sequence “HESITATIONS: monologues for dancing” includes lines and arrows which, in performance, Leonard embodies as silent gestures). The unclassifiable “ACH CALEDONIA” is “notes to accompany a performance tape” – not a description of the tape itself, but of what Leonard did while it was playing: holding up placards and delivering a fragmentary monologue on the politics of linguistic difference. One whole sequence, “Nine Variations on Larry's Poem”, contains no words by Leonard at all, communicating instead through relined and non-linear versions of a four-line poem by Larry Butler. Leonard's voice comes through here as surely as personality subsists in a loved one deprived of their speech: the last, wordless, variation has just the bracketed () ghosts of words, deployed on the page like the notes of a silent music. It's incredibly moving.

These poems hold the smallest parts of language up to the light, words

like “the” which might be passed over as ethically neutral and are anything but. Leonard wrote an essay called “What I Hate about the News is its Definite article”, and one of the poster poems here paints a thousand words:

AN
OXFORD
DICTIONARY
OF
AN
ENGLISH
LANGUAGE

Leonard once quoted Frederick Coplestone on the philosopher Duns Scotus and his use of the word *haeccitas*, “thisness”:

It is, as we have seen, neither matter nor form nor the composite thing; but it is a positive entity, the final reality of matter, form and the composite thing. A human being, for instance, is this composite being, composed of this matter and this form... it seems to be implied that a thing has *haeccitas* or “thisness” by the fact that it exists.

(“Chinweizu, Rothenberg, Duns Scotus”)

These are, I think, the concerns behind the beautiful poster-poem “Blessed Trinity”, which, in a review, I can only approximately map as

THE is the father
this is the holy spirit
a is the son

“THE”: the paternal authority of classification. “*this*”: italicised, the protean specificity of person, spirit, breath. “a”: one among many, the condition of being human in the world.

It says a lot about Leonard’s range that, having established himself as the finest poet that Glasgow speech has ever had, he quietly went away and wrote his best poem in English. The sequence “nora’s place” moves into and out of the voice of Nora, “just a human being / totally representative / as anyone is / outside the self // (and in it)”, following her through a day of shopping, cooking, drinking and politics. On the way it manages to say things about the

