

TOWARDS THIS PARTICULAR PLACE: TOM LEONARD'S PLACES OF THE MIND AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO HIS EARLIER WORKS

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"I'd like to link the whole bloody lot up. Not just literature, I mean THE LOT... that tremendous feeling of the pattern, like a great big mesh where suddenly everything lights up because you see the same electricity suddenly coursing through all these different things."

Tom Leonard, "The Present Tense".

Places of the Mind, published in February 1993, is Tom Leonard's biography of the 19th-century poet James 'B. V.' Thomson, best known for his long poem, *The City of Dreadful Night*. First published in 1874, though long since out of print, it is often cited as a precursor to Eliot's *The Waste Land* while, closer to home, its influence upon the city of Unthank in Alasdair Gray's *Laurel* should not be overlooked.

Leonard has been working on this for a long time. As far back as 1985 it was announced that he was "in the process of completing his book on James Thomson".¹ Work on it began "officially" as a postgraduate thesis in 1976 at Glasgow University,² although his enthusiasm for Thomson was fired "some years" prior to this, when he came across part of *The City of Dreadful Night* in an anthology.

Thomson has been with Leonard for almost the whole of his career as a writer. There has obviously been an interest on Leonard's part to research and write about Thomson for many years, but the fact that a biography has appeared now, in 1993, is indicative of a certain development in Leonard's work, the gaining of a capacity to link certain strands of his thinking to produce a unified, large-scale piece of writing.

What I aim to do is take an overview of his output to date, and to look at the importance of *Places of the Mind* to Leonard's concepts of role and purpose of Literature. The overview will attempt to be inclusive, in the spirit of Leonard's own work. He wrote recently, "the borders between criticism and creative writing, collage and poetry, have become fairly meaningless to me... if I've written any poetry that's worth reading it is also a worthwhile piece of criticism, and the kind of 'criticism' I am interested in writing is more to do with speculation and engagement than with conclusion and summary."³

Between the inception and completion of *Places of the Mind*, Leonard has published two main works: in 1984, *Intimate Voices: Selected Work 1965-1983*; and, in 1990, the anthology *Radical Renfrew: Poetry from the French Revolution to The First World War by poets born, or sometimes resident in, the County of Renfrewshire*. Since 1984 he has continued to publish essays, poem sequences, theatre sketches and polemics, in magazines, newspapers and pamphlets.

Intimate Voices contains all the writing from 1965 to 1983 that its author wanted to keep.⁴ It consists mainly of poems — short individual poems, "conceptual poems", a long poem and four poem sequences — but also includes cartoons, a prose piece, and two essays, which I would like to look at first.

¹ *Edinburgh Review*, no. 67/8, p. 160, in "Notes on Contributors". This issue contains an essay by Leonard on Thomson, "Matter Tenchurum" (which now reads like a small-scale model of the finished biography).

² *Places of the Mind*, Preface and Acknowledgements, p. xiii.

³ *Verses*, Vol. 8, No. 2, (written) interview with Ken Cockburn, p. 65.

⁴ as note 2.

The essays describe Leonard's thoughts on culture in Britain, particularly the role of education and Received Pronunciation in transforming all forms of culture into ownable property. Like a big house with walls round it, this keeps the dispossessed firmly out and, what is perhaps worse, believing that it is only within those walls that Literature, or any form of Art, can be created. In "The Proof of the Mince Pie" (1973) he writes: "where beauty in language is recognised as the property of a particular class, then naturally truth is assumed to be the property of that class also. So a person who doesn't 'speak right' is therefore categorised as an ignoramus; it's not simply that he doesn't know how to speak right, but that this 'inability' shows that he has no claim to knowledge of truth."

The second essay, "The Locust Tree in Flower, and why it had Difficulty Flowering in Britain" (1976) deals with the same subject more analytically, using specific poetic examples. Leonard expounds the following "tawdry little syllogism... embedded in the consciousness of [British] society":

"1. In speaking of reality, there is a standard correct mode of pronunciation.

"2. In writing of reality, there is a standard correct mode of spelling and of syntax.

"3. In reality, correct spelling and correct syntax are synonymous with correct pronunciation."

He describes how three British poets — Ian Hamilton Finlay, Bob Cobbing and Hugh MacDiarmid — have combatted such tawdry logic by creating work which is capable of "dissecting the 'voice' of poetry", that is, the propriated voice of assumed truth. They do so by developing a "heightened awareness" of specific linguistic properties — syntax, phonology and lexis respectively. But his main focus is on the American poet William Carlos Williams, and specifically his poem "The Locust Tree in Flower", constructed from only 13 words. Leonard submits these to detailed analysis, indicating the way in which the poem's semantic content is generated as much by the formal arrangement of the words (relationships of syntax and sound) as by their accepted meanings, or, as Williams puts it, "the tactile qualities, the words themselves beyond the mere thought expressed".

As well as individual poems, three poem sequences appear in *Intimate Voices*: "Bunnet Husslin" (1975), "Unrelated Incidents" (1976) and "Ghostie Men" (1980). It's probably true to say that Leonard is still best-known for these poems (especially those from "Bunnet Husslin"), written in a transcription of Glasgow speech. His preferred formal model is the 'spontaneous utterance' rather than a received or borrowed form. Some of the poems refer to musical or philosophical ideas, but the rhythm and shape of the poem is determined by linguistic concerns, rather than being an attempt to make a linguistic equivalent of, say, a particular musical phrase or form. As he describes it, "I think I do believe that when a person is being authentic in a given act of speech there's a shape of authenticity occurs in the structure of their articulation, a kind of shape made with the spaces between the words, and the repetitions."

There's a development within the poem sequences away from a presumed transcription of a 'spontaneous utterance' towards a more subtle form of statement. I'm jumping ahead here, as this process only fully develops in *nora's place*, published in 1989. Whatever, it could be presented thus:

- 1) first-person poems which are presented as the spoken words of a particular speaker to a particular listener in a social situation;
- 2) first-person poems which are presented as the spoken, or thought, words of a particular speaker, or thinker, but without a suggestion of a social situation;
- 3) poems, written in the first, second, or third person, which intimate a particular persona or voice, i.e. are not 'objectively' descriptive, but which are not located as specific utterances or thoughts of a defined character or persona.

⁵ *Intimate Voices* (Galloway Dog Press, 1984), "The Proof of the Mince Pie", p. 65.

⁶ *Intimate Voices*.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁸ *Verses*, op. cit., p. 64.

In the early poems, Leonard bypasses the pseudo-objective voice of poetry he so criticises by making poems which are clearly the individual utterances of individual speakers in specific situations — dramatic monologues, essentially. In doing so, what he, as writer, establishes in the text is a situation of speaker and listener which acts as a model of the relationship between the writer and the reader: both participate 'theatrically', as characters in a created situation (speaker and listener), thus at a certain remove from one another. As the poems develop, Leonard seems less convinced by the validity of this approach. The poems move towards a more direct relationship between writer and reader, moving away from dramatic presentation of characters and situations towards a specific type of narrative (first, second or third person), in which author, subject and reader are all equally engaged, and in which there is the acknowledgement of the presence of a non-objective, non-intrusive authorial voice behind or within the poem. A 'straight-line' model writer — speaking character — listening character — reader becomes triangular:

writer — subject
 \ /
 reader

After *Intimate Voices* the concerns of the 'monologue' poems grew out in three separate directions. Firstly, the social and dramatic aspects were developed in a series of satirical sketches, performed in various revues which toured Scotland, and to which Liz Lochhead, Alasdair Gray and James Kelman also contributed.⁹ Secondly, the formal aspects were worked through in essays such as "Journeys" and "The Present Tense", whose structural arrangements contribute significantly to the effect and meaning of the works — just as Leonard had argued, with respect to poetry, in "The Locust Tree in Bloom".¹⁰ Thirdly, linguistically-based concerns with what might be called 'inequality of dialogue' were articulated in *Situations Theoretical and Contemporary* (1986), a collection which includes analyses of the 'professional' jargons of eighties' enterprise culture; situations in which the utterance was anything but spontaneous, and where language was constrained within set limits, rather than acting as the expression of free impulses.

In Leonard's dramatic work, there seem to me to be two areas which become increasingly problematic. Firstly, there's the effect of performance on the written text; and secondly, the possibility of creating a larger structure which links individual scenes.

The attraction of Leonard to the theatre, given the 'dramatic' mode of his early poems, is clear. On stage, an event is enacted before an audience, not merely described. The notion of voice cannot be ignored. Monologues and dialogues can provide opportunities for an analysis of language, and of the way the use, or abuse, of language creates certain relationships of equality, or inequality, between people. Yet the stage, for a writer, has many restrictions, or disciplines at least. In particular, language has to take its place amongst other names of expression — movement, setting, lighting, music, and so on — all of which effect the meaning of a text. The theatre writer has to take into account the fact that their words will be accompanied, underscored, amplified, distorted, silenced, by the physical actions and technical effects of performance, over which they have, at best, limited control. Leonard's skill, in his poems and monologues, is in creating a scene, a situation, an object of interest, exclusively through language, and this carries over into his sketches. In one, "Mr Andrews Speaks", the speaker, a school headmaster, is required to be absent: his voice comes "over the tannoy which has speakers in every classroom".¹¹ In another, a scene is described which takes place "in the head of" a particular character.¹² Leonard is a 'literary' writer rather than a 'theatrical' writer, seeking answers to his questions in the writing itself, not in the theatrical presentation of that writing.

⁹ Many of Leonard's scenes were published in *Satires and Profanities* (STUC, 1984). The title is a homage to Thomson, belonging as it does to a posthumously published collection of his writings.

¹⁰ "Satires and Profanities", p. 13.

¹¹ The first monologue of "Two Monologues and Two Scenes from a work in progress", *Chapman* 43-4 (Spring 1986), p. 98.

As regards larger structures, I noted above that, as individual poems, Leonard has produced a number of (non-narrative) poem-sequences, in which individual poems are linked in theme, language, tone and, sometimes, character. In some respects, only *nora's place* can be seen as a sequence, rather than a group of good poems with certain shared characteristics.¹³ Like the poems, most of Leonard's scenes stand alone. Even his radio play *If Only Buntly Was Here*¹⁴ is described by its author as "a drama sequence of totally undramatic non-sequiturs"; and the *Two Monologues and Two Scenes from a work in progress*, published in 1986 and forming, I think, the skeleton of a play commissioned by Edinburgh's Traverse Theatre, have not led to the publishing or performing of a completed play. Indeed, these are the last pieces for the theatre that Leonard has published to date. The concision and intensity of Leonard's writing make for effective scenes, complete in themselves; but this very completeness mitigates against their functioning as part of a larger whole. It's as if, in the effort to write a complete play, Leonard realised the unsuitability of theatrical form for his concerns. The focus on language as an object of language and its extra-linguistic requirements. The way a theatre audience receives the work is obviously specific too: they hear, as a group, the spoken word, linear and unrepeatable, unlike the individual reader who responds privately and who can skip or reread as they desire. The notion of enactment will remain important to Leonard, but an enactment purely through language; an act experienced by the reader, in the private reception of a published statement. The need is to find in language, exclusively, formal methods to express meaning, to enact that which is being described.

It's this that recent essays have attempted, particularly "Journeys"¹⁵ and "The Present Tense"¹⁶. "Journeys" conveys Leonard's response to the poems of W. S. Graham. It's a prose sequence, in 17 sections, and uses different tones and perspectives. These include a 'personal narrative' of the writer's relationship to Graham's work, whereby a journey is enacted. At the beginning the writer, ill and immobile, listens to Graham's voice, broadcast on the radio, through headphones. At the end he attends a reading given by Graham. It's a device which provides an enactment of a particular coming-to-terms with certain poems, not merely a description of them, and it's in this particular coming-to-terms that the effect of the poems is most clearly and dynamically conveyed.

"The Present Tense" examines the same, and the varied and specific ways in which it can be used. It branches out in all sorts of directions (infant development, the workings of the House of Commons, Duns Scotus, quantum physics). Parts of it are presented as diary entries, and there's a spontaneity — a present tense — to much of the writing. I still find it both exciting and bewildering — while the connections between certain sections are often unclear, there's a spark in the juxtaposition of the material, as well as in the writing itself, which conveys exactly the breadth of concerns any individual has at any given moment, some complete, some half-formed, some half-forgotten. Again, the formal arrangement of the piece is crucial, the reader's experience of this (apparent) jumble becoming a sort of enactment of the essays stated concerns.

Biography deals with a set of external, generally verifiable events which occurred in a certain (chronological) sequence. In one sense, *Places of the Mind* is a perfectly conventional biography, in that it describes the events of its subject's life in chronological order. Yet Leonard would seem to have something else in mind, when he writes in the preface that "what follows, having been made, can be described as a shape, containing a biography, made slowly in response to the Art of another."¹⁷

¹³ These ideas are developed further in a review of *nora's place* by the current author, in *Literary Review*, no. 117 (1991).

¹⁴ Print Studio Press, Glasgow, 1979.

¹⁵ *Edinburgh Review* no. 75, November 1986, pp. 83-7.

¹⁶ *Bate Noire*, Issue Ten/Eleven, Autumn 1990/Spring 1991, pp. 286-295.

¹⁷ *Places of the Mind*, p. xiii.

The structure of the book is taken directly from that of *The City of Dreadful Night*. Thomson's poem consists of 21 sections plus the "Proem"; Leonard's text of 22 chapters, the last of which, "Postscripts", offers an overview following Thomson's death. Thomson originally planned to place the "Proem" at the end of "The City of Dreadful Night", and Leonard's concluding chapter is in a way a reminder of a given structure's earlier possibilities. The 21 chapters are arranged in four sections, entitled "Angel", "Warrior", "Unarmed Man", and "The City of Dreadful Night". The first three headings are taken from an episode in the poem which lends its title to the fourth, an episode which Leonard paraphrases thus:

"the narrator would describe how he had fallen asleep in the cathedral square, where the statue of an angel brandishing a sword stood before a sphinx; and the narrator had woken three times to the sound of the stone angel disintegrating. First the wings, then the head, then the trunk. Angel, warrior, unarmed man. Fallen forward, stone on stone, its head between the sphinx's paws."¹⁷

The section headings encapsulate the development of Thomson's life and thinking, as he encounters, absorbs, engages with and casts off received certainties and assumptions: religious first of all (his family background and schooling); then institutional and secular (his training and career as an army schoolmaster); social and political (his association with the Secularist leader Charles Bradlaugh); until he is left facing the fundamental terror and horror of things, alone absolutely, which condition he describes so lucidly in "The City of Dreadful Night".

Chapter 19, "Stone on Stone", is particularly interesting in the way it relates to Thomson's poem, and in the way it conveys the circumstances of the last years of his life. The title (and it's the only chapter given one) is taken from section XX of "The City of Dreadful Night", that which describes the collapsing angel. The chapter itself consists of

a
sequence with introduction and key
from the diaries 1877 - 1881 of James Thomson
based on

a computer-generated random number sequence

179 dates follow, scattered non-chronologically through the period in question. Following 100 of these is a diary entry; most of these are only 3 or 4 lines long. Following the remaining 79 is written "[Blank]"; in other words Thomson made no diary entry on the day in question. As Leonard himself acknowledges, it's not an easy read. It's too fragmented for that, the sequence revealing no patterns in Thomson's life. But Leonard justifies its inclusion as "a necessary part of the underlying structural argument of the book".¹⁸ Given the biography's structure is based on *The City of Dreadful Night*, this acts as a pointer towards the corresponding section in the poem, i.e., Section XIX, which describes "the River of Suicides", significantly a place both of immediate experience, and of oblivion. I'm not suggesting that there's a rigid pattern of specific parallels between the poem and biography, but the former pervades the latter so thoroughly that Leonard's directing the reader explicitly towards his "structural argument" functions as a rare explicit authorial nudge back to the structure on which it's based, the poem. More importantly, in presenting silences as well as texts relating to the period in question, the chapter serves as a reminder of all that is not known of Thomson's life. The blanks suggest unverifiable, and thus absent, but nonetheless "real" events, in the sense that Thomson obviously did something on those particular days. They also point, in a narrative sense, towards the blanks in Thomson's consciousness caused by his repeated drinking bouts. Never mentioned explicitly by him, only by others, their frequency increased towards the end of his life. The random ordering of the dates can be seen as reflecting Thomson's consequent disorientation, lucid though his lucid moments continued to be.

¹⁷ *Places of the Mind*, pp. 145-6

¹⁸ *Places of the Mind*, p. 253

¹⁹ *Places of the Mind*, p. 253

A further aspect of the book's "shape" is the way certain themes recur. In considering the "underlying shape and tone" of *The City of Dreadful Night* Leonard has written of "its long circular movements of thought".²⁰ The most notable occurrence of this in the biography is the argument between pre-destination and free will which features both around Thomson's birth — when it was being debated in religious circles — and around his death — when it was being debated in Secularist circles. How is the child to be educated, how is the man to be remembered? It's a debate which crops up repeatedly throughout the book, as for example in the description of Carlyle's (mis)reading of Kant, whereby the conflict between the two is apparently resolved. Again, key aspects of Thomson's thought — in this case a pessimistic, cyclical view of history — are formalised or enacted rather than simply described.

But the key to the effectiveness of the book's "shape" the "large structure", is to be found in the detail. The book works not because Leonard has found an apt "shape" for Thomson's life and then filled it with the facts. Rather, the shape, the themes, the subject himself emerge slowly from the accumulation of detail.

One of the most striking aspects of the book, especially given Leonard's earlier works, is the lack of explicit criticism, polemic and speculation throughout. The book is a succession of discovered facts and quotations; the role of the biographer, having undertaken the necessary research, is to arrange the material and, where appropriate, elucidate the ideas discussed, something which is done with clarity, sensitivity and precision. The notes, listing sources and including more tangential material, are thorough and copious (73 pages of a book barely 400 long). That said, this is not an academic book, concerned only with verifiable fact to the exclusion of imaginative engagement. Leonard's precision is also an expression of respect for Thomson: he deals in detail with what is known and, whatever regrets or frustrations he may feel at those unrecorded aspects of Thomson's life, does not seek to impose conjectured histories upon his subject. From the knowledge he gleans develops an intimacy, accepting and curious, but without prurience. Again, the triangular model posited above seems apt: a sharing of knowledge between writer, subject and reader, with the writer avoiding knowing winks or tall stories when the subject's back is turned.

The effect of this approach is to produce a detailed, rounded portrait of Thomson, and of the times he lived in — their intellectual, spiritual, social and political aspects. Like *nora's place*, the underlying assumption is that an "ordinary" individual is capable of containing, acting as focus for, expressing, all aspects of the culture of their times. In the succession of detail "the pattern" emerges.

Oddly, this approach has a negative effect on some of the characters around Thomson, especially those who drift in and out of his life. Repeatedly referred to, but lacking novelistic epithets, they acquire an insubstantiality, represented as they are only by their association with Thomson, and thus denied the rounded approach Thomson himself receives. This is a minor problem, and any problems with identification can be easily resolved by a glance at the index, but it remains one of the only aspects of the book I found unsatisfying.²¹

While the book is principally devoted to Leonard's consideration of Thomson and his work, in the final chapter the reader of Leonard's book is unconditionally acknowledged, as reading that particular piece of writing and, by implication, having been present throughout their reading of the book. Leonard takes his reader on a journey around the locations of Thomson's life, as he has experienced them in the making of the book, as they are now, as, broadly speaking, the reader may have experienced them in the recent past, or would experience them, were they to go

²⁰ *Radical Renfrew*, introduction, p. xxix, where he compares the poem's structure to the symphonies of Anton Bruckner, a contemporary of Thomson

²¹ It's dependent on circumstance too. Mr. Gibson, Thomson's last landlord, appears several times in the last two chapters, usually attempting to evict an increasingly uncontrollable but still resourceful Thomson from his room. When it's mentioned that he attended Thomson's funeral, there's something very touching in this bald statement of fact.

there now. For the reader, it's an equivalent of Leonard's relationship to the places Thomson inhabited. As Leonard describes it, so the place is remembered or imagined by the reader; just as Leonard, having read Thomson and being separated from him by time rather than merely literature, can only remember or imagine Thomson's places. The book's title refers to this literary communication of 'real' places, as well as to those created imaginatively by Thomson in his work, particularly *The City of Dreadful Night*. The book itself is also a 'place of the mind', where writer, subject and reader meet as equals, as individuals and representatives of the whole.

"Area of encounter as hologram. As model of the universe. As agora. First slave to be freed, the reader."

Tom Leonard, "The Present Tense".