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Ronald K. S. Macaulay

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Ronald K. S. Macaulay

Urbanity in an Urban Dialect: The Poetry of Tom Leonard



No alphabet exists for the Glasgow accent --
phonetic symbols are no good without a glottal
stop, a snort, or a wheeze.

-- Paul Theroux

In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*
Stephen Dedalus complains about the Dean of Studies, 'the
English convert':

His language, so familiar and so foreign,
will always be for me an acquired speech.
I have not made or accepted its words. My
voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in
the shadow of his language.

Despite this attitude, until *Finnegans Wake* Joyce continued
to write in English. Other writers from the Celtic fringe,
as diverse as W.B. Yeats and Seamus Heaney, Dylan Thomas and
R.S. Thomas have succeeded in presenting their view of the
world in the English language. Scottish writers, on the
other hand, have had the option of writing in Scots. Some,
such as Edwin Muir and Norman McCaig, have rejected this

possibility, but many others, particularly after Hugh MacDiarmid had shown the way, have chosen to write in Scots.

Poetry in Scots presents formidable difficulties to many readers. Even most Scots need to consult the footnotes, glossary, or a dictionary to read Burns, Fergusson, and Ramsay; the difficulties are multiplied when poets such as MacDiarmid, Sydney Goodsir Smith, and Robert Garioch write in a diction that is deliberately archaic and 'un-English'. This barrier is unfortunate because for the greater part of the English-speaking world it prevents access to a substantial corpus of poetry, including a genre that has been rare in English since Chaucer's time, namely comic poetry.

The comic tradition in Scottish poetry is a rich and long one, and at least since the beginning of the eighteenth century it has been affected by the status of Scots. A.J.Aitken, in the introduction to *The Concise Scots Dictionary*, makes a good case for considering Scots to be a language rather than a dialect, but this view has not been universally shared. The position of Scots as an independent language, which had been weakened by the Union of the Crowns in 1603 with the migration of the court to London and by the widespread use of the King James Bible in English, declined even further after the Union of the Parliaments in 1707. In 1757 David Hume wrote in a letter about 'speaking a very corrupt dialect of the tongue which we make use of' and there were many efforts on the part of the Edinburgh literati to eliminate 'Scotticisms' from their writings. Since the proper language for serious writing was deemed to be English, writing in Scots was appropriate only for rural characters and settings, for sentimental songs, and for comic purposes.

Humor is also anti-authoritarian, and the comic tradition in Scottish poetry contains many examples of attacks on those in positions of authority, particularly the clergy. Burns was not afraid to attack the authority of the kirk (e.g. 'Holy Willie's Prayer') and this iconoclastic attitude has continued into the present century with much of MacDiarmid's work and that of his followers in writing poetry in Lallans (e.g. Douglas Young's 'Last Lauch').

Recently, however, a different kind of poetry in Scots has emerged, poetry in an urban dialect. This poetry is very different from that of the Lallans poets, and deliberately so.

As Stephen Mulrine, one of the Glasgow poets observes:

Lallans seems wholly inappropriate to the Glasgow experience; its word-hoard is rural, in essence, and unsuited to a city with no past before the Industrial Revolution, not to mention a taste for American slang. ('Poetry in Glasgow dialect' in *Focus on Scotland*, ed. by M. Gorkach, John Benjamins, 1985, p.227)

Among the most interesting of the Glasgow writers is Tom Leonard, whose recent volume *Intimate Voices 1965-1983* (Galloping Dog Press, 1984) brings together in a convenient form poems and prose pieces that have until now been difficult to locate. The volume includes poems both in English and in a representation of the urban dialect of Glasgow. It is the latter that are the subject of the present article.

Poetry in an urban dialect is not a totally new phenomenon. The best known examples are probably e.e.cummings's 'oil tel duh woil doi sez' which contains taboo expressions that would not have passed the censor in 1931 if written in normal orthography, and the later 'ygUDuh' which is perhaps less successful. Both poems are ironical monologues in which at least part of the point is directed against the speakers. In these poems there is very little suggestion that cummings is asserting the inherent value of the language itself.

Leonard is overtly concerned with the value of the language he attempts to represent:

All modes of speech are valid -- upper-class, middle-class, working-class from whatever region: linguistic chauvinism is a drag, pre-judging people just because they speak 'rough' or with the accent of another region, or equally, pre-judging people just because they speak 'posh'(p.95)

The speech of working-class Glaswegians is frequently stigmatized (see R.K.S.Macaulay, *Language, Social Class, and Education: a Glasgow study*, Edinburgh University Press, 1977), though it has also its admirers for its directness, vigor, and humor. The widespread success of the comedian Billy Connolly, who speaks in a marked Glasgow accent, is an indication of the effectiveness of a dialect approach even with audiences unfamiliar with the dialect.

Leonard is also interested in the ways in which dialect can be represented in writing. One of the most remarkable characteristics of English orthography is the fact that it

can represent widely differing varieties of pronunciation. The system of writing has not changed radically from Chaucer's time although the whole vowel system has undergone a dramatic restructuring; and many 'silent' letters remain as memorials to earlier pronunciations. The writing system thus presents a major problem for all writers who wish to indicate a form of language different from the standard one that will be taken for granted by most readers. Leonard is concerned about the social implications of such a situation and he refers to a 'tawdry little syllogism' by which prescriptive grammar leads to an assumption about pronunciation:

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.
- Therefore
3. In reality, correct spelling and correct syntax are synonymous with correct pronunciation.
- (pp.95-96)

In other words, according to the view Leonard is attacking, only writing that can be read aloud in a 'correct pronunciation' is valid, and conversely people who do not use 'correct pronunciation' have nothing to express in writing. Leonard makes this point more effectively in poem 3 of 'Unrelated Incidents:

this is thi
six a clock
news thi
man said n
thi reason
a talk wia
BBC accent
iz coz yi
widny wahnt
mi ti talk
about thi
trooth wia
voice lik
wanna yoo
scruff. if
a toktaboot
thi trooth
lik wanna yoo

scruff yi
 widny thingk
 it wuz troo.
 jist wanna yoo
 scruff tokn.
 thirza right
 way ti spell
 ana right way
 ti tok it. this
 is me tokn yir
 right way a
 spellin. this
 is ma trooth.
 yooz doant no
 the trooth
 yirsellz cawz
 yi canny talk
 right. this is
 the six a clock
 nyooz. belt up.
 (p.88)

This is not a monologue uttered by a BBC announcer. It is the interpretation of the subliminal message transmitted by the announcer's form of speech, filtered through the consciousness and language of a working-class Glaswegian, 'one of you scruff'. There is, consequently, a contradiction between the message and the language of the poem, and it is this contradiction that gives the poem its rhetorical force. Many of Leonard's poems are self-reflexive about language in this way.

There are only a few dialect expressions in this poem: - *ny* for *n't*, *yooz* for *you* (plural), *yirsellz* for *yourselves*. *Aboot*, *widny*, *wahnt*, and *wanna* are ways of representing Glasgow working-class pronunciations. Some of the other spellings (e.g. *wuz* for *was*, *ti* for *to*) are attempts to represent the kind of vowel reduction in any variety of English, while others (e.g., *iz* for *is*, *coz* or *cawz* for *cause*, or *thingk* for *think*) are simply more phonetically accurate representations of the pronunciation found in most forms of English. Leonard also deliberately varies the spelling of some words even where the phonetic significance may not be obvious (e.g. *talk*, *tokn*; *coz*, *cawz*; *news*, *nyooz*). He apparently does this as a kind of iconic parallel to the variation found in all spoken language. As he observes in a prose monologue:

Yi write doon a wurd, nyi sayti yirsell,
 that's no thi way a say it. Nif yi tryti
 write it doon thi way yi say it, yi end up
 wi thi page covered in letters stuck thigithir,
 nwee dots above hof thi letters, in fact yi end
 up wi wanna they thingz yi needti huv took a
 course in phonetics ti be able ti read. But
 that's no thi way a *think*, as if ad took a
 course in phonetics. A doant mean that emdy
 that's done phonetics canny think right --
 it's no a questiona right or wrong. But ifyi
 write down 'doon' wan minute, nwrite doon
 'down' thi nixt, people say yir beein inconsistent.
 But ifyi sayti sumdy, 'Whaira yi afti?' nthey say,
 'Whut?' nyou say, 'Where are you off to?' they don't
 say, 'That's no whutyi said thi furst time.' They'll
 probably say sumhm like, 'Doon thi road!' anif you say,
 'What?' they usually say, 'Down the road!' the second
 time -- though no always. Course, they never really
 say, 'Doon thi road!' or 'Down the road!' at all.
 Least, they never say it the way it's spelt. Coz it
izny spelt, when they say it, is it? (p.73)

Of course, you don't need to have taken a course in phonetics to read what Leonard has written, although you need to realize that he writes *and* phonetically as n and usually attaches it to an adjacent word, as he also does with the unstressed form of *to*. There are also a small number of items that may not be obvious to those not familiar with the form of speech: *a* 'I', *hof* 'half', *wanna they* 'one of those', *emdy* 'anybody', *sumdy* 'somebody', and *sumhm* 'something'. This is actually a very sophisticated statement about the relationship between spoken language and its representation in written form, but the subtlety of the argument could easily be missed because of the superficial form of the language in which it is expressed.

Leonard deals with the relationship between sound and symbol in his poetry too. On the cover of *Intimate Voices* there is a concrete poem:

. in the beginning was the word .
 in thi beginning was thi wurd
 in thi beginnin was thi wurd
 in thi biginnin was thi wurd
 in thi biginnin wuz thi wurd

n thi biginnin wuz thi wurd
 nthi biginnin wuzthi wurd
 inthibiginnin wuzthiwurd
 inthibiginninwuzthiwurd
 . in the beginning was the sound .

Unlike the Lallans poets, who send you to the dictionary or the glossary to find out their meanings, Leonard teaches his readers how to decipher his style of writing. In this short poem he shows how small changes in the representation of unstressed vowels and the conventional use of spaces can alter the effect of the language presented on the printed page. As in so much Scottish poetry, the Biblical allusion is very important. A wittier example is poem number 2 of 'Unrelated Incidents':

ifyi stull
 huvny
 wurkt oot
 thi diff-
 rince tween
 yir eyes
 n
 yir ears:
 -- geez peace,
 pal!

fyi stull
 huvny
 thoata lang-
 wij izza
 sound-system:
 fyi huvny
 hudda think
 about thi dif-
 frince tween
 sound
 n object n
 symbol: well
 ma innocent
 wee
 friend -- iz
 god said ti
 adam:

a doant kerr
fyi caw it
an apple
ur
an aipl--
jist leeit
alane!

(p.87)

Once again the message is reinforced by the form of the language. The poem is apparently addressed to someone who does not understand about the relationship between speech and writing. Yet the text is difficult for many readers to decipher because of the unconventional spelling, which places unusual demands on the reader. In auditory terms, the language of the poem is appropriate for a working-class speaker; in visual terms, the poem requires a linguistically sophisticated reader who can interpret the unconventional symbols. Leonard's 'ideal reader' is an educated, literate individual with an appreciation of the effectiveness of working-class speech, i.e., someone like Leonard himself. A particular effect is created by having God speak in this way. Scottish presbyterianism has always been fairly receptive to the imposition of prohibitions, and God's command *jist leeit alane* has a familiar ring of paternal authority to anyone brought up in Scotland.

Leonard's poetry uses urban dialect not as a criticism of the speakers but as a celebration of the liveliness and spirit such language often affirms. A clear example of this is poem number 7 of 'Unrelated Incidents':

dispite
thi fact
thit
hi bilonged
tay a
class uv
people
thit hid
hid thir
langwij
sneered
it
since hi
wuz born;

dispite
 a long
 history uv
 poverty n
 thi
 violence uv
 people in
 positions
 uv
 power telln
 him his
 culture wuz
 a sign
 of his
 inferiority;

thit fur
 thi
 purposes uv
 cultural
 statistics hi
 didny really
 exist amaz-
 in iz it
 might seem
 this
 ordinary wurkn
 man got
 up wan day
 n
 wuz herd
 tay rimark
 thit

it wuzny
 sitcha
 bad day
 tay be
 alive
 (p.93)

With very few exceptions (*tay*, *didny*, *wan*, *wuzny*), this poem is written in 'Standard' colloquial English, but the phonetic spellings and the context of the other poems in the series make the poem seem as Glaswegian as the others in which the dialect forms are more clearly marked. Like all good poets,

Leonard teaches the reader how to interpret his poems. It is Leonard's good ear for actual speech that gives his poems their rhythm. In the following love poem with its Shakespearean title, he fully exploits this talent:

A Summer's Day

yir eyes ur
eh
a mean yir

pirrit this wey
ah thingk yir
byewtifl like ehm

fact
fact a thingk yir
ach a luyi thahts

thahts
jist thi wey it is like
thahts ehm
aw ther iz ti say

(p. 41)

Here Leonard catches the hesitations, false starts, and repairs of spontaneous speech to convey an emotion of true affection, despite the incoherence. Only those who believe that language must be 'beautiful' to be effective will fail to find this 'byewtifl'. Leonard is an admirer of William Carlos Williams and he writes in the tradition of colloquial style that goes back through Whitman to an earlier concern for plain speaking. As Whitman put it in *An American Primer*:

Pronunciation is the stamina of language,--
it is language. (p.12)

In the next poem, Leonard shows a mother's voice expressing a different kind of emotion:

The Dropout

scrimpt nscraipt furryi
urryi grateful
no wan bit

speylt useless yi urr
 twistid izza coarkscrew
 cawz rows inan empty hooss

yir father nivirid yoor chance
 pick n choozyir joab
 a steady pey

well jiss take a lookit yirsell
 naithur wurk nur wahnt
 aw aye

yir clivir
 damn clivir
 but yi huvny a clue whutyir dayn
 (p.51)

[*furryi* 'for you', *speylt* 'spoilt', *pey* 'pay', *dayn* 'doing']

Paraphrased into conventional spelling and standard grammar, poems like 'A Summer's Day' and 'The Dropout' become flat and undistinguished because the colloquial realism is lost. His ability to catch a tone of voice allows Leonard to treat serious subjects with a light touch, as in the following example:

its awright fur you hen
 at least your oppresst
 yi know wherr yi urr

no mahtr whuts wrang way yi
 yi kin looknthe mirrur
 nsayti yir sell

I am a wummin
 naw
 I am a persn
 who ztreatid izza wummin
 bi thaht basturd therr
 niz imperialist cock

but ah luknthe mirrur
 na sayti ma sell
 ahv goat a cock
 a canny help thaht

I am a man
naw
I am a persn
who happnz tay be a man
but ahm no iz bad iz summa thim

its no thi same
(p.106)

This is a witty comment on the problem of how to escape the charge of male chauvinism, but it is unlikely to receive widespread circulation because of the language in which it is expressed.

Leonard uses taboo expressions quite frequently in his poetry and it is clear that it is a deliberate attempt to increase the realism of the language, since swearing is common among working-class speakers (in contrast to middle-class speakers, of course, who never swear, except under extreme provocation). Although any shock value soon wears off and the use of such language can become as pointless and repetitious as in real life, there are times when Leonard can use it very effectively for comic purposes:

right inuff
ma language is disgraceful

ma maw tellt mi
ma teacher tellt mi
thi doactir tellt mi
thi priest tellt mi

ma boss tellt mi
ma landlady in carrington street tellt mi
thi wee lassie ah tried tay get aff way in 1969 tellt mi
sum wee smout thit thoat ah hudny read chomsky tellt mi
a calvinistic communist thit thoat ah wuz revisionist
tellt mi

po-faced literati grimly kerryin thi burden a thi past
tellt mi
po-faced literati grimly kerryin thi burden a thi
future tellt mi
ma wife tellt mi jist-tay-get-inty-this-poem tellt mi
ma wainz came hame fray school an tellt mi
jist about ivry book ah oapnd tellt mi

even the introduction tay thi Scottish National
Dictionary tellt mi

ach well
all livin language is sacred
fuck thi lohta thim

(p.120)

Nobody who believes that all living language is sacred could be offended by this. One person who obviously did not believe this was William Grant, editor of *The Scottish National Dictionary*, who stated in the introduction to the first volume that 'owing to the influx of Irish and foreign immigrants in the industrial area near Glasgow the dialect has become hopelessly corrupt' (p.xxvii). The speech of Glasgow, like that of the other major Scottish cities, was also deliberately ignored in the Linguistic Survey of Scotland.

The last poem in the volume is in English and it is a response to one kind of criticism:

Fathers and Sons

I remember being ashamed of my father
when he whispered the words out loud
reading the newspaper.

"Don't you find
the use of phonetic urban dialect
rather constrictive?"
asks a member of the audience.

The poetry reading is over.
I will go home to my children.
(p.140)

The world that the characters in Leonard's poems inhabit is not the comfortable, middle-class one of those who are most likely to read his poetry, but one of unemployment, decaying tenements, violence, prejudice, and hard drinking. In a variation on a familiar rhyme, Leonard writes:

humpty dumpty satna waw
humpty dumpty hudda big faw

aw thi kingz hoarsyz
inaw thi kingz men

came charjin up
n trampld im inty thi grunn
(p.107)

In this world, those in authority do not try to put you together again if you fall down, they trample you into the ground. Leonard's poems are a tribute to the resilience of those who find that despite everything occasionally it isn't 'sitcha a bad day tay be alive'. The cumulative effect of Leonard's poetry is of a profound humanity. It is fitting that his work should have an uncomfortable, superficially unattractive appearance but contain much warmth, humor and sympathy because that is true of the city itself.

Pitzer College