CUT WELFARE!

SAVE THE WARFARE STATE!

• CRS IX • 26.11.10 •
• TOM LEONARD • KESTON SUTHERLAND •
We halted on our path, and to our left a great drop o’erlooked a single plain that stretched to the horizon. No tree or plant could be seen thereon, no trace of animal or growth.

Yet in the middle distance could be discerned what seemed a vast crater full to overflow, a mound of teeming specks heaving and twisting in the gloom.

That is the great crater of those studying and teaching “The Waste Land” said my ancient Guide. His finger swept along the horizon, and faintly could be seen yet other craters, yet more mounds distant, separate and afar.

We gazed awhile on this boundless desolate world of hermetic worlds, then struck on inward in silence, my mind looking forward yet keener to life and warmth.

now.             (thats it)         noo.                          the noo
naw.        naw.        naw.        naw.        naw.        naw.        now then
(ya daft cunt)
tay thi business.
tay thi business of thi (leaps) (leaps) (leaps) (leaps)
its thi ih
tay thi business of thi aye
Breath is an important component of Tom Leonard’s poetry, used to punctuate the line-unit and as an organising principle across the page. This is, in part, a question of measure, how we measure the world, its continuities, what it contains. The lungs take priority over the heart. The point at which the defences are down is also a moment of vulnerability, which can be a position of moral force: ‘a human being | and a citizen of the world | responsible to that world | - and responsible for that world’ (p. 204).

In his early work ‘A Priest Came On At Merkland Street’ (pp. 29-35), Leonard shows us a vulnerable human being responding to the world. In this case, the world is a train carriage on the Glasgow Subway, a closed circuit, as illustrated by the map which appears at the start of the poem. Its speaker ‘king of Leithland Road | Pollok | Glasgow SW3’, disturbed by the Priest sitting opposite, details obsessive and intrusive thoughts about sexual abuse and mortality, and different mechanisms for coping with this distress. The person’s struggle for agency and calm in language is figured as a ‘tape recorder between my ears’ with no controls, repeating ‘I am going to die’. The registers are various; ‘a bit of Mahler’s Seventh’ to drown it out, defences built up via musical breath: ‘dah dum, da dum dah dee, l dah dah dah DAH da dah’. The ‘da’ obliquely signals the Father of the Church, either as a means of neutralising and containing the threat, or as a slip signalling the futility of the song. These snatches of music are singular because punctuated by commas: every other line is a single unit of breath, with no caesuras, prompting a kind of gasped prosody. The poem is dedicated to ‘sufferers of psychosomatic asthma’ and we breathe with the poem and its speaker in sympathetic discomfort, the unequal distribution of air in the gasp a kind of friction or discontinuity between the inner and outer, where some have as little security in breathing as in anything else. (The lines ‘you know whoo | correction | you know whwo’ most particularly enact the difficulty of breathing out during an asthma attack.)

‘A Priest Came On At Merkland Street’ is rare in Leonard’s work, in that it describes at length an ‘inner world’ in which other people are only intruders who, in part, make an equivalence or a continuity between inner life and the outer world impossible. This is how some people experience the world you breathe out in. I think that in the reading of this poem and in the perception of the breath of the vulnerable the capacity for a shared and humane responsibility is dignified, increases.

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2. See Leonard’s essay ‘The Common Breath’ for his remarks about the politics of form, and commentary on poems by William Carlos Williams, Paul Blackburn and others. Online: <tomleonard.co.uk/online-poetry-a-prose/the-common-breath.html>

3. For some perceptive comments on the comparable ‘[specified] limits of existence’ in Leonard’s poem ‘Nora’s Place’, see Keston Sutherland’s essay, ‘“this / is not a metaphor”: the possibility of social realism in British poetry’. Forthcoming in British Social Realism in the Arts 1945-2010, ed. David Tucker (London: Palgrave, 2011).
The police smack the people in Merrion Row, doing their jobs justice; at Millbank the windows are booted down, voiding reinforcement; the government boys look set to make solvency heroic; their genitals in plaster deck the halls like powerdrills;

You walk from the Strand to Nelson, turn left at the corner into Whitehall; the police are instructed to ingratiate camerapersons, by ignoring them; the technique is borrowed right from the top, tolerance of poverty is its paradigm; you film them and they film you, synergy by right;

Because the universe has been outmanoeuvred, individuals flourish; to put away your childish things, cut the arts first; say in the prophylactic tone of establishment sarcasm; what chance for debt reduction against the sheer nobility of sentiment;

If there will be a revolution in the UK, it will involve the army; war will continue either way, sugared by truth or not; love is not the unswerving professional bias of police dogs; it has to be made from scratch at the first indication of its possibility.

The French have their avantages à qui, as we in turn have ours; a peine rentrés les lampions, voilà que tombent les bonnes; if we don’t fight now, the superrich will harden into sultans; deeply and truly fuck them, one-way receptacles;
At the corner of Parliament Square the teenagers are standing on bus shelters; they are shouting for what they believe and feeling what you never will; think of the anger you waste on gifts that might be used on money; masturbation is not loved, it’s betrayal of the workers;

You can see the predisposition to moderate success in politics; in the features of Aaron Porter, the flexible physiognomy; the thought of sex with him doesn’t occur to the majority of his delegates; that’s what makes him perfect for redefining compromise;

The wall of glass smashed in, looks like what Wordsworth saw; in the flint windbreaker, lying on the empty floor; to be a shard of broken glass, shining like life; psychosis as the mirror of your dreams, or justice;

A cop with a freshly bandaged face is the punctum of the coverage; her wide eyes make fear emblematic, glint on film intensely; at Sussex they grabbed them and chucked them down the slope to be arrested; at the bottom of the slope the women on minimum wage count the minutes of grind;

I’m far from knowing what to do about any of this, or after it; but so long as my blood is attached to the world I live for by its motion; I create this pledge in utter solemnity, I will never deny it; but burst to make its love for everyone shower from my heart.
ON KESTON SUTHERLAND

I think, among other things, that the poetry of Keston Sutherland has resuscitated the power of image from its entrenchment in a century of abstraction. Even the weak imagist cries were just keeping busy until the Vortex appeared at the Western gate. What is instead on offer in the vending orbit, here, the jargon of vocalized pathologies, is the special arrangement of product, but the product contains further elements of product, and further inside the seeds we pass through the hydrocarbon filaments of stuffed bunny cakes and the cancerous ions of battery-operated dodecahedron calf implants; the atomism of capital lacks not the imagination of romance but the inscrutability of desire, the burgeoning moment unto the saturated void, the hair-twitch before the crease in diaphragm volume makes the bile contract, and the internal pleasure wheel spins, does its dance, and burns to the ground.

The vessel for desire rues its arbitrary ad hoc status, even while it anticipates a holistic dream-culmination and races to secure the eating of its own half-debited lobe; the future is by now appetizer. We put it in the symmetrical dispersion of potential instance like Watt or we put it in the clotting of hope like John Wieners or we put it in the sentimental demitasse and artifice of lightness like Frank O’Hara or we put it in the ecology of neo-tribal love like Charles Olson. Its location is an expression of ideology; even as it dissolves and shows its synthetic muscle at the edges, the deprived settle on the effigy as visionary spirit, and the search for an essence of attraction becomes a hematoma to trace the return of consciousness. This hyper-imagism despiritualizes the oratory of disinterested association, or reifies the bundled gift orifice of sanctimony, makes the whistle choke, the choking smooth, the sincere counterfeit, the counterfeit authentic, the neither both, the legroom reservation of not untrue the glaring risk of the thrice false.

Articulation of previously won content has recently been important to this excavation of lyric, but the embeddedness of sub-linkages and pop terminals do not ease or make transparent the song. Even if we embalm ourselves with facetiousness, the vacuum of materialism ushers in an ill-defined animism. It is by kinaesthetic filtering that the passion of angelic torpor is substantiated; by refracting passion within the confessional commodity-gazing that trust becomes an uncomfortable ethics of thinking. This inverted atavism tickles the anti-hero of storm-throated avant-porn, levels the set, and bears witness to the stupid fabulation of horror antics. Fine oratory does not capture eloquence, but makes distinction a reclaimer for heads rubbed out into stupefied dough, heads that may yet taste the conscripted tang of every first smile.

— RD
TOM LEONARD was born in Glasgow in 1944. His work includes dialect poems, sound poems, visual poems, essays and political satire. He has published a biography of James Thomson (B.V.) and his selected poems outside the narrative published last year gathers his work since 1965. He has recently written a translation of Brecht’s Mother Courage and her Children that Smokestack Books hope to publish late in 2011. The flag image is a still from the slideshow poem sequence ‘from a remote place’. The poem beginning ‘now’ is from ‘a traverse sequence’, published online at Onedit 15. As part of his CRS reading, Leonard read Robert Lax and showed some of his slideshow sequence poems.

KESTON SUTHERLAND was conceived in 1975, born in 1976 and is now living in 2010. He lives and works in Brighton. His books include The Stats on Infinity, Stress Position, Hot White Andy, Neutrality, The Rictus Flag and Antifreeze. Stupefaction: a radical anatomy of phantoms, will be published by Seagull Books in May 2011. He has published essays on Stephen Rodefer, Veronica Forrest-Thomson, J.H. Prynne, William Wordsworth, Frank Zappa, Alexander Pope, Frank O’Hara, Tom Leonard, concrete poetry made by people at art school, speed, vagueness, stupidity, spam and other noumena. As part of his CRS reading, Sutherland read Keats and Racine.

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