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## ARTICLE

# Poetic Forms & Existentialism in Tom Leonard's *access to the silence: poems and posters, 1984-2004*

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This article on Glasgow poet Tom Leonard explores his visual poetry and his poems with existentialist leanings in his fourth poetry collection: *access to the silence: poems and posters, 1984-2004*. This paper analyses Leonard's more experimental forms such as his poetry sequences and poster poems, as well as taking a look at his explorations in existentialism. The article aims to widen discussion on Leonard's work and find similarities in form and content to other poets in the UK. Previous criticism focuses solely on his previous work in urban phonetic dialect, and through discussing how Leonard's poems use poetic forms to explore philosophical concepts, this article aims to address this imbalance.

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**Keywords:** poetry; concrete poetry; posters; existentialism; contemporary

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## Poetic form and existentialism in Tom Leonard's *access to the silence: poems and posters, 1984-2004*

This article on Glasgow poet Tom Leonard explores his visual poetry and his poems with existentialist leanings in his fourth poetry collection: *access to the silence: poems and posters, 1984-2004* (2004).<sup>1</sup> Looking at Leonard's more experimental forms such as his poetry sequences and poster poems, as well as taking a look at his explorations in existentialism, the article aims to widen discussion on Leonard's work and find similarities in form and content to other poets in the UK. Previous criticism focuses solely on his previous work in phonetic rendering of urban dialect phonetic dialect and by discussing how Leonard's poems use poetic forms to explore philosophical concepts, this article aims to address this imbalance.

Tom Leonard inhabits an influential though narrowly thematic critical space in Scottish poetry as a result of his pioneering renderings of urban dialect and his representations of marginalised figures in his poetry and prose. Throughout his career, Leonard has been associated with various literary groups with which his writing shares political and linguistic aims of using urban speech as an artistic representation of an under-represented social class. In the 1960s Leonard's *Six Glasgow Poems* (1969)<sup>2</sup> appeared to emulate the urban poetry of Ian Hamilton Finlay and Stephen Mulrine, and, like Edwin Morgan, challenged the prescriptive limits of Hugh MacDiarmid's synthetic and generic brand of Scots, Lallans.<sup>3</sup> This counter-reaction towards Lallans was made by all three poets through the publication of their poems written in urban phonetic dialect, representing the marginalised voices of the Glaswegian working-classes. Leonard also has a reputation as being part of a Glasgow literary clique: as a student at Glasgow University in the 1970s, Leonard attended Philip Hobsbaum's intramural creative writing class which included Glasgow writers James Kelman, Alasdair Gray, Liz Lochhead and Agnes Owen, as well as Tom McGrath's informal performing troupe of writers and artists known as 'The Other People'.<sup>4</sup> In 2001, Leonard became even more closely associated with Kelman and Gray when the three writers were appointed joint chair of University of Glasgow's Creative Writing programme in 2001.<sup>5</sup>

Leonard has been seen as an influential figure in Scottish Literature, but not for the later poetry in Standard English which will be discussed in this article. Rather Leonard is known for his early poetry, through its phonetic representation of urban dialect and the use of Glaswegian vernacular to convey the experiential reality of living in working-class Glasgow. Within the context of the West of Scotland, the working-class topics of religion, sectarianism and football in Leonard's poetry placed him alongside fiction writers who were also tackling the social realities and class issues of contemporary Glasgow. Along with Alasdair Gray, Alan Spence, William McIlvanney and Archie Hind, Leonard has been identified by Douglas Gifford as part of a group of male writers in the 1990s whose work exemplified 'Scottish realism'; specifically a new wave of urbanised literature which strived to let go of the mythic

and rural Scotland once explored by writers such as Edwin Muir, Neill Gunn, Lewis Grassie Gibbon and Hugh MacDiarmid. Instead, this 'new Scottish realism' conveyed the experience of urban living in the West of Scotland and explored attitudes towards masculinity, violence and religion. Gifford terms this angry, gritty and male-centric movement a 'new urbanity' which 'by and large is deeply critical of the very Scotland it celebrates'.<sup>6</sup>

The repeated focus on Leonard's poetry in urban dialect means the full spectrum of his work, notably his range of essays, poster poems, and field and concrete experiments are relatively neglected. Critics have not provided rounded commentary on the breadth of his output as essayist, anthologist and biographer, and experimental poet which should enable him to be seen as a multi-faceted writer who has written in both prose and poetry. In critical analysis of Leonard's work there is little discussion of his poetry in Standard English, despite the fact that Leonard's output is almost equally divided between poems in Standard English and urban dialect. It can be argued that Leonard's poems in Standard English are not analysed in depth because they deal less overtly with issues of working-class aggression, language and power, and instead embrace topics such as existentialism and mental illness, as in the poems 'who wants to', 'access to the silence' and *nora's place*, which will be discussed at length in this article. Few acknowledge Leonard's flexible aural range or his application of contemporary poetics; again because he is seen primarily as a writer who provides political and social commentary rather than as an experimental poet.

This article analyses Tom Leonard's reflections on existentialism in the collection *access to the silence: poems and posters 1984–2004*. The poster poems and sequences experiment with spacing on the page, font size, shape and form in order to express the human desire for freedom. Some of the poems also explore basic concepts of existential freedom; topics which are an unstated but recurring concern in these collections. The poems express an idealist desire for individuals to attain a sense of existential freedom in their daily lives.; This particular freedom entails the inner rejection of cultural and class assumptions placed by the politically powerful. By reframing ideas about existential freedom, Leonard creates brief,

fragmented poems which ruminate on one's freedom to choose one's identity, despite the cultural expectations of class, wealth, status and language pressed on individuals in society. These existentialist poems can be argued to share ideas with Sartre's essay *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946), as they are similarly chiefly concerned with notions of existence and 'being'.<sup>7</sup> In Leonard's poems, 'being' means identifying, locating and encouraging existential freedom within public spaces, in private moments with others, within one's own mind and in the zone of professional language common in workplaces.

### ***access to the silence: launch and critical reception***

Leonard's publication of *access to the silence* with small Newcastle press Etruscan Books is a departure in his career from Jonathan Cape in his previous work *Reports From The Present: Selected Work 1982–94* (1995), a book associated with editor Robin Robertson and Scottish writers who emerged in the 1990s like Irvine Welsh, A.L. Kennedy, and John Burnside. The launch in 2004 at Edinburgh's radical Word Power book shop coincided with Leonard's sixtieth birthday. Despite the location not being Glasgow, the celebrations were a kind of homecoming, with friends and previous political interests at the forefront.<sup>8</sup> As Jennie Renton of *The Herald* newspaper reported: 'Jim Kelman, Alasdair Gray, Liz Lochhead and Tessa Ransford gave readings and a socialist magician turned blue hankies into red ones'.<sup>9</sup> The socialist symbols signified Leonard's continued engagement with language and politics and reflected his reputation as a poet of 'scorpion-tongued polemics'. But as Renton also notes, 'Now it is the morning after the night before, Leonard doesn't have a hangover. He gave up drinking and smoking years ago'.<sup>10</sup> Leonard's sobriety signifies changes in his circumstances and health and perhaps suggest greater maturity.

*access to the silence* contains new and previous collected sequences 'nora's place', 'Hesitations: monologues for dancing', and 'Situations theoretical and contemporary', which had been previously published in *Reports From the Present*. The recycling of these sequences is not much of a surprise; much of Leonard's work appears multiple times in separate volumes. The inclusion of these poems does allow the

reader to compare them against other types of Leonard poems, and get a sense of how his work has evolved thematically and formally over the years. There is also much new work: 'Nine Variations on Larry's Poem', 'Foodies', a selection of media-themed poster poems and a number of previously unpublished poems are included. What's most significant is that the collection is distinguished from Leonard's previous works by its total absence of prose writings; this may signify Leonard's return to what he perceives to be the genre that best expresses his aesthetic, political and social concerns: poetry.

Reviews of *access to the silence*, though short, were generally positive and supportive of Leonard's new artistic directions. Reviewers from a variety of journals agreed on certain language properties and existential attitudes found within the collection. The first point of agreement is Leonard's evolved engagement with language. Peter Manson noted that Leonard's fragmented poetry echoes the metanarratives of one's thoughts, the so-called uncontainable 'silence' mentioned in the title. Manson comments: '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'.<sup>11</sup> Matt McGuire spoke of Leonard's evolved textual style, noting that '*access to the silence* eschews Leonard's familiar phoneticised speech for a more Standard English orthography and in doing so signals an attempt to universalise and re-locate the experience of linguistic subordination that preoccupies his earlier work.'<sup>12</sup> Both Manson and McGuire commented on Leonard's creation of an alienated and secluded voice in the new poems. These critics noted the shift from a defensive and ironic voice to an inclusive voice projecting Standard English, though in lower case letters. It is these new poems which will be discussed in this article in order to explore how Leonard's style has evolved over the years, including how his poems hint at the exploration of existential philosophy.

It may be helpful to first discuss some principles of existentialism. A major tenet of existentialism is that 'existence precedes essence'.<sup>13</sup> This idea is crucial because it implies the possibility of freedom. As Kevin Aho states: 'for existentialists, no idea is

more central than freedom'.<sup>14</sup> Sartre explains in *Existentialism is a Humanism* that man has the ability to define himself and is not defined by either objects or persons in his life: 'We mean that man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself.' Sartre believes that man starts out as 'nothing' and builds his own character at his own pace and in his own time: 'He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself.'<sup>15</sup> Kierkegaard further states that 'The most tremendous thing which has been granted to man is choice [and] freedom.'<sup>16</sup> Existentialists also believe that, ideally, human freedom should not be limited by external factors. Aho continues: 'That means whatever our factual limitations – whether it is our genetic code, our socioeconomic backgrounds, our religious or family history – they do not ultimately determine who we are. We are self-making beings responsible for the meanings we give to things through our own choices, the totality of which makes us who we are.'<sup>17</sup> Leonard's poems reflect and question these ideas in their exploration of the self in relation to their environment. A concern with the freedom to define one's self beyond social conventions and established authority manifests itself in the poems 'coffee, cafe and the paper', 'who wants to' and 'access to the silence'.

It would appear that many of Leonard's existentialist poems question whether it is possible to be 'free' in one's own estimation of one's identity, as well as the possibility of being free within relationships, in urban or domestic environments. Some existentialists argue that though freedom is quintessential to existential living, man is never really free. Hegel's theory of freedom contends that a person is only free if he is not dependent on anything outside of himself, and that 'a man is only free when he knows himself to be free.'<sup>18</sup> Aho points out that existentialist freedom does not actually entail fulfilling one's desires, because when we do so 'we are actually at the mercy of our wants, where we simply respond to passing whims and desires.'<sup>19</sup> Instead, existential freedom is the freedom to evaluate without bias one's own actions, 'to interpret the world, to give meaning and value to our situation on the basis of our own choosing.'<sup>20</sup> The phrase 'our own choosing' is key to understanding Leonard's interpretation and application of existentialist ideals in his poetry as it encapsulates his belief that individuals should dictate their own lifestyles, despite social conventions.

Leonard's poem 'coffee, cafe and the paper' appears to explore the tension of being free in a public space. David Cooper's suggestion that alienated persons can struggle with objects in their surroundings chimes with Leonard's poems which deal with the relation of the self to objects. Cooper speaks of the tension between a person and the objects in the room: 'The alienated person, however, feels that objects "dominate" him, and that he is a "victim" of his sensual, "anima" desires. Hence, the attempt to overcome alienation is one with the urge towards freedom.'<sup>21</sup> Leonard's poem 'coffee, cafe and the paper' explores the tension of finding freedom through actively acknowledging one's participation in communal social ritual. Leonard asserts the narrator's individuality through personalised observations of sitting in a cafe with others. In this brief poem, Leonard contends that it is language which sustains individuality, yet also connects the individual to others. Language in this respect is like coffee, a form of individual and communal sustenance or as Leonard calls it affectionately, 'the day's supply':

quiet the  
habit of  
  
grazing  
privately publicly  
  
language/  
other-sewn  
  
at one  
with the many  
  
sufficing  
the day's supply<sup>22</sup>

This poem first acknowledges the paradoxical experience of being alone yet surrounded. Then it explores the intersubjective relationship between our sense of language and others, in his pairing of the words 'language/other-sewn', an enigmatic phrase which alludes to how individuals use language to express the terms of their



existence and sense of reality. The use of 'other-sewn' can be seen in terms of the idea of 'suture', a term used in film theory for the way in which camera shots generate subjectivity. 'Suture' refers to the processes by which film viewers become 'stitched' or 'drawn-into' a film, and viewers react to the narrative action as though they were 'enclosed' in the film, perhaps even subjects within the film if they identify with the characters.<sup>23</sup> In a similar manner, Leonard's term 'other-sewn' suggests that individuals can view themselves as resembling a character in a film about their own life, in which they are both spectators and participants, and use language to express the boundaries of their reality. Another significant and recurring device in this poem is Leonard's insertion of a oblique stroke midway through a line, a symbol which presents both a break and connection between two co-existing topics. The oblique stroke in this case represents the the link between the individual possession of language and its shared nature (??): 'language/other-sewn'.

Freedom to be an individual within a relationship, despite the ideal of the romantic relationship as a union of a couple sharing common ideas, is apparent in 'your eyes/the iris' and 'walking in the park'. In his review of *access to the silence*, Matt McGuire comments briefly on Leonard's treatment of the 'existential experience unique to human relationships.'<sup>24</sup> However, he makes no further comment on the nature of this 'existential experience'. Poems such as 'your eyes/the iris' investigate the paradox of a shared but individually felt experience. The narrator remarks on the shared scent of freesia that both of them can smell, and the poem questions whether the narrator's sense of 'home' might be shared by his companion. The fragmented and gnomic verses impart a secluded and private perspective:

and the freesia  
with the smell of freesia  
filling the room  
coming home,  
surprised  
that place we share<sup>25</sup>

Again, the poem 'walking in the park' questions the possibilities of parallel perceptions within a shared experience. The 'park' of the title loses its significance as a public space and becomes a private zone for the narrator to air his thoughts about his partner's particular sense of self, as well as his role in supporting her. Again the use of the oblique stroke between 'was just/the echo of nothing' illustrates a paradoxical, though connected experience of a 'feeling' which is not entirely understood or felt, but exists as 'an echo of nothing':

what happened this day, whether  
sensing your beauty  
  
was just/the echo of nothing  
to do with me or the inside of me  
  
but you and your private sense of being  
on this another such occasion<sup>26</sup>

It can be argued that these poems present the existential notion that the self can have component parts which relate to different aspects of one's personality; having a sense of separate selves in one's body forms part of Leonard's ideas on how one 'exists' in the world. Sartre's existentialist philosophy investigates the structures of the self, and the multiple aspects of the relationships between the self and others. The idea of locating a sense of freedom, despite external factors such as our relations to others, and to objects, is expressed in Leonard's poems 'respite in the reading', 'not-him', and 'leaning forward'. In these poems that Leonard also explores the possibility of shaping one's identity and character despite limitations that can impinge upon this process. These limitations include the depth of influence literature and texts can have on a person's thoughts, as texts shape our learning; also how legacies of conflict passed down families shape one's sense of self. On a stylistic note, these poems contain much white space which appears to be evocative of the perimeters of the narrator's mind. The white space forms a margin around the text, and so functions as a metaphor for boundaries or edges. In this way Leonard links discussions of existential freedom to discussions of the materiality of the mind.

These poems also share certain formal features: use of the present tense and a first-person perspective; a lower-case type which suggests a secluded perspective; short lines which create a precise, considered and yet urgent tone. They illustrate a distinct departure from Leonard's earlier poems written in urban dialect. Despite their brevity and simple presentation, these poems are critiques of the constraining effects of memory, as they question the shaping of an individual's identity by their memories. For example, 'respite in the reading', explores the impact and influence of text on a person's self-assessment, and how one can have the freedom to separate one's own thoughts from the ideas within a text. This poem explores the dialogical and intersubjective relationship between text and reader, as both are participants in the act of gathering and transferring information. Leonard speaks of the meeting place between book and reader, calling 'this place . . . an accompanying darkness'.<sup>27</sup> Leonard's next stanza describes the influence of text on a reader's assessment of themselves. The last line, with the words 'led into, of your own accord' conveys both a paradoxical sense of autonomy and passivity, illustrating the enigmatic nature of texts, which intrigues the human mind:

the role, a model  
of being oneself, helped  
by the places you were  
led into, of your own accord<sup>28</sup>

Despite the interaction between text and reader, Leonard insists that the reader can separate himself from the text's influence. The reader does not have to define his identity by what he chooses to read. The reader also has the existential freedom to step in and out of a mental space that is both flexible and inflexible, that becomes:

. . . a welcoming  
familiar, no time to stay<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, in 'leaning-forward', Leonard potentially explores the limiting role of memory on the understanding of one's self. Leonard seeks to separate memory from the concept of identity, seemingly arguing that the past as represented in an individual's

memory can be overcome. As with 'reading in the respite', Leonard describes the surface and textures of the mind, allowing it to have both an exterior and interior shape, leading to a view of the mind as a material object:

partly the  
inside maybe  
  
the outside  
of it, who knows  
  
which  
is the which  
  
of it, the real  
base line  
  
the hologram  
liveable within

In this poem, Leonard questions the experience of remembering and posits that even our memories do not totally define who we are. He acknowledges that the experience of reliving one's memories is fleeting, since one's assessment of one's self is an adaptable and variable structure:

it changes  
so readily,  
  
the sense  
of  
  
the place  
you come  
  
to a constant  
gone, no

coming back  
again, maybe  
  
all the head . . . <sup>30</sup>

In the rambling and fluctuating syntax of these short lines, the poem presents the idea that a person's identity is separate even from their own perception of their character, the 'hologram liveable within'. The poem suggests that humans have the freedom to reconstruct their identity even from their own (and perhaps former) perceptions of themselves. The poem reflects the symbiotic relationship between content and visual presentation.

### **Poems that explore existential freedom**

Another important set of new poems in *access to the silence* suggests the fantasy of a like-minded existentialist community. In an uncharacteristically gentle tone, poems such as 'who wants to be free', 'proem' and 'outside the narrative' speak of uniting individuals who yearn for a sense of belonging. 'who wants to be free' illustrates an aspiration for others to join the narrator in achieving release from the conventions set by established authorities, by the refusal to act, believe, and behave in a manner modelled by the politically and socio-economically powerful. It is a contemplative poem which conveys a fragmented voice through the use of the poem's generous white space, short lines and lower case letters:

who wants to be free  
who has need of air  
  
who is changing  
who has no definition  
  
instance  
(the right)  
  
who wants to find out what it is  
who wants to go forward  
  
who wants to<sup>31</sup>

Echoing the idea of existence before essence, the poem advocates an end to defining one's identity against conventional standards. The poem encourages individuals to accept their changing sense of self, even (and especially) when it diverges from social norms. The essence of the poem: 'instance (the right)' is a short couplet which argues that people have the right to choose for themselves. The poem ends with a call to others who want 'to go forward' by sharing experiences beyond social conventions. Leonard's use of open and ambiguous language, such as 'who wants to find out what it is/who wants to go forward' illustrates a sense of freedom in itself, as the reader can imagine for themselves how these experiences, conventions, or social norms can be determined. Despite the encouraging tone of the poem, it ends rather sadly with the detached line which answers the question about being alone: 'who wants to'.<sup>32</sup> The absence of response may indicate the narrator's sense of separation and increasing despair of finding a suitable community in which to belong. The same existentialist principle of collective action is presented in the poem entitled 'proem', which identifies a sense of human responsibility and a community of the separated that has similar tastes, choices, preferences:

who are we, trapped in our ways  
of dying towards the fact  
of only once having been, together  
  
or separate in our own being  
but never wholly separate, only a part  
of the time we live in, and with others occupy<sup>33</sup>

These two short and fragmented stanzas hint at Sartre's idea of responsibility, which is a continuation of his declaration that 'existence precedes essence'. Sartre explains that due to their shared space on earth, humans are responsible for each other: 'Thus the first effect of existentialism is to make every man conscious of who he is, and to make him solely responsible for his own existence. And when we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men.'<sup>34</sup> In speaking of Sartre, Cooper also states that living in an existentialist way means a 'constant striving, a perpetual choice; it is

marked by radical freedom and responsibility [. . . ]<sup>35</sup> Leonard's 'proem' explores in a brief but succinct way how humans' shared existence on earth requires a sense of responsibility towards each other. The use of 'we' in this poem illustrates Leonard's tendency to universalise his needs.

In Leonard's title poem 'to have access to the silence' a manifesto of subjective truths is put forth by the author and calls to mind Kierkegaard's statement that: 'the highest truth attainable' is 'the concrete and particular concerns of the individual'. As Aho states, For Kierkegaard, it is only when we live our lives on the basis of these passionate inward commitments that we actually succeed in becoming a self or individual.<sup>36</sup> Written as a series of statements or even directions, the poem reads as a set of inward commitments that Leonard feels one must adopt in order to realise one's individuality:

to feel part of the silence that is part of that which shares you and not-you  
to feel not liable to be attacked at an ontological level

to sense being as not being deprived of being  
to sense that is ok, whatever the it is that is a way of describing you

to sense it as being something that includes all of your being from the time  
you were born<sup>37</sup>

The 'silence' Leonard describes is the existential freedom to reflect mindfully and free of familial, societal or political limitations. Existentialist freedom is best understood as freedom of 'intention', where one has the freedom to choose how one thinks. As Solomon notes, 'it is our inescapable ability to interpret the world, to give meaning and value to our situation on the basis of our own choosing.'<sup>38</sup> Notions of 'being' are essential to the poem, as the narrator searches for acceptance for all that he is. This particular sequence of poems, then, proceeds from the desire to create an existential community but can also be seen as a form of protection against criticism. As Leonard chooses not to be 'attacked at an ontological level', he also distances himself from mainstream society, though only within his own mind. Leonard's aspiration of gath-

ering a like-minded community in these poems is a wistful notion which is amplified by the spare visual presentation of the poems on the page.

### **Field poetics in 'Nine Variations on Larry's Poem'**

In the poem sequence 'Nine Variations on Larry's Poem', Leonard uses the techniques of field poetics to depict an existential encounter between two people. The poem illustrates an emotional encounter between two individuals who are united in their shared silence before a song. In 'Larry's Poem', Leonard takes poet Larry Butler's four-line poem and reorganises the line breaks and spacing to alter the reader's processing of the text. 'Larry's Poem' is a visual, and if read aloud, aural exercise which challenges traditional versification in order to emphasise the significance of an existential 'moment'. The original four-line text acts as a theme and the following eight poems are variations on that theme. Leonard seems to treat the text as a piece of music, and offers a re-sampling of it in order to alter the prosody, or rhythm, of the text:

What if we, both you and me, were always listening  
I mean really listening to the silence – would we hear,  
really hear and heed the importance of waiting,  
really waiting for the right moment to begin the song.<sup>39</sup>

Field poetics was inaugurated by American poet Charles Olson and widely used by the American Black Mountain group. Charles Olson's essay 'Projective Verse' (1950) outlines three principles concerning the transition of a poem's energy from the writer to the reader. His first principle describes the 'kinetics' of a poem. Olson states that a poem is a 'high energy construct' and an 'energy discharge'. When the reader reads the poem, he is receiving the energy and inspiration of the poet when he composed the text. The second principle is 'Form is never more than an extension of content'. The lay-out of this 'energy' on the page is a representation of the poet's retelling of the event. Olson believes this is achievable if the poet follows the principle that the root of the poem conveys and contains the original energy of the poet. The third principle is that one perception is connected to the next perception. As



Olson explains in his essay 'Instant, on', each line of poetry must be directly related to the previous, perhaps part of the same thought. Leonard's use of field poetics calls to mind a specific energy with which to project a particular mind frame. This depiction of a precise mind frame is achieved textually, with the aid of a word processor. In Charles Olson's essay 'Projective Verse', he sees the typewriter as the liberator of the voice:

It is the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends. For the first time the poet has the stave and the bar a musician has had.<sup>40</sup>

Olson speaks of a kinetics achieved by typographically depicting the voice's natural rhythms through capitals, lowercases and spacing. The typewriter is a machine which gives the poet control over how the poem is perceived. Olson further states that the reading is controlled through the insertion of space:

If a contemporary poet leaves a space before it, he means that space to be held, by the breath, an equal length of time. If he suspends a word or syllable at the end of the line (this was Cummings's addition) he means that time to pass that it takes the eye – that hair of time suspended to pick up the next line. If he wishes a pause so light it hardly separates the words, yet does not want a comma – which is an interruption of the meaning rather than the sounding of the line – follow him when he uses a symbol the typewriter has ready to hand.<sup>41</sup>

By liberating the poetic voice, the typewriter plays a key role in fostering the poem's natural prosody. Leonard's poem is not grounded in a story or narrative but functions as a rhetorical question, and is characterised by an unresolved ending. The narrator expresses the silence of anticipation; a moment before the start of a song. In his variations, Leonard alters the conditions of the texts which allows for a semantic shift. The poem's visual presentation shifts and evolves into blocks, columns, sweeping single lines, and crossed and perpendicular structures, all with varying left-hand

indent. The different presentations call to mind what Olson wrote to Robert Creeley in the summer of 1953: 'the music of language is meaning'.<sup>42</sup> This statement illuminates how the meaning of Leonard's stanzas changes as the shifting and rotating of the text changes the emphasis within particular lines. Stress or significance is placed on specific phrases and words, though these specific phrases change throughout the course of the poem. For example, the first variation contains two block structures. White space surrounds the significant couplet: 'the right moment/to begin the song'. Similarly, the next variation's arrangement in three columns means that the text can be read both vertically and horizontally:

|             |                                   |                                 |
|-------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| What        | if we, both you and me            | were always listening           |
| I mean      | really listening to the silence – | would we hear,                  |
| really hear | and heed the importance           | of waiting                      |
| really      | waiting for the right moment      | to begin the song <sup>43</sup> |

Altering the text's position on the page emphasises that each moment is different from the previous one. Varying left-hand indent and triplet grouping in the fourth variation allows for stress to fall on the line 'to begin the song'. In the sixth variation, where the text is divided into four narrow parts and two bridging elements, forming an 'H' shape, Leonard highlights the words 'the silence' and 'the song', narrowing the theme to two key words:

|               |         |
|---------------|---------|
| what          | if      |
| we            | both    |
| you           | and     |
| me            | were    |
| al            | ways    |
| listen        | ing     |
| I mean        | really  |
| listen-       | ing, to |
| the silence – |         |

|                        |          |
|------------------------|----------|
| would                  | we       |
| hear,                  | really   |
| hear                   | and heed |
| the                    | import-  |
| ance                   | of wait- |
| ing,                   | really   |
| waiting                | for the  |
| right                  | moment   |
| to                     | begin    |
| the song <sup>44</sup> |          |

Peter Manson comments on the poem's changing formations and praises Leonard's use of typographic symbols in order to express a sense of loneliness. Manson's comments on the effect of 'brackets' as 'ghosts' of words which represent a silenced and alienated voice:

'Nine Variations on Larry's Poem', contains no words by Leonard at all, communicating instead through relinedated 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.<sup>45</sup>

Leonard's engagement with the materiality of the text is significant to this sequence, which illustrates a sense of existentialist voice through the dispersing of text. A pertinent definition of the materiality of text can be seen from John Cayley: 'In a sense the materiality of language arises from the fact of its being treated as an object'.<sup>46</sup> In the seventh, eighth and ninth variations, Leonard's dispersion of the text enforces the materiality and physicality of language; the narrative voice or text becomes a collapsible object. In the seventh variation, Leonard does not interfere with the text's surfaces, but in the eighth variation, he bolds and capitalises specific words: 'waiting'

and 'hear' and 'SILENCE', 'REALLY', 'LISTENING' and 'WAITING'.<sup>47</sup> In the ninth variation, words are replaced by a series of parentheses. Here, Leonard has used the parentheses as a semantic 'code' to express the words which are missing, as well as a sense of human silence. The pairs of brackets correspond to the words of the text and perform the anticipated silence, allowing the poem's theme to play out. By collapsing, dispersing and removing the text, Leonard enhances the importance of breathing and breath in voice as means of distinguishing us as human:

( ) ( )  
    ( )                    [ ] ( )  
( ) ( )                    ( ) ( )  
            [        ]  
( )                    ( ) ( )<sup>48</sup>

These narrative characteristics imply that the each step of the sequence is not only an independent poem but part of a process. Leonard's work is canvas-like; his use of the page's white space allows for engagements with text and shape to intersect in a codified presentation which expresses a shared moment between two individuals.

'Nine Variations on Larry's Poem' can be seen as re-shapings of an existential encounter. Leonard voices the separation and tension in the moments between 'silence' and 'song'. In reference to the book's title *access to the silence*, the narrator in the poem encourages his companion to embrace the silence before the song which appears to be a metaphor for mindful thinking. In the re-ordering of verse which contains a specific moment, the sequence functions as a short textual experiment typical of Leonard's oeuvre.

'Nine Variations' finds some similarities in other concrete works. English poet Veronica Forrest-Thomson has mixed and shuffled the lines of ancient poet Sappho in order to make feminist statements. In the first variation she mixes the line "mingled with all manner of colours" to gradually become "mangled with all angle of call ours"

mingled with all manner of colours  
 mingled withall manner of colours  
 mingled with allmanner of colours  
 mengladwith all manner of colours  
 man glad withall mangled of colours  
 manglad with all mingle of call ours<sup>49</sup>

Though the gradual changing and re-arrangement of words we see new words form which have political significance: the former statement of “mingled” become “manglad”, signifying a dig at the opposite gender; and colours becomes “call ours”, which can be read as a feminist reclaiming of space. The re-ordering of words has the same general purpose as ‘Nine Variations’, which is to allow the shifting of language to create new meaning.

### **Field Poetics in ‘Hesitations: monologues for dancing’**

Leonard’s sequence ‘Hesitations: monologues for dancing’ describes a character who feels estranged from his environment and who is angered by the social perceptions of his working-class Glasgow accent. This sequence describes the narrator’s existential journey from estrangement and isolation to an external release of anger. By the close of the sequence, the narrator learns that he is responsible for his own identity and that it is up to him to carry out the necessary changes in his life. As Cooper states, ‘Human beings are prone to experience estrangement from the world in which they live, and it is this sense of estrangement which has long inspired philosophical attempts to locate human existence in relation to the order of things.’<sup>50</sup> ‘Hesitations: monologues for dancing’ uses field poetics to depict and emphasise the narrator’s feelings of social alienation. This freedom is later realised by Leonard’s use of symbols such as arrows to indicate an internal release.

‘Hesitations’ contains a fragmented narrative which is characterised by the use of hesitant, repetitive, strangled, fumbling speech. This characterises the narrator’s lack of confidence and the socially marginalised position which he believes he inhabits. The fumbling speech is an ironic rendering of class expectations associated with

Glaswegian dialect, perceived as working-class. The narrator's lack of confidence is shown in the first few mumblings where the termination of a relationship is implied:

a dunno wiz jist thi way she sort uv

a dunno

been a long while anyway

fourteen year<sup>51</sup>

The narrator speaks bitterly of the collective establishment which he feels does not care about its citizens and in which he feels unimportant and unrepresented, especially with the words 'do you think they care about us?'

why bothir though?

who knows whut goes on n their heads?

do you think they care about us?

ahm no so sure

a think yiv got tay live in a place

thats whut a think

yiv goat ti live there

huv thi

experience<sup>52</sup>

In the narrator's journey towards release, acceptance and freedom, he also proclaims his anger towards an unstated group of established authorities, most likely political or governmental:

day we talk aboot that then

ur do we no talk aboot that

is that wan a they things no ti be said

wid that be breakin thi fuckin code

**BREAKIN THE FUCKIN CODE AYE**



Similarly, Peter Manson contends that since 'Hesitations' is a dramatic monologue, the lines and arrows are 'silent gestures' which Leonard re-enacts in performance. Following an existential line of thinking, it is conceivable that the arrows symbolise the narrator's release of tension, his movement from a previously stagnant place of isolation to one of self-identity.

### **Leonard's poster poems**

The poster poems in *access to the silence* are Leonard's work in his poster poems continues the theme of locating existential freedom despite constraints set by the politically powerful. Leonard's motivation behind *access to the silence*, that of using poetry to convey his desire for existential freedom, can be seen as a way of locating his identity in an existential manner. As Aho states: 'Who we are is not determined by any underlying trait or characteristic that we are born with. It is, rather, up to the individual to shape his or her identity by choosing certain projects and taking action in the world.'<sup>56</sup> It can be argued that Leonard's use of poetry which encourages living by existentialist principles is his method of 'taking action in the world' against societal attitudes which he believes infringe on a person's sense of freedom.

The nine poster poems and triptych within *access to the silence* are examples of how Leonard uses computer-generated images to express a sense of frustration at the strictures on freedom and individuality. In this collection, Leonard began to exhibit a reliance on word processors in order to achieve specific typographies, deploy non-linear spacing and create graphic images to represent significant themes in his poetry. Focusing on the materiality of language, Leonard employs a 'cut-and-paste' technique using varied fonts and images inspired by newspapers and other media. The expansion of technology, specifically the advancements of word processors, has enabled Leonard to devise new ways of presenting and manipulating text. The end result is a defamiliarising, juxtaposed text reminiscent of a 'cut-and-paste' collage. Using images and fonts taken from templates found in daily life, Leonard mimics authoritative fonts in his poster poems to battle the elitist and alienating coding of literature which threaten human freedom, and therefore, a person's ability to form and understand their own identity. Edwin Morgan's 'Newspoems' utilised



the method of cut-up phrases from random sources. His technique can be traced from an 'early modernist French tradition of picking poetry out of unexpected contexts – *poésié trouvée* – as well as of a formalist collage technique going back to nascent Soviet times.<sup>157</sup> A comparison may be made with Edwin Morgan's 'Newspoems' built from phrases cut from newspapers 'and other ephemera', pasted to sheets of paper and photographed. Morgan sought to highlight the textual relationship between medium and message, stating that: 'I began looking deliberately for such hidden messages and picking those that had some sort of arresting quality, preferably with a visual or typographical element itself a part of the "point", although this was not always possible.'<sup>158</sup> Some examples of Morgan's newspoems include the politically and ethically provocative expressions: "If you've /seen it/you haven't/seen it" or "Halt, Commit Adultery".<sup>159</sup>

The collection *access to the silence* includes an ergonomically linguistic fable which maps the relationship between literature teaching in schools and the upper-class canonisation of English literature. Dubbed 'An Old Story', the formal tone and high register is a deliberate mockery of the linguistic institutions Leonard speaks of. The owning of literature as cultural property through the examination system and literature teaching has been widely discussed in Leonard's prose. The quote below illustrates negative cultural assumptions towards the working-class accent, and posits these assumptions as barriers impinging on one's sense of identity and freedom:

They invented the concept, and then they invented the concept of their own ownership, of it. They invented the institutions from within which they lent out things to see if others could replicate their fitness-to-own. Fitness to own, they said, resided in their ability to say why and how a thing was or was not a thing-within- the-concept.<sup>160</sup>

The poster poems relate to existentialism in that they explore the human's position in society and protest against any kind of criticism against which infringes on a person's sense of self. As Kevin Aho states, existentialist freedom means 'whatever our factual limitations – whether it is our genetic code, our socioeconomic backgrounds,

our religious or family history – they do not ultimately determine who we are.' In the poster poems 'An Oxford Dictionary' and 'The Blessed Trinity' Leonard criticises the relationship between the established authorities and their use of language as property to own, as these attitudes are an affront to human freedom. Through aping the fonts and phrases used in dictionaries and public signs, Leonard illustrates how educational establishments who use the Oxford dictionary believe that other forms of language are of lesser value. Leonard critiques cultural attitudes in the poster poem 'An Oxford Dictionary' which reverses one's semantic expectations of a familiar book cover:

AN  
OXFORD  
DICTIONARY  
OF  
AN  
ENGLISH  
LANGUAGE<sup>61</sup>

The upper-case font and repetition of the indefinite article suggests the uniformity of language found in the Oxford dictionary, while undermining its authority by suggesting that there are other possible dictionaries within the English language. Leonard has a similar engagement with materiality of language in his poster poems on modern warfare. In 'Blessed Trinity', he merges the definite article of the English language with the holy trinity of Christianity. This poster poem reads:

THE is the father  
this is the holy spirit  
a is the son<sup>62</sup>

Through the poem's layout we become aware of a hierarchy – father, holy spirit and son – derived from the Roman Catholic sign of the cross. This and the repeated use of definite articles language illustrates how the media encourages the British public

to view their news stories as absolute truth. This topic is one that Leonard returns to frequently; Leonard has already presented his analogy of news presentation and 'gospel' in his article 'What I hate about the news is its definite article' and the pamphlet *On the Mass Bombing of Iraq and Kuwait, Commonly Known as The Gulf war with Leonard's Shorter Catechism* (1991), The British public's lack of knowledge of government actions carried out in its name results in two more, angry poster poems which Leonard models after objects found in everyday life. Speaking of the significance of written language, Leonard states:

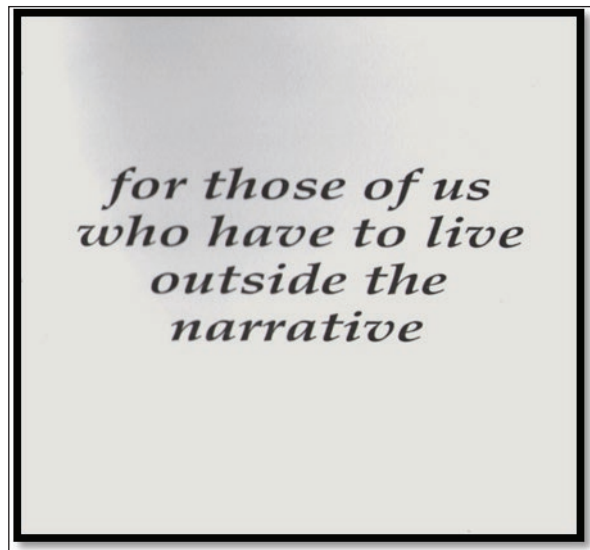
I think this business of whether or not somebody is invisible in the language, and the truth just comes through that has application in the actual printed word. And the way that headlines, or different types of font, create a certain . . . they create a certain kind of voice, an assumption of how you interpret what you see. The bigger the headline on a poster, you assume it's important.<sup>63</sup>

The materiality of the poster poem is evident in its satirical mimicking of a news headline. Emboldened and shaped into a narrow column, a kinetic energy is evident from the downward-thrusting text:

MISSILES  
LAUNCHED  
FROM  
MORAL  
HIGH  
GROUND<sup>64</sup>

Leonard's poster poems mimic the style and format of mass media in order to subvert cultural assumptions about class, status and language. Gardiner's observation that the 'reader is aware of the image at all times' is echoed in Leonard's

manipulation of text into familiar media forms which causes the reader to be aware of the poster poem's image before attention is drawn to the text.<sup>65</sup> Another aspect of Leonard's work is his poster poems which use digital formatting. Glazier notes that the 'transmission' of text from writer to reader is equally important as the act of creation. The inspiration, creation and transmission of a text are parts of the text's entire 'meaning-making'.<sup>66</sup> 'Meaning-making', according to Glazier, is the cognitive exercise where one takes into account not only the content of the text but how the materials, writing and transmission interrelate. Leonard's poster poem 'Triptych' uses digital formatting to convey a sense of social alienation. The sense of alienation and separation is further developed in the 'Triptych: an ongoing memorial'. Here Leonard critiques the human experience within narratives dictated by the powerful. In 'Triptych', there is a sense of a 'travelling' narrative in the poster poems' evolving appearances. In the first panel, the lower-cased and italicised text reads clearly: 'For those of us who have to live/outside the narrative' (**Fig. 1**).

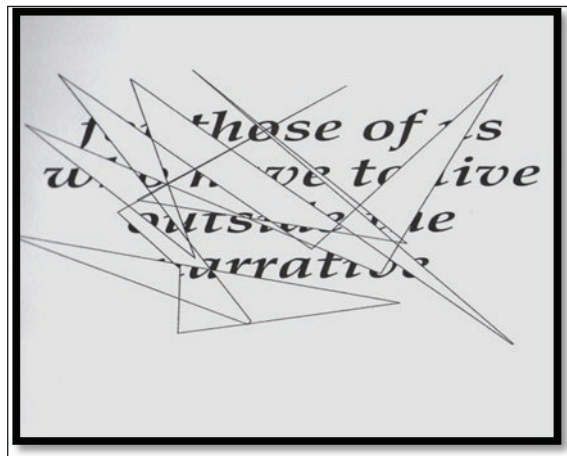


**Figure 1:** The first panel of 'Triptych'.<sup>67</sup>

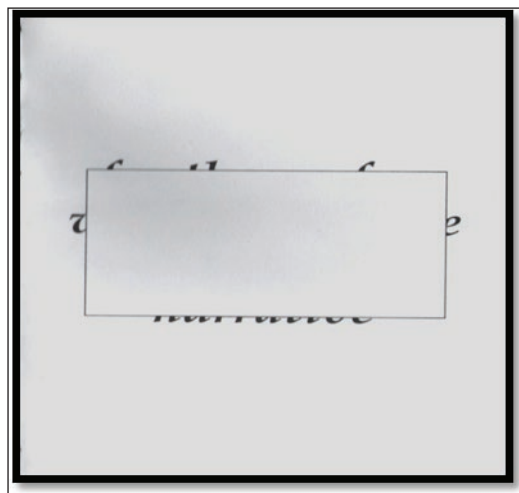
The second panel contains the same phrase but is obliterated by spiky triangular shapes (**Fig. 2**).

In the last panel the phrase is almost entirely blocked by a large rectangle, suggesting the complete transformation of the narrator's gradual alienation from mainstream society (**Fig. 3**).

Though based on paper, the processural nature of the 'Triptych' has its primary roots in the certain techniques of electronic poetry, in that images and words are



**Figure 2:** The second panel of 'Triptych'.<sup>68</sup>



**Figure 3:** The third panel of 'Triptych'.<sup>69</sup>

treated as disjointed materials, which morph through dynamic processes. Leonard's triptych is a self-contained object confined to paper and the reader must engage in a material process.

*access to the silence* marks the peak of Leonard's integration of existential philosophy into his poems. In these works, Leonard aspires for like-minded individuals to locate and identify opportunities for existential freedom in their daily lives. *access to the silence* is unified by the developed link between the title poem and the collection's overall theme of an individual's right of choice.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## Notes

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- <sup>20</sup> R.C. Solomon, *From rationalism to existentialism. The existentialists and their nineteenth-century backgrounds* (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield, 1972), p. 280.
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- <sup>24</sup> McGuire, p. 127.
- <sup>25</sup> Leonard, *access to the silence*, p. 11.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 108.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 38.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 38.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 105.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 10.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 9.
- <sup>34</sup> Sartre, p. 31.
- <sup>35</sup> Cooper, p. 4.
- <sup>36</sup> Aho, p. 86.
- <sup>37</sup> Leonard, *access to the silence*, p. 135.
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- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 102.
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- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 6.
- <sup>54</sup> Leonard, *access to the silence*, p. 26.

- <sup>55</sup> Leonard, *access to the silence*, p. 23.
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- <sup>59</sup> Morgan, *Themes on a Variation*, p. 63 & 66.
- <sup>60</sup> Leonard, *access to the silence*, p. 15.
- <sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 14.
- <sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 64.
- <sup>63</sup> Leonard, 'tom leonard on language and social status', 20 March 2011.
- <sup>64</sup> Leonard, *access to the silence*, p. 41.
- <sup>65</sup> Gardiner, p. 111.
- <sup>66</sup> Glazier, p. 32.
- <sup>67</sup> Leonard, *access to the silence*, 85.
- <sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 86.
- <sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 87.

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