

Da Problem o dese Paerts

by Christie Williamson

About twa year fae syne, in 2019, da essay fan me as a form. Haein bön a poyitry purist fur nigh on twa decades, I wis bidden ta makk twartree bits o prose. Tae my surprise, an nae smaa horror, I enjoyed makkin dem.

Ilkane o dese commissions wis nettrill grund fur me ta scribe apö - a Tom Leonard poyim, da presence o Shaetlan (geographic an linguistic) in mi writin, an a introduction tae a anthology o tree Scots poyits I'd edited.

Dis last wis med, laek da iddirs, in Ingleesh, an laetir Shetlandified at mi ain editor's request. Sic laek, hit's da first bit o prose a'm ivvir med in Shaetlan or ony iddir kindo Scots (letters an emails exceptit). Dis is da sikkind.

Dis aniddir sikkind as weel - da sikkind writin opportunity a'm bön awar o at's med me say 'keen whit? Da thing I want ta makk fur dis is a essay'. Da first time dat happened wis in 2020, whan submissions wis bidden bi Scottish Pen on da theme o freedom o expression fur writers.

Fur dat, I med a meditation apö da phrase 'syne some o wis isna free, dan nane o wis is free' - a concept I wis embarassed no ta be wint wi whan I heard hit. Da moo at browt da wirds tae mi lugs wis D'bi Young Anitafrika's, a Jamaican dub poyit wha wis bidden tae 'Creative Conversations' at da University o Glesga Chapel - a weekly sanctuary fur me whan we could gaddir afore da altar, an still noo on Zoom - maest recently wi da camera aff while I emptied an filled da dishwashir (sorry Don).

DIR a phrase a'm bön showin ower fur a start noo, wi da tow't o makkin a essay around hit. Da phrase is 'syne yer no paert ae the solution, yer paert ae the problem', an hit's sumtheen I first encoontird in mi teenage years. Mi adolescent proto-socialist haert fair jigged wi joy at da soond o hit!

Sae faur as hit geengs, da concept is fair an soond. Da actual quote cam fae a Black Panther activist, Leroy Eldridge Cleaver, wha proposed 'There is no more neutrality in the world, you either have to be part of the solution or you're going to be part of the problem — there ain't no middle ground.'

Hit's biggit apö da sam rock o truth as 'neutrality is impossible in the face of oppression - silence always supports the oppressor'. An in da context o da Jim Crow instincts o ower mony citizens o da Federal Republic hit was an sadly still is da truth, da hale truth an nawtheen but da truth.

I da haunds (an moo) o a tirn young chiel wha wisna refused ony basic richts, wisna subject tae derision an waar acause o da colour o his skin, da phrase wis a weapon at could geeng aff a wrang. Hit mutaetit oot o Cleaver's dignified resistance intil an accusatory lance I wid skewer pör unsuspectin boadies wi. 'Is du paert o da solutio?' I wid ax, wi little or less caase.

Wis I? Or wis I paert o da problem? An dat's whit a'm spierin ta roo mi heid around (an ony iddir heids at'll folloo me!) in dis essay. A'm pat i da mind o da awppneen haiku in Alan Spence's 'Glasgow Zen' -

On the oneness of self and universe

IT'S AW WAN

TAE ME

Dir a human instinct ta categorise, divide an compartmentalise, da sort trow da grain an makk a pile coarn. Hit helps makk da wirld navigable fur wis. Whan Cleaver said whit he said, he could herdly a spawkin mair truly. Mi ain youthful simplification o da wirld atil 'paert o da problem' fokk an 'paert o da solution' fokk isna his faat. An mibbe hit's no mine, but seen fae da iddir side o haalin twa peerie bairns trow da first ten year o dir lives hit seems a shade naiive.

Mercifully, at da laet 20th century Anderson High I lairnt mair as choost emotive politics. Mi best subjects in terms o grades wis Maths, Physics an Accoonts. Hit's a braa start fae a'm rowt wi da first twa, but I doot dey hae a prick o licht ta sheen apö humanity an da wirld, an da sprickleens o mi feeble brain ta makk sense o baith.

ALGEBRA is a subject at I lairnt in Ingleesh - 'solve fur x' an so on. Hit's also a cognitive behaviour inherently taen up wi problems an solutions. Can hit tell wis onythin about dis current inquiry?

Ee thing could be dis - a problem expresses aathin you keen aboot a situation. Syne du solves da problem, du'll keen a bit mair aboot dat situation. Takkin dis knowledge an applyin hit tae dis wrassle wi da ideas o problems an solutions, hit takks a bit o seein fu sumeen or sumtheen could be paert o da solution wioot bein paert o da problm.

Noo, a'm no sayin dis tae try an undermine Cleaver's assertion. I genuinely believe whit he said wis an is correct. Reddir as dat, whit a'm tryin ta dø is grow oot o an ayont mi ain mutaetit version o dat truth.

Een o da maest unkirsen aspects o hit is dis - categorisin fokk as 'paert o da problem' comes perilously close tae categorisin dat sam fokk as *da* problem. Fokk ir nivvir da problem, an fraemin dem laek dat leads nettrilly tae da conclusion at siccan fokk maun be gotten rid o. Gjittin rid o fokk is nivvir a good wye oot o a situation. Ensuring dir hermfu behaviour is rewardid wi punishment is crucial, but gjittin rid o fokk demsels lessens wis aa.

AN whit, hit wid be quite correct fur ony survivin readers ta cry, haes ony o dis ta dø wi Scots? Tae ansir dat, I maun set oot a peerie coarn o mi ain journey intae an trow scrievin in Shaetlan.

As a'm said at da tap o dis piece, fur maest o mi scrievin life twa things ir bön pretty much anathema tae me - prose, an Ingleesh.

Some monts afore Lehman Brothers collapsed in 2008, I hed coffee in Tinderbox wi twa linguistics professors, tae yarn about a potential PhD on Vagaland's poyitry (wan o mony a'm nivvir done).

'The thing is,' da mair senior o da twa declared 'poets shouldn't be trusted to do it'. Da 'it' in question wis definin a leid an fu hit wirks. He mawst a kent a fair bit about linguistics, an he maun a kent a bit aboot poyits an aa! As a breed we, bi wir very naetir, makk wirts up, subvert dir meanin, defy grammatical conventions an generally takk ilka liberty goin an mair wi perfectly communicative langweej in wir attempts ta drag hit keekin an screamin tawards music an mystery.

Whan I startit makkin poyims a wheen o factors pued an pushed me tawards makkin dem in Shaetlan instead o staunnart Ingleesh. Pit simply, Shaetlan is mi middir tongue, da leid at ony internal narrative I enjoy or suffer is kerried oot in. In mair

poyims as no, staunnart Ingleesh presents a phrase or wird at choost doesna sit, rings aa wrang an generally soonds an feels faase.

An so dere I wis, inhabitin mi ain peerie noost o da problem. I hunted doon as much Shaetlan an Scots poyitry as I could fin -- bi Christine De Luca, Robert Alan Jamieson, Hugh MacDiarmid, Sydney Goodsir Smith. I devoured wi glee da 'urban west-coast industrial demotic' o Tom Leonard alangside Billy Tait's translations o Villon intae Shaetlan. Fae James Robertson's Kettilonia press I read Colin Donati, Eunice Buchanan an Tom Hubbard's 'Faust'.

Da Scots canon o poyitry could herdly live mair or keek herdir, an is densely stappit wi makars o global renown. Back in da pre-crash buzz o Tinderbox though, I still hae nae annsirs fur mi no ta be professor. Whit wye ir leases, contracts, title deeds, disciplinary nawteesis, Polis warneens an invoices aa med oot in staunnart Ingleesh insteid o Scots? Whit wye syne I want ta read da elegant, expansive an tow't provokin kind o essay a'm attemptin ta scribe da day sall I mawst laekly end up readin hit in staunnart Ingleesh (or sum iddir moadrin European leid), an herdly ivvir in Scots?

Da graet Shaetlan fictional texts, scribed bi graet champions o da Shaetlan tongue, pits Shaetlan i da moos o hit's characters but da narration is ay kerried oot in staunnart Ingleesh. I da wider Scots oeuvre, da sam howlds. Twa notable exceptions spring ta mind - Matthew Fitt's Butt n Ben A Go Go, an da extraordinary novels o James Kelman which transcend ... mawst things.

Is da linguistic resources o Scots dat slender at hit canna support da precision an purpose at prose demands? An if so, fu can hit cast siccan a deep shadoo in poyitry at permeates da psyches o native, new an diasporic Scots o aa ages?

A'm no axin dese questions acause I keen da annsirs. A'm axin dem acause I dunna.

An whit wi da veeve momentum da leid haes shaan in da past decade dir maun be annsirs yit. An we, as spaekirs, readers an srievers o Scots maun keep wirkin wir wye tawards dem. Fur wir aa da problem. An wir aa da solution.