

'Literature must desire to be life, not an idea of life'

**HAMISH HENDERSON AND' POETRY BECOMES PEOPLE'
talk by Tessa for Edinburgh People's Festival 2011**

The 23 year old Hamish Henderson was sent to work as an intelligence officer in the North African Campaign early in 1942. (He had to interrogate prisoners and always asked them if they knew any songs!) On setting out he was reading Yeats, and in particular a poem of Yeats's *The Circus Animals Desertion* with the line 'Players and painted stage took all my love / and not those things that they were emblems of'. Hamish was clear that he was not seeking a literary career, or themes, out of the war experience, rather to be an impartial witness. Indeed his publisher John Lehmann remarked that it is hard to be impartial when 'in the midst of things', to which Hamish's reply was that it is certainly hard to be impartial *unless* in the midst of things. He wrote the exceptional sequence *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica* –poems which even 70 years on constitute reality rather than being 'about' anything. (read *So Long*: p.77 – and *D day Dodgers*, first three verses and last verse: p.94).

Hamish was in the midst of things all his life and desired that his poetry be life, become people. What could that mean? The phrase is borrowed from Heinrich Heine's statement that *Freedom must become people*. Heine's statement in the 1830s that when books are burnt, people will be burnt too is inscribed in the Bebelplatz in Berlin where the Nazis burnt books in the 1930s. The phrase also borrows ideas from Sardinian Communist thinker Gramsci about culture forming its own 'society' and affecting politics to the extent that it can almost be claimed that 'the politics follows the culture'. If we think about this we can see that it is true. Without a culture of service and subservience there can be no empire, and no mafia, for instance. Without a culture of poetic vision, creative thinking and steady building of infrastructures, there can be no freedom becoming people.

There are individual people and there are groups of people, societies of people, communities of people, nations of people, the world of people. Poetry needs to be 'in the midst of things' in all these circles within circles – for the individual to individuate and live in hope, for the community to have vision, openness and freedom from fear, for nations to operate on principles of freedom, collaboration and acceptance of diversity rather than fear, prejudice and deterrence.

In Tunis in January this year the people marching in the streets were chanting the verses of a poet Abu al Qarim Alshabi, who died in his forties a few decades ago. They took courage from this, even as they took courage from the self-immolation of the bullied and harassed fruit seller. For poetry to act as freedom acts in a society it needs to become anonymous in this way, to belong to everyone, to escape from the boxes into which it is often put as a precautionary principle – kept for academics, mavericks, prizes to a few and the rest ignored – hierarchies of ‘best poets’ and so on. Gramsci’s definition of popular song was : *those written neither by the people, nor for the people, but which the people adopt because they conform to their way of thinking and feeling... the way in which they conceive the world and life...* Gramsci and Hamish knew that folk song must operate in this communal way if it is to be borne on the carrying stream from generation to generation. No amount of oppression can prevent such *under* currents, or simply currents... the flow is all – ‘the continuing stream indeed’. The currents, however, need conductors of the energy, to gather and re-diffuse it. Hamish Henderson was such an one. Helen Crummy who died recently and who set up and sustained the Craigmillar Festival was another. You will know of others past and present.
(quote from Helen Crummy’s obituary)

Proverbs 29 in the Bible has the well-known phrase: *where there is no vision the people perish*. The German philosopher Heidegger stated that ‘poetry is the language of thought’. If poetry becomes people it means that people, the people, communities, societies have visions, setting them free from fear, and that they are creatively thinking, making connections! Other kinds of thinking: analysis, rationalising, calculating, plotting, manoeuvring, are not poetry. They can serve the creative thinking which is poetry, but without the vision they can lead to prejudice, oppression, violence, corruption, war.

For a people to think creatively, with vision, the language needs to be used the way poetry uses it, for image, feeling, archetypes, combined with precision, detail, the particular, making ‘figures of thought.’ Poets ‘in the midst of things’ are the vision-makers or vision messengers, the witnesses and recorders, the prophets and interpreters.

Without ‘people’ there is no poetry –
Without poetry there is no vision –
Vision allows freedom from fear
so poetry/freedom become people

The SPL became a community, a library as a milieu, base camp, no hierarchies or selectivity.
going out, welcoming in, diversity, inclusiveness

Quote poem: p.26

When we were children

Time ran errands for us...

...

O child child hurry

For life our mortal blow quickly we'll strike

The mortal blow we each must hurry to strike, is 'on behalf of life' and against fear. See 'The Flying of Life and Death' (Quote last verse p.144) – a dialectic of the rhythm in which we are required unambiguously, heroically, to struggle on the side of life at all times. Henderson's concept of the life that contends with death is one of the substantiality of life, its toil, sweat, tears and laughter. And it is to that life to which he wants his works of 'literature' to approximate. Hamish wrote 'Love operates faster and surer than time or space or both', and 'love cannot operate on your behalf as long as your own sickly fear will not permit love to operate on your behalf.'

Henderson was fully aware of the entertainment type of folksy 'come all-ye' song of Irish origin, which overacts and coaxes its audience in an almost pantomime fashion with topicality and knowing jokes. He understood the poet MacGonagall as being in this tradition, and therefore not so much a poor poet as a valid, poetic version of popular entertainment. This is in contrast to the great ballads in their 'sensuous austerity', where the audience is mentally and emotionally at one with the singer and does not need to be wooed. However the inclusive aspect of the 'come all-ye' tradition was not something Henderson deplored; on the contrary. For poetry and song to 'become people, in the sense of 'freedom becomes people' it must connect at a deep level to human communities and movements, nationally and internationally, passed from singer to singer with varying versions and becoming part of an anonymous treasure in due course, attributable only to this or that singer's version, rather than to an individual 'author'.

James Elroy Flecker's verse play, *Hassan*, was familiar to Henderson since his school days, as an orphan, His mother died when he was only thirteen and he must have felt very alone in the world - perhaps why he so much needed conviviality. He attended Dulwich Academy, where he organised a public reading of *Hassan*. Flecker died at the age of thirty of tuberculosis in 1915. He puts a clear commitment to the importance of poetry at the heart of culture in his famous dialogue between Hassan, the sweet-maker, and the Caliph of Baghdad: The caliph waxes philosophical saying: *In poems and in tales alone shall live the eternal memory of this city when I am dust and thou art dust, when all Baghdad is broken to the ground. If there shall ever arise a nation whose people have forgotten poetry or whose poets have forgotten the people, though they send their ships round Taprobane and their armies across the hills of Hindustan, though their cities be greater than Babylon of old, though they mine a league into the earth or mount to the stars on wings - what of them?* And Hassan replies, *they will be a dark patch upon the world.*

I quote this extensively because it seems to me that it is in the face of that 'dark patch upon the world', so fiercely confronted in the battle against Fascism and the desert landscape itself, but also felt in the emasculated populations of the Scottish glens and the crowded slums of Scottish cities, that Henderson felt compelled to commit himself with all his strength and ability, even as he had witnessed the deeds of brave resistance leaders in Italy, such as Corbora, 'yon wuddifu callant' for whom he wrote a ballad. And the form that resistance had to take for a *poet* was not to forget the people, or allowing the conditions in which the people forget poetry. A line from Henderson's translation of wartime Italian poet Quasimodo, 'Colour of Rain and Iron', touches on this sense of a burden of responsibility though couched in a question to the crucified Christ: 'how shall I answer those who ask? / Now, now: before another silence...' "(2nd verse p. 134). Hence the Edinburgh People's Festivals which, despite their success and support from such as Norman Buchan, were banned by the Labour party in 1952. Presumably this was from fear of nationalism and communism. (A Labour Council in Edinburgh similarly closed down the 'Women Live' festivals in 1983 after two successful years.)

Henderson had great ideas for international peace and equality, which he tried to put into practice in Scotland, almost as a crucible of experiment. There were high hopes after the war, before petty factions and international positioning took over. While he could have lived in Cambridge or London, or Ireland (where he taught in the WEA for a few years) or Cornwall

or America, he could have made his literary name anywhere,(though denied entry to Italy because of an 'exclusion order' imposed in 1950 when was translating Gramsci), Hamish could have lived elsewhere in Europe. But he chose to live and work in Scotland, believing in her latent shamanic strength, the deep-seated creative gifts among the people, her fund of archetypal wisdom.

Through his own poetry and song, the School of Scottish Studies, the folk song and folk story revival, through teaching, connecting people and ideas, singing, campaigning, - despite the layers of hypocrisy among the main power players which kept Scotland dependent, drained of talent and divided -, Hamish's prophetic, almost blind' vision of a spiritually-bonded people with a courageous history and an inclusive, communitarian, humanitarian sense of what it could and should be as a country, in itself and internationally, is alive and among us to inspire and uphold us in the now of our everyday present.