

LANGUAGE AND THE PRESIDENCY

JOE TREASURE

I ended my last piece with a promise not to waste any more words on the self-publicist and arch-troll Milo Yiannopoulos. I break that promise only to note that Simon & Schuster have cancelled their contract to publish his book after he was caught on video joking about clerical abuse and dismissing the significance of sexual consent. Perhaps the publishers were grateful that he provided them with an excuse to change their mind.

When I made that promise I was intending to take a break from the American carnage that is the Trump administration. I thought I might write about the contrasting stylistic choices made by various translators of *Anna Karenina*. But I find myself in Los Angeles and the news presses in on me. Tolstoy will have to wait.

A growing movement calling for Californian independence, though extremely unlikely to lead to anything, is symbolic of the strength of feeling here, where people voted against Trump in overwhelming numbers. As I learned today from a sociology professor at the University of California, more than half of the university's quarter of a million students is either immigrants or the children of immigrants. Most people in this diverse and dynamic state know that immigration is a good thing and reject Trump's xenophobic vision.

The phrase "American carnage" comes from the President's inaugural address. It was striking partly because we don't expect such a stark indictment of a country from its own leader, but also because it sounds incongruously like the title of a slasher

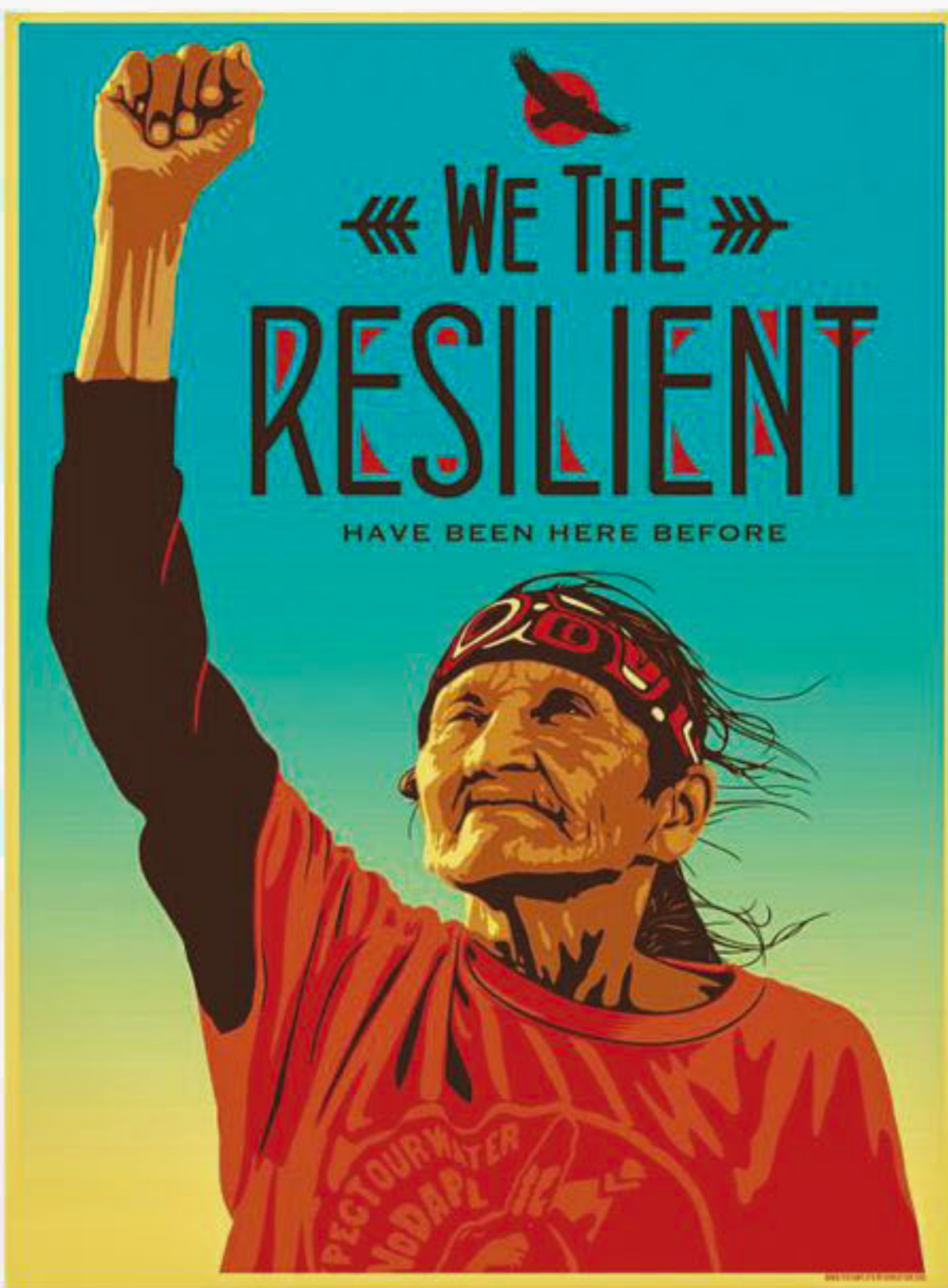
movie, a thrash metal band or a televised wrestling competition. It was verbally jarring in the context of a formal speech to the nation.

It points to a striking feature of the current political scene. America is undergoing a kind of linguistic revolution. From the beginning of his campaign, Trump's most plausible promise was that people would be liberated to speak as offensively as they please. He is doing his best, of course, to shut down criticism directed at him: his chief strategist

has said that on political matters the press should "keep its mouth shut" and a top White House aide has announced that the powers of the President "will not be questioned". But inciting hatred against the weak is to be encouraged. Trump continues to model this freedom at every opportunity.

In speech, he is crude, repetitive and often incoherent. And yet no American President has ever put such stock in the power of language to construct reality. And because of his position, the consequences of one of his tweets or casual asides can be enormous. I am reminded of Auden's poem, *Epitaph on a Tyrant*:

Perfection, of a kind, was what he was after,
 And the poetry he invented was easy to understand;
 He knew human folly like the back of his hand,
 And was greatly interested in armies and fleets;
 When he laughed, respectable senators burst with laughter,
 And when he cried the little children died in the streets.



THE POET AND THE EMPEROR



REZAUDDIN STALIN

TRANSLATED BY GULSHAN ARA KAZI

The Emperor became disillusioned & frustrated
 Renowned poets of the country gathered in king's court
 To read inspiring verses to him
 One poet, elegantly attired with gold button shirt, said in a deep voice
 O, the great emperor, I have composed a ballad
 Highlighting the glamour and heroism of your ancestors
 You sure will regain your self esteem
 And rule India with full confidence
 Entire court room resonated with loud applause and ovation
 As a reward, the poet received one hundred gold coins
 Then came a poet with long curly hair
 Wearing velvet cap and ornamented outfit and said
 O the honorable one, the great god of India
 I have composed the most amazing verses for you
 You will feel burst of anger in each verse
 And your desire for revenge will surpass your sense of frustration
 King's court shuddered with loud applause
 And he was awarded two thousand gold coins

Then came a poet wearing silk attire and a cap embroidered with precious stones
 Wearing eye color and deer skin sandal
 He came trampling rhythmically playing a musical bell and said
 O the greatest emperor, the king of the solar system
 I have composed the most amazing verses for you
 Which will make your war drum play aloud, not stop
 And you will be forever un-conquerable
 Ear piercing uproar and applause reverberated
 Poet's feet was flooded with three thousand gold coins

At last entered a poet pacing slowly
 Humbly dressed, wearing white turban
 With pensive look he said
 O the honorable emperor, I spent many sleepless nights,
 But could not come up with any verse which might please you
 I failed, please forgive me the great emperor

Creepy silence shrouded the entire assembly room
 Emperor was bewildered and speechless

Much later, it was known
 The poet was Mirza Ghalib

Kamal Chowdhury's soul-searching odyssey

AHMED AHSANUZZAMAN



Kamal Chowdhury

compose the entire poem. It is finally the craftsmanship that shapes a poem. I try to transform spontaneously gathered experience into natural poetry.

When did you realise you were a poet? What was the defining moment for you as poet?

I did not realise it. I started to feel that I was living with poetry. Nothing in particular...however, I had a twin brother who was stillborn. Sometimes I feel like the brother of mine sets the whole thing in motion and I write.

Asked by Donald Hall for The Paris Review if he was expressing any 'intention' in *The Waste Land*, i.e., disillusionment of a generation or his own obsession with Christianity, Eliot retorted, 'One wants to get something off one's chest. One doesn't know quite what it is that one wants to get off the chest until one's got it off. But I couldn't apply the word "intention" positively to any of

my poems. Or to any poems'. Do you pursue any intentions in your poems?

Well, I am not a Keatsian nightingale. I am a part and parcel of a society which has its own joys and sorrows, successes and failures. I cannot remain unmoved by them. I would not say that I pursue an intention when I write a poem. I can say, however, I try to communicate my experience with my readers.

How will you respond to Eliot's provocative 'impersonal' theory of poetry? Can a poet be impersonal at all?

I think poetry is an expedition—poets experience different experiences as they walk the ways of the world. As a poet, I talk about my own journey in my poems—the roads I have taken, the roads I have not taken. I cannot avoid being personal. Nor can I escape from my own emotions. Of course, the poet's own experience is turned into music in poetry.

How will you define 'creativity'?

Creativity is important, for one cannot be a poet without creativity. It is creativity that helps the poet to see the future; that is why s/he is called a seer, a sage who possesses intuitive powers or a person who is reputed to have special powers of divination. It is with this special gift that the poet, like a piece of blotting paper, soaks his own time. It enables the poet's inner eye with which s/he can see into the future or create a brave new world.

As I have known, Dylan Thomas is on your list of the favourite poets. Seamus Heaney introduces 'a multi-channel set of associations' to describe Thomas: 'Thomas the Voice, Thomas the Boozie, Thomas the Jokes, Thomas the Wales, Thomas the Sex, Thomas the Lies...'. What does Thomas mean for you?

A poet lives many lives. S/he is the Phoenix, s/he is the Sisyphus. Poets defy definitions, labels. S/he is a melting pot—of diverse experiences. Indeed, Heaney has aptly described Dylan Thomas. Then Heaney's multi-channel set of associations is applicable to any true poet.

What would you have become if you were not a poet?
 Difficult for me to say. I have become what I thought to be. I think I would have been a life-long student of history and anthropology if I were not a poet.



What are you doing now?

I have finished a work of prose—*Kannyake niye Lekha* (Musings about Daughter) which will come out in the ensuing Ekushey Book Fair. Last year I went to the United States to admit my daughter into a university where Emily Dickinson had studied. In the back of my mind I had Yeats' famous

poem "A Prayer for My Daughter" while writing the book. It is private and simultaneously public as I recorded the experience of my visit/journey in the book.

How do you write: Pen and paper, computer, notebooks?

When we had begun to write, it was only pen and paper. I then shifted to computer. I have reverted to pen and paper.

Tell us about an advice you received which you value the most. What will be your own advice to the youngsters?

Advice does not always work in writing poetry. The most important lesson I learned from my predecessors is that poetry is a craft and that one has to ceaselessly practice and experiment the craft. There are hardly any short cuts.

I do not have any particular advice for the youngsters. I rather have a suggestion for them: Do not consider anyone your rival. Instead, make yourself your rival, i.e., you better yourself. And read, read and read.

Jibanananda Das' "Aat Bochor Ager Ek Din" is one of my favourite poems. What do you think about it?

Obsession with death is an important feature of Jibanananda Das' poetry. Not only "Aat Bachar Ager Ek Din" (A Day Eight Years Ago) but also the most renowned and popular of his poems, "Banalata Sen" is preoccupied with death. The *panchamir chad* (the five-day old moon) of "Aat Bachar Ager Ek Din" instills the desire to die in the dramatis personae. In "Banalata Sen" there remain only darkness and silence.

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A unique voice that combines passion and fire with utmost discipline, Kamal Chowdhury has been active in Bangladesh's poetry scene since the mid 1970s. For Chowdhury, who celebrates his sixtieth birth anniversary on January 28, the journey through poetry is both metaphoric and literal. So much so that his latest book *Vromon Kahini* (Travel Tales) published in 2015 and containing 23 sonnets narrates a person's literal journey from one place to the other as well as a poet's growth over time almost in a Wordsworthian way revealed in *The Prelude*, aptly subtitled as "Growth of a Poet's Mind." The motif of journey is central to the collection; a lone traveller treading paths, roads and intersections of life and poetry is the protagonist. As Chowdhury notes in his short introduction, the poems included in the book record the words and thoughts he gathered from his intense soul-searching voyage.

I interviewed Kamal Chowdhury recently in an elegant book shop in the capital. The poet talked about his idea of poetry and poets. The rather casual interview was punctuated by the chance visits by a couple of the leading poets and writers of the country. Here is an excerpt of the conversation.

How is poetry important? How does a poem take shape for you?

Poetry is important because it speaks of the inner soul. As the most powerful art form which blends rhythm with sound and which finds expression in what we call the language, poetry gives us the strength to be true humans. It is all about a journey, a soul-search necessary to making life meaningful. It depends on situations. Sometimes a line comes, sometimes an experience. Some other times an image. Then I