

# THE POET ON HIS WORK

## ON 'PRIVEL DA CRAPPA!'

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Seán Haldane

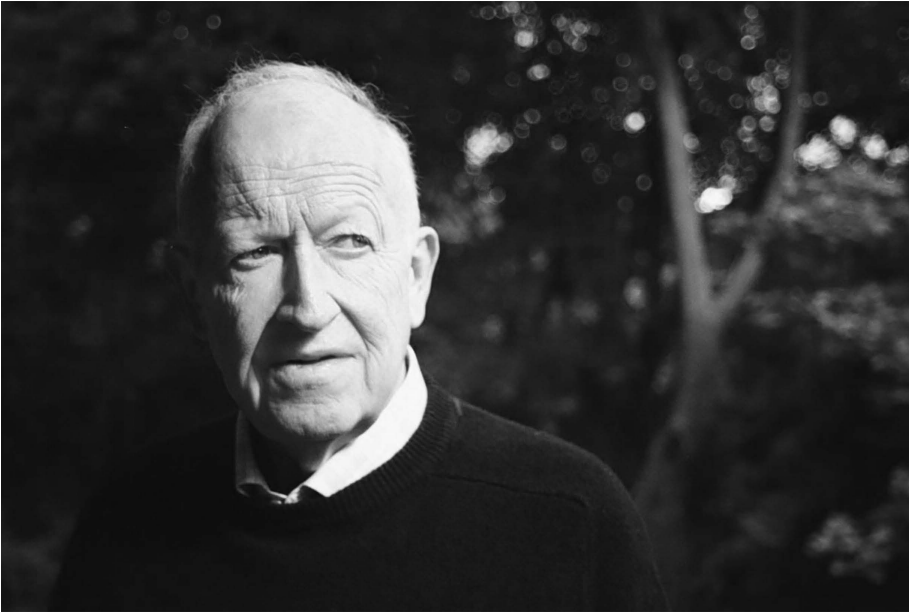
### **PRIVEL DA CRAPPA!**

One thing falls from another – like falling rocks:  
The signs PRIVEL DA CRAPPA! caught in the headlights  
As we careened down forest roads from the Stelvio  
(DANGER OF ROCKS!) We lay that night  
Chastely back to back in a single bed.  
We had first kissed the week before, as meteors fell  
Over olive groves and cypresses – Notte di San Lorenzo.

Tonight is San Lorenzo. I've been reading a book  
About Rumantsch: PRIVEL DA CRAPPA!  
I'm using the pepper grinder I bought in Florence  
That summer we came together without coming,  
Not knowing all would come to nothing  
And we would fall hurtling down the bends  
Of time screaming without a sound.

What would we live? – lust  
Falling out of love. But when did we fall in?  
Were we not just good friends?  
Wasn't that the trouble?  
What were the fragments in the eventual rubble?  
Lust, friendship, hope? It was hope  
That drove us down that perilous slope.

No meteors now: the night sky is dull with haze  
And we are living out our days  
On separate continents. The peppercorns are ground,  
Fall to dust.



SEÁN HALDANE

**T**his poem is about my time with an American girl (I'll call her K) I met in Florence when we were both very young, which started in hope but by a couple of years later was 'on the rocks' and ended sadly. But I don't deliberately write poems 'about' things. In a recent book about what I call 'the paradox of poetry and physics' I describe how poems are often the last link in a chain of what Robert Graves called 'more-than-coincidence'. They just happen.

This one happened last year on 10th August which the Italians call San Lorenzo and is known for its annual meteor shower. I had realised in the morning that it was San Lorenzo and I looked forward to watching the shooting stars with my wife, but as I was preparing supper I realised the cloud-cover was too dense. I found myself thinking of when K and I went for a drive up into the hills (49 years before!) and walked under the moon among cypress trees, not knowing it was San Lorenzo, then the shooting stars began to fall. Now I had been reading a book by a friend which he had just sent me from Switzerland, called *Muintir Sleibhe agus A Teanga (People of the Mountains and their Language)* which is, of all things, a study written in Irish Gaelic about another unusual language, Rumantsch. I had found myself thinking that although somewhere I had an old anthology of Rumantsch poetry called *Musa Rumantscha*, the only words I could now remember in Rumantsch were 'PRIVEL DA CRAPPA'. I had seen them on signs when K and I had driven together to Switzerland where she had to meet up with her parents and where I was going to see a friend. Careening down from the Stelvio Pass and having to swerve as the headlights lit up rocks in the road but sometimes hitting them, we had joked about how funny it was that 'crappa' must mean 'rocks' – like lumps of 'crap'. They must have done some damage since the

car's temperature gauge began to shoot up and when we reached the bottom of the pass late at night we stopped at a garage where there was a light. The garage owner said he would fix the car in the morning and, thinking we were married, gave us a room to sleep in.

Now my realisation that it would be too cloudy to see the stars, and the coincidence of thinking of San Lorenzo and Rumantsch, somehow started the poem, and as it came pushing into my head I also realised I was holding in my hand an old pepper-pot I had bought in Florence that summer of 1963. I went and wrote the poem down – more or less as it stands, although I repeated the phrase 'PRIVEL DA CRAPPA' four times and on revision cut this down to two. The pepper pot entered in, and I saw in my mind the peppercorns like crumbling rocks. And I 'flashed' on an Italian film I had seen a few years ago about an old man and old woman who at last make love on San Lorenzo's night. I felt painfully old.

So the poem is an example of the process in which a poem is the last event in a 'series', or a chain of more-than-coincidence. It also, like many poems, has various layers of meaning that I only became aware of as I was writing it down. As usual, I didn't know what the poem was 'about' until it ended. And as usual, there are unwritten phrases somehow in the background. The relationship eventually went 'on the rocks'. It went 'down hill'. I did not at the time see the 'danger' of our painful future. I couldn't see around the bends. And poems I have written 'to', or as the Elizabethans would say 'through' K have often been set in mountains. The following year we lived for a while in the Italian Alps – and we used to listen to people singing Alpine songs in the local Inn, and I became interested in the whole Alpine culture which cuts across Italian, Rumantsch and German.

This poem has not been published until now. I wonder if it is too eccentric, too self-referential. Also perhaps too gloomy, but although 'one thing falls from another', like the rocks from the crumbling mountains, things fall together in the poem and it is alive. I am glad the poem is in *The Reader*. But I have to say it was not written for anyone but myself and the Muse, and perhaps K if she ever reads it, and those who I know like my poems. If a

few other people read it and get something out of it then I'll be very pleased.

I don't believe in 'glossing' poems whether by adding footnotes or by explaining them in prose. A poem is a whole different way of looking at things. It may tell a story, but not as prose does. I can certainly add information to the poem, as I have just done here, which fills out the story into something more like a prose narrative – thinner, more discursive, more rational. But the point of the poem is itself. Its world is 'feeling thought'. Although it forced itself on me as I was preparing supper, wearing an apron, pepper-pot in hand, I was moved by it. If it moves you, or touches you, then I suppose that at some level the story or part of it is yours as well as mine – humanly ours.