

THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

Shared Intimacy: A study of Tony Harrison's public poetry with specific reference to his poetics, the political status of his work and his development of the genre of the film/poem.

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*In memoriam J. A. H. 1945-1995,  
Quail 1982-1997 and Bilberry 1988-1999.*

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Because of the frequency of quotation from texts written by Tony Harrison in this thesis, abbreviated titles of the author's works appear within the notes. The abbreviations are as follows:

<i>Black Daisies</i>	<i>Black Daisies for the Bride</i>
<i>Coming</i>	<i>A Cold Coming</i>
<i>Gaze</i>	<i>The Gaze of the Gorgon</i>
<i>Plays 3.</i>	<i>Tony Harrison: Plays 3</i>
<i>Selected Poems</i>	<i>Tony Harrison: Selected Poems</i>
<i>Shadow</i>	<i>Tony Harrison: The Shadow of Hiroshima and other film/poems</i>
<i>Trackers</i>	<i>The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus</i>

# *Introduction*

## *Introduction*

Poetry is all I write, whether for books, or readings, or for the National Theatre, or for the opera house and concert hall, or even for TV. All these activities are part of the same quest for a public poetry, though in that word “public” I would never want to exclude inwardness.<sup>1</sup>

Harrison’s use of the word public asserts his belief that poetry should be available for all. For some critics, however, poetry is not something that readily embraces such a categorisation. Geoffrey Grigson, for example, has suggested that poetry is essentially a ‘private art’, “the necessary secret possession of select individuals. It isn’t choral, it isn’t communal [ . . . ] it is resistant — if underneath or out of sight of journalists and Americans and teachers of literature — to vulgarization.”<sup>2</sup> Alan Bold, on the other hand, has argued succinctly that “there is nothing intrinsically private about poetry”<sup>3</sup> whereas for C. K. Stead: “Poetry is neither ‘public’ as in the moralist tradition, nor ‘private’ as in the aesthete’s”.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the vehemence of Grigson’s assertion, Harrison’s is a poetry in which there seems to be little, if any, separation between the public and the private or the personal and the political. His use of the word ‘public’ testifies to his belief that poetry is not the preserve of one particular sector of society, of “select individuals”. Rather his usage declares an agenda of poetry production that aims to erode the distinctions between public and private by a process of dissolving the arbitrary distinctions between low and high art and by revealing the interconnections between the public and the private.

Harrison’s rejection of an art that is directed at just one sector of society is made clear in his introduction to *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* (1990). He writes: “divided art is perpetuating divided audiences, divided societies [ . . . ] In the end those who feel excluded from ‘high’ art and relegated to ‘low’ will sooner or later want to destroy what they are not allowed to inhabit” (*Trackers*, pp. *xiii-xiv*). Harrison believes that, historically, the middle-

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Harrison’s preface to *Tony Harrison*. Contemporary Writers Series. London, 1987. Reprinted in *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies 1: Tony Harrison*. Ed. Neil Astley. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991, 9. Harrison’s preface hereafter referred to as ‘Preface’; Astley, ed., hereafter referred to as *Bloodaxe*.

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Grigson. *The Private Art. A Poetry Notebook*. London: Alison & Busby, 1982, 17. Hereafter referred to as *Private Art*.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Bold, ed. *Penguin Book of Socialist Verse*. London: Penguin, 1970, 57.

<sup>4</sup> C. K. Stead. *The New Poetic Yeats to Eliot*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967, 120.

classes have appropriated culture in such a way as to exclude other societal groups, and that this process still continues. Hence part of his challenge is to engage in acts of re-appropriation. One example of this is the critique in his work represented by his problematising of the binary opposition of the terms 'poetic' and 'vulgar'.<sup>5</sup> In Harrison's hands this culminates in what amounts to a re-definition of the term 'poetic'. This critique includes his politically conscious use of regular forms. These and other elements such as his repeated emphasis on poetry being a job, and his ongoing doubts and anxieties as to what licence he has to do what he does, are all part of Harrison's drive to demystify the very process of poetry, of making it public.

His use of the word 'public' also bears a sense of it being commonly available, something that is certainly true of his television work. This is readily apparent in his style, in particular the way he engenders a sense of inclusiveness. This is achieved, in part, as a result of his commitment to speaking for the voiceless and those marginalised and oppressed by the dominant culture. The wide variety of strategies and techniques that Harrison uses in order to create his public poetry, his politicised poetics, are a crucial component of his public art. It is these poetics that are the subject of the first four chapters of my thesis.

Harrison's quest of a public poetry has to be set in a cultural context in terms of our understanding of the terms public and private. Ostensibly these co-exist in a dichotomous relationship. This relationship is called into question by Harrison's work in the sense that his definition of public as not precluding "inwardness" threatens the stability of the dichotomy. In *Cultural Theory and Modernity* (1995) Johan Fornäs remarks that "The public and the private are logically, etymologically, historically and juridically each other's opposites".<sup>6</sup> The result is that the "public and the private have come to represent different values — rationalization, contract, and egalitarianism as counterposed to emotionality, bonding and difference; and different kinds of activities — productive work and rational calculation in the public sphere, and reproductive caring and intuitive empathy in the private sphere".<sup>7</sup> In this respect there exists a binary opposition between "rational calculation" (which we can term 'reason') in the public sphere and "caring and intuitive empathy" (which we can term 'emotion') in the private.

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<sup>5</sup> See Chapter Two for a detailed analysis of this.

<sup>6</sup> Johan Fornäs. *Cultural Theory and Late Modernity*. London: Thousand Oaks: New Delhi: Sage, 1995, 80. Hereafter referred to as *Cultural Theory*.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Bocoock and Kenneth Thompson, eds. *Social and Cultural Forms of Modernity*. Oxford: Polity Press, 1992, 72. Hereafter referred to as *Social and Cultural Forms*.

This opposition between reason and emotion has modulated into a gendered division between a male public sphere and a female private sphere:

. . . the very definition of private/public dichotomy is deeply connected to a gender order of male domination and marginalization of women. The intimate sphere as the core of the private is generally viewed as a female territory, while the market, the state and the public sphere are all dominated by men. Women are associated with home and family, intimacy and emotional life, while men are associated with politics, war and stage performances in cultural arenas or on urban streets.<sup>8</sup>

The explanation that has been offered historically for this gendered division is that “women are naturally suited to mothering and caring”.<sup>9</sup> Allied to this is a failure to perceive reproductive labour as work: “If we conceptualise women’s work as *labour*, then its relationship to other kinds of work quickly becomes apparent [ . . . ] reproductive labour — the ‘work’ of producing and caring for [ . . . ] subjective personal needs — is socially necessary labour, in the sense that it is necessary and inevitable and has to be done in every society irrespective of who takes responsibility for it.”<sup>10</sup> Despite this, the idea has developed that women’s ‘true’ place is in the private sphere, an idea that is also historically specific: “It might seem difficult to reconcile this idea of a natural sphere for women with ‘modernity’, since the idea sits uneasily with the grander Enlightenment claims of reason, progress, and the scientific domination of nature. However, historically, this dissonance was muted by the division of social life into ‘public’ and ‘private’, with all things intuitive and natural falling to women in the private sphere.”<sup>11</sup>

In broad terms, then, the public is a sphere characterised by the repression of emotions, with the emotions themselves being characterised as feminine qualities. For Harrison, though, “coming to terms with one’s own female qualities seems to be a very necessary struggle. You learn to do that by loving”.<sup>12</sup> That Harrison has had to come to terms with his female qualities is clear in that he has had to overcome the limitations of a working-class construction of masculinity, an ideology that denoted the arts and literature, and the poet, as effeminate. Moreover if the public means a place of restraint, of reason, then Harrison is implicitly locating allegedly ‘feminine’ qualities such as emotionality, tenderness,

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<sup>8</sup> Fornäs. *Cultural Theory*, 86.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>12</sup> *Bloodaxe*, 45.



tears and crying, in the so-called public arena in order to challenge the binary opposition between male and female. This throws a certain light on why Harrison's personae, for example the scholarship-boy, the poet and the persona of bard, are often dramatised as easily moved to tears. He himself has said that he thinks that "the crushing of the female principle is one of the great shortcomings of society in England and beyond".<sup>13</sup> In this respect the quest for a public poetry is a means of transcending this gendered division.

His emphasis on the female principle is, then, roughly equivalent to Harrison's use of the term "inwardness". This co-mingling of the public and the private is further illuminated by a phrase Harrison has used in a private conversation. On the one occasion I have spoken to him I asked what he meant by the term 'public poetry'. He said he wanted to create "a sense of shared intimacy amongst the viewers sat at home on their settees in their twos and threes."<sup>14</sup>

This is, then, the culmination, of the quest for a public poetry. Though the phrase resists an act of crude reductionism, I take the reference to "shared" as relating to all the techniques and strategies that Harrison utilises in order to make his work accessible, to make it public and to engender a sense of inclusivity. In short, his politicised poetics. The 'intimacy' element of the phrase relates to the variety of techniques that Harrison uses in *The School of Eloquence* sonnet sequence and the television work in order to create an act of emotional engagement on the part of the viewer/reader. I must emphasise that these matters are not easily separated but rather that they develop over a period of time. For example, though his politicised poetics are ever present and serve to imbue his television work with a characteristic accessibility Harrison develops many other techniques as a result of his involvement with this medium. He develops a documentary sense, for instance, that informs the television work with a cleverly contrived illusion of objectivity. The sense of authenticity that is generated, allied to the subjective camera techniques, create a public art of the highest order, not least because of Harrison's technique of privileging the visual image by using his verse to comment upon that, rather than television's traditional practise of appending images to a pre-written poem. This emphasis on the word explaining the world demonstrates Harrison's awareness (and commitment to) the poet-audience dynamic, a dynamic integral to his creation of a sense of shared intimacy.

No less important a technique in the television work is that of engendering an emotional response on the part of the reader/viewer as a result of an act of empathy. His hope

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<sup>13</sup> *Bloodaxe*, 241.

<sup>14</sup> Harrison in conversation with me at the Hull Literature Festival, 20 November 1993. Hereafter referred to as Hull Literature Festival.

is that his film/poems might thus create a bond, a sense of being part of something greater than the individual. It is through his TV work that Harrison intends to put a sense of the communal, the *commonsense* back into the concept of the public. But the phrase 'shared intimacy', suggesting as it does a sense of communal intimacy, actually intimates a little more than this — Harrison's work acts to reconstitute the public because an emotional response is required by his TV work that is usually either not requested or is withheld.

The political import of Harrison's aims is clear. Always resistant to the idea that the personal, the private, has been separated from the public, his strategy is to draw in as wide <sup>an audience</sup> as possible by making his very public film/poems, by showing an audience that they are involved in the kind of issues he writes about. In essence he wants to publicise the 'private' by facilitating a personal response on the part of the audience which will then, in a sense, have some kind of bearing on the 'public' sphere because Harrison will have facilitated an access previously denied to many. In other words, to place this within a kind of socio-political framework, in his rejection of the privatisation of experience Harrison's agenda suggests a desire to *nationalise* the public, to show that this is a communal place. His work thus serves to redefine the public by imbuing it with qualities typically associated with the private sphere. Hence Harrison's work rejects the perspective that suggests that poetry is purely a private activity. In this he was no doubt influenced by his response to poetry he read when he was growing up, verse of which he says "poets seemed too concerned to explore their own consciousness".<sup>15</sup> Hence his public poems utilise accessible modes to allow people access to issues that they might previously feel were not for them. There is an element of education here, his film/poems touring the living-rooms of the land almost, in a sense, as the Russian agitprop trains toured the former Soviet Union. His aim is to find ways of making poetry speak to those who previously never heard it, or rejected it. There are various possible reasons for this rejection but essentially they probably consist in two closely related elements. One is a fear of not understanding the verse. This is, presumably, a result of the elitism that has all too often shrouded poetry in an enigmatic mist. The second element is a belief that poetry has no relevance for people .i.e. even if they could understand it, they would be wasting their time anyway! It is these attitudes that Harrison is seeking to undermine. <sup>But</sup> there is also a social dimension, as befits a public poet, in that he is trying to include people in

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<sup>15</sup> Don Patinkin. 'A bleeding poet'. Vol. 326, *Economist*. 01-23-1993, pp 83. [sic]. Hereafter referred to as 'A bleeding poet'.

from which they would otherwise  
 experiences and issues . . . feel marginalised from, or would not  
 consider watching or attempting to understand, for a variety of reasons.

The nature of Harrison's politics has often been misunderstood and has led to varying interpretations of his works' literary merit. The critic Sandie Byrne has noted, for example, that this has been the case "particularly by writers producing the kind of normative criticism which sets as a given that the poems are intended to be political (in senses defined to a greater or lesser degree), and which then criticises them for failing to be so."<sup>16</sup> It is worth emphasising at the outset that my view of the political status of Harrison's work is more concerned with his politicised poetics rather than his ability (or lack of it) to adhere to, or advocate, a Party line. When asked if he had ever been a Marxist, Harrison replied: "I don't think I was ever one. I read all that stuff. I learnt from all that stuff, but I've never been any ist of any kind . . . except an artist."<sup>17</sup> Harrison, then, is not consciously political in the same sense as a political activist is. Rather he is trying to problematise our assumptions about poetry, about what is 'poetic'. He is looking to create public poetry, a poetry that might unify and bind people together rather than articulate a kind of partisan politics. That is not the same, however, as saying that there isn't a highly developed political component to what he does. Moreover this movement in his work of locating the private individual in a (re-defined) public sphere flies in the face of recent political history and the trend towards depicting the individual as an isolated economic being, summarised by Margaret Thatcher's infamous edict that there 'is no such thing as society'. It suited her ideological brief to say this, of course, because it neatly removed any moral imperative to provide for those who were unable to gain even a toehold in the capitalist boom of the 1980's. Hence Thatcherism made "the apparent separation of the private and the public one of its prime ideological objectives, and at the same time ensured that it was impossible for people to live in Britain without the political impinging on their personal lives, sometimes with startling intensity".<sup>18</sup> The effects of this on poetry were clear in the 1980's and (perhaps) 1990's — private experience was foregrounded but not in relation to any social agenda. Harrison attacks this process, working against the tendency to privatise experience. He is fighting against the idea that the personal has been separated from the public not least because

<sup>16</sup> Sandie Byrne. *H, v. & O*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press 1998, 127. See my Chapter 7 for a consideration of this point. Hereafter referred to as *H, v. & O*.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Brown. 'Harrison forward: Andrew Brown meets Tony Harrison, whose poetry goes straight to the heart and to the mind'. *The Independent* 23 JAN 93 Weekend Books, 29. Hereafter referred to as 'Harrison forward'.

<sup>18</sup> Bruce Woodcock. 'Poet as Heretic: the Political Imagination of Sean O'Brien'. From a forthcoming article in a volume called *Critical Survey*. Hereafter referred to as 'Poet as Heretic'.

this serves to remove the individual from history. In the *Eloquence* sequence, for example, he makes connections between his own (dramatised) personal situation and a wider political context. Here we can discern the presence of an inward to outward movement, from the scholarship-boy to the wider socio-economic realm, that testifies to Harrison's intention of showing the connections between the private and the public. This kind of inward to outward movement is paralleled in his television work by a reciprocal outward to inward movement; a movement from the outside world, down through the cathode ray, into the living rooms of Britain.

Given Harrison's passionate belief in poetry as a public art, it is no surprise that his quest for a public poetry has led him to write for television. He wants to "take poetry 'where it is not wanted' - out of the garret of lyrical despair and into the public arena"<sup>19</sup>, as one critic elegantly put it. He himself has said that though "poetry used to inhabit all the important public arenas, the theatre, politics [ . . . ] it retreated and shut itself away in poetry magazines. What defeatism! What a pathetic decline!"<sup>20</sup> It is in an attempt to reverse this decline that Harrison has sought to utilise television, for a variety of reasons. One is that he is able to reach many more people than he otherwise would have done by relying on books alone. It is also natural for an artist to seek new challenges and new horizons — and it pays well. The result is a public poetry that is accessible whichever way we choose to define the term, whether in terms of viewing figures or stylistic characteristics. The viewing figures make interesting reading. According to Andrew Holmes, the producer of three of Harrison's film/poems, "*Maybe Day in Kazakhstan* was seen by 750,000 people in the UK and by a slightly smaller number in France and Germany. *Shadow of Hiroshima* was seen by 1.1 million on C4. Both these figures are for the first broadcast, there will be more over a considerable time. Not bad compared with the library and book sales."<sup>21</sup> Not bad indeed especially considering that subsequent repeats will increase the total number of viewers substantially. *Shadow*, for example, was repeated in August 1998 and Harrison's *Black Daisies for the Bride* (1993) has been shown twice on BBC2. Moreover Neil Astley has

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<sup>19</sup> Robert Winder. 'Interview. Robert Winder meets Tony Harrison'. *Independent Weekend* 5th August 1995, 3. Hereafter referred to as 'Interview'.

<sup>20</sup> Rosemary Burton, unpublished article. Quoted by Peter Forbes. 'A Hundred Harms: Poetry and the Gulf War'. *Poetry Review* Vol. 82 No. 2 Summer 1992, 4.

<sup>21</sup> This information was supplied by Andrew Holmes in a private correspondence, 9. 9. 1998. Andrew Holmes was the producer of Harrison's film/poems *A Maybe Day In Kazakhstan* (1994), *The Shadow of Hiroshima* (1995) and *Prometheus* (1998)

commented that *v.* (1987) “reached an audience of several million”.<sup>22</sup> In addition Peter Symes has told me that *Blasphemers’ Banquet* (1989) was seen by “3.9 million”.<sup>23</sup> As regards the figures for book sales, Harrison’s public achievement is graphically clear. For example sales of *v.* “were not spectacular - about 400 and about 1700 of the cloth and paper first editions”.<sup>24</sup>

Harrison is not the first poet to have been featured on television, of course. There have been films about Larkin and Betjeman, for example, that included their verse. Another example is that of W. H. Auden and his poem *Night Mail*, written for a GPO film. More recently television has experimented with video poems in BBC2’s *Words on Film* series of half-hour films including works such as Fred D’Aguiar’s *Sweet Thames*. In June 1992 Simon Armitage’s *Xanadu* was also screened on the BBC. Harrison, however, is not writing *for* television so much as *writing* television.

Harrison has said “When I was young, the most favoured form was the short lyric. But that’s too cramping. I wanted a more public poetry, a poetry that reaches out, something that might ultimately envelop the whole community - as Greek tragedy once had.”<sup>25</sup> Clearly a public art that enveloped the whole community would help to make narrow terms such as ‘public’ and ‘private’ redundant. The form that Harrison uses for this is the film/poem, the compound noun being Harrison’s term. It is a form characterised by the same concrete, idiomatic style which artfully uses the ‘I’ voice and the poet persona that Harrison develops in his book-bound poetry and that I discuss at length in relation to both *Eloquence* and ‘*v.*’ in chapters 1-4. What Harrison has done, however, is <sup>to</sup> synthesise this style with film into an innovative form, a style characterised by the way that two different forms of the contemporary, film and poetry, interact.<sup>26</sup> What is exciting about this is that, after *v.*, the verse and the film develop together in a kind of symbiotic relationship, rather than a film being made to *explain* an already existing poem. Thus in Harrison’s case the poet’s eye offers images both visual and verbal, while the guiding tenet of his craft seems to be that the word explains the world, not vice versa.<sup>27</sup> This seems to be the basis of Peter Syme’s explanation of

<sup>22</sup> Bryne. *H, v. & O*, 131.

<sup>23</sup> From a private correspondence, 15 September 1998. Symes also provided these figures for the four films in the *Loving Memory* (1987) series. *Letters in the Rock*: 1 million; *Mimmo Perella*: 1.7 million; *Muffled Bells*: 1.6 million; *Cheating the Void*: Unknown. In addition these four films were repeated in 1988.

<sup>24</sup> Bryne. *H, v & O*, 67.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Glover. ‘Postcard from Ilkley: Fists sculpted in the air: Masks with open eyes: Michael Glover sees Tony Harrison and Brendan Kennelly read their poems’. *The Independent* 19 March 1994.

<sup>26</sup> See Chapters 5-7 below.

<sup>27</sup> Ira Sadoff. ‘Neo-Formalism: A Dangerous Nostalgia’. *The American Poetry Review*. January/February 1990. Internet download <<http://www.english.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/sadoff.html>>. Hereafter referred to as Sadoff,

Harrison's unique, poetical contribution when he explains that "the goal of any film maker working with verse should be to *enable*. Unless the poet's own creativity is allowed to inform the film-making itself, you might just as well use prose, and produce a conventional commentary, because what we are talking about is not verse commentaries but films which are driven by the poetic imagination, something that will infuse not only the words, but the sounds and pictures too."<sup>28</sup> Harrison has always been keen to explore what the role of contemporary poetry should be, what its function is. His engagement with various cultural forms of the contemporary is one answer to the question.

To attract his audience, to make them feel included, Harrison uses verse because of its abilities to draw people in, to allow them to look on things that otherwise they might turn away from. He believes that verse allows this capacity in ways that prose cannot. Because of Harrison's belief in the social function of art — verse has a job to do, it must earn its keep — his film/poems will enable audiences to square up to the horrors of 20th century life as witnessed in places like the Gulf and Bosnia, for example, and the more subtle horrors of Western Europe such as drug addiction, corruption, the suppression of free speech. In order to do this Harrison will use his public poetry, his poet's gaze to counter that of the Gorgon. In such a way, and on our behalf, he will square up to the 'Gorgonisms' of our contemporary world. For Harrison television is the medium to use precisely because it is both implicated in the causes of this callousness and yet the means of breaking the cycle. He suggests:

television is one of the spectres at the feast. I mean, you see the images and they make me, and I think most people, they make you lose your appetite for life. But actually I like those correspondents: 'Here I am in Tuzla. Here I am in Sarajevo.' They're like Greek heralds. But you see these terrible things, and you have people sitting down to eat while they watch, and if that's the case, you either become callous or you lose your appetite. I wanted to find a way of making people go on watching.<sup>29</sup>

The way that Harrison makes people go on watching is by developing a sense of shared intimacy throughout his work, from the book-bound *Eloquence* sequence through his

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'Neo-Formalism'. In this article Sadoff writes briefly in general terms about the relationship between "writer and audience, between word and world [ . . . ] language and experience" I am using the terms in a much more specific way in order to explore the ways in which film and verse interact. Hereafter referred to as 'Neo-Formalism'.

<sup>28</sup> Peter Symes, 'Blasphemy and Death: on film making with Tony Harrison', in *Bloodaxe*, pp. 384-394: 384. Hereafter referred to as 'Blasphemy and Death'.

<sup>29</sup> Winder. 'Interview', 3.

extensive television work. But that is not to suggest that his aim is to make cosy, comfortable verse; rather he seeks to challenge and disturb the assumptions of the viewer/reader. Hence he persistently questions his role as public poet and problematises the conventional view of poets and poetry. Harrison's challenge is to provoke and disturb the viewer / reader but not to alienate them. He is, then, a public poet who wants to explicate and warn. In this respect he is an 'unacknowledged' facilitator, to paraphrase Shelley, in that he wants to find ways of enabling individuals to face up to the Gorgon's gaze, he wants to speak for the voiceless, he wants to make us feel *and* to feel together. Poetry is the art that can achieve this, suggests Harrison, because

poetry, the word at its most eloquent, is one medium which could concentrate our attention on our worst experiences without leaving us with the feeling, as other media can, that life in this century has had its affirmative spirit burnt out.<sup>30</sup>

My intention has been to write a 'public' thesis, one that is available as a reading experience to someone not necessarily steeped in academic practice, though I realise that this might be too bold a claim for a work necessarily tempered by academic considerations. This aspiration underlies my decision not to apply contemporary theory (at least consciously) as I am more interested in considering Harrison's creation of an art of shared intimacy and in looking at his work in its own terms, by which I mean the poetic and artistic strategies and techniques that his work displays. I am primarily interested in his aims, what the effect is of his work, his ability to take poetry to those who haven't necessarily sought it out, and how the texts interact with an audience. His quest (and mine) culminates with his film/poems, for now at least.<sup>31</sup>

Harrison's quest is initially located in his crafting of a flexible speaking voice, an 'I' that incorporates both the allegedly private and the public. Indeed, his public poetry is dependent upon his crafting a poetic voice that will do justice to his aspirations. His *Eloquence* sequence seems a reasonable place to begin because it is here that the search for a voice is detailed. To explore this and other concerns Harrison develops a strongly

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<sup>30</sup> *Bloodaxe*, 9.

<sup>31</sup> At the time of writing (September 1998) the release of Harrison's latest work, *Prometheus*, is expected. This is a full length feature film made for the cinema in conjunction with Channel Four. In a private correspondence the producer of *Prometheus*, Andrew Holmes, informed me that the film is scheduled for a premiere at the National Film Theatre, South Bank, London, Sunday November 8th. 1998.

autobiographical mode in order to show the interconnections between the private and public, the personal and the political. Chapter One of my thesis begins with an exploration of this mode and the themes and issues with which it engages, the purpose of which is to establish a frame for my exploration of Harrison's development of his public poetry, a process culminating in a sense of shared intimacy.



## Chapter 1: Breaking The Chain

Harrison's private life and public art often seem inextricably coterminous: it often seems as if the poems *are* his life, presenting a shared intimacy all the more remarkable for its controlled craft. In order to identify and locate the origins and nature of Harrison's poetic strategies in this respect, let us begin with a reading of some of the *School of Eloquence* sonnets from an almost unproblematised autobiographical view, often the view of the ordinary reader or audience at a Harrison reading. In this chapter I discuss the various narrative strands in the sequence and explore Harrison's techniques, for example his deliberately autobiographical approach, which will be problematised later.<sup>1</sup> This is Harrison's primary mode of showing the connections between the public and the private. In *Eloquence* the technique serves to inscribe a movement from inward to outward, from the scholarship-boy to the wider socio-economic sphere. It is in this movement that Harrison dramatises certain elements of his personal situation. In this way Harrison articulates and negotiates issues as varied, yet interconnected, as division and conflict; guilt; memory; the personal and the political; divides of class and culture; the role of poet and the imperative to create a poetry and a poetic strategy which does justice to this. Many of these issues are present in 'Breaking the Chain', a poem which bears quoting in full in order to derive a fuller sense of Harrison's intimate style:

The mams pig-sick of oilstains in the wash  
wished for their sons a better class of gear,  
'wear their own clothes into work' but not go posh,  
go up a rung or two but settle near.

This meant the drawing office to the dads,  
same place of work, but not blue-collar, white.  
A box like a medal case went round the lads  
as, one by one, their mums pushed them as 'bright'.

My dad bought it, from the last dad who still owed  
the dad before, for a whole week's wage and drink.  
I was brought down out of bed to have bestowed  
the polished box wrapped in the *Sporting Pink*.

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion of Harrison's denomination of an autobiographical persona see Chapter 3.

Looking at it now still breaks my heart!  
 The gap his gift acknowledged then 's as wide as  
 eternity, but I still can't bear to part  
 with those never passed on, never used dividers. (*Selected Poems*, 153)

The poem begins by suggesting that parents' hopes for their offspring are often born out of the hardness of their own lives: put simply they want better for their children. The dream they cherish is for them to "go up a rung or two but settle near", to move up, but not to move out of their lives. It is a dream of social rather than geographical mobility, but a mobility that does not entail a complete divorce from the parent's cultural horizons. Typically this might have meant a job in the same place of work as the father but with the prestige of being 'on the staff', drawing a salary not a wage. In the poem this aspiration is marked by the gift of "A box like a medal case" which "went round the lads / as, one by one, their mams pushed them as bright".

This sequence of events is, then, one meaning of the chain that Harrison himself broke: the hopes and dreams of his parents. But there is, perhaps, a subtler meaning which is implied by the emphasis the poem places on the idea of the chain as *continuity* for its links bind those who are a part of it and thus give a kind of solidarity of shared values to the kind of community that Harrison himself originates from. This wider social context is implied when we learn of the importance that the fathers place on it, something that is clear in the ceremony that attends the giving of the gift, in this instance the bringing down out of bed of the speaker in the poem in order to receive the paternal blessing for being "bright". Though they were right to perceive their son as bright, any hopes they had that their son's progression would be comprehensible to them were not to be realised, as the poem reveals: the son kept the gift as a kind of poignant reminder, rather than use it in a practical sense. Whereas to the parents the dividers represent a manifestation of their hopes, they are to the poet symbolic of a void, an unbridgeable schism between him and his parents and, by extension, his class. Unlike John Donne's use of a similar image in 'A Valediction: forbidding Mourning', where he suggests that when one of the feet of the compasses "far doth roam" the other "leans, and hearkens after it"<sup>2</sup>, Harrison's "never passed on, never used, dividers" are a symbol of division. This division from his parents and his roots is a key note in

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<sup>2</sup> John Donne. 'A Valediction Forbidding Mourning'. *John Donne The Complete English Poems*. Ed. A. J. Smith. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977, 85. Hereafter referred to as *John Donne The Complete English Poems*.

Harrison's verse and the dividers are a fitting symbol of this: when inverted they form the versus sign, 'V,' a symbol that amounts to a leitmotif in his work, from *The School of Eloquence* onwards.

The gulf between Harrison and his parents has its origins in his education: "I had a very loving upbringing; without question, a very loving, rooted upbringing. Education and poetry came in to disrupt that loving group, and I've been trying to create new wholes out of that disruption ever since. They're not reconcilable, it seems, in the kind of class system we have in England; they are reconcilable in the kind of emotion I would momentarily grant in certain poems, but I have to take it away in the next poem".<sup>3</sup> That this is a characteristic strategy in his verse is clear, as we see in 'Illuminations', a poem where these antagonisms are temporarily reconciled through the image of the family relationship.

The poem is comprised of three parts. The first tells of a family holiday in Blackpool in "that post-war year", presumably 1946, where the nine-year-old Harrison sneaks off in order to play machines on Central Pier. At first reading, the point of the poem seems to be that it is puerile escapism to waste time and money on 'the amusements'; life and nature are advocated as being more rewarding, at least if one has had a working life like Harrison's father: "Bugger the machines! Breathe God's fresh air!" he snaps, a retort that offends the boy:

I sulked all week, and wouldn't hold your hand  
I'd never heard you mention God, or swear,  
and it took me until now to understand. (*Selected Poems*, 146)

What the poet now understands is that he should have been spending the time with his father while he was able to. This is the real *Blackpool illumination*: not the lighting display on the sea-front but an illuminating insight into the past. This kind of characteristic wordplay adds to the poignancy of the poem, a mood enhanced by the jokey use of cliché in the last line: "The penny dropped in time! Wish you were here!". Here the dropped penny refers to both the playing on a machine and the realisation that has been gained.

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<sup>3</sup> John Haffenden, 'Interview with Tony Harrison'. *Poetry Review*, vol. 73 no. 4, January 1984, pp. 17-30; also in Neil Astley, ed., *Bloodaxe* pp. 227-46. For convenience subsequent references are to the *Bloodaxe* text. Hereafter referred to as Haffenden 'Interview'.

That his father *is* in a sense still here, and his mother in fact, is suggested in 'Illuminations II' for the three meet again, or rather are *made* to by the poet, in an instance of autobiographical fiction. The poem is once more a kind of 'postcard poem' from the seaside but this time, instead of the speaker playing the amusements by himself, the family trio of father, mother, and son would hold hands and grip one of the electric-shock machines on the pier:

The current would connect. We'd feel the buzz  
 ravel our loosening ties to one tense grip,  
 the family circle, one continuous US! (*Selected Poems*, 147)

From this triumphant, celebratory position, however, Harrison reveals that it will be his destiny to fracture the family ties. His education will prove too much for the familial system and result in a blown fuse:

That was the first year on my scholarship  
 and I'd be the one who'd make that circuit short.  
 I lectured them on neutrons and Ohm's Law  
 and other half-baked Physics I'd been taught.  
 I'm sure my father felt I was a bore! (*Selected Poems*, 147)

That some sort of temporary reconciliation is granted here, however, between his education and "that loving group", is made clear in the last stanza. Though at the time of the poem's writing his parents might be dead in a material sense, some kind of spiritual current still flows through the three of them, a current culminating in: "that small bright charge of life where they both meet." Harrison has felt able to grant this unity here but he has to take it away in Part III:

The family didn't always feel together.  
 Those silent teas with all of us apart  
 when no one spoke except about the weather  
 and not about his football or my art. (*Selected Poems*, 148)

The irony of Harrison's education is that while it equipped him to become a poet it also served to instil in him a profound sense of cultural displacement. In 'Wordlists II' Harrison offers us a kind of balance-sheet, a profit and loss account between his roots and his learning:

[ . . . ] I've studied, got the OED  
and other tongues I've slaved to speak or read: (*Selected Poems*, 118)

There then follows a list of all these tongues in a tone of mock crowing, a crowing that serves as an ironic counterpoint to the sadness of the price that he has paid to acquire them. If this esoteric catalogue of erudition is the profit column for his learning there is deep sadness when he relates the loss. He might have got all these tongues but there's one he'll never learn again. This is:

[ . . . ] the tongue that once I used to know  
but can't bone up on now, and that's mi mam's. (*Selected Poems*, 118)

This loss has an echo in the moving sonnet, 'Book Ends II'. In this we see that despite the learning he has amassed, he is still unable to better his father's words when it comes to writing an inscription for his mother's gravestone. The poem starts in a sombre, reflective mood but this is soon shattered by the interjection of his father:

*Come on, it's not as if we're wanting verse.  
It's not as if we're wanting a whole sonnet!*

*You're supposed to be the bright boy at description  
and you can't tell them what the fuck to put!* (*Selected Poems*, 126)

Ironically the studied, yet fragile, formality of the sonnet is also shattered by this voice, a juxtaposition that points to the budding poet's dilemma. The problem, it seems, is that the poet has all but lost his mother-tongue, his native speech. He might have acquired learning and eloquence but they are in forms that are unable to communicate with his parents. Harrison was aware of this and knew he needed to find his own voice, that he'd "got to find the right words on my own" (*Selected Poems*, 127). Perhaps it is the case that his education simply had not equipped him to deal with loss and death for the poem ends on a note of failure as Harrison reveals that his uneducated father has managed what the educated poet has not:

I've got the envelope that he'd been scrawling,  
mis-spelt, mawkish, stylistically appalling  
but I can't squeeze more love into their stone. (*Selected Poems*, 127)

In another poem, *Blocks*, we see a further collapse of the aspiring poet's attempts to craft a poetic voice that will do justice to his public aspirations. Faced with the challenge of providing an oration at his mother's memorial service the poet fails once more. He sits in the church listening to the vicar "droning" on, boring the congregation and, interestingly, unable to resist commenting on how the vicar "misquotes *Ecclesiastes* Chapter 3". Of course this is his learning intruding again, but the point he is making is not one based on intellectual snobbery but more of a point against himself: as a poet it should be him that is able to deliver a fitting oration *and* it should be in his own voice. The implication, in a wider sense, is that an art that fails to communicate with those to whom it is addressed is all but worthless. Just as in 'Book Ends II', however, the attempt ends in failure.

The poem's title is significant: 'Blocks'. It is a title which refers not only to mental obstructions - "Blocks with letters" (*Selected Poems*, 164) - but also, perhaps, the obstruction that the 'world of letters' represents in denying Harrison his own voice. Though he is at least able to sense that he has to move the "blocks" in order to attain this voice "VALE, MATER" is all that he can spell. This time, however, there seems to be a recognition that perhaps he needs a new perspective with which to tackle his craft. He picks up on the vicar's words "*A time to . . .*" and decides that it is indeed a time for him to

. . . plough back into the soil  
the simple rhymes that started at her knee,  
the poetry, that 'sedentary toil'  
that began, when her lap was warm, with ABC. (*Selected Poems*, 164)

He is, then, aiming to seek his own voice but his attempts to do this are marked by more conflict, a conflict revealed in the poem 'Bringing Up'. The incident that triggers it is the publication of Harrison's *The Loiners* (1970), a collection of verse characterised by the poet as being concerned with "sex and history"<sup>4</sup>. Its frank treatment of sexuality is deeply distressing to his mother:

Even cremation can't have dried the eyes  
that wept for weeks about my 'sordid lust'. (*Selected Poems*, 166)

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<sup>4</sup> Haffenden. 'Interview'. *Bloodaxe* 231.

Even at the time of writing he suggests that he can still see her weeping, her hurt looks, and it is the guilt that this memory induces which underpins the idea of his volume being cremated along with his mother. Though they would have been “devoured by one flame” they would still have been “unreconciled, /like soots on washing, black on bone-ash white”. There are no prizes for deducing that Harrison is represented by the black stain on the bone in this image, a blackness that he accepts willingly for his transgression against his mother’s sensibilities: whereas he *was* brought up to receive a pair of dividers, given in trust for future generations, he “*weren’t brought up to write such mucky books!*”. (*Selected Poems*, 166)

Given Harrison’s thesis that the conflict between himself and his parents is attributable to his education (and wider associated class shift) the poems enact a situation in which it seems that it was the fear and suspicion engendered in the parents by the scholar’s erudition and learning that caused the rupture between them. This schism is clear in one poem when we are told that during a summer when he read “Ibsen, Marx and Gide” the speaker “got one of his you-stuck-up-bugger looks” from his father, who then proclaims:

*ah sometimes think you read too many books.  
ah nivver ‘ad much time for a good read. (Selected Poems, 141)*

The speaker’s reply, though kept to himself, is no less scathing or insulting for that:

*Good read! I bet! Your programme at United!  
The labels on your whisky or your beer!  
You’d never get unbearably excited  
poring over Kafka or King Lear.  
The only score you’d bother with ‘s your darts,  
or fucking football . . .*

(All this in my mind.) (*Selected Poems*, 141)

In ‘Continuous’ we learn that some point of union was reached between the father and son. They used to go to the pictures together, a shared love of James Cagney’s art being the impulse. Even in this poem, however, Harrison finds it necessary to hint about his father’s shortcomings in that the film and ‘a choc ice’ “were the treats / that showed about as much love as he dared” (*Selected Poems*, 143).

Moments of shared experience between father and son are few in *Eloquence*, more typical are the moments of conflict. In 'Book Ends I' we learn a little more about how this gulf originated. The two of them are sat together later on the same day that Florence, his mother, died.<sup>5</sup> Harrison builds on the image of <sup>himself</sup> / and his dad as book ends, an image his mother used to describe them:

*You're like book ends, the pair of you, she'd say,  
Hog that grate, say nothing, sit, sleep, stare...*

The 'scholar' me, you, worn out on poor pay,  
only our silence made us seem a pair. (*Selected Poems*, 126)

Harrison is ruing the fact that on a night <sup>when</sup> / his father was desperately in need of company to help him overcome his grief, his learning, and the practise of an art that failed to communicate with those he loved, came between them:

for all the Scotch we drink, what's still between 's  
not the thirty or so years, but books, books, books. (*Selected Poems*, 126)

The poems that I've discussed form one of the major thematic strands of *The School of Eloquence* sonnet sequence, Harrison's separation from *his parents and their deaths*. They are, then, poems of atonement for the guilt he feels. This is clear in one poem when Harrison refers to the quarrel with his father that took place in 'Book Ends I':

We *had* a bitter quarrel in our cups  
and there *were* words between us, yes,  
I'm guilty, and the way I make it up 's  
in poetry, and that much I confess. (*Selected Poems*, 126)

Poems such as these are Harrison's way of holding on to his parents' memory. They are, as he puts it: "lines to hold the still too living dead", (*Selected Poems*, 160) but though clearly elegiac they are not without a political conscience. What Harrison is doing is to dramatise his own cultural shifts as representative "of broader social dislocations which have been a major

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<sup>5</sup> Tony Harrison. Hull Literature Festival.



feature of post-war life for many working-class families in Britain. [ . . . ] as in most elegies, they dramatise a personal crisis as representative of larger problems.”<sup>6</sup> In this respect, though the sonnets often appear to be quite autobiographical, Harrison is *dramatising* certain elements of his personal situation. The poetic voice in the poems is only one aspect of his imagination. Despite this qualification or, perhaps, because of it, his “filial art”<sup>7</sup> is in fact inseparable from his political commitment and this becomes clearer when we consider the structure of the sonnet sequence as a whole.

Blake Morrison has observed that a study of the development of the *Eloquence* sequence suggests that “though [Harrison is] committed to an open-ended structure [he has] gradually evolved a clear thematic, tripartite frame for the sequence”<sup>8</sup>. The elegies for his parents appear, in the main, in the second section, immediately after the

densely-wrought politico-historical<sup>9</sup> poems of Part I and followed by a looser set of poems (about politics, history, art and mortality) in Part III: the elegies at the centre acquire their meaning from the context in which they are set. [ . . . ] this context was actually uppermost in Harrison’s mind when he began to write the sequence: of the eighteen poems in *From ‘The School of Eloquence’*, the first public airing of the sequence, thirteen belong to what later became Part I, three to Part III, and only two to Part II. At this early stage the sequence was more blatantly and single-mindedly a thesis about political and linguistic oppression than it appears in *Selected Poems*.<sup>10</sup>

That Harrison is keen to emphasise a balance of the political and the personal is clear in the three epigraphs to the sequence. The first is taken from E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). It refers to the ‘School of Eloquence’, a cover name for the London Corresponding Society, a working-class organisation suppressed in 1799 by a ruling class whose repressive measures were matched only by its paranoia. The second epigraph is sixteen lines of Latin taken from John Milton’s ‘Ad Patrem’. It is a poem in which the son pays tribute to his father - “my greatest gifts could never match yours . . . ”<sup>11</sup> - while also justifying his intention

<sup>6</sup> Rick Rylance. ‘On Not Being Milton’. *Bloodaxe*, 115.

<sup>7</sup> Blake Morrison. ‘The Filial Art’. *Bloodaxe*, 56.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

to become a poet. Though Harrison has only included the opening and closing passages of Milton's poem (thus making it match his own sonnets, in length, at least) Morrison notes that the omitted section contains much that is pertinent: " 'Do not, then, I pray, persist in contempt for the sacred Muses', . . . an invocation which ghosts such poems of Harrison's as 'A Good Read' ".<sup>12</sup> Moreover because it is in Latin it also reminds most readers of the difficulties of participating in the literary culture, a theme that informs many of the sonnets. The third epigraph is Harrison's own and we see that its effect is to merge the personal and the political elements:

*How you became a poet's a mystery!  
Wherever did you get your talent from?  
I say: I had two uncles, Joe and Harry-  
one was a stammerer, the other dumb. (Selected Poems, 111) <sup>13</sup>*

Harrison's thesis that the personal is political is justified by his belief that "the intimacies of the private life are a kind of earthing area for the lightning of history and of political struggles"<sup>14</sup>. Though this comment was made with specific reference to *The Loiners* it still accords generally with his work. For example, when John Haffenden asked Harrison if he hadn't perhaps appropriated an historical-social resentment in order to give a larger authority to a personal, psychological issue Harrison replied: "I see them all as intimately related: the historical, the autobiographical, and the metaphysical [ . . . ] it seems to me that what you call the psychological issues are as historical as the historical issues are psychological. I see them as part of the same scale, the same historical spectrum. The understanding of my feelings about my relationship with my father - probably exacerbated because I committed myself to the identity of the poet, so that the pain, the needle, is felt in the language - is nevertheless related to historical struggles between the classes"<sup>15</sup>. This, then, is why the elegies of Part II of *Eloquence* can be said to be political and why 'Marked With D', for example, is not only a deeply moving poem but also an acerbic

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 56-57.

<sup>13</sup> When Harrison introduced this at the Hull Literature Festival (1993) he recounted an anecdote relating something that he overheard during the interval of *The Misanthrope* at the National Theatre. He heard one woman say to another: "He has such a command of language but they say he comes from Yorkshire". He told the same anecdote at the Ilkley Literature Festival, 29 March 1998! Hereafter referred to as Ilkley Literature Festival.

<sup>14</sup> Haffenden. 'Interview'. *Bloodaxe*, 231.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 230.

political statement. The poem is “probably the most bitter”<sup>16</sup> of Harrison’s concerning his father’s feelings of inadequacy about his speech and it is this metaphorical ‘coldness of tongue’ that is the ‘mark’ that the father carries. Ironically it is the ovens at the crematorium that finally will make:

... his cold tongue burst into flame  
but only literally, which makes me sorry (*Selected Poems*, 155)

The sorrow is both for a life endured in a silenced state and that his father won’t find the after-life he hungered for. While the poet’s hunger is satisfied on Earth, presumably by the ‘daily bread’ of intellectual sustenance, this feast was denied to his father who

hungered for release from mortal speech  
that kept him down, the tongue that weighed like lead. (*Selected Poems*, 155)

It is the same England that suppressed groups like The London Corresponding Society that prevented this baker ‘from rising’ in a social sense, making him feel “like some dull oaf” and, ironically, it is the same England that has educated the son. It is in his education that we find the causal factors for the divisions and conflicts which are the stuff of Harrison’s verse.

Harrison was born into “an uneducated working-class family”<sup>17</sup> and won a scholarship to Leeds Grammar School when he was eleven years old. Almost immediately he began to study the Classics, all the time conscious that as he was “being shepherded towards these great founts of eloquence” he had “a family about me with an uncle who stammered and an uncle who was dumb, and others who were afflicted with a metaphorical dumbness, and lack of socially confident articulation; and also their forebears, who although their mouths had been shaped for speech like all *meropes anthropi* had been silenced and went unrecorded in the chorus of history.”<sup>18</sup> As he writes in one sonnet:

Words and wordlessness. Between the two  
the gauge went almost ga-ga. No RI,  
no polysyllables could see me through,  
come glossalia, dulciloquy. (*Selected Poems*, 117)

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>17</sup> Tony Harrison, ‘Facing Up To The Muses’. *Bloodaxe*, 436. First published in *Proceedings of the Classical Association*, 85 (1988) and reprinted in *Bloodaxe*, pp. 429-454. Hereafter referred to as ‘Facing Up’.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 436.

It is this schism between “words and wordlessness”, this division between the “founts of eloquence” and his silenced kinfolk that Harrison focuses on in much of his verse. It was brought home to him at Leeds Grammar School when he came up against a teacher who was, according to Harrison, engaged in a campaign to keep all colloquial language out of the translations his pupils were required to do from Latin and Greek: “It’s easy to deny the colloquial roots of a dead language. The upshot of what seemed like a conspiracy was to pretend that the language had never been alive or spoken at all.”<sup>19</sup> Harrison had suggested that the words an official might have spoken were something like ‘move along there’ but his Master had ruled this unacceptable, suggesting ‘Vacate the thoroughfare’ in its place. This is a value-laden assumption on the part of the master, an assumption indicative of a reverence for Classics, which Harrison abhors. He feels that the Classics have been appropriated as the property of the middle classes who then jealously protect them, trapping them, so to speak, in a preserve of ‘high culture’. It is this kind of experience that is the impulse for his poem ‘Classics Society’, a poem expressive of the frustrations Harrison had as “a working-class boy with a Leeds accent translating upper-class English into patrician Latin”<sup>20</sup>:

We boys can take old Hansards and translate  
the British Empire into SPQR  
but nothing demotic or too up-to-date,  
and *not* the English that I speak at home (*Selected Poems*, 120)

The poem is primarily concerned with the experience of the working-class scholarship boy .

But if we consider the beginning we realise that Harrison is offering a sharp analysis of how political power legitimises speech forms. The poem begins with a quotation from 1552, the year that Leeds Grammar School was founded:

*The grace of Tullies eloquence doth excel  
any Englishman’s tongue . . . my barbarous stile . . .* (*Selected Poems*, 120)

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 437.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 437.

According to Harrison these are the words of “one who felt humbly cowed by the gracious eloquence of Ciceronian rhetoric”<sup>21</sup>, Tully being the familiar name for Marcus Tullius Cicero. By including them here he establishes an historical precedent for the experience of the twentieth-century scholarship boy, the point being that

The tongue our leaders use to cast their spell  
was once denounced as ‘rude’, ‘gross’, ‘base’ and ‘vile. (*Selected Poems*, 120)

and  
It is power that legitimises speech, then, the power that a ruling class wields enables it to determine which forms of speech are correct and which are deviant. It is a problem that has been around for hundreds of years and Harrison, by including the sixteenth-century student’s words, is not just affirming the place of marginalised and suppressed tongues but reminding the reader of the political context of their absence.

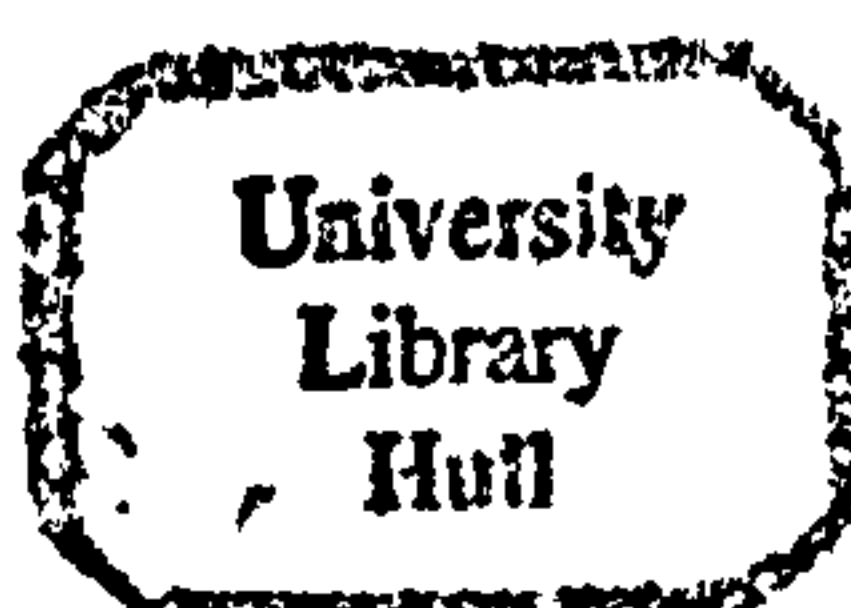
Another important experience at the Grammar School was crucial in informing the perspectives we find in *Eloquence*. This was the occasion of Harrison being prevented from reading poetry because of his accent:

4 words only of *mi ‘art aches* and... ‘Mine’s broken,  
you barbarian, T.W.!’ *He* was nicely spoken.  
Can’t have our glorious heritage done to death!’ (*Selected Poems*, 122)

Harrison’s pronunciation of Keats is seen by the “nicely spoken” teacher not simply as an assault on Standard English but as an assault on “our glorious heritage”, but the point of the poem is that this heritage is not ‘ours’: “the teacher claims it for himself and the Queen’s English, not for [uz]”.<sup>22</sup> With hindsight Harrison can undermine the claim that literature is the heritage and cultural property of those with one kind of accent known mysteriously as Received Pronunciation by noting that Keats himself was a victim of a similar snobbery on account of his speaking with a Cockney accent. In *Talking Proper: The Rise of Accent as Social Symbol* (1997) Lynda Mugglestone tells us that ‘Cockney’ was a term of abuse applied to many linguistic ills in the nineteenth century. One such ‘ill’ was the use of rhymes which were dependent on aural,

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 438.

<sup>22</sup> Andrew Swarbrick. ‘Tony Harrison’s poetry: Collision and Collusion’. *The English Review*. Vol. 4. No. 1. September 1993, pp. 18-21. Hereafter referred to as Swarbrick, ‘Collision and Collusion’.



rather than visual, correspondences. These were often condemned as ‘Cockney rhymes’. Mugglestone tells us of Thomas Hood’s comments in *The Wakefield Spelling Book* (London 1868). In the section of his book designed to aid the aspiring poet, Hood “felt driven to exhort ‘the writer of verse to examine his rhymes carefully’: ‘see that they chime to an educated ear. Such atrocities as “morn” and “dawn”, . . . “fought” and “sort”, are fatal to the success of verse. They stamp it with vulgarity, as surely as the dropping of “h” stamps a speaker’.”<sup>23</sup> This was the kind of attack that plagued Keats “whose rhymes of *thorns/fawns*, and *thoughts/sorts* contravened popular notions of correctness”.<sup>24</sup> This contravention was the root of a particularly vicious attack on Keats by a certain John Lockhart in an article in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*. He called Keats “‘an uneducated and flimsy stripling’. He is ‘without logic enough to analyse a single idea, or imagination enough to form one original image’. More fundamentally, he is also ‘[without] learning enough to distinguish between the written language of Englishmen and the spoken jargon of Cockneys’.”<sup>25</sup> Small wonder, then, that Harrison identified so closely with Keats.

The essential theme of ‘Them & [uz] I’ is the class conflict that the title signals. As we often find with Harrison, even the title is loaded with associations. As Andrew Swarbrick has noted, it is “slangy and peremptory” in its use of “‘&’ rather than ‘and’”,<sup>26</sup> a form which suggests a similar cultural impropriety as does Harrison’s usage of the northern pronunciation of ‘us’. That it is written as the phonetic symbol [uz] serves to emphasise that Harrison is keen to tread on cultural toes but also the poem’s “clamorous assertion” is that these brackets can be read as symbols of “cultural and political marginalisation”.<sup>27</sup> Thus we are presented with two opposing groups. On the one hand the “mediators of culture . . . who act as cultural guardians” and, on the other, the vulgar under-class, the [uz]. In this context “the ‘&’ is really ‘Vs’ ”<sup>28</sup>.

The dedicatees of the poem, the “Professors Richard Hoggart & Leon Cortez” are also worthy of consideration. Hoggart is the author of *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), a book which

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<sup>23</sup> Lynda Mugglestone. *Talking Proper - The Rise of Accent as Social Symbol*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, 100. Hereafter referred to as *Talking Proper*.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>25</sup> J. G. Lockhart. ‘On the Cockney School of Poetry No. IV’. *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, 3 (1818), 520, 521. Quoted by Mugglestone. *Talking Proper*, 101.

<sup>26</sup> Swarbrick. ‘Collision and Collusion’, 20.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

Harrison admits “helped me understand myself”<sup>29</sup> and to which he owes his poem’s title. *The Uses of Literacy* describes “the cultural ‘chafing’ experienced by the working-class boy undergoing a scholarship education, ‘at the friction point of two cultures[ . . . ] He both wants to go back and yet thinks he has gone beyond his class”.<sup>30</sup> Leon Cortez, on the other hand, is a remembered figure from Harrison’s childhood, a “stand-up comedian who ‘translated’ Shakespeare into Cockney”.<sup>31</sup> When Harrison has spoken about specific literary or cultural influences in his sonnets he tends to cite Milton and the technique of music-hall comedians from his youth. It is in this context that we might place Hoggart and Cortez for together they represent the twin allegiances that Harrison feels to the culturally respectable and the popularly demotic, as Swarbrick and many others have noted.<sup>32</sup> These dual allegiances, and the attendant schism between ‘proper’ and ‘improper’ learning, are re-enacted in the poem’s beginning. Here the choric cry from Greek tragedy, “αἰαῖ”, with the demotic ‘ay, ay’ of the music-hall artist, reminds us of the paradox of eloquence and inarticulacy, as Harrison invokes Demosthenes, a fourth-century Athenian orator. He fought against his speech impediment by filling his mouth with pebbles, “rather as the upper classes are said to speak with plums in their mouths”,<sup>33</sup> and then attempting to shout over the noise of the sea. Harrison’s position is analogous to the Greek stutterer’s when he tries to read Keats’s ‘Ode To A Nightingale’ and by the end of the poem he too has become a dumb stammerer. Faced with his teacher’s assertion that “Poetry’s the speech of kings” and that his “barbarian” tongue makes him fit only for the low parts of Shakespeare, he decides to ‘doff his flat a’s and “hawk up and spit out” (*Selected Poems*, 122) the glottals of dialect and accent that his mouth is stuffed with.

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<sup>29</sup> BBC 2 ‘Arena’ programme of Harrison reading and talking about his life (1985); Brent Garner. ‘Tony Harrison: Scholarship Boy’. *Transactions of the Yorkshire Dialect Society* (1986), 23.

<sup>30</sup> Richard Hoggart. *The Uses of Literacy*. Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1958, 246. Bruce Woodcock discusses this material in ‘Classical Vandalism: Tony Harrison’s Invective’. *Critical Quarterly*, 32, no. 2 (Summer 1990), 52. Hereafter referred to as Woodcock, ‘Classical Vandalism’.

<sup>31</sup> Haffenden. ‘Interview’. *Bloodaxe*, 238.

<sup>32</sup> Another formative dual allegiance was that recounted to interviewer Peter Lennon in *The Guardian*. Lennon tells us that as a child Harrison’s “two great heroes were Livingstone and George Formby. He once described his poetry as being a kind of compromise between the two: ‘half missionary, half comic; Bible and banjo.’” Peter Lennon. ‘The world seen from the gods’. *The Guardian* 19 March 1990, 21. Hereafter referred to as ‘World seen from the gods’.

<sup>33</sup> Woodcock. ‘Classical Vandalism’, 56.

The conflict between 'Them' and [uz] is epitomised for Harrison in the division between Standard English and Received Pronunciation, (forms in which 'us' is pronounced [ʌs]), and the non-standard English he spoke at home, (where it is pronounced [uz]). For Harrison [ʌs] is an 'exclusive' symbol while [uz], the "pronoun of solidarity"<sup>34</sup>, is 'inclusive'. It is in this context that he speaks of his writing as: "a long slow-burning revenge on the teacher who taught me English when I was eleven or twelve", hence it is "full of retrospective aggro"<sup>35</sup>. This 'aggro' is fuelled by his belief that language and speech <sup>have</sup> been invested with class assumptions. It is this connection between the political power of a ruling-class and the forms and standards it imposes upon language and speech that Harrison is at pains to expose and attack. One example he has given is that of the Victorians: "The lexicography of the nineteenth-century Victorians has Victorian class-assumptions - the assumption, for example, that something is either 'poetic' or 'vulgar'. Poetic language [ . . . ] can take in the crude and the holy almost in the same line, and that English talent seems to me to be a very important one. The Classics have come down to us from high-minded Victorians with Anglican persuasions along with the notion that poetry can only be read with an R. P. voice".<sup>36</sup>

There are two points to be made here. The first is more of a humanitarian issue. On a basic emotional level this is clearly a very damaging attitude to propagate, <sup>since</sup> to attack someone's voice is to attack their very being, to go to the heart of their emotional centres. Given that voices are more individual than fingerprints, because of the uniqueness of an individual's physiology, we *are* our voices: "A speaker who is made ashamed of his own language habits suffers a basic injury as a human being: to make anyone, especially a child, feel so ashamed is as indefensible as to make him feel ashamed of the colour of his skin".<sup>37</sup> The second point is that this attack on the voice has far reaching political ramifications - this dichotomy of the 'poetic' and 'vulgar' has serious consequences for the working-class.

<sup>34</sup> Haffenden. 'Interview'. *Bloodaxe*, 233.

<sup>35</sup> Tony Harrison. 'Facing Up'. *Bloodaxe*, 437.

<sup>36</sup> Haffenden. 'Interview'. *Bloodaxe*, 243.

<sup>37</sup> Mathieson, Margaret. *The preachers of culture: a study of English and its teachers*. Allen & Unwin, 1975, pp 148-9. Hereafter referred to as *The preachers of culture*.



The Scottish poet, Tom Leonard, tells us of a teacher who said to him that she “always felt proud that she spoke the same language as ‘the byootiful lengwidge of Milton’ ”.<sup>38</sup> The beauty of this ‘lengwidge’ for many is, Leonard suggests “that the softness of its vowel-enunciation reinforces their class status in society as the possessors of a desirable mode of speaking”. Citing how a quote like Keats’s “Beauty is truth, truth beauty”<sup>39</sup> is made to subserve class interests by what he scathingly calls the “Any Questions” crowd Leonard argues that: “where beauty in language is recognised as the property of a particular class, then naturally truth is assumed to be the property of that class also”. The consequences of this are severe: “a person who doesn’t ‘speak right’ is therefore categorised as an ignoramus; it’s not simply that he doesn’t know how to speak right, but that this ‘inability’ shows that he has no claim to knowledge of truth. That supposed insult ‘the language of the gutter’ puts forward a revealing metaphor for society. The working-class rubbish, with all its bad pronunciation and dreadful swear words, is only really fit for draining away out of sight”.<sup>40</sup>

The connections between Harrison and Leonard’s views are many and worth further consideration. Leonard, for example, suggests that there are really only two ways of speaking in Britain: “one which lets the listener know that one paid for one’s education, the other which lets the listener know that one didn’t”.<sup>41</sup> The latter is obviously more varied, a mixture of regional working-class accents, and it is these that the ‘bought’ education has pledged will not be allowed to contaminate its pupils. Instead, argues Leonard, it will equip them with “a mode of pronunciation which ironically enough is called ‘Received’ ”. Leonard maintains that the consequences of creating, or at least preserving, a particular mode of pronunciation on a strictly economic basis inevitably has deep repercussions in a society and, in particular, in that society’s literature. He argues that if a society has a standardised grammar, (i.e. spelling and syntax) and also a standardised mode of pronunciation, then, almost inevitably it seems, the two will become indivisible from one another: “the notion tends to get embedded in the consciousness of that

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<sup>38</sup> Tom Leonard. ‘The Proof of the Mince pie’, *Intimate Voices: Selected Work 1965-1983*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Galloping Dog Press, 1984, 65. Hereafter referred to as ‘Mince Pie’.

<sup>39</sup> John Keats. ‘Ode On A Grecian Urn’. *John Keats: Poems*. Ed. Gerald Bullett with an introduction by Robert Gittings. London: Melbourne: Toronto: Dent/Everyman, 1974, 192.

<sup>40</sup> Leonard. ‘Mince Pie’, 65.

<sup>41</sup> Tom Leonard. ‘The Locust Tree in Flower, and why it had Difficulty Flowering in Britain’. *Intimate Voices*, 95. Hereafter referred to as ‘Locust Tree’.

society, that the one is part of the essence of the other [ . . . ] Prescriptive grammar [ . . . ] becomes the sound made flesh of prescriptive pronunciation".<sup>42</sup>

The consequence of this linkage is particularly bad in terms of the prospects for working-class literature for "if a piece of writing can't comfortably be read aloud in a 'correct' (Received pronunciation) voice, then there must be something wrong with it". In this society it is, then, invalid. And, perhaps, not just the style of the piece but its semantic content as well since "the standard pronunciation, having to be bought, is the property of the propertied classes, then only such content as these classes do not find disagreeable, can be correct". Moreover, given the inbuilt tendency of the economically superior classes to assume that their language is also aesthetically superior it follows that "in the interests of 'Beauty' and 'Truth', the regional and the working-class languages [ . . . ] certainly aren't capable, the shoddy little things, of great Art".<sup>43</sup>

Art is *capitalised* because it is identified with "owned language, the established voice and accent of the culture".<sup>44</sup> The group that is able to impose their standards can be said to 'own' art because "in a society where a person's worth is determined by how much he owns, then the concept of ownership will permeate not only 'property', but culture, education, marriage, language as spoken, language as written".<sup>45</sup> What happens, then, in a materialistic society is that an elitist culture is fabricated by the middle and upper-classes and bolstered by propaganda to the effect that it is of a "higher plane", "of the *noblest* emotions, etc". This is due, in part at least, to the increasing secularisation of English society in the nineteenth-century. This process led to art becoming invested with spiritual properties and values because "as craftsmen and artists were employed for purposes not specifically religious, so the arts came to embody values and to evoke emotional responses which were not themselves in the service of religion".<sup>46</sup> The effect of such propaganda is that it tends to inculcate into the majority of the population the notion that culture is therefore: "an intellectual and spiritual property which their mode of speaking and being debars them from sharing"<sup>47</sup> unless, of course, the person is prepared to forsake and reject both his or her native tongue and their lowly social origins.

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<sup>42</sup> Leonard. 'Locust Tree', 95.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>44</sup> Rylance. 'On Not Being Milton. *Bloodaxe*, 117.

<sup>45</sup> Leonard. 'Mince Pie', 68.

<sup>46</sup> Bryan Wilson, in Margaret Mathieson, *The Preachers of Culture*, 76.

<sup>47</sup> Leonard. 'Mince Pie', 68.

In Harrison's 'Them & [uz] I' we see much the same point being made. For example we see that the class that the teacher represents enjoys enough power to have appropriated "All poetry". This class, colonialists of language who say [ʌs], not [uz], have "dubbed" poetry into Received Pronunciation and the speech of those excluded from this cultural preserve "is in the hands of the Receivers". The idea that language can be 'owned' by one class is emphasised by Harrison's wordplay: the 'Receivers' are not just 'Pronouncers' but carry a legal sense of being those who are appointed to administer property that is subject to a bankruptcy order. This idea that language is something that can be taken possession of is also given expression in Part II of the poem. Though apparently silenced by his teacher's assertion that RP is the *only* voice in which to read poetry, the poet has decided to fight back, to regain his birthright of expression. While in another sonnet the choice had seemed to be stark, his only option being between "Words and Wordlessness" (*Selected Poems*, 117), in 'Them & [uz] II' he makes his choice: it is to be neither one nor the other but, rather, a combination of the two. He is to dispossess the establishment of its control over language/poetry by making his poetry full of the voices of those hitherto dispossessed by that same establishment. The battle is to be conducted in an effort to emancipate ordinary speech and the battleground is English literature:

So right, yer buggers, then! We'll occupy  
your lousy leasehold Poetry. (*Selected Poems*, 123)

In Harrison's assertion of the validity of his own working-class tongue he has become a kind of urban-guerrilla of language, a linguistic freedom fighter committed to wresting from the dominant class its monopoly over language. It is no accident that I have used words with a combative sense as this is a real political-linguistic war to the poet. He has perceived the false duality of the "words/wordlessness" dichotomy: "Words" would have entailed his passive assimilation into the dominant materialistic ideology and "Wordlessness" would have sealed his mouth as if it were a redundant coal mine. His task is to speak for those who have had "Wordlessness" thrust upon them, as happened to the Cornish:

The dumb go down in history and disappear  
and not one gentleman's been brought to book:

*Mes den hep tavas a-gollas y dyr*

(Cornish) -

'the tongueless man gets his land took.' (*Selected Poems*, 121)

It is this voice's task to speak on behalf of those that are inaudible in history:

Wherever hardship held its tongue the job

's breaking the silence of the worked-out-gob. (*Selected Poems*, 124)

(Harrison's own note tells us that 'Gob' is an old Northern coal-mining word for the space left after the coal has been extracted and that it also means the mouth and speech.)

It is clear in *Eloquence* that with the benefit of hindsight Harrison realised that in order to articulate on behalf of others the aspiring political poet must first carve out his own identity. In his case he decided to arm himself from the linguistic arsenal before he was able to carry the fight into the enemy's camp. Harold Pinter has spoken of Harrison's "voracious appetite for language",<sup>48</sup> an appetite the poet refers to in 'Them & [uz] II':

I chewed up Littererchewer and spat the bones

into the lap of dozing Daniel Jones (*Selected Poems*, 123)

Harrison's contempt is clearly signalled in his 'spitting' of the bones and the target for them is carefully chosen. The complacently dozing Jones, unaware of the threat that a poet like Harrison poses to high culture, was a prominent and influential linguist who, along with others like A.J.Ellis, took as their models for Received Pronunciation and standard English the "educated pronunciation of the metropolis, of the court, of the pulpit, and the bar", as the critic Rick Rylance has noted.<sup>49</sup> In addition he adds: "the construction of standard forms was a way of stressing social-bonding and a shared cultural heritage. In reality it meant the non-recognition of 'deviant' or non-standard forms".<sup>50</sup> These non-standard forms, according to Daniel Jones's *English Pronouncing Dictionary* (1917), were "intellectually and socially disadvantageous, whereas standard forms offered common intelligibility and literary, cultural and

<sup>48</sup> Harrison. 'Facing Up'. *Bloodaxe*, 436.

<sup>49</sup> A.J.Ellis: *On Early English Pronunciation* (1869-89) quoted by Rylance in 'On Not Being Milton', *Bloodaxe*, 119.

<sup>50</sup> Rylance. 'On Not Being Milton'. *Bloodaxe*, 119.

educational access. They were also intrinsically superior aesthetically".<sup>51</sup> This attitude to working-class speech found its most explicit formulation in the Newbolt Report of 1921, as Ken Worpole has noted.<sup>52</sup> Their conclusion regarding non-standard speech forms makes for disturbing reading:

It is emphatically the business of the elementary school to teach all pupils who either speak a definite dialect or whose speech is disfigured by vulgarisms, to speak standard English, and to speak it clearly. The great difficulty of teachers in elementary schools in many districts is that they have to fight against *the powerful influence of evil habits of speech contracted in home and street*. The teacher's struggle is thus not with ignorance *but with a perverted power*. [my emphasis] <sup>53</sup>

To this committee regional speech is an "evil perversion", a disease that can be "contracted in home and street", but sentiments such as these are not rooted solely in a historical cul-de-sac. It is a debate that is still continuing, as Harrison well knows: "When anyone says that I'm fighting a battle that's been fought long ago and that the class system doesn't exist, I know it does exist, I keep banging my head against it".<sup>54</sup> Evidence that it does exist is provided, once again, by Worpole. He notes that as late as 1981 a staff pamphlet published by the BBC entitled *The Spoken Word* began with the following: "In what follows it is assumed that the speaker uses Received Standard English in its 1980s form. The form of speech recommended is that of a person born and brought up in one of the Home Counties, educated at one of the established southern universities, and not yet so set in his ways that all linguistic change is regarded as unacceptable."<sup>55</sup> Despite the codicil in the last sentence, the message still appears to be the same sixty years on from Newbolt, though its utterance is couched in somewhat more diplomatic tones.

It is, then, to be the Daniel Joneses, those cultural policemen from Newbolt to the BBC, that Harrison is to 'wake up'. Their dictums are unreservedly rejected, an intent signalled by the fact that he 'chewed Littererchewer', he didn't 'swallow' it whole. He took from it what he wanted and the bones, perhaps the class-assumptions that held the carcass of the literary canon

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>52</sup> Ken Worpole. 'Scholarship Boy'. *Bloodaxe*, 65.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>54</sup> Haffenden. 'Interview'. *Bloodaxe*, 231.

<sup>55</sup> Worpole. 'Scholarship Boy' *Bloodaxe*, 67.

together for the dominant class, were rejected. This was only the first step, albeit a fundamental one for the poet. Soon he has:

dropped the initials I'd been harried as  
 and used my *name* and own voice: [uz] [uz] [uz],  
 ended sentences with by, with, from,  
 and spoke the language that I spoke at home.  
 RIP RP, RIP T.W.  
 I'm *Tony* Harrison no longer you! (*Selected Poems*, 123)

As Damian Grant has noted “if Harrison is a political poet [ . . . ] then it is in the finding and claiming of a voice that his political activity manifests itself”<sup>56</sup>, a process described in the poem. This was aided by his realisation that Wordsworth and Keats, both canonical poets, also had accents that were not RP:

You can tell the Receivers where to go  
 (and not aspirate it) once you know  
 Wordsworth's *matter/water* are full rhymes (*Selected Poems*, 123)

Despite this, however, Harrison is honest enough to end the poem on a rueful note implicitly revealing just how pervasive is the hegemony that props up notions of ‘high culture’:

My first mention in the *Times*  
 automatically made Tony Anthony! (*Selected Poems*, 123)

Tom Leonard has suggested that the critical establishment in Britain speaks with one voice, the voice of RP, and as a consequence “the voice of the non-RP speaker is the council-house tenant of the larynx; when the RP voice of British poetry came under attack, the ‘establishment’s reply was ‘Ratepayers of the voice, unite!’ ”.<sup>57</sup> This is tacitly suggested in the way that *The Times*, that venerable organ of the establishment, “automatically” changed the informal “Tony” to the formal “Anthony”. This is essentially a political act by *The Times*, the literal re-naming of someone in order that that person (and their work) will fit with the preconceived notions of who should write

<sup>56</sup> Damian Grant. ‘Poetry *Versus* History: Voices off in the poetry of Tony Harrison’. *Bloodaxe*, 104. Hereafter referred to as ‘Poetry *versus* History’.

<sup>57</sup> Leonard. ‘Locust Tree’, 98.

poetry and indeed, who is 'capable' of doing so. These attitudes are, perhaps, linked with the difficulties Harrison faced in attempting to reach a wider audience, for, until his *Selected Poems* received the 'King Penguin' seal of approval in 1984, his work was very difficult to obtain. The critic Ken Worpole has pointed out that Harrison's work "rarely gained access to the metropolitan literary and cultural journals, including the *New Statesman* and *Tribune*, compared with the work of such poets as Craig Raine, Christopher Reid, Blake Morrison or Clive James, which was made available as soon as it came out of the typewriter".<sup>58</sup> As Bruce Woodcock has pointed out, however, while conspiracy theories of cultural influence are not always helpful it is worth noting that Harrison shares none of the Oxbridge connections of the "New Establishment poets of the 1970's and 1980's".<sup>59</sup>

Harrison's awareness of the factors that operate in order to prop up notions of 'high culture', and the connections he makes between political and linguistic oppression, do not arise solely as a result of the dramatic contradictions between his working-class origins and his middle-class education. In 1962 he left England for Nigeria for a four year spell lecturing in English at the Ahmadu Bello University at Zaria. His time in Africa didn't provide quite the release he had hoped for from the stifling class pressures of home, rather the opposite: "I found the drama of my own education dramatically posed in black and white; people coming from illiterate backgrounds and reading about Wordsworth's daffodils because it was set in their exam papers, when they didn't know what a fucking daffodil was. There was an almost surrealistic perversity about 'O' Level questions, which were set by a board in England for African students. That kind of dichotomy made me think about my own education and dramatise it, and find some of the polarities through that dramatisation".<sup>60</sup>

Harrison's increasing understanding and emphasis on the relationship between poetry, education and politics was also heightened by his time in Mozambique. It was here that he met Marcelino Dos Santos, "Frelimo's fluent propagandist" (*Selected Poems*, 181). Dos Santos is the dedicatee of the sonnet 'Dichtung und Wahrheit', a poem which expresses the hope that eloquence may after all be more powerful than machine guns. He was at that time the spokesman

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<sup>58</sup> Worpole. 'Scholarship Boy'. *Bloodaxe*, pp. 73-74.

<sup>59</sup> Woodcock. 'Classical Vandalism', 51.

<sup>60</sup> Haffenden. 'Interview'. *Bloodaxe*, 236.

for Frelimo which was the Marxist governing party of Mozambique. Like many of the leaders of that party he was also a poet and it seems that Harrison became fascinated by the concept of poet-revolutionaries. Hence his ongoing interest in the Pentecostal gift of the Tongues of Fire, a typical motif in his work. It is the ambiguity of this that attracts him for it refers both to eloquence and speech, and also the flames that lick from the end of a gun barrel: "Fire brings pain, but also eloquence; articulation, but also the suggestion of fanaticism".<sup>61</sup> It is, perhaps, Harrison's fear and loathing of fanaticism that informs the poem and his fear that the gun might prove to be more attractive and thus more powerful than the pen:

Dulciloquist Dos Santos, swear to them  
whose languages you'll never learn to speak  
that tongues of fire at a 1000 rpm  
is not the final eloquence you seek. (*Selected Poems*, 181)

While Harrison's revolutionary instincts do not extend as far as armed struggle, his meetings with poet-revolutionaries at least seem to have informed his political perspectives in a crucial respect. As Damian Grant has suggested, they seem to have spurred Harrison to mount his own revolutionary campaign under the banner of *The School of Eloquence*.<sup>61a</sup> Hence the sequence begins with a poem dedicated to Africans, Sergio Vieira and Armando Guebuza: "Both are poets and have a particular concern for education."<sup>62</sup> The poem is 'On Not Being Milton' - written in 1971 during Harrison's time in Mozambique.<sup>63</sup>

Harrison calls the poem his "*Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*" - 'notebook of a return to a native land', a reference to a poem by the Martinican writer, Aimé Césaire. His poem "exuberantly celebrates anti-colonial resistance" and documents "colonial privilege (and) French cultural hegemony". Besides the "poignant loneliness of the returning son" there is also "the peccancy of complicity with the educational and cultural structures which degrade one's people".<sup>64</sup> It is easy to see why such themes should appeal to Harrison, given Césaire's preoccupation with the social context of language and both writers' feelings of alienation from, and yet sympathy with, a native culture and also Harrison's sense of having betrayed his roots by

<sup>61</sup> Rylance. 'On Not Being Milton'. *Bloodaxe*, 123.

<sup>61a</sup> Grant. 'Poetry versus History', *Bloodaxe*, 108.

<sup>62</sup> Rylance. 'On Not Being Milton'. *Bloodaxe*, 121.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 122-123.



becoming a poet. 'On Not Being Milton' describes Harrison's "growing black enough" (*Selected Poems*, 112) to return to these roots, an appropriation of the 'black experience' that Césaire writes of in order to make the political point that he is aware that as a Northerner he is subject to what might be termed an 'internal colonisation'. Moreover the image of blackness is a fitting symbol for Harrison to use for it also refers to the blackness of coal - the very stuff on which his homeland is built. In this respect his "growing black enough" might mean that he is aware that his true allegiance is to that 'coal culture' which has made his ancestors. In other words he is asserting his identification with the culture in which he was reared, not the one in which he was educated.

There is, however, another meaning of this blackness that refers to his role as a poet. Speaking of how he makes his poetry out of his family's inarticulacy he says:

Theirs are the acts I nerve myself to follow.  
I'm the clown sent in to clear the ring.  
Theirs are the tongues of fire I'm forced to swallow  
then bring back knotted, one continuous string  
igniting long-pent silences, and going back  
to Adam fumbling with Creation's names;  
and though my vocal cords get scorched and black  
there'll be a constant singing from the flames. (*Selected Poems*, 168)

This is a blackness caused by his adoption of the poet's role, by his swallowing the tongues of fire. It is a wordplay that helps to explain the shift in 'On Not Being Milton' (*Selected Poems*, 112) away from the African/blackness experience to that of the scold, or even the skald, the Old Norse bard. This emphasis on a Northern voice also helps to explain the poem's title as Harrison is stressing, somewhat self-consciously, just what kind of poet he is *not* going to be. The point is that Milton or, more accurately, the veneration and appropriation of him, is representative of the essentially southern middle-class cultural hegemony which has rejected Harrison's native culture. This suggests an interesting ambiguity in Harrison's work. In essence "Milton represents what is to be rejected, but his poetry is admired."<sup>65</sup> Moreover the emphasis on a Northern voice is also a response to those who would stress the

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

Mediterranean (southern) rather than the Germanic (northern) origins of English",<sup>66</sup> a tendency explicitly expressed by such as Arthur Quiller-Couch who suggested that "always our literature has obeyed, however unconsciously, the precept *Antiquam exquisite matrem*, 'seek back the ancient mother'; always it has revealed itself, kept pure and strong, by harking back to bathe in those native - yes, native - Mediterranean springs."<sup>67</sup>

This kind of ideological sentiment is one of "the branks of condescension" (*Selected Poems*, 112) that Harrison refers to in 'On Not Being Milton'. A 'brank' is "an iron bridle used to restrain scolding women".<sup>68</sup> It consists of an iron frame that covered the head, "having a sharp metal gag or bit which entered the mouth and restrained the tongue."<sup>69</sup> This device enforces silence. It is used by Harrison as a symbol of the way one class might be silenced by another. Whereas a scold is typically a nagging or railing woman, Harrison is using the term more generally, invoking the idea of the 'mother tongue', the suppressed tongues that he is trying to reinstate. Perhaps there is another sense in which the 'scold' means a 'curse', or oath, or the roar of anger that emerges in a political dimension. In this respect the stutter of the scold might refer to the hesitant but strengthening roar of awakening on the part of the dispossessed. This is paralleled linguistically, in a sense, in the poem's outward narrative journey from the 'I' to the inclusive 'we'.

The "stutter" that issues from the scold in the poem is, then, both Harrison's own Leeds accent and an articulation of the scold's rage against the iniquitous device that silences her. It is also a potential source of energy for social change in that the stutter "thickens with glottals to a lumpen mass / of Ludding morphemes closing up their ranks" (*Selected Poems*, 112). With this image Harrison links the idea of the stutter effecting a political challenge with the Luddite's revolt in the early nineteenth century. In the same way that they smashed the knitting frames that were depriving them of their livelihoods, so the scold's (and Harrison's) Leeds accent will smash the "frames of Art" (*Selected Poems*, 112) that oppress and marginalise the Northern tongues. Hence

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>68</sup> *Collins Softback English Dictionary*. 3rd ed. Aylesbury: Harper Collins, 1991, 185. Hereafter referred to as *Collins*.

<sup>69</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed., prepared by J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner. Vol. 11. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989. Hereafter referred to as OED.

Harrison casts himself as “a poetic Luddite using the sledgehammer (‘Enoch’) of his voice to demolish establishment power over language”<sup>70</sup>:

Each swung cast-iron Enoch of Leeds stress  
clangs a forged music on the frames of Art,  
the looms of owned language smashed apart! (*Selected Poems*, 112)

This highlights, however, a major tension in Harrison’s work, namely that as a result of his use of classical forms he too is one of the owners of language. This is implicit in the language the speaker uses to describe the confrontation. Rick Rylance has drawn attention to this, pointing out that “‘Art’ is ‘framed’. It is constructed, it is false and exclusive, and it is related to the dominant economic interests, the owners of the means of production, the knitting-frames”.<sup>71</sup> On the other hand “the opposing language is ‘forged’ which implies imitation, and deceit.”<sup>72</sup> Whereas the use of ‘forged’ suggests to me a subtle allusion to Joyce’s “forging in the smithy of the soul”,<sup>73</sup> and the implication that in Harrison’s hands the language will be strengthened. As Rylance has pointed out it also suggests that “Most efforts to get a working-class voice into literature are compromised because ‘literature’ is produced outside the working-class, even when that class is its subject. The poem can only recognise the inevitable and make it part of its theme”.<sup>74</sup> In this context the “frames of Art” (*Selected Poems*, 112) refers directly to the classical forms that Harrison is using as a poet. It is, then, a reference that suggests both his awareness of his complicity in the forms that historically have been used to oppress and marginalise his class and also the need to use these forms in order to counter this marginalisation. The poem counters any suggestion of complicity by asserting that articulacy and political activism are linked. The inference is that the speaker is going to rise to the challenge of working within, albeit subversively, the “frames of Art” (*Selected Poems*, 112) because, as the final section of the poem asserts : “Articulation is the tongue-tied’s fighting” (*Selected Poems*, 112). Not to accept this

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<sup>70</sup> Woodcock. ‘Classical Vandalism’, 53.

<sup>71</sup> Rylance. ‘On Not Being Milton’. *Bloodaxe*, 118.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>73</sup> James Joyce. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. London: Glasgow: Paladin, 1990, 257. Hereafter referred to as *A Portrait*.

<sup>74</sup> Rylance. ‘On Not Being Milton’. *Bloodaxe*, 118.

challenge is to risk ending up like Tidd because failures in articulation result in unsuccessful political activism, as the final line's pun on 'writing' and 'making right' suggests:

In the silence round all poetry we quote  
Tidd the Cato Street conspirator who wrote:  
Sir, I Ham a very Bad Hand at Righting. (*Selected Poems*, 112)

It is, perhaps, Harrison's worry that he is compromised, that he is estranged from the class of which he writes, that underlies his repeated stress on poetry as a job. For instance in one sonnet he speaks of how the lingering ghosts in rooms such as the one in which his stammering uncle died "taught me my trade" (*Selected Poems*, 144) and in another he speaks of how his family couldn't grasp that "years of Latin and of Greek" could represent working: "they'd never seen the point of 'for a job'," (*Selected Poems*, 164). The emphasis on poetry as a job is interesting, given that 'poet' in Greek means 'maker'.<sup>75</sup> For example it is noticeable that Harrison's worry that he has betrayed his class makes him keen to present himself more as an artisan, a skilled craftsman, than a rarefied aesthete. Hence his insistence that poetry-writing is not an easy option or an indulgence but rather that "It had to be hard work, and it was, and it still is."<sup>76</sup>

Harrison's view of his craft, and the direction it should take, is intimated in an early sonnet, 'Working'.<sup>77</sup> The poem's subject is the working conditions of children in the mines, in this instance the fourteen-year-old Patience Kershaw. The final injury done to her, it seems, is that she is "lost in this sonnet for the bourgeoisie" (*Selected Poems*, 124), a realisation that seems to cause the speaker to turn on himself in a way that suggests he is questioning his whole poetic strategy:

this wordshift and inwit's a load of crap  
for dumping on a slagheap, I mean  
*th'art nobbut summat as wants raking up.* (*Selected Poems*, 124)

<sup>75</sup> See Michael Kustow. 'Where Yorkshire grit meets Attic wit'. *The Guardian* 1 October 1992, 25. Hereafter referred to as 'Where Yorkshire grit meets Attic wit'.

<sup>76</sup> Tony Harrison. 'The Inkwell of Dr Agrippa'. *Bloodaxe*, 33. Hereafter referred to as 'Inkwell'.

<sup>77</sup> The poem was first published in *Stand* Volume 14, No.4. (1973), 65.

If we remember that Harrison has said that in general terms what he designates in roman type in the poems is "me as the poet"<sup>78</sup> then it follows that the italicised voices are those who he is trying to make audible like Patience<sup>25</sup> like those of his parents', or Tidd the Cato Street conspirator, for example. In this context Harrison's dramatisation of both his role as a poet and the voices of those hitherto excluded from literary culture is part of his attempt to achieve a sense of poetic justice on their behalf. Moreover we can understand these dramatisations as part of Harrison's commitment to demystifying the poetic process in that the authority of the speaking voice is called into question and criticised by other speakers, as we see in 'Working'.

What seems to be happening in the poem is that Harrison is self-consciously acknowledging his doubts as to what he is trying to do with his verse. "Inwit" means conscience/moral sense while "wordshift" is a coinage that suggests both a 'work-shift' with words as the object of the toil and also, perhaps, a pun on the term 'wordplay'. This usage might remind us of Heaney's use of a similar *kenning* in his David and Goliath poems. If my reading of these words is granted then it seems to suggest that Harrison realises that there is something missing in his verse, that he senses that a writing impelled by a troubled conscience, written to ameliorate the pangs of that conscience, and a footling around with erudite wordplay to achieve this, is not the answer. It is simply not enough. Rather he has to strive for a complete, genuine empathy, he has to strive to achieve an 'unselfish art' that gives others their say. It is Harrison's realisation that this is a strategy that will do justice to those he wants to give a voice to that is described in 'Working'. The point seems to be that he has to avoid the trap of merely exhibiting his 'inwit', his conscience, and allow those he is speaking of to speak for themselves. This awareness seems to have been achieved in the poem by his realisation that traditional monologic poetry forms meant that someone like Patience was 'trapped' within a poem. This breakthrough, his inspiration, is arrived at by staring at the very substance which made Patience's childhood such a miserable one; coal:

I stare into the fire. Your skinned skull shines.  
I close my eyes. That makes a dark like mines. (*Selected Poems*, 124)

<sup>78</sup> Haffenden. 'Interview'. *Bloodaxe*, 229.

It is as a result of this act of empathy that he realises that his job as a poet is to “break the silence of the worked-out gob” (*Selected Poems*, 124). It is as if he has felt ashamed by his realisation that he has not been working hard enough, certainly not in comparison with the *minor-miners*. In this sense the poem’s title, *Working*, refers as much to him as a poet as it does to Patience. The implication seems to be that Harrison will work as hard at being a ‘breaker down of silences’ as children like Patience were made to work down the pits.

One way that he is to do this is by dramatising himself as poet as a result of developing an autobiographical strategy, both in a fictional and poetic sense. This receives a detailed consideration in Chapter 3. But before that we need to consider the craft that has gone into Harrison’s creation of his artistic illusion of shared intimacy, in particular the verse itself, and the politicised poetic which informs its making.

## Chapter 2: Rhyme, Reason and Poetic Justice

It is his commitment to hard work that made Harrison pit himself against what he has termed “the most difficult traditional verse forms”<sup>1</sup>. The result, in *Eloquence*, is the as yet unfinished sequence of sixteen-line sonnets. So, while Harrison’s commitment to ‘hard graft’ was originally born of a sense of respect for his father’s working-life, it is also impelled by his desire to show that these forms are not automatically the property of one class alone but that, when used politically, they can also serve as <sup>vehicles</sup> / for the dissemination of hitherto marginalised interests and concerns. It is this politically conscious use of the form that results in the medium becoming the message as Harrison often builds into his verse the conflict between two modes of articulation. Speaking of that “*dreadful schism in the British nation*” (*Selected Poems*, 120), which we can take as referring to a class-based linguistic division, he has commented that the tensions in that schism made him into “the kind of poet who uses an immensely formal classical prosody against colloquial diction and against the working-class speech of Leeds and even the language of street aggro and graffiti”.<sup>2</sup> This strategy allows Harrison to be political as it enables him to build into his sonnets the same divisions that he seeks to remind the reader of, conscious as he is “of what are called the ‘restricted’ and the ‘elaborate’ codes. I play one form of articulation off against the other.”<sup>3</sup> He is not, then, a poet who privileges style at the expense of content (if we are able to draw such a distinction), rather his content seeks to expose the class privileges inherent in style. Moreover, in the context of Harrison’s verse, we might note that the sonnet is a form that is peculiarly well suited to this given that the word sonnet comes from the Italian ‘sonnetto’, diminutive of suono, *sound*, as Worpole has noted: “The sonnet is a literary form derived from the importance of the human voice, and Harrison has quite radically restored that function to it”.<sup>4</sup>

Harrison’s use of classical forms yoked together with a demotic content is, he has claimed, a

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<sup>1</sup> Harrison. ‘Inkwell’. *Bloodaxe*, 33.

<sup>2</sup> Harrison. ‘Facing Up’. *Bloodaxe*, 438.

<sup>3</sup> Haffenden. ‘Interview’. *Bloodaxe*, 232.

<sup>4</sup> Worpole. ‘Scholarship Boy’. *Bloodaxe*, 68.

deliberately dramatised contradiction. It's a way of testing the aspiration towards eloquence, of giving it a place in which to be heard, but also a way of subjecting the classical form [ . . . ] to those things which you would think most likely to destroy it, like putting a beautiful object in a wind tunnel to test its stress. So the two things happen at the same time; there's a reclamation re-energising the classical form to the point when it might begin to crumble. By doing that you also give voice to an aspiration or a motivation that would not normally seek a poetic place to be heard.<sup>5</sup>

Hence his resourceful use of a form traditionally associated with fourteen, rather than sixteen, lines. The reason for his choice is that Harrison has been careful to incorporate the potential for polemic. The sixteen liner, derived from George Meredith's sequence *Modern Love* (1862), allows for this — the two octets mean that “the dialectic can be stronger”.<sup>6</sup> An added attraction of the sixteen liner is its narrative possibilities when it is used in the form of four quatrains. Harrison employs this often, using “that narrative impulse to leave an up-beat which will carry on into the next poem”<sup>7</sup>, as we find in ‘The Rhubarbarians’ I & II, for example. This helps to link the poems, emphasising the interconnections of experiences, both in an historical, a political and in a so-called ‘personal’ sense. The result is that they read as equally important facets of the one larger picture. Hence the title of one collection, *Continuous* (Rex Collins 1981), a collection that, significantly, has no pagination. Though his verse might often have the intimacy and autobiographical air of diary excerpts, this interrelatedness acts to suggest something of a densely woven, interconnected novel, in other words, a carefully crafted work of art.

It is worth noting that though Harrison obviously never wavers from the sixteen-line form, he often breaks the lines up, sometimes even splitting one line into three smaller units as we see in ‘Isolation’ (*Selected Poems*, 142), for example. The reason for this is political in the sense of a politics of challenge to cultural hegemony and the effect is dramatic: the typographical irregularity serves not only to prevent the lines congealing together as a seamless, polished artifice, rather like a tombstone, but also draws attention to the poem's voice or the voices that are speaking within it. It is in this form's traditionally *silent* representation of speech that Harrison's voice finds its

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<sup>5</sup> From the transcript of an interview with Clive Wilmer first heard on Radio 3 in February 1991. Published in ‘Face To Face’. *English Review* Vol. 2 Issue 4. July 1992. pp. 31-35. Hereafter referred to as ‘Face To Face’.

<sup>6</sup> Haffenden. ‘Interview’. *Bloodaxe*, 230.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.



natural expression, and it is remarkable how, after reading Harrison, 'conventional' sonnets look (and sound) almost insipid in comparison.

One effect of the broken stanza forms is that it helps to create a shading, a rise and fall of the urgency of the voice's delivery. It is an aural effect rather like the light and shade of the dynamics we might hear in a piece of music. In Harrison's verse the result is the suggestion of speech, a conversational tone that suggests that one is really being *told* something and, moreover, that it's *real*. This obviously aids the establishment of an autobiographical persona in the verse. This is due to the pauses that result from the fragmentation, pauses that, in a sense, invoke an idea of a two-way conversation as they almost give us time to think as we are reading but, more importantly, give weight, authority, and often a solemnity, to what the voice is saying. They work rather as a caesura might within a line. In 'On Not Being Milton', for example, the text appears in sections of four, seven, one, three and one lines. The first four lines reveal the perspective that underpins the poem, namely the voice's anti-colonialist stance. The seven line section contains the argument, followed by a pause that precedes the ironic rallying-cry: "Three cheers for mute ingloriousness!" (*Selected Poems*, 112). This pause serves almost as a drawing of breath, for the speaker and the listener, that helps to affirm the line's assertion but the pause that follows this single line serves a different purpose. It has a calming effect. It slows the pace and prepares the way for the determined seriousness of the poem's conclusion while the final pause which precedes the words of Tidd seems to emphasise that his words are genuinely *real*. By using such oratorical devices on the page Harrison is reminding us that the poems are speech. Hence the poem's enactment of the technique of the public speaker — drawing the audience in, proposing an argument, allowing the opportunity for reflection and then ending by offering the proof that clinches the argument.

Another typical function of the pauses is to draw out the detail of a poem's theme. In 'Wordlists 1', for example, the text appears in sections of four, four, one, three and four lines. The emphasis falls upon the isolated line, in this instance a line of reported speech: "*Sometime . . . er . . . there's summat in that drawer . . .*" (*Selected Poems*, 117). While the line's isolation enacts the separation of 'ordinary' speech from 'poetic diction' in a wider sense, the pauses before and after it render it of pivotal importance to the poem as a whole. In other words, it throws light on what has come before and on what is yet to come. The voice is, presumably, that

of the scholarship-boy's father and his words place him in exactly the same position as the Classics master who was embarrassed when asked to explain the meaning of "harlot". The wordlessness that afflicts both men allows Harrison to show the interconnections between the so-called public and the private, the point being that the same suppressions pervade all aspects of life: the middle-class school and the working-class home are both points in the same continuum — they might constitute different areas of experience but they are not separate spheres. The poem makes the point that one effect of language having been invested with class assumptions is that there are often no words with which to talk of sexual matters — language fails both men and, therefore, both classes. In a society which adheres to an unwritten agenda that makes a dichotomous distinction between the 'poetic' and the 'vulgar', to talk of such things is to veer dangerously close to the latter. The result is that neither man has the words to communicate his knowledge to a boy who, though he has the knowledge, does not have the words to communicate with them: words and wordlessness can go both ways it seems.

For the Classics/RI master, however, Harrison has reserved particular scorn. When asked by the boy for the meaning of "harlot" he "hummed and hawed" (*Selected Poems*, 117). I do not know how many times I had read this as 'hummed and ha'd' before I realised my mistake. Harrison's allusion to this phrase is intentional of course but equally intentional is the semantic correspondence with the word "bawd" in line eight, giving us whored/bawd. The master, it seems, is prostituting himself, his learning and his profession, by only 'selling' one particular, class-based, brand of eloquence. It is as if eloquence, when it is 'sold' in this manner becomes like the sex that, ironically, the master and the boy's father cannot talk about. In this respect the eloquence on offer is more like a commodity that only the wealthy can purchase. It is tantamount to a material possession, in a sense, a status symbol in an increasingly materialist society and worth, perhaps, as little as the sex that is bought in the transaction between prostitute and punter. Maybe this is quite a tenuous inference to draw but support of a kind is found in one of Harrison's translations from Palladas:

Those who sell eloquence like common whores  
 'll foul pure Justice with their dirty paws. (*Selected Poems*, 87)

If teachers and, by implication, scholars are as whores, then that invites an analogy between the state and pimps/madams. In the case of teachers and scholars, the state is helped to survive and prosper precisely because those who should be writing a fair account, or putting the record straight, have sold themselves to the ruling-class in return for the dubious security of a comfortable berth within an hierarchical, class society. This kind of critique helps to explain the underlying anger of poems such as 'Them & [uz]'. Despite the comical overtones of these poems, it is clear that Harrison believes that teachers and scholars have much to answer for. i.e. their complicity in the historical oppressions that the working-classes have been subject to. A fine illustration of this anger is found in 'National Trust' where the word-play of the title suggests that the trust placed in the ruling-class (by the nation) was abused by their use of a convict to gauge the depth of a mine shaft. A better way of ascertaining this, suggests Harrison, would be by "dangling a scholar" down into the pit for it is their historical silences which more fittingly "plumb the depths of Britain" (*Selected Poems*, 121). The point is that scholars have been the servants of the ruling-class, and have acted as educated lackeys, writing their crimes out of history. The reason that "not one gentleman's been brought to book" (*Selected Poems*, 121), i.e. been charged, or brought to account, is because their crimes have not been recorded in a book by scholars. This amounts to another kind of wordlessness but not one to be confused with the dumbness induced in the unfortunate convict winched back up: "flayed, grey, mad, dumb" (*Selected Poems*, 121). It is also different <sup>from</sup> the wordlessness and powerlessness of the Cornish miners who were robbed not only of their native tongue but also their labour and their fledgling attempts to institute a trade union, as Luke Spencer has noted.<sup>8</sup> The wordlessness of the scholars, however, is not a result of being dispossessed but the result of having been 'bought off': it is they who have 'sold' themselves, (prostituted their eloquence and learning), by writing and teaching unjustly biased accounts.

All these connections and associations stem from the complex use of the rhyme of "hawed" and "bawd" that we saw in 'Wordlists 1' and they serve to indicate just how important an element rhyme is in Harrison's verse. On the one hand it invites in those to whom the reading of verse is not a regular experience, making it more enjoyable, rewarding and accessible, while on

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<sup>8</sup> Luke Spencer. *The Poetry of Tony Harrison*. New York: London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994, 72. Hereafter referred to as *Poetry of TH*.

the other it puts Harrison on his mettle as a poet and craftsman. As one critic has commented, the regularity of the forms “gives his imagination an edge to work against that seems to drive it to articulate itself with often stunning economy and precision”<sup>9</sup>.

Harrison, however, is keen to dispel any suggestion that it is the demands of the form itself that results in powerful emotions being held in check; “it’s not a question of taking this and putting it into this container; it’s finding out what this is [ . . . ] Which comes out through finding the form”.<sup>10</sup> He illustrates this by referring to Auden’s suggestion that rhyme is not so much restrictive, more an instrument of discovery: “because the associations are sometimes irrational, it keeps the subject in focus in a molten state, it doesn’t set too soon; that’s the other thing that strong forms and rhymes do for me, they keep the subject alive and raw till the last, until the true form has been discovered”.<sup>11</sup> While the multi-layered effects of rhymes such as “hawed/bawd” are a testament to this, other poets have taken very different views. In his book *Convention and Revolt in Poetry* (1930) John Livingstone Lowes reminds us of Dryden’s suggestion of “the slavery of rhyme”, and “the close of that one syllable, which often confines, and more often corrupts, the sense of all the rest.”<sup>12</sup> Robert Lloyd seems to have been no less despairing in his ‘On Rhyme’:

While the trim bard in easy strains,  
Talks much of fetters, clogs and chains;  
He only aims that you should think,  
How charmingly he makes them clink.<sup>13</sup>

While a certain Quevedo can at least see the funny side:

Oh, this damn’d Trade of Versifying,  
Has brought us all to Hell for lying!  
For writing what we do not think,  
Merely to hear the Verse cry Clink;  
For rather than abuse the Meter,  
Black shall be white, Paul shall be Peter.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Woodcock. ‘Classical Vandalism’, 55.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Hoggart. ‘In Conversation with Tony Harrison’. *Bloodaxe*, 43. Hereafter referred to as ‘Conversation’. Harrison interviewed by Hoggart. B.C.A. p43.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 43-44.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in John Livingstone Lowes, *Convention and Revolt in Poetry*. London: Constable & Co, 1930, 161. Hereafter referred to as *Convention and Revolt*.

<sup>13</sup> From Robert Lloyd’s ‘On Rhyme’, quoted by Lowes. *Convention and Revolt*, 161.

Donald Davie went so far as to assert the end of rhyme, suggesting that: "It's an end to the word-smith, now, an end to the Skald."<sup>15</sup> For Brecht the problem was not so much that he felt restricted by rhyme, rather that he felt that it did not create the right effect. He once said of his anti-Nazi poems, for example, that "Rhyme seemed to me unsuitable". The reason for this being that "it easily makes a poem seem self-contained, lets it glide past the ear".<sup>16</sup>

Though some poets might be intimidated by the demands of form, Harrison seems to thrive on it. Quite simply this is because he is very, very good at rhyming. One anecdote about his facility with verse concerns the time when Laurence Olivier was rehearsing *Phedre Britannica* (1975) at the Old Vic. According to Peter Lennon, Olivier "balked at the phrase 'One hundred pounds.' 'Kilos surely, dear boy?' said Olivier. 'Can't you find a rhyme for kilo?' 'Venus de Milo,' Harrison countered instantly."<sup>17</sup> This kind of wry dexterity with rhyme is clear to even the most casual reader of his verse. One result of this is that it helps to offer a more satisfying reading experience. This can be seen, for example, in 'Book Ends 1' when Harrison produces 'Cockney rhymes', rhyming "smithereens" with "between 's"; (*Selected Poems*, 126) in 'Aqua Mortis' with the rhyme of "eureka" and "beaker", (*Selected Poems*, 137) or in 'Currants I' with "madeleine" and "t'men". (*Selected Poems*, 151) The last examples are particularly interesting as Harrison is not just pleasing our senses by offering unexpected rhymes but he is, in a sense, making a general political point — the rhymes serve both to unify foreign tongues with English (and thus are part of his general impulse to break down prejudices about languages, accents and tongues) and also serve to yoke together high and low culture.

The suggestion that Harrison's dexterity with rhyme allows him to enact and underscore the political import of his wider themes is more explicit if we look at other examples. If we recall the assertion in 'Them & [uz]' II that "Wordsworth's *matter/water* are full rhymes", (*Selected Poems*, 123) and apply it to some of Harrison's own, the result is very interesting. There is a fine example in 'Book Ends 1', often commented upon by critics, in which Harrison rhymes "gas" and "pass" (*Selected Poems*, 126). Similarly, in 'Illuminations II', he rhymes "buzz" and "US!"

<sup>14</sup> From Quevedo's 'Complaint of the Poets in Hell', quoted by Lowes. *Convention and Revolt*, 161.

<sup>15</sup> From Donald Davie's 'To Helen Keller', quoted by Eric Homburger. *The Art Of The Real*. London: Toronto: Dent, 1977, 84. Hereafter referred to as Homburger, *Art Of The Real*.

<sup>16</sup> J Willett. *The Theatre Of Bertolt Brecht: a study from eight aspects*. 3rd ed., revised. London: Methuen, 1967, 98. Hereafter referred to as *The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht*.

<sup>17</sup> Lennon, 'World seen from the gods'. *The Guardian* 19 March 1990, FEA, 21.

(*Selected Poems*, 147). Like s Wordworth's, these too are full rhymes . . . if one speaks with a short 'a' vowel sound [æ], or pronounces 'us' as [uz].<sup>18</sup> In 'Grey Matter' a similar thing occurs. Because he rhymes "fez" with "says" Harrison is once again drawing attention to the listeners' own speech patterns. You pay your money and (if it's for your education) you might just be able to take your choice: half rhyme or full rhyme, do you say 'says' or 'sez'? Another example is when he rhymes "Puck's" and "books" (*Selected Poems*, 137). This is, once again, a full rhyme if one allows for the Northern accent and, similarly, so is the rhyme of "could" and "blood" (*Selected Poems*, 113) unless, of course, one speaks with an RP accent then they risk becoming safely marginalised as quaint half-rhymes. In this respect the sonnet 'Working' becomes even more significant as the rhyming of "corf" and "off" (*Selected Poems*, 124) invites 'orf', thus echoing the pronunciation of the music-hall toff. This phonetic correspondence is, perhaps, deliberately ironic given the poem's attack on Harrison's techniques, as we have already seen, and in this respect it is entirely fitting that the inclusion of Patience's words, her 'natural' speech: "*th'art nobbut summat as wants raking up*" (*Selected Poems*, 124) unequivocally introduces a half-rhyme with "crap", thus privileging 'natural' speech over 'poetic diction' once more.

It is important to emphasise that Harrison is not prescribing a pronunciation for rhymes such as these however. It is possible that the word "corf", for example, could be pronounced gruffly, perhaps as in 'coff', making it a full rhyme. It is more the case that Harrison wants to make the reader/listener aware of how *they* speak, as well as how the voice in the poem is speaking. As Tom Leonard argued, the point is not that one accent is better or worse than another, rather that our opinions about them should be value-free: "All modes of speech are valid — upper-class, middle-class, working-class, from whatever region: linguistic chauvinism is a drag, pre-judging people just because they speak 'rough' or with the accent of another region, or equally, pre-judging people just because they speak 'posh' "<sup>19</sup>. In this respect, given an example like "gas" and "pass", it is somewhat inaccurate to say that Harrison is enforcing the Northern

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<sup>18</sup> For an interesting discussion of the changed status of the short [æ] and the lengthened [a:] see Mugglestone. Briefly she tells us that though the long [a:] now "functions as one of the primary markers of a non-localised 'standard', or RP, [ . . . ] Using [a:] was in fact, for much of the nineteenth century, quite likely to damn the speaker [ . . . ] as 'inaccurate', 'vulgar' or uneducated". Mugglestone. *Talking Proper*, 90.

<sup>19</sup> Leonard. 'Locust Tree', 95.

pronunciation of 'pass', that he is being prescriptive. It is surprising that Harrison is so often misinterpreted on this point. If his was as simplistic an approach as this then he would be liable to the charge of being equally as negative as those who would suggest that colloquialisms must be suppressed, or that a sonnet must have fourteen lines, etc. In an interview Harrison was tackled on this issue by Andrew Brown in *The Independent*, a journalist who, from his question, we can take as being from Southern England, or at least presume that he is not from Yorkshire. Brown informs us that he asked Harrison if "he had not to some degree reversed the original slight, so that someone with [Brown's] accent could not read his poems as they were meant to be read. 'No', he said: 'A poem, once it's written, is meant to be read with the inner voice of the person who reads it'."<sup>20</sup>

The question of Harrison's own voice is interesting here. In an illuminating statement that attests to the idea that Harrison has created a poetic voice as a deliberate poetic strategy Simon Armitage has pointed out that, contrary to popular belief, Harrison does not write in the way he speaks. Nobody does that, argues Armitage:

What he has done is to establish a written version of his voice, a sort of acceptable presentation of West Yorkshire utterance that stops short of dialect poetry. In making the point, he spared those of us from the same region the strife of having to write in another hand and read in another tongue. Who'd have thought that some of t'most moving poems in t'language would have been composed in a form of English normally reserved for sheep-shaggers and colliers?<sup>21</sup>

Harrison's use of metre is somewhat more complicated. There are two main elements at issue here. One is that strong rhythms fulfil a specifically personal function for Harrison as a writer, the other is his politically conscious use of metre. Just as we saw with his use of rhyme the personal and the political impulses are unified.

Harrison's use of metre is a fundamental component of his campaign to occupy literature and also, perhaps, not a little Northern bloody-mindedness: "... strong rhythm is necessary for me. At first I thought I wanted to do it because it was, what the most classical things were, say

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<sup>20</sup> Andrew Brown. 'Harrison forward'.

<sup>21</sup> Simon Armitage. 'Tony Harrison is sixty: Simon Armitage salutes the master (poet)'. *New Statesman* Vol. 126, 25 April 1997, 45. Hereafter referred to as 'Tony Harrison is sixty'.

the sonnet and the rhyming couplet; and I wanted to be able to do them, because I was the person who wasn't allowed to read poetry in my own voice."<sup>22</sup> This was the initial impulse, then, but an increasing accomplishment in technique was eventually to lead to a more profound realisation. Speaking of his occupation of literature Harrison has said: "Now that I've occupied it in the sense that I can do it — I learned it as skilfully as I could in order that people would have to pay attention — I still instinctively feel that it's associated with the heart beat, with the sexual instinct, with all those physical rhythms which go on despite the moments when you feel suicidal."<sup>23</sup> This notion of rhythm as somehow affirming life itself is significant in understanding Harrison's verse. In a televised interview in 1993 he illustrated this further. Quoting Jean Louis Barrault he said: "‘Le cour bat iambique.’ — ‘The heart beats iambically’ — so that for me, rhythm is always rooted in blood and in celebration, and it seems to me that in all that darkness it's the necessity for some kind of joy to surface."<sup>24</sup> When asked by the interviewer, Michael Ignatieff, what exactly was being celebrated Harrison answered by saying "Simple existence and continuity [ . . . ] that your heart is beating". An example of this philosophy can be found in 'Jumper'. The poem's voice is that of the scholarship boy recounting a war-time experience. He tells us of how his fears were allayed by his mother's knitting:

When I want some sort of human metronome  
to beat calm celebration out of fear  
like that when German bombs fell round our home  
it's my mother's needles, knitting, that I hear,  
the click of needles steady though walls shake. (*Selected Poems*, 165)

The rhythms of the verse can be thought of as an embodiment of this celebratory impulse and are, then, analogous to an appetite for life itself: "My brain can tell me life isn't worth living, I would like to die; but my heart beats on. For me, it's the struggle and tension between what the head is saying and what the heart is feeling which is how I make my poetry"<sup>25</sup>. In the context of this struggle rhythm becomes for Harrison as a kind of life-support system. Emboldened by this, he feels more able to go "closer to the fire, deeper into the darkness [ . . . ] The metre itself is like

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<sup>22</sup> Hoggart. 'Conversation'. *Bloodaxe*, pp. 42-43.

<sup>23</sup> Haffenden. 'Interview'. *Bloodaxe*, 236.

<sup>24</sup> Harrison, *Lateshow*.

<sup>25</sup> Hoggart. 'Conversation'. *Bloodaxe*, 43.



the pulse [ . . . ] I don't have the heart to confront some experience unless I know I have this rhythm to carry me to the other side. It's an existential need, the metrical form, for me"<sup>26</sup>.

For these reasons another attraction of using traditional forms is that this existential need is met by his recourse to the past practitioners of metrical verse: "It's like standing on their shoulders to get over that enormous obstacle of blackness and self-defeat."<sup>27</sup>

Rhythm, then, is a way of not giving in to the pressures of rational pessimism. It is also a means of controlling the agonies that a writer such as Harrison feels subject to. It's not for nothing, then, that he has been nicknamed "northern gloom" by theatre director John Dexter.<sup>28</sup> Allied to this pessimism is his passion: "I'm a very passionate person. And I feel that I need a way I can control what I say. It's not restrained, isn't the word itself, it's like giving blood. If you're dying I can't give you blood by slashing my wrists; it has to go through a sterile jar".<sup>29</sup> This might strike us as quite lurid stuff, invoking intriguing suggestions that Harrison sees his poetical function as that of being a kind of lexical life-saver but his ideas about metre might put us in mind of some comments by William Wordsworth in his 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1802). He suggests that a danger for poets is that "excitement may be carried beyond its proper bounds" and therefore strong metre is essential because it has "great efficacy in tempering and restraining the passion by an intertexture of ordinary feeling".<sup>30</sup> Similarly Coleridge felt that metre arose from the mind's "spontaneous effort . . . to hold in check the workings of passion"<sup>31</sup>. Much earlier John Donne was to suggest that writing in verse would help to tame passionate feelings because of the necessary application of Reason, (the 'head'), and thus the outpourings of the 'heart' would be constrained:

. . . I thought, if I could draw my pains  
Through rhyme's vexation, I should them allay.  
Grief brought to numbers cannot be so fierce,

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>27</sup> Haffenden. 'Interview'. *Bloodaxe*, 236.

<sup>28</sup> Dexter introduced Harrison to the soprano Teresa Stratas and has commented: "I knew they would get on - northern gloom and Greek doom. (Stratas is Canadian born, of Greek parents). See Lennon 'World seen from the gods'. *The Guardian* 19 March 1990, FEA, 21.

<sup>29</sup> Hoggart. 'Conversation'. *Bloodaxe*, 43.

<sup>30</sup> William Wordsworth. 'Preface'. *Lyrical Ballads Wordsworth and Coleridge*. 2nd ed. Eds. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones. London and New York: Routledge, 1991, 264. Hereafter referred to as *Lyrical Ballads*.

<sup>31</sup> Antony Easthope. *Poetry as Discourse*. London: Methuen, 1983, 72. Hereafter referred to as *Poetry as Discourse*.

For, he tames it, that fetters it in verse.<sup>32</sup>

The Russian poet Mayakovsky took a somewhat different view: "Rhythm is the fundamental force, the fundamental energy of verse [. . .] rhythm accommodating itself to some concrete situation, and of use only for that concrete situation [. . .] I know nothing of metre —."<sup>33</sup> In Harrison's case, however, rhythm and strong verse forms are both life-affirming *and* a form of control.

The technical implications of Harrison's use of metre are equally interesting. It is often said of his verse that he typically uses iambic feet, often in pentameters, but very often with substitutions. This is fair comment as far as it goes but it does not really do justice to the effects that Harrison creates. Moreover his reliance on the iambic is not due to any veneration on his part for the iambic metre but because he wants to subvert its ideological pull by working, in a sense, to democratise it in a cultural context for, as Antony Easthope has argued: "The metre can be seen not as a neutral form of poetic necessity but a specific historical form producing certain meanings and acting to exclude others".<sup>34</sup>

It is worthwhile considering why the bulk of English poetry seems to rely on the iambic foot, and why it is that iambic metre is so dominant. As opposed to the frequently invoked idea of iambic metre as somehow the 'natural' metre for English verse Easthope suggests that the dominance of iambic metre can be traced to its promotion by the new courtly culture at the time of the Renaissance when the metre achieved prominence as a neo-classical form. The consequence of this form's adoption was that: "the native language [was] brought into relation with the classical model. So a particular practise of the national tongue can dress itself in the clothes of antiquity and a bourgeois national aspiration may represent itself in the form of universal civilisation".<sup>35</sup> In other words the speech of those who are best able to determine and impose the criteria for 'civilised' speech, (i.e. the ruling-class), is then able to be represented as something much more superior than the class-dialect it really is — the "clothes of antiquity" afford a cloak of respectability which masks the fact that this class is seeking to further its own

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<sup>32</sup> John Donne. 'The Triple Fool'. *John Donne The Complete English Poems*, 81. This passage has also been included by Rosemary Burton. 'Introduction', in *Bloodaxe*, 26.

<sup>33</sup> Grigson. *Private Art*, 11.

<sup>34</sup> For a full account of this argument see Easthope, *Poetry as Discourse*, pp. 51-77.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

narrow interests by suppressing those of the subject class. This investiture of language with class-assumptions was chronicled in 1589 when Puttenham sang the praises of Wyatt and Surrey for their work in translating Italian sonnets by Petrarch into English and into iambic pentameter: "they greatly polished our rude & homely maner of vulgar Poesie, from that it had bene before, and for that cause may justly be sayd the first reformers of our English metre and stile".<sup>36</sup>

It is because of its establishment as national poetic institution, suggests Easthope, that pentameter becomes a hegemonic form: "It becomes a sign which includes and excludes, sanctions and denigrates, for it discriminates the 'properly' poetic from the 'improperly' poetic, Poetry from verse [ . . . ] a poem within [this] metrical tradition identifies itself [ . . . ] with polish and reformed manners as against poetry in another metre which can be characterised as rude, homely, and in the modern sense, vulgar".<sup>37</sup> Harrison's problem is how to overcome this, given that the hegemony of pentameter continues to promote certain meanings rather than others: "Unruffled smoothness, flowing eloquence, poise: these are qualities the counterpoint of pentameter facilitates in two respects. Through counterpoint the abstract pattern of the metre is relatively backgrounded. Recognition of the work of metric *production* — and so of the poem as constructed artifice — is suppressed in favour of a notion of the poem as spontaneously generated *product*."<sup>38</sup> In addition pentameter "makes verse especially compatible with the 'Received Pronunciation' of Standard English (the bourgeois norm). It does so because it legislates for the number of syllables in the line and therefore cancels elision, making transition at word junctures difficult". To illustrate this Easthope quotes from Shakespeare's 'Sonnet 73': " 'That time of year thou may'st in me behold' ". Though he suggests a casual or vernacular elision is invited at several points: 'tha'time, 'i-mov', [etc.] . . ." this is prohibited by Received Pronunciation because pentameter insists on each syllable being articulated fully. In short: "the canon asks for a clipped, precise and fastidious elocution". Pentameter helps to enforce this as one of its main aims is to "preclude shouting and 'improper' excitement" and consequently "it enhances the poise of a moderate yet uplifted tone of voice . . .".<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 68. This section has also been considered and quoted by Spencer in *Poetry of TH*, 17.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., pp. 68-69. There are obvious exceptions to Easthope's analysis. For example though Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *Macbeth* are comprised in large part of iambic pentameters excited shouting is very much in evidence.

The first point to make is that though Harrison's metrical usage rests on the iambic foot (and multiples thereof), and not specifically on pentameter, the dangers described in Easthope's analysis are still applicable. Clearly Harrison is faced with quite a challenge. Yet, equally clearly, he still manages to fashion verse that attacks the hegemony of bourgeois forms while utilising those very forms.

One of Easthope's points is relatively straightforward to deal with, the idea that iambic pentameter suppresses the work of metrical production — on the contrary Harrison wants us to know that his poems are written. In *Blasphemer's Banquet* (1989), for example, the speaker points out that he is using the stanza form of Omar Khayyam, humbly adding: "as best I can".<sup>40</sup> This element of Harrison's technique of demystifying the poetic process is similar to that described by Stanley Mitchell in his introduction to *Understanding Brecht - Walter Benjamin* (1973). Here he suggests that "To be anti-bourgeois or proletarian was to show how things worked, while they were being shown; to 'lay bare the device' (in the words of the Russian Formalists). Art should be considered a form of production, not a mystery; the stage should appear like a factory with the machinery fully exposed."<sup>41</sup> Hence Harrison's insistence that writing poetry is hard work, and that that work must be apparent in the poem. Moreover this acknowledgement that he's *working* at his verse helps to explain one aspect of the metrical 'irregularities' as some poems enact the difficulty of being articulate because the poems themselves are difficult to read. How could they be otherwise for a writer whose poetic voice is so strongly allied with accents that "glugged like poured pop" ? (*Selected Poems*, 113). This is a brilliant image for the very noise that Harrison is suggesting practically occurs as we try to articulate the phrase ourselves. No wonder, then, that "rebarbative syllable[s]" (*Selected Poems*, 113) such as these are produced by someone whose accent "thickens with glottals to a lumpen mass" (*Selected Poems*, 112). Blake Morrison's review of *Continuous* (1981) talks of how Harrison's verse "coughs and splutters, all fits and starts [ . . . ] these must be some of the least fluent poems in the language. But they mean to be. The poetry that comes as naturally as leaves to a tree is, they imply, the poetry of the leisured classes, whereas these are poems that must work

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<sup>40</sup> Tony Harrison. 'The Blasphemer's Banquet'. *Tony Harrison The Shadow of Hiroshima and other film/poems*. London: Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995, 55.

<sup>41</sup> Stanley Mitchell. 'Introduction'. *Understanding Brecht Walter Benjamin*. Trans. Anna Bostock. London: NLB, 1973, pp. xv-xvi.

for their effects”<sup>42</sup>. One such effect is in line eight of ‘Study’ where Harrison usurps the iambic by writing “d-d-damascener’s hammer” (*Selected Poems*, 115), a metrically regular line in that it is made up of ten syllables. The primary effect is onomatopoeic, suggesting the voice of the stuttering printer, “Uncle Joe”. The secondary effect is that real speech takes precedence over abstract rules. This is entirely in keeping with Harrison’s poetic ethos. Despite using a metre that Easthope suggests minimises “*production*” Harrison’s output “never lets us forget what a contrived and artificial activity poetry really is”<sup>43</sup> Harrison himself refers to his techniques as ‘engineering’ (*Selected Poems*, 207). This image of the ‘poet as engineer’ is carefully chosen in order to suggest the precision, indeed the degree of manipulation, with which he *works* with rhythms and words. It seems a particularly appropriate term for him to use as the ‘blue-collar worker’ analogy both suggests Harrison’s hopes that somehow he has managed to retain some kind of connection with his working-class origins and also relates to the idea of the ‘poet-as-maker’. In this respect it reminds us once more that, for Harrison, the poet is conceptualised as a worker, not some rarefied aesthete, but an artisan working at a specific task — that of achieving a public poetry. This conception of the poet needs to be understood in terms of what Harrison has described as “the anglicisation of culture, the idea that culture is genteel. It’s not genteel.”<sup>44</sup> In another context, for example, he has commented on how he felt in his youth that verse in the theatre had been “anaesthetised and genteelised by Eliot and Fry, that it had really become drawing-room plays versified rather than finding a real use for verse.”<sup>45</sup> Instead he admired poets such as “the Greeks or Shakespeare or the Jacobean or Molière or Racine or Goethe [ . . . ] who worked directly with actors and found a style which rather than concealing the fact that it’s verse, drew attention to the physicality of its mechanics.”<sup>46</sup>

Harrison’s desire to show that poems are *written* is tantamount to a desire to de-mystify poetry. This is apparent in his use of initials and numbers. The political dimension of this did not really strike me at first because I *think* in terms of numbers, not the letters for them. In Harrison’s

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<sup>42</sup> Blake Morrison. ‘Labouring: *Continuous*’. *Bloodaxe*, 219.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>44</sup> Winder. ‘Interview’, 3.

<sup>45</sup> Wilmer. ‘Face to Face’, 31.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

verse, however, they are another way in which he breaks the rules and thus subverts the hegemony of the classical form. The visual impact is often remarkable, as when he writes:

“Tony Harrison            1946            ” (*Selected Poems*, 129)

The line might still have ten syllables but it certainly doesn't look like part of a 'traditional' poem. Amongst other examples are the use of "(8x5)" in 'Next Door II' (*Selected Poems*, 130), "G and A!" in 'Punchline' (*Selected Poems*, 150), or the line that reads "RIP RP, RIP T.W." in 'Them & [uz] 11' (*Selected Poems*, 123).

Another subversive strategy is Harrison's technique of varying the line length in his sonnets, some even amounting to a remarkable fifteen syllables. Line lengths are variable because it is the content that is privileged and not the form as we see, for example, in "you barbarian, T.W.!' He was nicely spoken" (*Selected Poems*, 122), assuming we count "W" as three. Lines of nine or eleven syllables, and others, are commonplace but what is interesting is how often the eleven syllable lines are metrically regular except for the addition of a syllable at either the beginning or end of the line. As, for example, with: "Articulation is the tongue-tied's fighting" (*Selected Poems*, 112). The additional light-stressed syllable, (technically a feminine ending), is deliberate, suggesting a subversion against the form that echoes the subversion inherent in the line itself. This technical irregularity is all of a piece with how the metre becomes less regular from the line that tells us of "the stutter of the scold". Thus the idea of an emerging under current of social resistance is enacted in the poem by the emergence of a metrically irregular voice.

In addition a further strategy is to expose iambic pentameter for what it really is — an artificial, abstract system invested with class assumptions which is no more than a conceptual tool that enables a critic to focus on a very narrow definition of how a poem achieves its effects. Harrison is able to offer us a critique of iambic pentameter (and, implicitly, a critique of the way poetry has been hi-jacked by the leisured classes) because his dexterity with the form is allied with a commitment born of his political consciousness. The aim is to achieve a poetic justice, a justice which might be achieved if the class assumptions that bedevil art can be expunged as a result of their exposure. Hence, it seems to me, one of Harrison's more important strategies in *Eloquence* is that of constantly questioning the nature of what we mean by the terms 'poetic' and 'vulgar'.

If we look more closely at 'Wordlists 1' we might see how this works. In line three the 'scholarship-boy' writes of how he "learned new long words and (wrongly stressed) *harlór*" (*Selected Poems*, 117). There are two points to be made here. The first is that by mispronouncing the word a full rhyme is made between "*harlór*" and "got", of line one, thus privileging 'improper' speech. More significantly, however, the "wrongly stressed" word serves to create a line of regular iambic pentameter because of the heavily stressed syllable, '*lór*'. Harrison is ironising the deficiencies of the traditional corollary between metre and poetic diction by perversely implying how metre has traditionally worked to suppress such demotic usages — his use of metre can liberate them but only because it is impelled by his politicised poetic. His insistence is that so-called non-standard speech can and does constitute 'poetry'; in 'Wordlists 1' it even meets the abstract criteria of regular pentameter. There are many such examples of this in Harrison's verse, one such being that found in 'Self Justification' (*Selected Poems*, 172). In this sonnet Uncle Joe's stammered explanation of some stationery as being "b-buckshee" (without charge, free) ensures a regular syllable count of ten and, at the same time, exhibits Harrison's ability to effortlessly integrate foreign words. Another example, again based on Uncle Joe's stammer, is found in 'Study'. In this sonnet Harrison writes of how Joe's jaws:

once plugged in to the power of his stammer  
 patterned the stuck plosive without pause  
 like a d-d-damascener's hammer. (*Selected Poems*, 115)

The syllable length of these three lines is 11, 9 and 10 respectively. Perhaps Harrison is seeking to convey the erratic delivery of a stammerer's words by the uneven line length but what is quite clear is that the stutter has been validated and privileged by rendering it as that highly desirable poetic device, the alliterative phrase, as Christopher Reid has also noted.<sup>47</sup> The stutter is no longer merely an example of non-standard pronunciation - it has become something laudable. This is Harrison at his best: at one and the same time he is subverting *and* fulfilling both metrical and 'poetical' expectations.

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<sup>47</sup> Christopher Reid. 'Articulating the awkwardness'. *The Times Literary Supplement*. No. 4111, 15 January 1982, 49. Hereafter referred to as 'Articulating the awkwardness'.

Another example of Harrison's brilliance with metrical language is in the sonnet 'Next Door IV'. In this the father-figure is bemoaning the fact that his world, his neighbourhood, has changed. Indeed, the house next door but one seems to have become an early example of an enterprise zone:

*Next door but one this side 's front room wi t'  
Singers hell for leather all day long 's  
some sort o' sweatshop bi the looks on it  
running up them dresses . . . them . . . sarongs! (Selected Poems, 132)*

The father-figure has in this instance used an incorrect word to describe the items that are being produced. He is wrong in a sartorial context and a cultural/geographical one — a sarong is not a dress but a draped skirtlike garment worn by men and women. The garment does not originate in the land of "turbans", "Moslems", or "Paki" either but from the Malay Archipelago, Sri Lanka, and the Pacific Islands. On one level this is an example of Harrison's playfulness, the object is to poke fun at the old man but there is something else occurring as we see that Harrison's underlying imperative is fulfilled. What I mean is that the *wrong* word is necessary in order to make a rhyme.<sup>48</sup> In this instance at least, the bourgeois ideal of the poetic can only be realised because of the working-class 'error'. As a result of the inclusion of this mistake Harrison ironises the idea that poetry can only be full of beautiful (home Counties) pronunciation. Moreover the mistake is necessary in order to make poetry! Similarly in another sonnet, 'Fire-eater', Harrison ironically writes "Dad punctuated sentence ends with but . . ." (*Selected Poems*, 168) The irony here is both that Harrison punctuates his own line's ending with the word "but" and that the grammatical error is necessary to produce a fairly regular pentameter line.

That Harrison is keen to affirm such strategies is abundantly clear in his verse. He does this in two main ways. One is by the effect of his voice's particular brand of poetic diction; the other is by including the speech that has so often been considered 'unpoetical' and vulgar, the so-called 'language of the gutter'. The reason for this has been neatly summarised by the director Richard Eyre, a personal friend of Harrison's. Speaking of him, Eyre has commented that he "wants the whole body of society, not just its head, to be involved in art. He wants art and

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<sup>48</sup> Also noted by Christopher Reid. 'Articulating the awkwardness', 49.



literature to be accessible to everyone, for the distinction between High and Low art to be annulled, and for art to be removed from the clutches of class distinction".<sup>49</sup>

This then is one important meaning of what Harrison means by public poetry and a major element towards achieving this has been the development of his poetic voice. There are, obviously, contradictory elements to this, in particular the clash between the learned lexicon of the trained Classicist and the blunt, plain-speaking of the working-class poet, which he exploits to the full. Indeed, the plain-speaking element of Harrison's diction adds a consistently discordant undertow to the "unruffled smoothness" of the metre and blows apart Easthope's suggestion that elision and transition at word junctures is made difficult by the use of iambic metre. Chief amongst this is Harrison's use of the floating 's'. In another context he has described this device as a means of achieving an "illusion of the colloquial".<sup>50</sup> He seems to use this in two ways, sometimes letting it stand alone where it represents 'is', as in this example:

That circle of scorched cobbles scarred with tar 's  
a night-sky globe nerve-wrackingly all black (*Selected Poems*, 158)

At other times he uses it to represent 'has', as we find in: "and not one gentleman 's been brought to book" (*Selected Poems*, 121). Similar devices are his use of "'d've" (*Selected Poems*, 113) instead of 'would have', "I'd" (*Selected Poems*, 114), instead of 'I would', and "he'd've" (*Selected Poems*, 117) instead of 'he would have', etc. The effect of these, allied with an all but total use of 'he'd', 'can't', 'wasn't' etc., in addition to the wonderful blend of brilliant imagery and colloquialisms like "whose girdling's giddy speed *knocks spots off* Puck's" (*Selected Poems*, 137, my italics) is a living, *talking* poetry. Also it is often a poetry with a distinctively Northern flavour, as usages such as "t'mob" (*Selected Poems*, 113), "nowt" (*Selected Poems*, 149) and "mi mam's" (*Selected Poems*, 118) affirm — they all help to undercut the ideological sway of the iambic by resisting the imposition of Received Pronunciation. The danger, however, is that by using such idioms Harrison might appear as a dialect poet — like a thinking person's Jake Thackeray. His awareness of this is implicitly voiced in 'The Queen's English'. It is a poem that bears being quoted in full:

<sup>49</sup> Richard Eyre. 'Such men are dangerous'. *Bloodaxe*, 364.

<sup>50</sup> Tony Harrison. 'Preface to *The Misanthrope*'. *Bloodaxe*, 142.

Last meal together, Leeds, the Queen's Hotel,  
 that grandish pile of swank in City Square.  
*Too posh for me!* he said (though he dressed well)  
*If you weren't wi' me now ah'd nivver dare!*

I knew that he'd decided that he'd die  
 not by the way he lingered in the bar,  
 nor by that look he'd give with one good eye,  
 nor by the firmer handshake and the gruff *ta-ra*,  
 but when we browsed the station bookstall sales  
 he picked up *Poems from the Yorkshire Dales* -

*'ere tek this un wi' yer to New York*  
*to remind yer 'ow us gaffers used to talk.*  
*It's up your street in't it? Ah'll buy yer that!*

The broken lines go through me speeding South -

*As t'Doctor stopped to oppen woodland yat . . .*  
 and

*wi' skill they putten wuds reet I' his mouth.* (Selected Poems, 136)

The sense of unease that the father-figure feels in "that grandish pile of swank" is matched by the clash of his diction being presented in the architectural splendour of that prized icon of all that is poetic, the sonnet.<sup>51</sup> This is a fine parallel, the confident Victorian pile of the hotel presenting all the qualities of assured form, style and exclusivity, and legislating, in a sense, against the intrusion of the lower orders and the vulgar. It is in this context that we can place Harrison's elisions and the colloquialisms such as "*ta-ra*", "*tek*" and "*yer*". But the poem has as much to say about Harrison's poetic techniques, about what kind of poet he is *not* going to be, as it does about the conventions that act to regulate poetic diction. This is suggested by the contrast between the metrical irregularity of the father-figure's words at the station bookstall and the perfect iambic pentameters of the two quoted lines of Yorkshire dialect verse. The key words here are "broken lines" (line 14). On one level we might read this as an ironic self-reflection on Harrison's part concerning his use of 'broken forms'. Alternatively they might refer to the railway lines that are bearing the scholarship-boy away from the North or the shattered lines of communication between son and father but if we interpret "broken" in a cultural sense then their metrical

<sup>51</sup> See Spencer, *Poetry of TH*, pp. 19-20 for an alternative reading of Harrison's strategy.

regularity implies “a realisation on Harrison’s part that an attempt to become a kind of folksy dialect poet would be to play into the hands of hegemonic form [ . . . ] Such well groomed displays of provincial quaintness reveal how thoroughly domesticated (broken-in), creatively exhausted (broken-down) and culturally displaced (broken-from-history) they are,” as Luke Spencer has noted.<sup>52</sup>

Spencer’s reading of this poem is generally sound but one problem with his analysis is that his argument implicitly creates the impression that Harrison’s representation of demotic speech consists in having this speech appear as metrically irregular in opposition to the polished, regular metre of conventional verse. Clearly this is not the case, as Spencer eventually makes clear elsewhere in his book. It is worth emphasising, however, that what Harrison is doing in his verse is much more significant. For instance, it is not that we should consider Harrison’s verse in terms of an either/or context, i.e. that either Harrison wants “to make the regularity of iambic metre yield to the unmannerly interruption of a subaltern voice”<sup>53</sup>, (as Spencer has it), or that he wants to show that the ‘subaltern’ voices scan just as well as bourgeois poetic diction. These two possibilities are the wrong terms of reference as, quite clearly, his verse shows that he does both. That he is doing both is evident in ‘The Queen’s English’. The poem implicitly insists that Harrison is not going to be a poet who has his *wuds/words* put in his mouth — he has found his voice and he is going to use it to achieve a poetic-justice for those he cares about. Thus we see that Harrison’s metrical inconsistencies and variations are deliberate: the demotic speech is ‘irregular’ when it is used to enforce a political point in a specific poem and it is ‘regular’ when Harrison is seeking to subvert conventional notions of the ‘poetic’. Hence the irony of the poem’s title as it refers both to Standard English and the English spoken within the Queen’s Hotel and, therefore, within the poem itself by both the father-figure and the poet. It is all *English*: the English spoken in the hotel is equally as valid as any other form. Hence Harrison offers us lines like line three where metrically regular ‘ordinary’ speech appears unified with the regular iambs of Harrison’s own diction and metrically regular lines like line four with its mixture of colloquialisms and elisions. We might also note <sup>^</sup>line like line 12 which, except for an extra stressed syllable at the beginning is fairly regular thereafter.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., pp. 19-20.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 17.

Harrison has often commented on how he is fascinated by the incidence of metrical regularity in 'ordinary' speech. Indeed, Aristotle commented in passing, apparently, that "the iamb prevailed in ordinary conversation."<sup>54</sup> Moreover Harrison maintains that he once sat on a bus and listened to people talking in iambic pentameters: "If your ear is tuned to it you hear them. I always remember the [ . . . ] woman I heard on the train explaining to a stranger where her son-in-law worked, and she said, 'He works for British Gypsum outside Leek', which is a perfect iambic pentameter. Then she made one that was rather more adventurous like, 'Well, it's the whole world over, the unrest.'"<sup>55</sup> Another example of this is the words of Tidd in 'On Not Being Milton'. This is more evidence of Harrison's use of "deliberately non-literary sources which actually could be taken absolutely untouched from speech". For Harrison this act of reclamation and reinstatement is "a kind of deliberate contrast to the kind of poetry which bolstered itself up with quotations from many other cultural sources, other languages, whether they were Latin, Greek or Sanskrit [ . . . ] Like Pound and Eliot."<sup>56</sup> It is probably no coincidence, then, that when the narrator in the poems talks of his 'mother tongue', his own 'ordinary' speech, the lines are metrically regular. For example in the line:

and *not* the English that I speak at home" (*Selected Poems*, 120)

and

but not the tongue that once I used to know  
but can't bone up on now, and that's mi mam's. (*Selected Poems*, 118)

Alternatively Harrison often offers regular lines that contain expletives, such as in : "*Ah bloody can't ah've gorra Latin prose.*" (*Selected Poems*, 116), or in 'A Good Read' when he writes: "or fucking football . . . (All this in my mind.)" (*Selected Poems*, 141). Or there are regular lines almost entirely comprised of colloquialisms as when he writes: "*Off laikin', then to t'fish 'oil all the boys,*" (*Selected Poems*, 116). At other times in order to promote this kind of *expressive* speech Harrison often adheres to regular iambic pentameter but includes inversions. We see this in 'Long Distance I':

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<sup>54</sup> Peter Jones, ed., *Imagist Poetry*. Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1976, 140.

<sup>55</sup> Wilmer. 'Face to Face', 32.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

*Ah've allus liked things sweet! But now ah push  
food down mi throat! Ah'd sooner do wi'out* (*Selected Poems*, 133)

The first line is perfect iambic pentameter, the second begins with an inversion. Instead of the iambic we have a trochee — a strong stress on “food” followed by a light stress on “down”. This is an accepted practise, of course, one for which Pope was famed, but Harrison is using it to convey the emotion of what is being said: the disruption of the iamb’s “oily smoothness”<sup>57</sup> expresses the feelings (and the action) of the father-figure as he talks of forcing food down his mouth. Alternatively Harrison will write a line which can be read with the abstract pattern of iambic pentameter in mind but which cannot be imagined as being spoken in that way. As we see, for example, in the quoted words of James Murray, a past editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “*Fling our doors wide! all, all, not one, but all!*” (*Selected Poems*, 119). In this instance it is the repetition that serves to promote ‘expressive’ speech. This expressive quality is produced in other ways by Harrison. Sometimes he completely shatters the iambic by the introduction of a rhythm that conveys exactly the semantic meaning of the words. The effect of this is reminiscent of Pound’s assertion that pure rhythm must be used in order to exactly convey the specific emotion. This is often Harrison’s strategy as we see, for example, in ‘Next Door 11’:

The Sharpes came next. He beat her, blacked her eye.  
Through walls I heard each blow, each *Cunt! Cunt! Cunt!*” (*Selected Poems*, 130)

The metre has collapsed so that we feel the full force of the blows ourselves — there might still be ten syllables in the line but the imperative is to convey the brutality of the speech, which, in turn, conveys the physical brutality of Sharpe himself.

Another interesting example of Harrison’s metrical variations is in ‘Confessional Poetry’ where we see that the metre is mostly irregular and many of the lines of represented speech have nine or eleven syllables. They take the form of an argument between the narrator and what can

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<sup>57</sup> Brecht has written about this in relation to his theatre work. Talking of his play *Edward II* he has commented: “The problem was simple: I needed elevated language, but was quite put off by the oily smoothness of the usual five-foot iambic metre. I needed rhythm, but not the usual jingle.” ‘On Rhymeless Verse With Irregular Rhythms’. *Bertolt Brecht. Poems 1913-1956*. Eds. J Willett and R Manheim. Trans. E. Fried. London: Methuen, 1976, 464. Hereafter referred to as *Bertolt Brecht. Poems*.

only be described as a ‘critic’, we have to decide for ourselves how ironically this situation might be perceived:

*But your father was a simple working man,  
they’ll say, and didn’t speak in those full rhymes.  
His words when they came would scarcely scan.*

Mi dad’s did scan, like yours do, many times! (*Selected Poems*, 128)

The words, then, scan “many times”. At least as often, they do not. We might notice an irony here in that the last line of the quote scans perfectly. The point is that Harrison wants to stress that it is *what* is being said that is of importance. To exclude much that is spoken because it fails to accord with a value-laden paradigm is wrong. This is the poetic justice Harrison seeks: we should consider what a poem is saying, and *why*, not be hoodwinked by style. Hence he makes iambics yield *and* makes ‘ordinary’ voices scan, produces perfectly regular iambic pentameter lines with eloquent ‘poetic diction’ *and* expletives, and writes lines of ‘formal’ verse that are themselves metrically irregular because he wants to confound our expectations of what poetry really *is*. In essence he wants to re-define the ‘poetic’ and the ‘vulgar’ to show that ‘poetry’ is not found *solely* in traditional bourgeois forms, nor that it is bound by a traditionally narrow definition which actually has more to do with value judgements and prejudice: he wants to turn traditional notions of ‘poetry’ upside-down and he wants to do it from the inside, by making his poetry *speak*.

That Harrison believes that poets are under an obligation to speak on behalf of others is clear in his verse. He occupies literature on behalf of people whose speech was condemned as inarticulate because he wants to: “give them the setting that was always considered the classical setting [ . . . ] It’s taking what is regarded as dross and giving it the setting of a jewel.”<sup>58</sup> At other times he has spoken of his strategy of colonising the high style as being fuelled by his desire to “present it back as a gift to those people you were brought up with”<sup>59</sup>. This is the idealist in him, speaking from the heart. In this respect the aim seems to be to produce public verse that is accessible to the ‘great unread’. In one sonnet he writes hopefully:

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<sup>58</sup> Harrison. *Lateshow*.

<sup>59</sup> Woodcock. ‘Classical Vandalism’, 55.

These poems about you, dad, should make good reads  
for the bus you took from Beeston into town  
for people with no time like you in Leeds - (*Selected Poems*, 141)

The realist in Harrison knows, however, that his audience is more likely to be those for whom literature is not a unique or esoteric pleasure. This presents him with a problem for he has said that he finds it hard to write poetry when he knows that: “probably the only people that want to read it are already converts”.<sup>60</sup> His strategy, then, is to build reminders into his verse that effectively “pull back the camera”<sup>61</sup> (to use Harrison’s own phrase), and thus show a context for the readers’ own privileged literacy: “At the banquet of verse he offers, there are always the ‘ghosts of the inarticulate’, so that the reader has to pay for their cultural gratification: ‘that literary frisson - “*hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frere*” - will cost you so much in social awareness, in the consciousness of social gaps and divisions”<sup>62</sup>. A symbol of this, perhaps as much a reminder for Harrison as it is for the reader, is the bookplate that Harrison has printed in all his books.<sup>63</sup> It takes the form of a drawing of Thomas Campey, the subject of ‘Thomas Campey and the Copernican System’ (*Selected Poems*, 13). He is a man who “didn’t partake of the literary culture except to drag books to market with his bad back”. This is the man from whom Harrison bought his books in Leeds, and the bookplate serves as “exactly the kind of reminder that is in [his] poetry”.<sup>64</sup> The reminder is that there is a price to pay for literacy, and it’s “probably someone other than the reader who has paid that cost.”<sup>65</sup> The strategy appears to be to work on the ‘converted’, to influence them, in order that they will in turn create a climate for change — the ultimate goal being, presumably, that the subjects and situations of which Harrison writes in his sonnets will not need to be written of again.<sup>66</sup> It is worth reconsidering the title of the sonnet sequence in this context. Historically it refers to the cover name of The London Corresponding Society and this is paralleled by Harrison using traditional forms as a cover for his

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<sup>60</sup> Harrison. *Late Show*.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Woodcock. ‘Classical Vandalism’, 55.

<sup>63</sup> Haffenden. ‘Interview’, *Bloodaxe*, 233. Harrison means in his own books at home, however it is printed in *Bloodaxe*, 2.

<sup>64</sup> Haffenden. ‘Interview’. *Bloodaxe*, 233.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>66</sup> A measure of his success is how poems of his such as ‘v.’ are taught in schools and, of course, the success of the film/poems.

own subversive beliefs. At the same time the (book)cover name is redolent with meanings of what it was like for a scholarship-boy to be schooled in the eloquence of another class. But, if we read 'School' as a collective noun, rather than in the singular, it suggests that eloquence comes in many forms and thus the sonnets are representative of this broad School of Eloquence. In this respect the title of the sequence applies equally to the reader as it does to the poems' contents: we too are being 'schooled' in an eloquence that is not based upon arbitrary distinctions between the 'high' and the 'low'.

Whether his strategy of reminders is enough, or whether it is merely a sop to the idealist's conscience, is not a question Harrison has shied away from. He seems all too well aware that his strategy of reinstating the speech suppressed by the 'high culture' might be compromised by his own position within that same culture. As he says to his father in one sonnet:

I've come round to your position on 'the Arts'  
but put it down in poems, that's the bind. (*Selected Poems*, 141)

It seems clear that Harrison is fully aware that his Trojan Horse, his strategy of re-presenting the demotic voices within the traditional forms, might be more of an Achilles Heel: "because I have a strong sense of past poetry-I am drawn to be being able to make my mark in a traditional way: its a great temptation, but I know its betraying much of what I truly feel and the way in which I was formed".<sup>67</sup> It is an unresolvable problem, however, for the simple reason that without the forms the poetry would not exist as it does. Despite this truism (and Harrison's acknowledgement that "by being a poet [he's] moved into another class anyway"<sup>68</sup>) he still allows the sense that he has betrayed his class to surface. In 'Turns', for example, he writes of his complicity in the literary process, of his involvement with the class that marked his father with 'D':

and *me*, I'm opening my trap  
to busk the class that broke him for the pence  
that splash like brackish tears into our cap. (*Selected Poems*, 149)

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<sup>67</sup> Haffenden. 'Interview'. *Bloodaxe*, 233.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.



The word “trap” refers both to the mouth but, more significantly, the trap of being a poet and the ever present danger of being in collusion. It is this trap that is the real subject of ‘Classics Society’:

And so the lad who gets the alphas works  
the hardest in his class at his translation  
and finds good Ciceronian for Burke’s:

*a dreadful schism in the British nation.* (*Selected Poems*, 120)

Given the pun on “translation” which has a class context, as well as a linguistic one, we see that the poem turns against the poet, as Harrison has commented,<sup>69</sup> and once again we detect his guilt - he too is one of those ‘lads who got the alphas’. But there is another form of collusion being enacted by the poem, one that refers directly to Harrison as poet, which suggests that he is also prone to the same kind of containment as were the working-class scholarship-boys, i.e.: “the imperative to translate potentially explosive content into a nicely turned form”.<sup>70</sup> Given that Burke was a notable reactionary in relation to the French Revolution, the irony is that the translating of his words into elegant Ciceronian Latin has the effect of distracting the student from the politic implications of the “dreadful schism”. That Harrison is aware of the traditional forms’ propensity to enact a linguistic gagging on his own writing is suggested by the self-conscious separation of the italicised text from the body of the poem. It is a graphic illustration of what Harrison sees as the dangers of apolitical poetry, the privileging of form over content, of style over substance: “the moment I become ‘poet’ in that unpoliticised way I am in collusion with the reader, and part of the struggle is not to be always in collusion”.<sup>71</sup>

This struggle to give his verse form a political imperative by creating a sense of shared intimacy is equally apparent in the strategies he has adopted in terms of dramatising what is to all intents and purposes his personal life into an artistically crafted voice. It is to that major area, his recasting of the personal into the political through the creation of the illusion of a kind of public autobiography, that we must now turn.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>70</sup> Woodcock. ‘Classical Vandalism’, 57.

<sup>71</sup> Haffenden. ‘Interview’. *Bloodaxe*, 233.

### Chapter 3. *Figures of Speech: The Question of Autobiography*

We can read Harrison's *School of Eloquence* sonnet sequence as being the poetical evocation of a search for an adequate means of expression, in particular the struggles that a working-class poet has in order to find a voice. At the nub of this search is a straightforward question: how can a poet balance a fidelity to his roots with a need to articulate his ideas and beliefs, however painful this might be? Clearly any form of rejection of his hard won eloquence is going to be unacceptable, as is any rejection of his origins, of his class. The answer is to be found, perhaps, in Harrison's quest for a public poetry, a poetry that would continually strive to break down the arbitrary separations between high and low culture, between the poetic and the vulgar, and between the private and the public. In this way — and it is difficult to imagine another — Harrison feels that he is able to stay true to his origins and yet still manage to embrace the other elements in his make-up, his learning and erudition. This is important to Harrison: by maintaining this balance he can avoid colluding with those cultural forces that use their privileged class position to promote concepts of a high culture at the expense of a denigrated 'low' culture, thus fostering elitism, prejudice and division. That is not to suggest that Harrison is sentimental or naive about his class status — he is the first to admit that he has left his class, though clearly he has not left it behind in the sense of having forsaken it. Harrison himself is clear on this issue, fully aware that by being a poet he has "moved into another class anyway",<sup>1</sup> as I said above. In an objective sense (if that is not a contradiction in terms when discussing class) this is quite true but in a subjective sense some element of the Harrison imagination has stayed firmly within his class: in terms of his imagination that class of origin, that class nexus, has always been his frame of reference. Hence Harrison has aimed to craft a poetic voice, and a poetic, that will fulfil his political imperatives of achieving a public poetry. The main strategy is to fuse the very form and subject matter so the 'politics' and the 'style' can no longer be separated out and pinned between quotation marks: they are one and the same. This is evident in the sonnets where we recognize the co-mingling of classical forms and a demotic content, a conjunction paralleled,

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<sup>1</sup> Haffenden. 'Interview'. *Bloodaxe*, 233.

in a sense, in the way that Harrison uses a highly public form, TV, in order to create a sense of shared intimacy.

One of the single most important elements of Harrison's project are the poetic voices we find in the poems. The voice that Harrison habitually settles on is deceptively simple and is characterised by a kind of man-of-the-people air. This voice is crucial in his attempts to achieve a public poetry and its acquisition has been hard won, as *Eloquence* testifies. Consequently there have been changes and fluctuations in style over a period of time for, if we examine Harrison's verse closely, we see that it not only depicts the competing voices of characters in the poems, like the father-figure, the mother-figure, etc., but that the verse is also characterised by an often subtle variety of Harrison's poetic personae, for example the scholarship-boy persona and that of poet.

One clear factor in the development of Harrison's poetic voice is the death of his parents. His mother, Florrie Harrison, died on December 13th 1976, his father, Harry Ashton Harrison, died on February 21st 1980. In Harrison's words: "It's one of the tragic ironies of my work that I found a language in poetry I could address to my father and my mother only when it was too late. I've now found poetry about our life together; I found what it should be; but they're no longer around for me to address the poems to them."<sup>2</sup> It was, continues Harrison, the shock of his parents' death, his awareness that he had never found a way of using "the art I have to speak directly to the people I'm writing about" and the confronting of the guilts and regrets that helped him develop his characteristically accessible voice. There are other factors as well, his foreign travels and his marriages, firstly in 1962 to Rosemarie Crossfield, secondly in 1984 to Teresa Stratas. The effect of the life on the art is quite obvious, then, but there is another element involved in his search for a voice. While Blake Morrison was quite correct to remind us that Part 1 of *Eloquence* describes "the growth of the poet's mind"<sup>3</sup> we also are privy to a process of formation that occurs in a more generalised sense over the whole of the sequence and, indeed, some of the earlier work as well. What I am suggesting is that, in an albeit limited way, Harrison's sonnet sequence hints at changes in Harrison as a person, rather than as a poet though in truth it is hard to see how we could begin to separate the two: while *Eloquence* explicitly reveals developments in poetical techniques and differing approaches, the sub-text is that of a person in the process of finding himself.

<sup>2</sup> Hoggart. 'Conversation'. *Bloodaxe*, 45.

<sup>3</sup> Blake Morrison. 'The Filial Art'. *Bloodaxe*, 58.

That is not to suggest that somehow the sonnet sequence represents the formation of a unified self; that is clearly nonsense. But it does seem to suggest that Harrison is somehow trying to write himself into being. Not 'being' in the sense of a self in the singular, but in the sense of multiple selves. The effort to understand this multiplicity is implicit in Harrison's verses that deal with the gulf between the scholarship-boy and his parents. This is particularly true of 'v.' and that poem's study of a divided self.

There is a clear sense that he has used the sequence as a way of coming to terms with the sense of estrangement he feels from his parents. This is, in part, what Robert Lowell did in *Life Studies* (1959), a sequence largely written after the death of his parents. Eric Homberger suggests that these losses "enabled Lowell to reassume a role in imagination, that of long-suffering son, which he had long since rejected. Resuming the relationship [ . . . ] brought with it a freedom to negotiate his way through the flux of his early life, to highlight some things and to remain silent about others. It represents an effort to order his own life."<sup>4</sup> There are clear links with Harrison, then, in that both writers used their art to understand the implications of their relationships with their parents and also attempted to learn more about themselves. In *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) Wayne C. Booth argues that during the process of writing an author

creates not simply an ideal, impersonal "man in general" but an implied version of "himself" that is different from the implied authors we meet in other men's works. To some novelists it has seemed, indeed, that they were discovering or creating themselves as they wrote. As Jessamyn West says, it is sometimes 'only by writing the story that the novelist can discover — not his story — but its writer, the official scribe, so to speak, for that narrative.' She continues, arguing that 'Writing is a way of playing parts, of trying on masks, of assuming roles, not for fun but out of desperate need, not for the self's sake but for the writing's sake.'<sup>5</sup>

Harrison has spoken of his awareness of the writer's involvement in this process of self-formation, albeit in the context of his theatrical works:

My feeling about playing verse is that it should be in the voice that you grew up with, not in the voice you learn in drama school. At one time, *when I was forming myself*, these things were things I had to combat. I had to struggle with them in order to find my own voice. Now they concern me less, perhaps,

<sup>4</sup> Homberger. *Art Of The Real*, 143.

<sup>5</sup> Wayne C. Booth. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: London: University of Chicago, 1961, 71. Hereafter referred to as *Rhetoric of fiction*.

than they did, because some of my preoccupations are different. But I still have that attitude to art and culture.” [my emphasis]<sup>6</sup>

This process of forming oneself is obviously an integral part of finding a voice and it raises interesting though, perhaps, unanswerable questions about such matters. For example to what extent is having found a voice commensurate with having attained a certain level of emotional security? Is it something to do with the passing of chronological time or is it a purely enigmatic phenomenon, a process that might just culminate with a period when imaginative aspirations are in some kind of harmony with the requisite skills that are necessary in order to accomplish them? Or, perhaps, it has more to do with an act of literary and imaginative breakthrough or formation, something that is more closely related with mastery of art than life.

Probably the dominant characteristic of Harrison’s poetic voice, at least the way we think of it, is his use of the first person pronoun, the ‘I’ voice. He uses this throughout his verse. Sometimes when it is used its denomination as a mask is obvious - this is generally the case in *The Loiners* (1970), for instance. At other times Harrison uses it in a way that invites or rather forces us to draw parallels between the events of a particular poem and the events of his own life, as in many of the sonnets for example. If this was the extent of Harrison’s use of the ‘I’ voice then readers would be faced with a very simple judgement to make: is such a reading appropriate or not?

One recent example of a confused approach is that of Carol Rutter in her introduction to Harrison, *Permanently Barred* (1995). This is an example of how she writes about Harrison’s work: “In all of these sonnets-as family-snapshots, the son is present. Sullen, grudging, reticent, he’s somewhere in the corner. His growth into poetry, into articulacy, is what finally conquers the son’s reticence”.<sup>7</sup> One obvious issue that writing like this raises, yet which Ms Rutter does not explore is the extent to which we can interpret a particular poetic voice as being autobiographical? She is not alone in this. In *English Poetry since 1945* (1993) for example, Neil Corcoran blithely finds the ‘real’ Harrison in the work. In ‘Me Tarzan’ it is “the young Harrison’s head sticking out of the window” and in ‘Them and [uz]’, Corcoran tells us, “the child Harrison has his ‘mouth all stuffed with glottals”.<sup>8</sup> Another

<sup>6</sup> Brown. ‘Harrison forward’, 29.

<sup>7</sup> Carol Rutter, ed. *Permanently Bard*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1995. 20. Hereafter referred to as *Permanently Bard*.

<sup>8</sup> Neil Corcoran., *English Poetry since 1940*. London: New York: Longman, 1993, 160.

instance of this glib assumption is provided by Martyn Crucefix and his reference to “the narrator (the adult Harrison)”.<sup>9</sup>

In *H, v. & O* (1998) Sandie Byrne is much nearer the mark, providing an interesting discussion of Harrison’s ‘I’ voice in terms of its range of themes and topics.<sup>10</sup> She concludes that it is “the ostension of a recognizable, living person”.<sup>11</sup> Though she recognises that the ‘I’ voice in the poems is a persona that represents some element of Harrison she still, confusingly, veers between statements like these and blithe references to the speaker in a poem *being* Harrison himself. For example in her discussion of ‘Breaking The Chain’ she remarks: “although Harrison went ‘up a rung or two’ to a position from which he could ‘wear [his] own clothes to work’ and would not make ‘oilstains in the wash’, he did ‘not go posh’ ”.<sup>12</sup>

In terms of Rutter’s position, somewhat confusingly she does not tell us whether she is talking about a persona or a real person either. Her analysis implicitly posits the idea that somehow it is a matter of common-sense as to whether a particular poem invites an autobiographical reading or not. In one instance, for example, in some rather confused notes to Harrison’s poem ‘Durham’, Ms Rutter writes

The poet’s business in the city is seduction. Well, possibly poetry first. Then seduction. It seems the poet has been reading his stuff to some student group or other. (Unlike Harrison’s sonnets, which invite autobiographical readings, however, the poet of this poem isn’t Harrison; this poem has other fish to fry.)<sup>13</sup>

The problems arise because she seems to be saying that while ‘Durham’ doesn’t invite an autobiographical reading, the sonnets do. Elsewhere, however, she asserts that “The poems of section two”, (almost all are sonnets from *Eloquence*) “are biographical . . . ”<sup>14</sup> Is she saying that biographical poems invite an autobiographical reading? It is unclear as to whether this is a typing error or Rutter’s unconscious hint at the idea that even when Harrison appears to be writing in a confessional mode he is, in fact, denominating an autobiographical persona? Another example can be found when we consider a poem like ‘Changing At York’ (*Selected Poems*, 154). This poem has a poetic voice which is drunken and offering

<sup>9</sup> Martyn Crucefix. ‘The Drunken Porter Does Poetry: Metre and Voice in the Poems of Tony Harrison’. *Tony Harrison Loiner*. Ed. Sandie Byrne. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997, 167. Hereafter referred to as *Loiner*.

<sup>10</sup> See Chapter 5 ‘Poetry and truth: readings of Harrison’s class war’ in Byrne *H, v. & O*, pp. 128-162.

<sup>11</sup> Byrne. *H, v. & O*, 148.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>13</sup> Rutter. *Permanently Bard*, 134.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

biographical details relating to its family. The voice also refers to "some place where I'd read". This suggests the poet-persona again but whether this 'invites' an autobiographical reading or not is purely a matter for speculation or, perhaps, a matter for the theoretical basis, or lack of it, on which the discussion is conducted.

At other times Ms Rutter seems to read Harrison only in a strictly autobiographical sense. When this is the case the identification she makes between Harrison and the 'I' of the poems is so complete she creates the impression that the two are synonymous. One example of this is in the notes to 'BookEnds' I & II where she writes: "The first sonnet is fractured into two-line segments; it's as though the poet can't utter more than two lines at a time. Grief chokes him. Father and son have nothing to say"<sup>15</sup>. The poet = the son? It is not clear whether 'the poet' refers to Harrison or a poet persona in the sonnet but usually Ms Rutter is in no doubt. This is evident in her notes to 'Timer'. Based only on a reference to "Dad" in the poem Ms Rutter writes about "Mr Harrison".<sup>16</sup> On a common sense level it clearly lends itself to an autobiographical reading in that Harrison has said that much of his work is based on his, and his family's, personal history. But how can we be certain which work? How can we *really* know if 'Timer' is autobiographical and 'Durham' isn't? A further complication is that Ms Rutter is a personal friend of Harrison's and as such might be privy to certain biographical information. She tells us, for example, that one of the inquisitive questioners implicitly referred to in the poem 'Heredity' was Harrison's mother.<sup>17</sup> This is probably true but it makes no difference to our understanding or appreciation of the poem whether we know this or not. This assumption of the autobiographical as a special kind of truth, as something to be considered sacrosanct might also cause other problems in that it might lead some readers into thinking that the ostensibly autobiographical poems are, somehow, more factual than the others. The dangers inherent in such a reading of Harrison are clear when we consider what Robert Lowell once said about the autobiographical voice in his *Life Studies* (1959). It wasn't the case, for example, that Lowell sought to provide the 'truth' about his parents:

I've invented facts and changed things, and the whole balance of the poem was something invented. So there's a lot of artistry, I hope, in the poems . . . there

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>17</sup> When I heard Harrison read this on a radio broadcast he read the first half of the poem in a rather twee 'Any Questions' voice. The counterpoint to this was the gruff Leeds accent with which he spoke the second half. This was interesting because it explicitly demonstrated that for Harrison the situation in the poem was political. From a radio broadcast of Bath Literature Festival. *Stanza*. BBC Radio 4, 28 September, 1996.

was always that standard of truth which you wouldn't ordinarily have in poetry - the reader was to believe he was getting the *real* Robert Lowell."<sup>18</sup>

Clearly there is a sense in which Ms Rutter is right to suggest that Harrison "was the schoolboy made to 'shut my trap' " in 'Them & [uz]' and "he was the son who sat silent in those silent family teas", as described in 'Illuminations IV',<sup>19</sup> because he is obviously drawing on material from his life, as Harrison has himself indicated, suggesting that "You have to work with what you've got if you want to develop a public voice for poetry."<sup>20</sup> But, to totally identify the poetic voice in any poem with the person who wrote it can be very misleading, if not a waste of time. This highlights a problem in Rutter's book in that she overlooks or omits any consideration of the transformative nature of language and of verse conventions: i.e. when anyone writes down 'I' what they are *not* doing is putting themselves on paper, as any deconstructionist might tell us — language and the self do not coincide, the self is re-cast or reconstituted through language.

It makes more sense to see Harrison's 'I' voice as modulating between various related, yet distinct personae. These are those of the 'scholarship-boy' persona itself and the persona of 'poet'. There is also a more neutral poet persona which seems to have no relation with the others, except that it is a poet. In addition we have the father-figure persona and that of the mother-figure. It is understandable that because of Harrison's strategies of accessibility and inclusivity a reader might be inclined to look for the man in the poetry. Clearly many of the poems lend themselves to an autobiographical reading. But this autobiography is a fictionalised one, something that becomes apparent when we consider some of the autobiographical elements in detail.

To assume a synonymical relationship between the 'I' and the author of any work is, then, too narrow an approach. It is also impractical. For example the reference to a sister in 'Clearing II' (*Selected Poems*, 145) is the only reference to a sibling in all Harrison's work. Why this should be I have no idea. Perhaps Harrison was toying with the idea of creating some sort of Shakespeare's-sister character, jokingly casting himself as Shakespeare. After all, his childhood home was in *Tempest* Road, Leeds! Maybe the 'real' Tony Harrison had a sister in 'real life' or maybe he did not? Who knows, who cares? It is more rewarding, I

<sup>18</sup> Frederick Seidel. 'Writers at Work: Robert Lowell'. *The Paris Review*, No. 25 Winter-Spring 1961, pp. 65-95. Reprinted in *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*. Second Series. New York: Viking Press, 1963, 366. Quoted by Homburger, *Art Of The Real*, 144.

<sup>19</sup> Rutter. *Permanently Bard*, 16.

<sup>20</sup> Lennon. 'World seen from the gods'. *The Guardian* 19 March 1990, 21.



suggest, to consider what artistic strategies Harrison brings to bear to create an art which gives the illusion of deriving from direct life experience, and which has transformed any actual experience into political art. In this respect the propensity built into an 'I' voice for an apparently *honest sincerity* which can lead a reader to an assumption of the autobiographical as a kind of special truth is revealed as being more of a technique rather than it being an unconscious consequence - in other words this autobiographical mode seems to be crucial to Harrison's brand of political and public poetry because its 'genuineness' relates to how he presents his political poetry through showing the inter-relations between the apparently personal and the political.

In order to consider this we need to look at Harrison's 'I' voice in greater detail. Initially we might consider just how we might describe it. Do we describe it as being characteristic of confessional writing or, alternatively, is it the case that he is denominating an autobiographical persona whilst utilising some confessional elements? According to *A Glossary Of Literary Terms* the term confessional poetry

designates a type of narrative and lyric verse [ . . . ] which deals with the facts and intimate experiences of the poet's own life. It differs in subject matter from poems of the *Romantic Period* [ . . . ] in the candor and detail — and sometimes the *psychoanalytic* insight — with which the poet reveals intimate or clinical matters about himself or herself".<sup>21</sup>

At first sight it seems that we could apply this definition to much of Harrison's verse, particularly the *Eloquence* sequence. Indeed the critic Damian Grant has suggested that one of Harrison's typical strategies is "the blending of the public and private experience, the classical and confessional mode, in such a way as to make them mutually authenticating."<sup>22</sup> But Abrams' reference to revelatory *psychoanalytic* insights as being a feature of confessional poetry is interesting for it draws attention to the fact that, for such an allegedly autobiographical poet, Harrison is extremely selective about the insights that he discloses. This is something that Ken Worpole has discussed. Writing about the *Eloquence* sequence he suggests that the "omissions, or silences, in Harrison's account of childhood and school are highly significant: there are no references to any other children or friends of his own age, no evocation of children's games, street-life, sweet-shops, comics, Saturday morning pictures,

<sup>21</sup> M. H. Abrams, ed. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 5th edition. Fort worth: Chicago: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1988, 34. Hereafter referred to as *Glossary*.

<sup>22</sup> Grant. 'Poetry versus History'. *Bloodaxe*, 109.

collective rebellion in the classroom, larking about on summer evenings, early sexual involvement<sup>5</sup>, or any of these collective memories which are usually the very stuff of the literature of class or geographical exile".<sup>23</sup> This is fair comment if Harrison's aim was, in fact, that of seeking to provide an account of working-class childhood or seeking to provide a full account of his own childhood. But his intentions are not so straightforward. Rather it is the case that he wants to make political poetry by dramatising the tensions and conflicts inherent in being a working-class scholarship-boy.

There are obviously occasions when Harrison deploys elements of the confessional mode in order to achieve a certain kind of effect but as a description of his style I would suggest that it provides too glib an understanding of what he is doing in his verse. What is really the case is that, just as surely as Harrison has 'occupied literature', he has also occupied the confessional mode, hijacking it as a medium for his politicised poetics. The verse cannot be considered as unqualifiedly confessional for the simple reason that Harrison's public art is essentially political. While it is true that his style incorporates certain confessional elements usually it does so only as part of his desire to describe a general traffic from the private to the public, and vice-versa, as a way of showing the connections between the two. The aim is to show that the private and the public are two points on the same continuum, an integral component of his overarching quest to achieve a public poetry. In this respect the problem that I have with the term confessional is that it seems to suppress the importance of what might be termed the calculated element, implying as it does a sense of the spontaneous outpouring of emotion, of guilt even. In other words it is too limiting, too narrow a term to convey the complexity of Harrison's art because the term plays down the accommodation of a calculated political perspective. That is not to suggest that there is anything insincere about Harrison's elegiac mode, quite the contrary. But we need to recognise that Harrison's use of what we might term 'confessional elements' are, paradoxically, both sincere and a calculated poetic strategy.

For instance even poems that might appear to fall quite easily into some kind of autobiographical catchall are not always what they seem. We see this when we consider the poem 'Clearing II' for example. The speaker is musing about the changes that occur when there is a death in a house. He remembers the past, a sister who had to be quiet so the speaker had peace in which to study. We learn of the rooms in which this study took place even

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<sup>23</sup>Worpole. 'Scholarship Boy'. *Bloodaxe*, 71.

though, so the speaker tells us conspiratorially, he wrote verse instead. References like these certainly suggest the confessional mode and invite an autobiographical reading, except that the final stages of the sonnet seem to include a rare admission on the speaker's part that all is not what it seems. The speaker tells us how the hearse called at the front of the house, "the formal side". This is the entrance that the ghosts of his parents will have to use. The poem ends by saying:

Hush!  
                   Haunt me, and not the house!  
   I've got to lard  
 my ghosts' loud bootsoles with fresh midnight oil. (*Selected Poems*, 145)

Looked at from an autobiographical perspective, Harrison writes "ghost" in the plural: he is referring to the mother and the father-figure.<sup>24</sup> It is as if the speaker, in imploring these parent-figures to haunt him rather than the house, recognises his dependency on his parents — both in terms of the loss he feels at their death and, more pragmatically, in terms of his parents being a rich source of material for his verse. He admits as much in another poem when he says of the father-figure in 'A Good Read': "once I'm writing I can't put you down!" (*Selected Poems*, 141). This sonnet was first published on August 1981,<sup>25</sup> nearly a year after Harrison senior's death, thus the address is directed not to the father-figure but to us, the readers. Harrison is explaining to us that he cannot stop writing about his father. Even here the virtuosity of the word-smith is abundantly clear. For example there is an allusion to the phrase that refers to a book so gripping that it could not be put down, also a suggestion that the speaker cannot put down (denigrate) the father-figure, even a grim suggestion that the speaker cannot put down (kill off) his favourite character. We might also interpret the last line of 'Clearing II' as implicitly revealing that Harrison needs the presence of his ghosts in order to have an object for his labours, so he can quieten them with the results of his midnight toil. In this instance it seems that the division between the writer and the 'I' of the poem has all but broken down.

<sup>24</sup> 'Clearing' was published in *The Times Literary Supplement* 12 December 1980. Both Harrison's parents had died earlier, his mother in December 1976 and his father in February 1980.

<sup>25</sup> 'A Good Read' was published in *The Times Literary Supplement*, No. 4091, 28 August 1981.

Writing in *The Art Of The Real* (1977) Eric Homburger argues that the term confessional poetry is “a massively unhelpful concept”.<sup>26</sup> He argues that the problem with the phrase is that while it identifies

the more sensational elements in the content of the poetry [it doesn't identify] the process of infusion by which the 'I' of the poem and the 'I' of the poet come together in a speech which is utterly natural, and yet heightened, alive, crackling with energy. The very casualness of the tone seems to reject artifice; the poems present themselves as things made, a poem, but also a *thing*, an addition to the sum of the world, with no existence independent of that world. There are no phantasms, myths, or idealized orders; simply, the poem itself, without uplift or symbolic reality, an object, a real object: the art of the real.<sup>27</sup>

It is not difficult to see the connections between the art of the real and Harrison's work, then. Furthermore, the idea that Harrison's style might be categorised, in *Eloquence* in particular, as confessional, that the poems are 'true', that the events described in them 'really happened' is not discouraged by Harrison. It is in his interests to do so as it helps him to convey a sense of lived experience and, more subtly, it implies that there is nothing remarkable about Harrison himself: the verse implicitly posits the idea of a scholarship-boy who just happened to be talented enough to be a poet. This is helpful, in so much that it works away against the idea of the poet as otherworldly, as a rarefied aesthete. Hence his utilisation of a voice which, to paraphrase W. D. Snodgrass, “you might hear in this world, not a voice meant to lift you out of this world”.<sup>28</sup> More importantly it helps to engage readers emotionally and encourages them to assent intellectually to the political import of a particular poem.

That Harrison is equipped to engage his readers on an emotional level is clear. He is, as Richard Hoggart described him, “in touch with his sentiment”<sup>29</sup> and a poet with a strong liking for Dickens: “I got a lot from Dickens. I liked what I think of as something very English about [him] his directness, his vulgarity, his willingness to be almost sentimental”.<sup>30</sup> This “willingness to be almost sentimental” amounts to a pronounced sense of mournfulness in many of the sonnets but for Neil Corcoran this “runs the severe risk of mawkishness”<sup>31</sup>. Yet

<sup>26</sup> Homburger. *Art Of The Real*, 135.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted by Homburger. *Art Of The Real*, 136.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Hoggart, introducing Harrison's reading at Ilkley Literature Festival.

<sup>30</sup> Hoggart. 'Conversation'. *Bloodaxe*, 42.

<sup>31</sup> Neil Corcoran. *Contemporary Poets*. Ed. Tracy Chevalier. 5th ed., with preface to the 1st ed. by C. Day Lewis, preface to the 5th ed. by Diane Wakoski. Chicago: London: St. James Press, 1991, 388. Hereafter referred to as *Contemporary Poets*.

this display of sentiment might not be as straightforward as it first seems, however, in that the emotional appeal that is undoubtedly present, and integral to Harrison's sense of shared intimacy, perhaps represents another challenge for the reader. It certainly offers a challenge to modern critics, as Rick Rylance has noted. He suggests that 'On Not Being Milton'

poses interesting questions for our modern sense of how we read as literary critics. It is technically accomplished and verbally dextrous, but its primary impact is emotional [ . . . ] it bids for sentiment through its virtuosity [and it] invites a response which professionally we are not accustomed to give. It is populist in cast, draws upon the sentimentality of popular entertainment, and makes us want to cry. This embarrasses the tough, conceptualised manner of much recent criticism, which has not wished to attend to such effects. Indeed it has been suspicious of frank appeals to emotion, preferring the complexities of disruption and difficulty.<sup>32</sup>

If one omits to understand the emotional appeal of his verse in terms of Harrison's agenda of achieving a public poetry then this appeal might indeed seem mawkish and sentimental. But this is to miss much of the point. Christopher Reid, for example, is surely correct in perceiving that the emotional outpourings that occur in some sonnets may be deliberate: "a sort of awkwardness of emotion to parallel the undoubted awkwardness of rhythm and metaphor in the sequence — both dedicated to revising the middle-class reader's notions of the poetically acceptable",<sup>33</sup> as Corcoran has pointed out. As Reid himself says: "The heart on Harrison's sleeve is worn - no bones about it - to disconcert."<sup>34</sup> We can, then, understand this deployment of the emotional appeal as a technique, indeed a political gesture, another instance of Harrison's attempts to redefine the 'poetic'. It is also a technique that pre-figures the appeal to the emotions that the film/poems make, of which more later.

The emotional appeal generated in many of the sonnets also functions as a kind of touchstone for the reader. By this I mean that it is interesting to speculate just how much credence would be given to Harrison's more impersonal, more overtly political poems if they did not have some kind of referential connection to the elegiac sonnets of *Eloquence*. It is Harrison's *double-vision*, his educated, outsider's view and his working class sensibility, that enables him to do this. Because of this he is able to combine theory and action, not just render

<sup>32</sup> Rylance. 'On Not Being Milton'. *Bloodaxe*, 116. See also Byrne's *H. v. & O*, pp. 94-95, for a brief but interesting discussion of the 'failure' of contemporary theory.

<sup>33</sup> Corcoran. *Contemporary Poets*, pp. 387-8.

<sup>34</sup> Christopher Reid. 'Articulating the awkwardness'. *The Times Literary Supplement*. No. 4111, 15 January 1982, 49.

abstract theory into a kind of theme-park real life. Harrison shows us that politics and life are inextricably linked — the personal *is* political and, moreover, the effect of the political *is* personal. And he does this by what we might term his construction of a poet's biography: in other words by his denomination of an autobiographical persona. That is not to say that Harrison is lying or being economical with the truth (these are actually the wrong criteria) — we cannot know and in any case that is not the point. It is more the case that if we view Harrison as a poet who is denominating an autobiographical persona (rather than seeing in the verse a reductionism to Harrison himself) then he becomes much more of a political poet than some might credit him as being. That is, he is not simply making political capital out of certain 'true' events — it is more the case that his preferred impulse is to present a politicised view of experience, either explicitly or implicitly. Moreover if we subscribe too fully to the autobiographical idea — i.e. isn't Harrison good because he can see the political implications of the matter of his own life — then a view is implicitly posited that the only valid political viewpoint is one based on real experience, rather than a particular view's competence. It follows, then, that though much of his verse might seem very autobiographical he is still exercising strategies, still selecting and ordering. In this respect the political precedes the autobiographical, not vice versa. The idea that Harrison's preferred impulse is to present a politicised view of experience is bolstered when we look at the evidence of Harrison's developing political consciousness.

That Harrison had a well developed awareness of political issues before he spelt it out in terms of a personal situation becomes quite clear if we consider certain of his prose writings, in particular those from around the time of the publication of the sonnet 'On Not Being Milton'.<sup>35</sup> The reason for selecting this date as a benchmark is partly that this poem opens the *Eloquence* sequence, thus standing as a kind of manifesto piece, and also that the sonnet successfully combines the integration of an autobiographical persona with the wider socio-economic sphere. Indeed 'On Not Being Milton' is a unique poem in that it blends the political dimension with the autobiographical in a way that Harrison had not previously achieved, or even attempted. Prior to this point the material had mainly been characterised by an inwardly-looking autobiographical style — often very personal, if not subjective, in nature.

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<sup>35</sup> See Kaiser. *Bibliography*, pp. 48-49. This tells us that 'On Not Being Milton' was first published in a 20 pence publication called *Southbank Poetry and Music*, in October 1971. This was presented by *The Poetry Society* and *The National Book League*. Also published in *The Times Literary Supplement*, No. 3673 (21 July 1972), 839

One such example is 'Ghosts: Some Words Before Breakfast' (*Selected Poems*, 72).<sup>36</sup> There is much autobiographical detailing in this poem and also many of the characteristics of much of the later verse. We note a characteristic openness and honesty, a willingness to explore pain and anguish, and we also might note certain technical elements such as the rhyming of "piss" and "Pride & Prejudice" (*Selected Poems*, 72), and the word play of "laid, laid, laid" (*Selected Poems*, 76) at the end. Many of these pre-'On Not Being Milton' poems have a first person 'I' voice narrator but they lack both the edge of social engagement, and the bite of an 'I' voice narrative intended to speak of the interconnections between the public and the private.

First let us consider a small but important detail from 1968. The Harrison bibliography tells us that in the Contents list of a P. E. N. anthology called *New Poems 1967*<sup>37</sup> Harrison is recorded as T. W. Harrison. This was published on 14th October 1968. On page 37, however, he is listed as Tony Harrison.<sup>38</sup> Presumably the editor attributed the 'T. W.' while Harrison's submitted copy bore the name of 'Tony'. Whatever the case we can at least deduce from this that Harrison seems to have abandoned the initials T. W, as described in 'Them & [uz]'<sup>39</sup> around this time in October 1968. The date bears a significance that prompts us to ask whether this act of self assertion, Harrison's personal revolution, was inspired at least in part by the traumatic events that had unfolded in Europe that summer. I am referring to Alexander Dubcek's political liberalisation policy during the Prague Spring of 1968. His introduction of far reaching reforms, including the abolition of censorship and increased freedom of speech, met with predictable Soviet hostility to what Dubcek had called 'Socialism with a Human Face'. This culminated with the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact forces in August 1968.

Prior to 1968 Harrison had also travelled extensively. He was in Nigeria from 1962-1966, Prague from 1966-1967, London and Newcastle from 1967-1968. In the period 1969-1971 his residence in Newcastle was interspersed by trips to Cuba, Brazil, Senegal and

<sup>36</sup> For a very interesting example of this apolitical, autobiographical mode see an early short story by Harrison called 'The Toothache', *Stand*, Vol 5, No. 2 (1961), pp. 41-45.

<sup>37</sup> This has a publication date of 14 October 1968.

<sup>38</sup> According to John R. Kaiser's *Tony Harrison: A Bibliography 1957-1987* Mansell, 1989, (hereafter referred to as *Bibliography*, 'On Not Being Milton' appeared in *TLS*, No. 3673, 21 July 1972.

<sup>39</sup> 'Them & [Uz]' was published in *Planet*, Nos. 24/25 (August 1974), 18-20. Interestingly the same issue also contains a poem called 'The School of Eloquence', the original title for 'Rhubarbarians'. According to Kaiser the poem appeared under its original name in a publication called *A Decade and Then Some*.

Gambia in 1969. A trip to Mozambique took place in 1971.<sup>40</sup> While we can not say which particular factor was most influential in developing Harrison's political awareness it is at least clear that by 1971 he had the intellectual apparatus in place to create political poetry. His developing ideas about the role of poetry, its public and political functions, were apparent in an early review in which Harrison defended Neruda against the charge that his poetry had been sullied by its political impulse. This is the reason, Harrison believes, why Neruda's *Canto General* is never well served by anthologists: "This is partly because the 'poetry' is felt to have been spoiled by the politics." Harrison then goes on to quote a certain Ben Belitt who had said that "Neruda's talent was 'diminished by causes, predilections, intrusions of history, injured by its own wilful insistence on allegiances which have little to do with the majesty and melancholy of its long contact with the Sphinx'."<sup>41</sup> Harrison's view of Bellit's assertion is interesting, showing as it does his awareness of the ills of colonialism and American imperialism, his awareness of the internationalism of politics: "In Latin America, on the contrary, they have everything to do with it, when 'the Sphinx' in all probability is the riddling voice of colonialism or the CIA".<sup>42</sup> The inference is clear: it is inevitable that poetry should absorb and reflect the conditions in which it is written, that it should be a media of protest, indeed of struggle.

Only weeks later, in an article entitled 'Beating the Retreat' (November 1970) we find more evidence of Harrison's inchoate poetics. With what seems to be a pre-echo of the property references in 'Them & [uz] I & II', Harrison begins a review of Clifford Dyment by writing

For some it is not enough that Britain is an island; it must also be a verdant piece of private, high-walled garden. The poetry of Clifford Dyment represents some thirty years of freehold withdrawal. It is a poetry of exclusion, of urban noise, as of definite articles if they don't fit the metre, and ultimately of almost all sense of life, now and in England.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> During the period leading up to the publication of 'On Not Being Milton' Harrison published *Earthworks* (Univ of Leeds School of English, 1964), *Aikin Mata* (OUP, 1967), *Newcastle is Peru* (Eagle Press, 1969), *The Loiners* (London Magazine Editions, 1970).

<sup>41</sup> Tony Harrison. 'New worlds For Old'. *London Magazine*, New Series, Vol. 10 No. 5, September 1970, pp. 82-83. Hereafter referred to as 'New Worlds For Old'.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>43</sup> Tony Harrison. 'Beating the Retreat'. *London Magazine*, New Series, Vol. 10 No. 8, November 1970, 91. Hereafter referred to as 'Beating the Retreat'.



It is clear that by this point Harrison conceives of language as an ideological battleground. Moreover we might recognise the emergence of some characteristic Harrison themes in that, in his criticisms of Dyment, Harrison is implicitly arguing for an inclusive poetry, advocating that urban noises (the demotic) are invited in to poetry's estate, and arguing on behalf of the language of those hitherto excluded. With ideas such as these its no coincidence that, in a later piece, Harrison was to describe his fellow city dwellers of Leeds as being an "internal proletariat".<sup>44</sup> In the same article Harrison tells of his moments of: "awakening solidarity with the oppressed of the Empire". He tells us that together these two groups are " 'the internal and external proletariat' in Harold Nicholson's stony phrase".<sup>45</sup> More tellingly he is arguing for a sense of life to be present in English poetry. He has had enough of "tired and literary" writers whose poems "strain in an all too literary manner".<sup>46</sup> In a review of Daniel Hoffman's *Broken Laws* (1971) he writes that the "general impression is one of a reach-me-down language pitched several notes higher than the actuality it purports to discuss."<sup>47</sup> The criticisms are clear in this example: "Hoffman writes in a borrowed idiom, not self-created, which has no relation to that which it claims to be concerned with". In a similar vein Harrison writes of the poetry of James Merrill and Adrienne Rich as being "culturally incestuous" because it is full of "expresso and ouzo, Kabuki, Verdi and Vienna, and Lehmann's Maschallin." Moreover this kind of poetry continues to be imported, despite there being a glut of this stuff on the home market, Harrison argues. No wonder, then, that in 1971, he was to urge: "Here on our *cap d'Asie*, faced with the word-hordes of poetry in English, we have to discover an *English* poetry".<sup>48</sup>

Perhaps the most significant piece of early prose writing by Harrison is 'All Out', a review of *The Penguin Book of Socialist Verse* (1970).<sup>49</sup> Given his, by now, well developed political antennae it is no wonder that Harrison's opening sentence notes an irony of that book's publication. With an observation that we can imagine Orwell making in a different context Harrison opines that "It is typical of English priorities that *The Penguin Book of*

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<sup>44</sup> Tony Harrison. 'Black and White and Red all Over: The Fiction of Empire'. *London Magazine*, New Series, Vol. 12 No. 3, August/September 1972, 91. Hereafter referred to as 'Black and White and Red all Over'.

<sup>45</sup> Harrison. 'Black and White and Red all Over'. 94.

<sup>46</sup> Tony Harrison. 'Wonderland'. *London Magazine*, New Series, Vol. 11 No. 1, April/May 1971, 168. Hereafter referred to as 'Wonderland'.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>49</sup> Tony Harrison. 'All Out'. *London Magazine*, New Series, Vol. 10 No. 12, March 1971, pp. 87-91. Hereafter referred to as 'All Out'.

*Socialist Verse* should appear only after the *Sick* and the *Animal*.” Moreover there is the sense of a very real anger on Harrison’s part in this review. It seems to be directed at the editor, Alan Bold, for having missed an opportunity to promote the cause of socialist poetry. The last sentence of Harrison’s review is as blunt as it is damning of Bold’s editorship. He writes: “He seems a competent guide neither to socialism nor to poetry”.<sup>50</sup> Harrison is particularly angry that Bold ignored 19-century broadsides and ballads, specifically those that came from industrial England, particularly the mining areas. The importance of the mining areas is clear, as Harrison points out, because “the mines are the classic battlefield between capital and labour in the nineteenth century”<sup>51</sup>. There is nothing in Bold’s anthology from this rich area asserts Harrison, and this is a major flaw, a fatal flaw, in an anthology that purports to be a collection of socialist verse: “The North of England with its vast seemingly indestructible, industrial detritus, is still one of the most gruesome monuments of capitalist greed in existence. A specifically *poetic* protest is galled into being by both the inarticulateness of the dispossessed and the fluent, religious mystification of a class who sought to reconcile them with a fatalistic sentiment to a nature of things laid down by God and/or Law”.<sup>52</sup> Here we have a very early articulated instance of Harrison’s intention to speak on behalf of the voiceless, of those denied expression either by subjugation or, in the example which follows, death. Harrison tells us of an appalling incident that occurred at Atkinson’s Cotton Mill in Colnebridge, near Huddersfield, on the night of 14 February 1818. It was here that a fire caused the deaths of seventeen girls whose ages varied between 9 and 18. They had been locked in while they worked. The horror of this is almost equalled by our revulsion at the inscription on their monument in Kirkheaton graveyard which reads:

‘Near this Place Lie what remains of the  
bodies of Seventeen Children: *A Striking  
and Awful instance of the Uncertainty of Life  
and the Vanity of human attainments.*’<sup>53</sup>

Harrison’s response to this is unequivocal and self-explanatory: “The fact that the exploited dead have no other voice than this makes the form of rebellion linguistic, and often that form of language which most draws attention to itself, poetry.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

Harrison goes on to cite more examples of Victorian sanctimonious hypocrisy. After an accident down a pit which killed 139 men and boys a letter from the Local Board to the bereaved concluded that ‘ . . . there was a feeling of thankfulness, when we learned that so many of them had in the last hour of life found succour in prayer to God. For them there was light in the Valley of the Shadow of Death.’<sup>55</sup> Nor was it simply the case that the authorities alone perpetrated this kind of “sanctimonious mystification”. Harrison tells us that it “unhappily finds its way into the Uncle Tom tone of some miners’ poetry”. Someone who lost a father and two brothers in that pit disaster “composed stanzas in which his love and grief find only the clichés approved by the *status quo*”.<sup>56</sup> These are the passages in question:

There’s blood on coal, ’tis often said  
And these men paid the price;  
They fell asleep in the Wheatley Bed  
To wake in paradise

. . . And with these simple words  
I have tried to convey  
What impressions were in my mind;  
‘God bless the miner’ is what I pray  
And ‘God bless all mankind’.

These excerpts suggest that Harrison’s political impulse preceded the autobiographical. Hence we can argue that the autobiographical strategy was relevant to that, and not the other way round. The excerpts also show Harrison as a fiercely committed political poet revealing specific political concerns — speaking for the voiceless, enacting linguistic retribution, a desire to achieve an English poetry. This is not to deny that Harrison had written autobiographical material prior to the *Eloquence* sequence but rather to argue that the sequence marks the point where he successfully writes as a political poet utilising an autobiographical mode (rather than the other way around). The importance of this is that it suggests that his verse implicitly (and explicitly) argues that the public and the private are not separate spheres but two points on the same continuum. This, then, is the basis of his quest for a public poetry and fundamental to this quest is Harrison’s politicised imagination.

It is clear that Harrison’s imagination could be described as politicised. Indeed, in the sense that he aspires to achieve a public poetry then this seems to be a fundamental

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 88. The accident was at Cooms Pit, Thornhill, near Dewsbury, 4 July 1893.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 88.

requirement, for reasons that I hope shall become clear. In essence Harrison needs to be political in everything, to be aware of contradictions, antagonisms and tensions, to see the political implications in language, relationships, work, life and death, etc., in short to be aware of the dialectal relationship between the word and the world. Another political poet, Sean O'Brien, has said:

. . . if the imagination has any function then it's ultimately a public one [. . .] As regards the relationship between poetry and politics, I think the relations between the two are as direct as between any other facts of life, which is to say that as far as I'm concerned there isn't anything that isn't political, so that any activity, from the simplest to the most elaborate, from the most obviously public to the most allegedly private, is at bottom political . . . The effort of the poem is to see the process as a whole, to see it entire; not to say 'There's politics and here is the private life', but to suggest that the two are inextricably bound up with each other, that they are really metaphors of each other.<sup>57</sup>

Ira Sadoff has commented that Harrison understands "the relationship between the personal and the social in part because [he is] brave — [he pays] attention — but also because [his] relationship to the social world is tactile and immediate. [He] can't escape to the suburbs or the university: the evidence of the effect of culture on the individual intrudes on [his] daily life."<sup>58</sup> That this is so is clear from an early stage in Harrison's work. In 'Durham', for example, Harrison writes of the relationship between the private and the public:

. . . You complain  
that the machinery of sudden death,  
Fascism, the hot bad breath  
of Powers down small countries' necks  
shouldn't interfere with sex.

They *are* sex, love, we must include  
all these in love's beatitude.  
Bad weather and the public mess  
drive us to private tenderness,  
though I wonder if together we,  
alone two hours, can ever be  
love's anti-bodies in the sick,  
sick body politic. (*Selected Poems*, 69)

<sup>57</sup> From an interview with O'Brien conducted by Andrew Mitchell. *Third Ear*, BBC Radio Three, 15th June 1992. Hereafter referred to as *Third Ear*. Quoted by Woodcock. 'Poet as Heretic'.

<sup>58</sup> Sadoff. 'Neo-Formalism'.

For both Harrison and O'Brien it seems there is no distinction between the public and the private. In O'Brien's case the critic Bruce Woodcock has argued that he conceives of the imagination "as interfused with a total process of life which is itself indiscriminately 'political' ".<sup>59</sup>

Hence O'Brien's poetry seeks to render "the concrete experiences which the imagination offers in such a way as to reveal that complex process at work, and hence display the interconnections between the seemingly different categories or areas of human experience [ . . . ] In O'Brien's view, it is the imagination which seizes on the complexity of that net because it renders experience in its own terms."<sup>60</sup> This is precisely what occurs in Harrison's work. It is the location of Harrison's politically charged sensibility. In *Poetry And The Common Life* (1974), M. L. Rosenthal argues that "Our minds are always in search of the inner depths of ourselves [ . . . ] Touching something [ . . . ] is a way of bringing it inside our bodies, and our minds. All experience is an invasion of ourselves."<sup>61</sup> Sometimes, as in cases of sexual gratification or drug use, we desire this, but usually it is an unconscious process: ". . . whatever enters is transformed by an inner process that assimilates it into our own natures." The consequence is that "we in turn project images into the outer world again that reflect both what we experienced originally and what we have made of it because of the pressure of our own memories and needs and personalities."<sup>62</sup> Rosenthal terms this process the "animating principle".<sup>63</sup> The connections between Rosenthal's theorising and O'Brien's position are clear. Moreover Rosenthal seems to have identified a phenomenon which is particularly relevant to Harrison. He argues that as a result of this process of animation: "we develop a curiously separate part of our inner selves that is able to "objectify" what we are doing - to see and meditate on the difference between absolute, undifferentiated reality and our humanised version of it".<sup>64</sup> Another political poet in which this animating principle was particularly well developed was the Russian poet Mayakovsky, suggests Rosenthal:

His very manner showed how this normal psychological process of conversion creates an independent consciousness within oneself, a consciousness standing in a curious relationship to the rest of one's nature that is simply a part of ordinary, unconscious reality [ . . . ] *The speaker in a poem often embodies this independent consciousness, especially when the poem is clearly rooted in*

<sup>59</sup> Woodcock. 'Poet as Heretic'.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> M. L. Rosenthal. *Poetry And The Common Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974, 68. Hereafter referred to as *Poetry And The Common Life*.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 71.

*its author's private memory and imagination. [my emphasis] Mayakovsky the living man could look upon his speaker as a character he had created: a presence within himself that was his inner consciousness.*<sup>65</sup>

In one poem, 'The Cloud in Trousers', he presents that newly created self:

I feel

my "I"  
is much too small for me.

Stubbornly a body pushes out of me.<sup>66</sup>

In a curious way this echoes the scene in 'v.' where the speaker tells us that the name that the skin sprayed was actually his own. Thus it represents a kind of birth (or recognition) of an alternative self. In Mayakovsky's case this was particularly pronounced, as Pasternak's account of hearing Mayakovsky reading aloud in an outdoor cafe suggests:

It was the tragedy *Vladimir Mayakovsky* which had just come out then [ . . . ] Here there was that profound animation, without which there is no originality, that infinity, which opens out from any one point of life in any direction, without which poetry is only a misunderstanding, something temporarily unexplained [ . . . ] And how simple all this was! The creation was called a tragedy. And that is what it ought to be called. The tragedy was called *Vladimir Mayakovsky*. The title contained the simple discovery of genius, that *a poet is not an author, but—the subject of a lyric, facing the world in the first person. The title was not the name of the composer but the surname of the composition.*" [My emphasis]<sup>67</sup>

I think that this helps to explain, in part, the autobiographical in Harrison's verse, why he often includes his name, for example. This occurs many times in poems like 'Them & [uz] I & II' (*Selected Poems*, 122-123), 'Next Door', (*Selected Poems*, 129) and 'Bye-Byes' (*Selected Poems*, 163). This is what Harrison means when he refers to the trap of being a poet, he is all too aware that the 'I' in the poems is not him but, rather, a manifestation of an alternative self.

Whatever the composition of the 'I' voice in his work it is clear that the autobiographical persona is integral to Harrison's public voice. That is not to imply that the poems are not 'true', rather that Harrison is drawing upon the autobiographical, the elements

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 69.

of his own life, in order to make a political point. The autobiographical persona, then, is crucial in terms of drawing the reader in, in terms of making him/her *believe* the words of the poem, and the autobiographical persona is often at its most apparently natural in the elegiac sonnets of *Eloquence*. This is why we get the carefully selected details in the poems, like the *Sporting Pink*, and *Kensitas* etc. The aim is to create a replica of reality.

Harrison himself offers a little encouragement for this approach. For example in the ironically titled 'Confessional Poetry', (a sonnet which is omitted from Rutter's selection), the voice in the poem ends by saying:

We *had* a bitter quarrel in our cups  
and there *were* words between us, yes,  
I'm guilty, and the way I make it up 's  
in poetry, and that much I confess. (*Selected Poems*, 128)

The way *I make it up*, writes Harrison, suggesting both atonement and an imaginative or, perhaps, fictional construct — he's making it up? Given Harrison's brilliance with puns this ambivalence can hardly be accidental. This aspect of the autobiographical element in Harrison's verse might remind one of Wordsworth's 'I wandered lonely as a cloud'. This is the poem in which he famously wandered around a bit, spying huge quantities of daffodils as he did so. Suitably inspired he returned home and wrote a poem in the first person singular which related the events. Or did he? Well, he wrote the poem but Dorothy Wordsworth's journal only reveals for certain that it was she who saw the daffodils, which leaves open the possibility that she either told William or he read about it later.<sup>68</sup> My point is that the authority apparently inherent in the 'I' voice is not always what it seems. Wordsworth's poem, for example, might very well be an instance of second-hand knowledge written up in the first-person singular. The irony of this is clear if we recall that the speaker in the poem tells us that the pleasure the daffodils afford is not restricted to the specific moment of viewing them:

In vacant or in pensive mood,  
They flash upon that inward eye  
Which is the bliss of solitude;  
And then my heart with pleasure fills

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<sup>68</sup> See the *Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt. Vol. 1. London: Macmillan, 1952, 131. Dorothy's journal entry is dated 15th April 1802; the poem was probably composed between March 1804 and 1807 - but Dorothy's entry has 'we' viewing the daffodils - so it may have been William or he might have got the idea from reading the journal entry later.

And dances with the daffodils.<sup>69</sup>

The poem, then, has as its main point the fact that a pleasurable experience can be recollected afterwards, tranquilly no doubt, in order to experience the pleasure once more, yet the person who wrote this might never have experienced the pleasure at first hand! Though Harrison's situation is different in that generally we can assume he did experience the situations he writes about, the example offered by Wordsworth's poem might still put us on our guard: despite the sense of authority that the first-person singular mode seemingly lends to a poem, we should remember that Harrison is dramatising certain elements of his personal situation — the poetic voice in the poems is only one aspect of his imagination, it is not necessarily Harrison himself. Harrison himself has alluded to this, albeit ambivalently. In one interview he has spoken of how "most of the autobiographical poems of *Continuous* were written in New York,"<sup>70</sup> that is, at a distance, while at other times he has talked about the sonnets as being "small-time dramatisations of 'silence, exile and cunning'."<sup>71</sup> We might note the allusion here to something that Stephen Dedalus says in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*,<sup>72</sup> a book deeply concerned with strategies for lone artists, as is Harrison's sonnet sequence. The significance of this allusion is that Harrison seems to be borrowing from a previous literary model as well as, if not instead of, personal experience.

What is clear is that Harrison has manipulated his past, he has 'shaped' his memories of his father, as he puts it in 'The Icing Hand'.<sup>73</sup> It is this father-figure's hand "gritty with sandgrains" that "guides/my pen when I try shaping memories of him" (*Gaze*, 27). It is a pun that ranks with 'making it up', which begs the question of what is an autobiography anyway? It is no more the 'truth' about a life than a biography, just another version. As Balzac observed: "The great events of my life are my works."<sup>74</sup> This shows how difficult it is to extricate the literary artist from the text, the human being from the writer, and the life and times from the person: "With the literary artist it is not possible to detect in the life itself a

<sup>69</sup> William Wordsworth. 'I wondered lonely as a cloud'. *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth*. Cambridge Edition, revised and with a new introduction by Paul; D. Sheats. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982, 311.

<sup>70</sup> Haffenden. 'Interview'. *Bloodaxe*, 229.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

<sup>72</sup> Joyce. *A Portrait*, 251.

<sup>73</sup> Tony Harrison. *The Gaze of the Gorgon*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1992, 27. Hereafter referred to as *Gaze*.

<sup>74</sup> Honoré de Balzac. Quoted by Georges Gusdorf in Gusdorf. 'Conditions and Limits of Autobiography'. *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Ed. James Olney. Princeton N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1980, 47. Hereafter referred to as *Autobiography*.



kind of truth that exists before the work and comes to be reflected in it — directly in autobiography, more or less indirectly in novel or poem. The two simply are not independent”.<sup>75</sup>

An interesting development in literary studies has been the upsurge in critical and theoretical considerations of autobiography.<sup>76</sup> For example James Olney has written extensively on this matter. Though a theorist mainly concerned primarily with prose works, certain ideas still apply to poetry. Olney reminds us that autobiography is often “the least ‘literary’ kind of writing, practised by people who would neither imagine nor admit that they were ‘writers’ ”.<sup>77</sup> This is a wonderful cover for Harrison, as the opening words of ‘Self Justification’ suggest: “Me a poet!” (*Selected Poems*, 172) he exclaims. Clearly he wants to convey surprise, amazement. This essentially naive aura is necessary to retain some kind of connection with the class of origin by signposting the poet’s own surprise, i.e. he still regards himself as an ‘ordinary bloke’. It reminds us of that consistent thread that runs through Harrison’s work, a thread which again connects him to Wordsworth’s highly politicised ‘Preface’. In this Wordsworth says that “the Poet is chiefly distinguished from other men by a greater promptness to think and feel without immediate external excitement” but essentially, besides this and numerous other qualities that he lists, Wordsworth concludes that in his evaluation of a Poet’s composition “is implied nothing differing in kind from other men, but only in degree.”<sup>78</sup> This sounds like Harrison talking and, indeed, his use of an autobiographical persona is crucial in maintaining the idea of the poet as worker, not as a rarefied aesthete or even in extreme cases as a kind of divinity.<sup>79</sup> Hence Harrison’s artistic strategy of creating a believable character in the ‘scholarship-boy’: he keeps the emphasis firmly in the socio-political realm. The importance of this is that the quasi-autobiographical sonnet form places the poet squarely within the subject of which he is writing about — he is still there in what we can call the subject-class: the class that is the subject of the particular poem and the subjected working-class. Hence Harrison, despite having obviously moved out of the working-class, can write himself firmly back into it when he chooses, because of the denomination of an

<sup>75</sup> Gusdorf. ‘Conditions and Limits of Autobiography’. James Olney ed. *Autobiography*, 47.

<sup>76</sup> See for example James Olney, ed., *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Princeton N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1980. Roy Pascal, *The Autobiographical Novel and the Autobiography*. Essays in *New Literary History*, 1960.

<sup>77</sup> James Olney, ed., *Autobiography*, 4.

<sup>78</sup> William Wordsworth. ‘Preface’. *Lyrical Ballads*, 261.

<sup>79</sup> This is ironic as both the autobiographical persona and the rarefied divinity derive from Romantic poetic practice and theory. (I’m thinking of the Blakean bard; Shelley’s ‘unacknowledged legislator’, etc.)

autobiographical persona. In this respect the persona of the post scholarship-boy cum poet can be read as a psychological lifeline, a way of hanging on.

As was noted at the opening of this chapter, Harrison speaks with varying voices in his *School of Eloquence* sonnet sequence, something to be expected from a storyteller, perhaps, given that poetry stems from an oral tradition. In the case of the *Eloquence* sequence we find voices in the third-person singular, the first-person plural and first-person singular voice. There are, of course, many variants within these rough categorisations. The third person singular, for example, is used in a narrowly specific way in 'The Rhubarbarians I'. It partly takes the form of a specifically Yorkshire voice as the line "What t'mob said" and the following extract make clear:

It wasn't poetry though. Nay, wiseowl Leeds  
*pro rege et lege* schools, nobody needs  
 your drills and chanting to parrot right  
 the *tusky-tusky* of the pikes that night. (*Selected Poems*, 113)

The first thing we might notice is the similarity between this voice and the first-person singular voice that we find in the majority of the sonnets in *Eloquence*. For example we find in a bare three and a half lines a collage, the converging idioms of a Latin phrase, the old Northern word pike, the slang of "to parrot" and the Yorkshire idiom of "Nay". This is all of a piece with Harrison's poetics, as one would expect, but while not forgetting Harrison's aim of reinstating a demotic, northern voice, and his strategy of making poetry out of material traditionally considered to be unfit for poetical expression, in this sonnet the voice's purpose is to sound almost like a contemporaneous account, as if the speaker was actually present at the historical events described in the poem. The voice is designed to lend a validity, almost an objectivity, to the situation that makes it easier for the reader to yield what Abrams has termed "that unstinting imaginative consent without which a poem or novel would remain no more than an elaborate verbal game."<sup>80</sup> In other words it draws us in, and we welcome this. This poem is also interesting because of what amounts to almost a journalistic, a documentary air. In 'Rhubarbarians I', for example, Harrison becomes a reporter, in a sense, telling us verbatim what "Horsfall of Ottiwells"<sup>81</sup> said, which was that he:

<sup>80</sup> M. H. Abrams, ed.. *Glossary*, 137.

<sup>81</sup> See E.P.Thompson. *The Making of the English Working Class*. Pelican, 1970, 612.

'd've liked to (exact words recorded) *ride*  
*up to my saddle-girths in Luddite blood.* (*Selected Poems*, 113)

This is an important example not just because Harrison is creating a real sense of atmosphere in these lines but because he is also making a point about the politics of language in that it is the ruling class's words that are typically preserved in history books, not the workers. Moreover, with this in mind, Harrison seems to be insisting that working-class history is a fit subject for study indeed, for poetry, by drawing attention to the connections between personal history and history in a wider sense, *à la* E. P. Thompson.

At other times Harrison uses a third-person voice to present us with a situation which might appear at first glance to be autobiographical though isn't. One such example is the sonnet 'Cremation' (*Selected Poems*, 125). It is no accident that this ends Part 1 of *Eloquence* as its tone helps to prepare us for the intimacies of Part 2, and the introduction of the father-figure and other characters. 'Cremation' is concerned with a mining couple but because of the poem's setting of the fireside scene and the atmosphere created around the ageing, loving couple, it is evident how easy it is to assume it to be about Harrison's own parents, at least on a first reading. Another example of the opportunity for a case of mistaken identity is found in the situation of the working-class scholarship-boy in 'Me Tarzan'. The use of the third person is found in lines like "It's only his jaw muscles that he's tensed" (*Selected Poems*, 116). This example is interesting for despite a tendency to glibly categorise Harrison as an autobiographical poet, in this instance he seems to have had Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* in his mind. This is something of what Hoggart wrote of the scholarship-boy: "He is likely to be separated from the boys' groups outside the home, is no longer a member of the gang which clusters around lamp-posts in the evenings; there is homework to be done".<sup>82</sup> In Harrison's sonnet he writes:

Outside the whistled gang-call, Twelfth Street Rag,  
 then a Tarzan yodel for the kid who's bored,  
 whose hand's on his liana . . . no, back  
 to Labienus and his flaming sword. (*Selected Poems*, 116)

<sup>82</sup> Harrison has also spoken about these experiences as being very like his own, as Brent Garner has pointed out in Brent Garner. 'Tony Harrison: Scholarship Boy', *Transactions of the Yorkshire Dialect Society*. Ed. Ken Smith.. LXXXVI Vol. XVI, 1986.

To suggest an antecedent is not to suggest that Harrison didn't identify closely with the experience described in the sonnet but rather that in this case (and presumably many more instances) it was his reading that provided the impulse, confirmatory or otherwise. It seems that it took something like the influence of Hoggart in order for Harrison to realise that his experiences could be made the stuff of literature. In an oft-cited interview of Harrison by Hoggart, he talks of how he had used to think that his life couldn't be written about: "I always had that sense that saying '*rhubarb*' was what my life was about, whereas the central literary life was somewhere else."<sup>83</sup> He continues by talking about how he realised that there was more than one reality, not just the one offered by his grammar school. Speaking of his awareness that his home life, his family life and the city life of Leeds were as real as anything else he continues: "Once you take that step and decide that that reality is the stuff of literature, there's no stopping you. Everything then becomes usable, everything becomes describable and the stuff of which literature could be made".<sup>84</sup> Harrison has alluded to Hoggart's influence, (not least by making him one of the dedicatees of 'Them & [uz]'), by writing in an essay of how he grew up in Hoggarty, Leeds.<sup>85</sup> It is interesting, then, that Douglas Dunn reads the character in 'Me Tarzan' as 'being' Harrison<sup>86</sup>, but we might read the third-person voice as indicating that the sonnet is not *about* Harrison specifically, rather that the sonnet is about the generalised situation of a scholarship-boy. The use of the third person is because Harrison is speaking through, or talking about, a created character. My point is simply to show how even experienced critics can be lulled by the deceptive openness of the poetic voice — Dunn, and many others, read the sonnet as being about Harrison because Harrison wants them to.

The first-person voice is the one that is, perhaps, of more interest for us. One example of this voice would be 'On Not Being Milton', the poem that opens the *Eloquence* sequence. In this poem there are no autobiographical details as such (save a reference to Leeds, the city of Harrison's birth) but we still make assumptions about the voice. We still associate it with the autobiographical persona because it is concerned with writing, concerned with making connections between political and linguistic oppression, because of its place within the sequence and, if we're honest, because hindsight allows us to do this. In the case of this poem

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<sup>83</sup> Hoggart. 'Conversation'. *Bloodaxe*, 39. Here Harrison explains the reference to '*rhubarb*' saying that his father had been taught to say it when he was in a school play. (It is a theatrical device designed to achieve indescribable crowd noises.)

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 39-41.

<sup>85</sup> Harrison. 'Inkwell'. *Bloodaxe*, pp. 32-35.

<sup>86</sup> Douglas Dunn. 'Formal Strategies in Tony Harrison's Poetry'. *Bloodaxe*, 131.

the use of the first person pronoun has the effect of creating a conspiratorial air between the voice and the reader, we feel privileged to be privy to the private thoughts of whoever it is talking to us. This is another example of how Harrison strives for inclusiveness, rather than exclusiveness. This feeling of solidarity is amplified by the switch to the first-person plural of the last stanza when we learn that “In the silence round all poetry *we* quote . . .” (*Selected Poems*, 112 my emphasis). The importance of an early example like this is that it marks a pursuit of a style that will eventually lead to the speaking voice that we hear in Harrison’s film/poems. It is a style that is dependent not just on a poem’s subject matter but on the dynamic generated by the alliance of the subject matter and a particular form of address.

• Harrison has developed his personae, in particular those of the scholarship-boy and that linked (yet older) persona of the poet in order to maximise the political potential of a particular situation, whether based on personal experience or not. One unremarked benefit is that this has created an astonishing degree of freedom for Harrison as a writer, something that is clear in the *Eloquence* sequence. As I have commented above, in its early stages the sequence was more manifestly political than it now appears. The freedom engendered by Harrison’s technique has arguably led to a watering down of this overtly political strain by his inclusion of poems such as ‘Timer’ (*Selected Poems*, 167), of which he has said “there is just deep feeling”.<sup>87</sup> I take this to mean that there is an absence of overtly political engagement. It is understandable that a poet who often draws so heavily on the matter of his personal life should at times write something without explicit reference to a wider socio-political dimension. One potential problem with this is that when this is not effective we get poems that are at best self-indulgent and at worst, bad. There are no such grounds for accusing ‘Timer’ of these charges, the poem won the National Poetry Competition in 1980, but Harrison’s explanation of its inclusion in the sequence is less praiseworthy. He describes poems such as ‘Timer’ as “poems which are unqualified except for the fact that they are in the sequence . . . and therefore they are qualified.”<sup>88</sup> This does seem a little disingenuous on Harrison’s part — ‘Timer’ is in the sequence and thus qualified: the reason that it is qualified is because it is in a sequence called *The School of Eloquence*. This tautological explanation amounts to Harrison having his cake and eating it: clearly he realises that writing about his parents is very rewarding (in terms of the parents being a rich source of material, as we also

<sup>87</sup> Haffenden. ‘Interview’. *Bloodaxe*, 233.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

noted in 'Clearing II' (*Selected Poems*, 145), yet he is aware of the dangers inherent in not living up to the kind of criteria I have described, i.e. demonstrating the movement from the personal to the political. Yet a poem like 'Timer' casts an interesting light on the idea of the personal and the political because, within the structural context of *Eloquence*, for example, such a poem seems to be linked to the idea of a construction of a poet's biography. We might describe the effect as that of *personalising* the political in that the poet persona is fleshed out by the inclusion of such a poem and thus given a more recognisable sense of character.

The main character in the *Eloquence* poems, the dominant 'I' voice, is usually that of the scholarship-boy persona. It is a persona that seems to have aged along with Harrison. This might strike one as glaringly obvious and I realise I am exposing myself to charges of being precious and disingenuous but it is simply too glib a solution to say that Harrison is 'being himself', or 'just writing about what he knows'. Because of his designation of an autobiographical persona (which is not completely divorced from his possible recognition that this persona forms a very real part of his self) Harrison can write, for example, in the voice of a poet outlining a poetic manifesto, as he does in 'On Not Being Milton'. This voice, the poetic persona, is that of a post scholarship-boy. By this I mean that the voice is speaking in the manner of someone who has been a scholarship-boy but, at the point of writing, is one no longer. This is clear in a pair of poems like 'Wordlists I & II' (*Selected Poems*, 117-118). In these the speaker is talking of past events. This is evident in the use of the past tense and also conveyed by the speaker's question of whether "The *Funk & Wagnall's*" (*Selected Poems*, 118), an encyclopaedia, still survives? By the use of an apparently simple phrase the speaker shows the chronological gulf between the events he describes and himself (as manifested in the poet persona), years later, whilst still adding to the 'objective' quality of the poem. At other times the voice is that of the scholarship-boy himself, speaking in what we might term his present, though the writing has obviously come later, in a chronological sense. We find this in 'Book Ends II' where we read about the speaker's recollection of the envelope on which the father-figure had "been scrawling" in a style characterised as "mis-spelt, mawkish, stylistically appalling" (*Selected Poems*, 127). This style, however, is more effective in conveying the father-figure's emotions than is the speaker's own. He is ruefully forced to conclude that he "can't squeeze more love into their stone". It is a testament to the success of Harrison's strategy that we might fail to be struck by the irony of reading about a person's amateurish attempts to compose an elegy in a well-crafted poem such as this. We see this in the language

of line 3, for example, where the rhythm is fractured by the (metrically) incompetent attempts of the widowed husband to articulate his emotions in contrast to the metrically polished last line of the scholarship-boy who is, ironically, unable to best his father at providing an epitaph. This cleverly set up contrast between the irregularities of speech, which actually do their job properly, and the polished line which fails, is simply yet eloquently made: an emotional response might be more valid than the technically correct one.

A similar present-tense account is given in 'Study' in which we read of the voice's unsuccessful attempt to whistle in a room in which his auntie had just died. In a poem like 'The Morning After' (*Selected Poems*, 157) the voice is that of a post-scholarship-boy talking about an experience that the scholarship-boy of 'Study' and 'Book Ends II' had. This persona is often at one with the persona of poet that we find in many of the poems. This is occasionally a complex situation as sometimes the post scholarship-boy persona and the poet-persona are one and the same, but occasionally it is possible to read them as, somehow, separate. This is, perhaps, the case in the 'Art & Extinction' section of *Eloquence*. This collection of sonnets offer a more neutral poetic voice, particularly in the case of poems like 'John James Audubon' (1785-1851) (*Selected Poems*, 182) and 'Weeki Wachee' (*Selected Poems*, 183). The voice in these poems is that of a musing poet. We can still feel a certain controlling presence in that we note the concern for words and language, (admittedly more dense than in examples such as 'A Good Read') but it is clearly not the same persona that we hear in many of the other poems. All we can say with certainty is that all the personae are elements of the same poetic imagination. In terms of the narrative in the *School of Eloquence* it is clear that the scholarship-boy grows up and becomes a man in the process. It is in the relationship between the grown man and his parents that we find the poet persona:

I walk along the street where he dropped dead,  
my hair cut his length now, although I'm called  
*poet* in my passport. (*Selected Poems*, 139)

In another sonnet there is a typically self-conscious reference to poetry writing itself:

These poems about you, dad, should make good reads  
for the bus you took from Beeston into town  
for people with no time like you in Leeds -

once I'm writing I can't put you down! (*Selected Poems*, 141)

In one sonnet the poet is looking back to the blitz and to the times spent in an air-raid shelter when the memory causes him to realise that the lines he writes are a way of keeping in touch, of communicating with those who are now dead:

How close we were with death's wings overhead!

How close we were not several hours ago.

These lines to hold the still too living dead -

my Redhill container, my long-handled hoe. (*Selected Poems*, 160)

The relationship between a poet, the writer of a poem, and a persona in a poem is variable, as Harrison's verse testifies. There is, perhaps, a sliding scale of correspondence between an author and a persona.<sup>89</sup> Sometimes the boundaries between the two are obscured to the point where we might wonder whether they exist at all. This is the case in one poem where the persona is that of a published poet. Speaking of his mother's cremation, in an intertextual reference to a Harrison publication the speaker says: "I thought you could hold my *Loiners*, and both burn" (*Selected Poems*, 166). Consider also 'Bye-Byes' (*Selected Poems*, 163) where a voice that is presumably the persona of the mother-figure says "Say bye-bye, our Tony, that's enough!", or 'v.' with its profusion of autobiographical references. Clearly this autobiographical peppering is concomitant with Harrison's strategy of wishing to appear objective and therefore authentic, but that is not to say the emotion generated by poems like this is false or insincere but rather that the autobiographical references are fulfilling a poetical function. The function is that of helping to create Harrison's own particular version of reality, an aim helped by his narratives being leavened with the autobiographical detailing I mentioned earlier. In addition there are the more personal details that refer to family and relatives. In 'Study' (*Selected Poems*, 115) there is mention of an "Uncle Joe" and the voice refers to "Mi aunty"; in 'Wordlists II' (*Selected Poems*, 118) there is mention of "mi mam's"; in 'Confessional Poetry' (*Selected Poems*, 128) mention is made of a father, of arguments, even of another published Harrison poem; in 'Next Door' I, II, III, and IV (*Selected Poems*, 129-132) there is mention of 'Tony Harrison', dates, and terms indicating a familial relationship, etc.

<sup>89</sup> Peter Verdonk, ed.. *Twentieth-Century Poetry: From Text to Context*. London: New York: Routledge, 1993, 116.



Harrison's generation of the autobiographical effect in his verse is achieved almost seamlessly. Any possible grounds for highlighting discrepancies are often purely speculative. One such example occurs in 'Turns'. This one is very interesting as the 'I' in the poem tells us that:

Dad was sprawled beside the post-box (still VR),  
 his cap turned inside up beside his head,  
 smudged H A H in purple Indian ink  
 and Brylcreem slicks displayed so folk might think  
 he wanted charity for dropping dead. (*Selected Poems*, 149)

As we read these lines we do not even think to consider whether the speaker saw the body of the father-figure on the pavement. We are invited to assume that the speaker did in fact witness the corpse himself though this is not a claim that the speaker makes. If we were to consider the poem's speaker as being Harrison then we have to ask whether Harrison was in Leeds, let alone accompanying his father to the post-office. It is interesting that in the very next poem in the sequence, 'Punchline' (*Selected Poems*, 150), the voice tells us that he missed the father-figure's cremation:

The day of your cremation which I missed  
 I saw an old man strum a uke he'll never play,  
 cap spattered with tossed dimes. I made a fist  
 round my small change, your son, and looked away. (*Selected Poems*, 150)

The reference to "dimes" suggests that the setting of the poem is America — we are left with the feeling that it is unlikely that Harrison was present at the death and yet did not wait around for the funeral. One possibility is that the speaker in 'Turns' is an invented perspective or persona who did witness the death. More likely is it that the speaker of 'Turns' never witnessed the event that the poem describes. If this is indeed the case then clearly Harrison is using a little poetic licence — the poem then becomes a very useful example of how Harrison fuses the autobiographical with the art — of how he takes a real event, i.e. his father's very public death, and then tweaks certain details in order to give the whole situation a resonance it might otherwise not have had. It also serves as an example of how in his more successful poems Harrison brings a poem to a political point. In this case he starts with something personal, some autobiographical event perhaps, which then evolves into a wider context. In this respect we might remember Goethe's claim that: "Every healthy effort [. . .] is directed

from the inward to the outward world.”<sup>90</sup> The job that Harrison undertakes in this poem, the function that his verse provides is that of drawing out meaning, of making connections for the reader, of making the poem enact the politics. It is a process best explained by saying that the scene in the poem is Harrison’s painting of a particular incident, his interpretation: that is the essence of his art, in one sense, it is what he does best. It is, for example, his task as a poet to offer an alternative meaning for the upturned cap that lies haphazardly next to the old man’s corpse.<sup>91</sup> Though I have already mentioned ‘Turns’ in another context, it is worth looking at the end of the poem from a slightly different angle. It is not just that ‘Turns’ conveys the idea of guilt at complicity in the literary process — on a deeper level the poem enacts what it is saying. The poem continues:

He never begged. For nowt! Death’s reticence  
crowns his life’s . . .     (*Selected Poems*, 149)

By seizing upon the cap and then introducing the idea of a busker Harrison has changed the note of the poem — a simple, natural occurrence has become a tragedy — the death has been put into perspective by a reference to a life of subjection. Then the poem takes a new turn, a turn which reveals a deeper level of meaning and thus the real point, indeed the essential political point which is the basis of the poem, becomes apparent. It is an attack on the poet himself. The poem continues:

. . . and *me*, I’m opening my trap  
to busk the class that broke him for the pence  
that splash like brackish tears into our cap. (*Selected Poems*, 149)

The final twist of the poem has served to turn it against the poet in order to make the political point regarding his complicity in the literary process. Besides the pun on “trap” we also see that the voice’s attack on itself is embodied in the two lines of perfect iambic pentameter that close the poem, and the highly poetical effect of the alliteration and chiming half-rhymes of “busk the class . . . splash like brack(ish)”, etc. Moreover another sense of ‘turn’ is suggested as a result of the speaker’s self-contempt. The suggestion is that his hope that he is still of the working-class is just another ‘turn’, or act, in other words a pretence. In this example we see

<sup>90</sup> Wayne. C. Booth. *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 67.

<sup>91</sup> It is interesting how potent a symbol the cap is for Harrison. Besides ‘Turns’ it turns up again in ‘An Old Score’ (SP, 139) and ‘Flood’ (SP, p135). This might suggest that the ‘poet’ tends to have a prominence over the ‘grieving son’.

the result of the politicised imagination: the autobiographical element is fashioned in such a way as to produce political art.

There is other evidence that argues against the idea of Harrison being read, in the main, as an autobiographical poet, in the sense that I am using the term. There are in fact minor yet important contradictions that suggest the extent of his ordering and selecting of material. My position is not that Harrison's verse does not invite an autobiographical reading but that to concentrate on this approach is to ignore much of the political import of his work. One example of this is 'Continuous' (*Selected Poems*, 143). This is written in the persona of the grown man, the post scholarship-boy persona which we might also consider as the poet persona. The speaker is recalling the memory of a trip to the cinema to see Jimmy Cagney in *White Heat* (1949).<sup>92</sup> The reason that this poem is significant is that it has a date: "He'd be my own age now in '49!" writes Harrison. Dates suggest certainty, fact and objectivity. This poem is another that invites an autobiographical reading, a reading which suggests that the father referred to in the poem is Harrison's own. We learn from the poet persona that he senses "... my father's hands cupped round" (*Selected Poems*, 143) his ice cream treat. Tony Harrison's father, Harry Ashton Harrison, was born in 1903 so if we were attempting to argue that the sonnets were strictly autobiographical we would be faced with a problem, as a closer look at the arithmetic reveals. If the poem's reference is to Harrison's 'real' father then in 1949 Harrison's father would have been approximately 46 years old. Thus the voice suggests that it is the voice of someone who is 46. The arithmetic seems to suggest that if the sonnet was written by someone who was 46 then Harrison must have written it sometime in 1983, given that he was born in 1937 — the problem is that 'Continuous' was first published in *The Times Literary Supplement* on December 12, 1980. This is a simple example of how Harrison manipulates autobiographical detail to effect a certain tone, perhaps a certain rhyme, in this case the rhyme afforded by "49/mine" of lines 5 and 7. A similar manipulation happens in 'v.'. The poem tells us its setting: "How many British graveyards now this May" (*Selected Poems*, 238). From the evidence of the poem we can assume that the setting is May 1984. Two of the opposing societal groups are "personified in 1984/by Coal Board MacGregor and the NUM" (*Selected Poems*, 238). The setting of May 1984 is bolstered by the stanza in which Harrison writes:

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<sup>92</sup> There is an irony regarding *White Heat* that I assume Harrison is aware of. This is the fact that the character played by Cagney is a psychotic with a mother-fixation! Shortly before his death on top of some kind of factory tower the character shouts out something like 'Made it ma! I'm on top of the world'.

When I first came here 40 years ago  
 with my dad to 'see my grandma' I was 7.  
 I helped dad with the flowers. He let me know  
 she'd gone to join my grandad up in Heaven. (*Selected Poems*, 238)

These figures, these objective facts, seem to fit. Forty years earlier would have been 1944. In May 1944 Harrison would have been seven years old. Later in the poem, however, the voice says :

I tell myself I've got, say, 30 years.  
 At 75 this place will suit me fine. (*Selected Poems*, 245)

The inference is that the speaker is 45 years old. In the case of Harrison he became 45 at the end of April 1982 (born 30/4/37). Clearly Harrison has settled on the line that he has because it effects a meditative air, a sense of being natural and unforced. It also serves to show that it is quite pointless trying to tie the poems down to absolute autobiographical parallels, as the critic John Lucas has suggested

Harrison's parents are 'emblems' in the poet's dramatic presentation of class and underprivilege. I have no more means of knowing whether the father of his great sonnet sequence is 'really' Harrison senior than I can tell whether Walter Morel is 'really' D.H. Lawrence's father. I don't doubt that there are connections between the two, but as Harrison is an immensely gifted playwright it probably makes the best sense to see in the tensions, connections and disconnections, between father and son a working through of *typical* issues. As such, the sequence will survive the local occasion of its writing and remain a definite account of the struggle to articulate the rottenness of the most class-conscious nation in the world<sup>93</sup>

Harrison's manipulations seem to act against a too easy acceptance of his verse as being in the confessional mode. Moreover they occur relatively frequently in his work, generally taking two forms. The rarest of these is the kind that might be considered at worst as a mistake and at best an inconsistency, rather than a conscious exercise of political license. One such example occurs when Harrison seems to describe the same room in different ways. In the poem 'Clearing I' the voice says:

A stammerer died here and I believe  
 this front room with such ghosts taught me my trade (*Selected Poems*, 144)

<sup>93</sup> John Lucas. 'Speaking for England?'. *Bloodaxe*, 360.

But, as Luke Spencer has also pointed out,<sup>94</sup> there seems to be quite a discrepancy between the affirmation of this reference and the aura of negativity, gloom and silences associated with what we can take to be the same front room in 'Study' in which the speaker tells us "I try to whistle in it but I can't" (*Selected Poems*, 115). Whereas the family ghosts in 'Clearing I' proved to be an inspiration, no such comfort is available in 'Study'. The voice has to look within: "My mind moves upon silence and *Aeneid* VI." Whether this is a mistake, a slipping of the mask, a different mood or a conscious disregard of one of the sequence's narrative strands, we cannot really say, but examples of this type are rare — Harrison is too much in control to do this too often. This alone might make us wary of blithely accepting the notion of Harrison as an autobiographical poet: the control that is fundamental to the art belies this. More typical are the kind of manipulations that we find in 'Pain-Killers', for example. This is a poem in which the post scholarship-boy cum poet-persona speaks. The voice tells us of how he is haunted by reminders of his father by old men whose queuing holds him up in shops:

I curse,  
 but silently, secreting pain, at this delay,  
 the acid in my gut caused by dad's ghost -  
 I've got aerogrammes to buy. My love's away!  
 And the proofs of *Pain-Killers* to post! (*Selected Poems*, 169)

The last line shows Harrison's wonderfully assured touch. It cleverly reveals that he had already decided when he wrote the poem that he was going to be held up by old men who would remind him of his father! He obviously is not referring to a 'real' incident recollected in some kind of tranquillity — the mention of the proofs of the poem tells us this. It is tempting to see this reference as an example of a certain post-modern self-consciousness and self-reflexiveness. Whatever the merits of this, it does suggest the self-consciously literaryness and playfulness of Harrison's work. It serves as a further reminder that it is not transparently authentic or autobiographical in origins and effects. This 'playfulness', this kind of premeditated spontaneity, occurs often in Harrison's verse in *Eloquence* and elsewhere outside the *Eloquence* sequence. In 'A Kumquat for John Keats' (1981), for example, Harrison writes:

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<sup>94</sup> Spencer. *Poetry of TH*. n 17, 142.

Now were you twenty five or six years old  
 when that fevered brow at last grew cold?  
 I've got no books to hand to check the dates. (*Selected Poems*, 192)

What the manipulations reveal is that Harrison is playing around in the margins, in the gap between himself as a writer writing the poem and the 'I' that is in the poem. Harrison the writer could have checked the dates — it is entirely probable that he knew the answer to the question anyway. He has instead chosen to imbue the lines with a feeling of informality, of spontaneity, easiness, of normality. This is because Harrison wants the voice's tone to sound human and fallible, not omnipotent. The effect is to demystify, to democratise, to show the poet as simply a man who varies only in degree from other men and equally importantly, one effect is that of reminding us that the poems are written, they do not simply materialise while, paradoxically, another effect is that of privileging the sense of spoken speech. In the example from 'A Kumquat for John Keats' the idea of books (written speech) is, ironically, implicitly downgraded. The speaker's:

grudging but glad spirit celebrates  
 that all I've got to hand 's the kumquats, John (*Selected Poems*, 194)

The speaker has no book, not even a pen to write the poem with, only some kumquats. We are presented with an attractively simple vision which brilliantly masks the irony of us reading such a poem in a book!

Another example is that found in 'The Red Lights of Plenty' (*Selected Poems*, 203). The poem tells us about the Population Clock in Washington DC. This is a display that shows the world's population count. Next to this is an indicator that shows whenever a serious crime has been committed in the USA. The poem's voice imagines that it flashed on when the youth he sees led away in handcuffs committed his crime. Though he saw "that young black pursued/then caught" the voice is keen to emphasise that he doesn't know what crime the youth committed. In this instance the effect that Harrison wants to create is that he's being entirely truthful and objective. It is interesting, then, that the voice (telling us about the crime indicator) says: "I imagine that it flashed on when the youth/...committed his [crime]". Clearly the light could not flash to announce the crime because that crime had not been processed. It really does not matter if Harrison actually saw this incident occur — the important point is that this is how he has chosen to write about it. Harrison could have specified what the youth's crime was, that is he could have 'made it up', or researched a genuine crime, or

whatever. He has simply chosen not to. It is a small but subtle point and it concerns Harrison's strategy of creating a believably *honest* voice, the example of the black youth is just a texturing in the poem which serves to render his overall theme credible and true. This is, of course, so crucial to our acceptance of Harrison's political connections and observations — if we accept the experiences detailed in the verse we will accept the detail of the politics and, ultimately, engage in a shared intimacy. In such a manner Harrison helps to make his insistently political approach palatable — Harrison's 'I' voice is the sugar that sweetens the pill.

## Chapter 4: Voices of Conflict

Harrison's first person singular, the 'I' voice, is fundamental to his quest for a public poetry. In a sense it is the most public form of expression available to him. By this I mean that if Harrison had settled on a third-person mode of address then it would be public only in the old, traditional sense in that the third-person effects a distancing, a remove. In this respect it is impersonal. Harrison wanted a voice that was both personal and public. To a poet like Harrison it is clear that the two are not mutually exclusive. Indeed the establishment of a believable 'I' voice has been crucial in allowing Harrison to develop as a poet. He has successfully utilised a subjective mode in order to create an objective (yet illusory) art. Hence the experience detailed in a particular poem has the effect of authenticity that in other circumstances might be more negotiable, more ambiguous or uncertain. It is the subjective element afforded by the 'I' voice that allows this and it is this element that works against the 'I' being represented as a disembodied voice. This is crucial in effecting a movement from the particular to the more publicly and generally representative by showing the effect of the general on the particular, so to speak, a movement that is expressive of Harrison's belief that the personal is "a kind of earthing area for the lightning of history and of political struggles",<sup>1</sup> as I suggested above. It is in the so-called personal sphere that the results of political actions are felt and this is what we find in 'v.', a poem in which Harrison's most successful persona, that of the post-scholarship-boy cum poet, receives its most dramatic presentation. In a sense we can understand this presentation in terms of Harrison's ongoing attempts to subvert the ideology of separate spheres, the false dualism that consists in the belief that the essential qualities in the public sphere are typified by a certain "rational calculation", while the qualities associated with the private sphere are, typically, "caring and intuitive empathy".<sup>2</sup> There is a direct connection between the separate spheres ideology of the Victorian age (viz. a male public sphere and a female private sphere) and the kind of prejudice that Harrison is attempting to counter in the nineteen-eighties. The link is Thatcherism with its much heralded call for a return to Victorian values.

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<sup>1</sup> Haffenden. 'Interview'. *Bloodaxe*, 231.

<sup>2</sup> Boccock and Thompson. *Social and Cultural Forms*, 72.



Blake Morrison said of 'v.' that it "takes the abstractions we have learned to live with - unemployment, racial tension, inequality, deprivation - and gives them a kind of physical existence on the page."<sup>3</sup> In other words it shows that the political is personal. This is, of course, exactly what Harrison is doing more generally in his verse and is the basis of his use of the autobiographical persona. It is not simply the case that Harrison thought of his own circumstances and then saw the political mileage, more the case that he decided he wanted to write about certain things and then considered what would be the best technique for accomplishing the things that he wanted to do. It is clear that over a period of time Harrison's political consciousness developed to the degree that he wanted to write about issues concerning language and power, language and inarticulacy, societal divisions, estrangement, and cultural anomie. Hence he evolved an 'I' voice which allowed him to write in the personae of scholarship-boy, post-scholarship boy, poet, and the heavily ironic 'bard'. It is clear that all these personae are dependant to a greater or a lesser degree on matter from Harrison's personal life. But the political impulse precedes the autobiographical impulse from *Eloquence* on, not the other way around.

Nevertheless the autobiographical detailing in 'v.' is abundant. For example the precise site of the poem's setting, the graveyard, is "on the brink of Beeston Hill" (*Selected Poems*, 236). Beeston is the part of Leeds where Harrison grew up and where many past members of the Harrison family are buried. Hence the speaker muses on the fact that he might end up there himself. Maybe even "under the rose roots and the daffodils/by which dad dignified the family plot"<sup>4</sup> and, if so

If buried ashes saw then I'd survey  
the places I learned Latin, and learned Greek (*Selected Poems*, 236)

Besides this reference to Harrison's own Leeds education we find references to "the family plot" (*Selected Poems*, 238), and how "families and friends have gone away / for work or fuller lives, like me from Leeds" (*Selected Poems*, 238). At one point there is even a reference to the name "Harrison" itself. The function of these autobiographical elements is both that they are 'real', and that they act as symbols. Their 'realness' lends a veracity to the poem but their symbolic element means that they are transferable: we as readers can either identify with

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<sup>3</sup> Morrison. 'The Filial Art'. *Bloodaxe*, 56.

<sup>4</sup> See photograph 1 in Appendix.

them literally or transpose their significance onto experiences of our own. In other words we can read the poems as being about a character called Harrison, or see in this persona's social estrangement parallels with our own personal situations. In this sense some of the sonnets in *Eloquence* and some of the issues in 'v.' become almost parabolic, a model for the difficulties of the father/son relationship, or symptomatic of the cultural contradictions and awkwardness that some working-class people feel as they undergo their process of education.

Yet these autobiographical elements are not present merely or primarily for themselves. The location of so many autobiographical references in a poem like 'v.' allows us to argue that what the poem is enacting is the actualisation of a poetic apprehension of the world. By this I mean that Harrison looks at one element of his reality (in this instance the scrawled UNITED on his parents' grave), interprets it and then offers us an imaginative explanation. In this respect 'v.' is a fine example of Harrison's politicised imagination in action, of the presence of the "animating principle"<sup>5</sup> in his work. He takes one symbol, a scrawled word, and from this creates a state of the nation poem, a poem in which he successfully uses the personal, the autobiographical, as the basis for one of the most political and public poems of the 1980's.

Any suggestion that Harrison is really more an autobiographical poet who can recognise the potential for a political interpretation, rather than a political and public poet who utilises an autobiographical mode, is once again undermined when we consider the genesis of 'v.'. In the television film of the poem, Harrison's introduction informs us that he wrote it in 1984 after a May visit to his parents' grave in Holbeck Cemetery, Beeston, Leeds. This was the occasion of the poem and its impulse was Harrison finding graffiti on the grave. He was horrified and hurt. But whereas the appearance of a finished poem tends to create the illusion of a relatively seamless process between the initial observation and publication, the reality is somewhat different. What seems to have been the case is that prior to this time Harrison has explored some of the issues in different forms but his consideration of them has needed a deeper sense of the inter-relationship between the allegedly private and the wider socio-economic sphere in order to give a communicably public meaning to what were hitherto simply private experiences. For example in 'Divisions' Harrison writes of a Newcastle skinhead who

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<sup>5</sup> Rosenthal. *Poetry and the Common Life*, 70.

When next he sees United lose a match,  
 his bovvers on, his scarf tied round his wrist,  
 his rash NEWCASTLE RULES will start to scratch,  
 he'll aerosol the walls, then go get pissed (*Selected Poems*, 173)

This sonnet dates from 1979.<sup>6</sup> Another interesting example is the sonnet 'A "scanty plot of ground" ', a graveyard poem that precedes 'v.'. Harrison's bibliography suggests that this was published between May and September 1984<sup>8</sup>, presumably it was written before the trigger events of the miner's strike later that same year. This is a comparison between Harrison's sixteen line poem 'A 'scanty plot of ground' ' and the first four stanzas of 'v.'.

'A "scanty plot of ground" '

Those who look for me will have to search quite hard  
 to find my slab behind the family dead  
 butcher, publican, and baker, and now bard  
 adding poetry to their beef, beer, and bread.

But with Wordsworth facing opposite  
 and Byron three graves on I'll not go short  
 of the company of peers of a sort.  
 We might all be thrown together if the pit  
 whose galleries once ran beneath this plot  
 causes the distinguished dead to drop  
 into the rabblement of bone and rot,  
 shored slack, crushed shale, smashed prop.

Wordsworth built church organs, Byron tanned  
 luggage cowhide in the age of steam.  
 They knew their place of rest before the land  
 caves in on the lowest worked out seam.

'v.'.

Next millennium you'll have to search quite hard  
 to find my slab behind the family dead,  
 butcher, publican, and baker, now me, bard  
 adding poetry to their beef, beer and bread.

With Byron three graves on I'll not go short  
 of company, and Wordsworth's opposite.  
 That's two peers already, of a sort,  
 and we'll all be thrown together if the pit,

whose galleries once ran beneath this plot,  
 causes the distinguished dead to drop  
 into the rabblement of bone and rot,  
 shored slack, crushed shale, smashed prop.

Wordsworth built church organs, Byron tanned  
 luggage cowhide in the age of steam,  
 and knew their place of rest before the land  
 caves in on the lowest worked-out seam.  
 (*Selected Poems*, 236)

The changes between the two drafts are small but important as they testify to Harrison's aim of achieving a public voice. One obvious difference is the lack of explicit political engagement in 'Scanty' compared to 'v.' as a whole. In addition we can detect subtle but important differences such as that in the first line, for example, where the relative vagueness of "Those who look for me" (L1 'Scanty') has been changed to the definitiveness of "you'll have to search quite hard". (L1 'v.') We might also note the mix of high and low tones suggested by the mixture of the publicly oratorical tone of "Next Millennium" and the more colloquial "now

<sup>6</sup> First published in *Iron*. No. 28 April-June 1979, 21.

<sup>7</sup> Published in *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 26, nos. 1 & 2 Spring & Summer 1984, 156.

<sup>8</sup> In the bibliography 'A "scanty plot of ground" ' appears, along with two other items, between references for 11 May 1984 and 23 September 1984. Kaiser. *Bibliography*, 81.

me”, and what Sean O’Brien terms the “unpoetic” quality of phrases like “search quite hard” and “I’ll not go short”. We might also note the desire for greater precision that is suggested in the change from “and now bard” to “now me, bard”. In a similar context we might notice the change from the relative vagueness of ‘Scanty’s’ “the company of peers of a sort” to the more definite, more specific and more orally intimate tone suggested by the colloquial reference to “That’s two peers already” in ‘v.’. Moreover a similar transition occurs in the movement from ‘Scanty’s’ “We might all be thrown together” and the line “we’ll all be thrown together” in ‘v.’ The effect is the establishment of a clear connection between the speaker of the poems and the listener. The address of the voice is now tighter, more specific and less generalised. This is also the effect that is gained by dropping the “But” (L5 ‘Scanty’) — the tone is that much cleaner and uncluttered as the effect of “But” was to introduce a note of reservation, of qualification. In addition Harrison makes the last four lines of ‘Scanty’ into one sentence, thus adding the qualities of oral (not solely written) speech. At the same time as all this is occurring Harrison maintains his commitment to the voiceless and his politicised poetics in that he manages to reinstate the archaic word “rabblement”. Sean O’Brien points out that “‘rabblement’ is encountered in 1545, meaning ‘rabble . . . in various senses’; and also, more rarely, from 1590, ‘riotous conduct’.”<sup>10</sup> Thus Harrison craftily blends “metrical elegance and wildly indecorous matter, the deftly conceived riotous assembly of the official dead and the pit’s lost casualties”.<sup>11</sup>

One way of enforcing the distinction I am making regarding how Harrison utilises matter from his own background is presented by his poem ‘v.’. At the end of the poem Harrison writes:

If, having come this far, somebody reads  
these verses, and he/she wants to understand,  
face this grave on Beeston Hill, your back to Leeds,  
and read the chiselled epitaph I’ve planned:

*Beneath your feet’s a poet, then a pit.  
Poetry supporter, if you’re here to find  
how poems can grow from (beat you to it!) SHIT  
find the beef, the beer, the bread, then look behind. (Selected Poems, 249)*

<sup>9</sup> Sean O’Brien. *The Deregulated Muse*. Newcastle-upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1998, 61. Hereafter referred to as *The Deregulated Muse*.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

This is a strong ending for a strong poem. But if you follow the speaker's instructions to the letter then the geography does not work out. For example, if you look at the space on the grave where the epitaph would go, and then look behind, strictly speaking you would be facing towards Beeston, away from Leeds. The poem suggests, however, that as one had one's back to Leeds in order to read the epitaph, then a turn would produce the view of Leeds that we find on the cover of the 1984 and 1987 editions of Harrison's *Selected Poems*. This serves as a metaphor for how Harrison achieves his art from life — he takes what he can use from the matter of his personal life and then just skews it a little, effectively transforming it imaginatively to make it more resonant in the public sphere.<sup>12</sup>

In 1979, as Margaret Thatcher's General Election campaign reached its climax, the ex-Labour Party MP turned television-interviewer Brian Walden said of her: "This country needs someone like Margaret Thatcher. In years to come great novels and poems will be written about her".<sup>13</sup> One such poem is 'v.', a state of the nation poem written in 1984 (published 1985) against a backdrop of division and conflict. Prime Minister Thatcher had been in power since 1979. It is worth reminding ourselves of the speech she made upon her first arrival in Downing Street. With hindsight I can see it now as being marked with a characteristic display of hollow piety. In *One Of Us* (1989) her biographer Hugo Young tells us that the text selected for her exuded self-confident grandeur: "Where there is discord, may we bring harmony . . . Where there is error may we bring truth. Where there is doubt may we bring faith. Where there is despair may we bring hope."<sup>14</sup> Though the words are traditionally attributed to St Francis of Assisi this is misleading as "the words are in fact a piece of nineteenth-century piety. But as the keynote for a leadership, it had a seigneurial ring."<sup>15</sup> Young's words are apt: a seigneur is a feudal lord. It is as good a way as any of describing the rule of Thatcher in the eighties.

Thatcher's reign was a time of great change in Britain. The country was undergoing a process of economic cauterisation that was unprecedented in living memory. Helped into office in 1979 by Saatchi & Saatchi poster campaigns that proclaimed "Labour Isn't Working" the Conservatives then proceeded to ensure that greater numbers than ever before were not to work either. For example in May 1979 unemployment stood at 1.2 million. In 1980 a further

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<sup>12</sup> See photograph 2 in Appendix.

<sup>13</sup> Hugo Young. *One Of Us*. London: Pan, 1990, 136.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 136-137.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

836,000 instances of “de-manning” were registered. Riots followed in 1981. Unemployment had risen to 3 million by May 1983. Changes in the basis on which the figures were calculated had already removed 300,000 from the register. In addition another 350,000 were kept off the register by special employment measures. As Hugo Young notes, the number of long-termed unemployed (without a job for more than a year) was very nearly as great as the total number out of work when the Tories took over. When interviewed in 1987 Sir Keith Joseph (also known as the ‘mad monk’) had this to say: “We hadn’t appreciated [. . .] that an oil-strong currency, and hence a strong exchange rate, coupled with intense world competitiveness, would lead to such rapid and large demanning [. . .] Unemployment had not been considered a huge problem”.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time as this rampant rise in unemployment the economy was faring a little better. Between June 1983 and May 1987, for example, the FT index quintupled in value. Indeed, growth in the economy in general had been registered each year since 1981 and in the four years after the 1983 election, average weekly earnings rose by 14% in real terms.<sup>17</sup> The employed felt better off as a result of Thatcherism and though unemployment never fell below 3.1 million during the 1983/1987 government, unemployment as an issue declined in importance. This was one of the major achievements of Thatcherism, re-educating the electorate so as not to care too much about unemployment. It came to be regarded as inevitable, as a fact of life — greater economic prosperity in places like the south-east helped to take Southern minds off the fact that in places like the industrial North things were getting a lot worse.

If there could ever be any doubt as to whether Harrison was justified in emphasising the divisions that were apparent in the eighties then these words of Margaret Thatcher’s might be relevant. To her the issues were clear-cut: “I am in politics because of the conflict between good and evil, and I believe that in the end good will triumph”.<sup>18</sup> What this meant was that she was right morally, intellectually and ideologically. The logic of this position was that all opposing views were wrong.

Soon after the start of her second term of office the National Union of Mineworkers struck in an action calculated to prevent pit closures. The strike began on 6 March 1984. On July 19, while still maintaining a facade of governmental non-involvement Thatcher described

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 316.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 501.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 352.

the striking miners as “a scar across the face of the country”.<sup>19</sup> Never loath to display the traditional Tory tendency for jingoistic patriotism she continued, raising the spectre of dreaded socialism, saying “ ‘We had to fight an enemy without in the Falklands. We always have to be aware of the enemy within, which is more difficult to fight and more dangerous to liberty.’ ‘There is’, she said, in a peroration of blazing grandiloquence, ‘no week, nor day, nor hour when tyranny may not enter upon this country, if the people lose their supreme confidence in themselves, and lose their roughness and spirit of defiance.’”<sup>20</sup> This, then, was the typical flavour of the Government’s invective against the NUM. However, Thatcher’s keenness to invoke the catechism ‘The Falklands’ should not make us lose sight of the fact that the NUM weren’t citizens of some far-flung land but citizens of the same Government that was seeking to demonize and outlaw them. This was a form of civil war by any definition.

Though hardly mentioned, the miner’s strike of 1984/1985 is ever present in *v.*, as the poem’s inclusion of Arthur Scargill’s <sup>epigraph</sup> testifies. Indeed we might hear a subtle echo between the UNITED on the tombstones and the miner’s chants. One in particular that I remember hearing at a concert in Hatfield Main miner’s welfare club, the night before their return to work, is “the miner’s united will never be defeated”. Unity and community were big issues for many people during this time. Not, however, for a Prime Minister who was to famously declare that there was no such thing as society. No wonder, then, that this was a dispute characterised by violent conflicts and class hatred.

Thatcher’s allusion to the miners as the enemy within has been used by Harrison as a philosophical starting point for an investigation of the divisions within Britain and the sense of division he himself feels as a poet. Harrison’s ‘*v.*’, then, is a poem written in response to a certain series of events, on behalf of a particular group in society. It is accessible, it is inclusive. Furthermore it acts to redefine the arena of the public by showing the relationship between the public and the allegedly private. The private, in this instance the carefully selected matter of Harrison’s own circumstances, is very much foregrounded in ‘*v.*’ and it is this, paradoxically, that makes it a public poem. At first this might seem to be contradictory in that his insistence on writing about so many allegedly ‘private’ issues might work against the creation of a public poetry. But it’s not really an irony at all — the inclusion of these issues in a poem such as ‘*v.*’ is deliberate. In one sense the divisions and conflict within the speaker

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 371.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 371.

serve as a metaphor for the divisions and conflict in wider society and in another sense the inclusion of the allegedly private issues is related to Harrison's implicit redefinition of the terms private and public. The underlying question throughout his verse is simply 'what is it that is so private about these issues?' What is it that is so private about tenderness, about qualities of gentleness, about love? What Harrison is trying to do is draw attention to how these qualities, these emotions are inextricably linked to a wider socio-political context. Consequently 'v.' seems to imply that certain issues, whether they be concerned with sexual-politics or private education or language are designated as private in order that they can then be safely designated as non-political. In this respect, then, we might see 'v.' as evidence of how Harrison effects a poetical movement from the private to the public sphere for, as his poetry asserts, the public elements are as often as not the private elements writ large. After all it is this kind of movement that he has been effecting in his sonnet sequence. It is here that he perceives the hitherto unacknowledged consequences of public policies (for this read political injustices) on a micro level and extrapolates them to a macro level, thus showing the two-way dynamic between the public and the private, the continuum. This was the kind of idea that informed Harrison's statement that "in that word 'public' [he] would never want to exclude inwardness."<sup>21</sup> His caveat is significant for it is only by this, by individuals looking inwards and accepting that we are composed of many competing elements, he suggests in 'v.', that we can begin to overcome self-divisions and ultimately societal divisions. Put simply the idea is that if we could accept the otherness in ourselves then we might be able to accept the otherness that other people represent. This is, in a sense, the basis of Harrison's destabilising and redefining of the term 'public', especially in respect of the gendered division between public and private spheres. We might be reminded of Blake's maxim that "Without Contraries is no progression"<sup>22</sup>. This is, ironically, the basis of the public/private continuum and the basis, moreover, of much of Harrison's philosophy. To try to acknowledge the presence of one quality at the expense of another is not an option: you can not separate the saint from the shit, as he reminds us in *The Blasphemer's Banquet*.

The setting of 'v.' is a graveyard in Leeds, a place, then, that represents a possible resting place for the speaking voice in the poem.<sup>23</sup> It seems, however, that this is shaky

<sup>21</sup> Harrison. 'Preface'. *Bloodaxe*, 9.

<sup>22</sup> William Blake. 'London'. Plate 3. *Blake Complete Writings*. Ed. Geoffrey Keynes. Oxford: New York: OUP, 1991, 149. Hereafter referred to as *Complete Writings*.

<sup>23</sup> See photographs 3 and 4 in Appendix for general scenes of Holbeck cemetery.



ground on which to prepare for the future, as this graveyard “stands above a worked-out pit” (*Selected Poems*, 236). The graveyard is itself undermined:

and we'll all be thrown together if the pit,  
 whose galleries once ran beneath this plot,  
 causes the distinguished dead to drop  
 into the rabblement of bone and rot,  
 shored slack, crushed shale, smashed prop. (*Selected Poems*, 236)

In the poem the speaker is visiting his parents' grave. He notices that many of the graves have been graffitied by disaffected supporters of Leeds United. They take a short cut home from Leeds' Elland Road ground and:

reassert the glory of their team  
 by spraying words on tombstones, pissed on beer. (*Selected Poems*, 236)

This, then, is a place in which various forms of language ranging from the high to the low all compete. There is of course an irony here for much of the conflict (and therefore the strength) of Harrison's verse is reflected in the range of language to be found on Beeston Hill. The speaker is struck by the fact that:

the language of this graveyard ranges from  
 a bit of Latin for a former Mayor  
 or those who laid their lives down at the Somme,  
 the hymnal fragments and the gilded prayer,  
 how people 'fell asleep in the Good Lord',  
 brief chisellable bits from the good book  
 and rhymes whatever length they could afford,  
 to CUNT, PISS, SHIT and (mostly) FUCK! (*Selected Poems*, 237)

These are the extremes of language, then, from the (alleged) high of Latin to the (alleged) low, the language of the gutter: the sacred and the profane, the high and the low. These expletives are often linked with the “versus Vs” (*Selected Poems*, 237) typically used in football fixture lists, such as Leeds United v:

the opponent of last week, this week, or next,  
 and a repertoire of blunt four-letter curses  
 on the team or race that makes the sprayer vexed. (*Selected Poems*, 237)

This is the language of opposition and confrontation. And when the poem connects the graffitied 'V's' with "all the verses of life" (*Selected Poems*, 238) we see that Harrison's language as a poet is also connected with this — the pun of "versuses"/verses reminds us that his verses are oppositional as well. But this is only partly true in that, paradoxically, Harrison's verse is also part of establishment culture. So we can say that his verses are contradictions running both within and outside the poet, private and public, in an ironic parallel to the way that class conflict is inscribed within the individual psyche as well as being a schism through the social strata. In 'v.' the sense of opposition ironically runs parallel with a sense that one result of these oppositions is a reminder of the interconnections between the public and the private:

class v. class as bitter as before,  
 the unending violence of US and THEM,  
 personified in 1984  
 by Coal Board MacGregor and the NUM (*Selected Poems*, 238)

Class war is unending, Harrison argues, and the personification of abstracts like US and THEM attest to its being personal. The sub-text is that it is not abstract market forces such as Adam Smith's 'invisible hand', or any other phrase a career-climbing marketing-man coins that subjugate and oppress, the reality is that it is people who do these things to each other. The list of these oppositions, these "fixtures" continues:

Hindu/Sikh, soul/body, heart v. Mind,  
 East/West, male/female, and the ground  
 these fixtures are fought out on 's Man, resigned  
 to hope from his future what his past never found. (*Selected Poems*, 238)

No wonder, then, that Man is in this state, no wonder that there is so much conflict because there is hatred on both sides of the divide:

The prospects for the present aren't too grand  
 When a swastika with NF (National Front)'s  
 sprayed on a grave, to which another hand  
 has added, in a reddish colour, CUNTS. (*Selected Poems*, 238)

For the speaker the 'Vs' become a symbol of opposition and division that far exceed the football field. They are also linked to the 'V' sign, meaning "fuck off". These modern

usages are in sharp contrast to the speaker's childhood memory of 'V', as the poem testifies.

The speaker in the poem recalls that as a child he helped to:

whitewash a V on a brick wall.  
No one clamoured in the press for its removal  
or thought the sign, in wartime, rude at all. (*Selected Poems*, 237)

Harrison's ongoing interest in the potency of 'V' as a symbol is clear in later poems such as 'Initial Illumination' (1991), for example, where he explores the symbolic implications of the initial 'V'. In his poem 'v.' Harrison's concern is to contrast the divisive quality of the modern day usage with the apparently socially binding quality that 'V' had in wartime. One irony is that the meaning of the two usages was not that different, though its application was. In wartime the 'V' symbol meant 'V For Victory'. The purpose was simple —to help unite the people of the United Kingdom in their resolve to defeat the Axis powers. It was still oppositional in the sense that it was directed against an identifiable, external enemy but it had the consolatory effect of internal unity. This was its positive element. This 'V' sign still retains the capability to express the sense of victory but it is irreparably diminished by its obverse, the 'V' sign which signifies the "fuck you" of contempt. Thus the modern usage seems to be more of a retreat within, in a sense, for the scale of the consolatory effect (when measured against its ability to give offence) is far, far smaller than in wartime. Whereas in wartime a whole nation might be in some kind of unity, in more recent times the group unified is restricted to a relatively small set of supporters of a particular football team whose very existence seems to be dependant on the expression of hatred for 'otherness', whether in a footballing context or some other. This is clear when we consider how <sup>these</sup> symbols are communicated by a person — the 'V for Victory' symbol is expressed by facing the palm outwards whereas the 'V' of contempt is expressed by facing the palm inwards. In the latter case the hand has turned in on itself, hence it is possible to see the V sign with palms inwards as a suitably fitting symbol of civil war, as in the case of 'v.', for example. Whatever orientation we put on it the depressing conclusion might be that historically one undoubtedly effective way to achieve a sense of unity is by coming together in opposition against another party or group of people.

There are two ways, then, in which the 'V' sign might be used: one in the main generates a largely positive effect by promoting unity while the other generates a negative effect by promoting divisiveness. The fact that both usages are dependant on hate for an

enemy should not surprise us, given the anecdotal evidence regarding the origin of the symbol. Around the time of the battle of Agincourt in 1415 the English had been using a new weapon. This was the long bow. As its name suggests it was longer, and thus more powerful, than its predecessor and required two fingers, rather than one, to draw the string. Its military impact in previous encounters had been impressive but the English knew that if captured they would be hung or at least have their bow fingers severed. The response of the English was what we now know as the 'V' sign. By their waving of their bow-string fingers at the French lines the English archers goaded the French by showing them that they still possessed the means to destroy them.<sup>24</sup>

A 'V' sign is precisely what we see at the beginning of Channel 4's screening of 'v.', in 1987. After archive footage of Churchill flashing the symbol in what passes for a visual equivalent of a sound-bite we are treated to the extra-ordinary image of Margaret Thatcher's interpretation. With what seems to be an amazing Freudian slip she gives the sign with palms *inward*. This is the "fuck you" mode of address. Clips like this emphasise the scale of 'v.', and remind us that it is a state-of-the-nation poem. In this respect Blake Morrison's perceptive observation that Harrison "casts himself in his poems as a sort of prole-prince of Elsinore" is particularly apposite.<sup>25</sup> We might remember the graveyard scene in *Hamlet* (Act V: 1) and the play's father/mother theme. In 'v.' it is clear that the speaker has cast himself in the role of prole-prince of Beeston, perhaps even as an avenging skald. At one point the speaker himself touches on this, saying:

I don't fancy an encounter with my mam  
playing Hamlet with me for this swearing (*Selected Poems*, 245)

This might remind us of Marcellus' famous line from the play: "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark"<sup>26</sup>. This seems to lurk unsaid throughout 'v.', yet might just be heard underpinning the speaker's words when he asks:

How many British graveyards now this May  
are strewn with rubbish and choked up with weeds (*Selected Poems*, 238)

<sup>24</sup> Professor Richard Holmes. *War Walks*, BBC 2, Friday July 26 1996.

<sup>25</sup> Morrison. 'The Filial Art'. *Bloodaxe*, 54.

<sup>26</sup> Marcellus says this in William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, (1: iv) ed. T. J. B. Spencer. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980, 89. Hereafter referred to as *Hamlet*.

As Hamlet informs us “. . . ’tis an unweeded garden/ That grows to seed.”<sup>27</sup> This, in turn, might remind us of another garden reference, this time from *Richard II*. In this one of the gardeners asks why he and his colleagues should bother to

Keep law and form and due proportion,  
Showing, as in a model, our firm estate,  
When our sea-walled garden, the whole land,  
Is full of weeds, her fairest flowers choked up<sup>28</sup> [my emphasis].

The question is a straightforward one: why keep the garden ordered when the country itself is being mismanaged by Richard? In terms of ‘v.’ the point is more to do with establishing a parallel between the graveyard and the nation itself. In a sense the same relative havoc has been wreaked on Great Britain — the same legitimised thefts, the same contempt for the working class — as practised by Richard II and his cronies. But the allusion to the garden scene might also be to do with understanding why there should be vandalism, graffiti and litter in a place where one might expect to find order, calm and dignity, and with why there should be divisions and hatred, violence and strife, on a national scale. Why should the skins respect the dignity of the graveyard when the government does not respect the country as a whole? If we slant the question a little more directly to the skins we can ask: why should they respect their society when that same society is not worthy of respect, when it does not respect them? In the graveyard, though the speaker is horrified to find the graffiti on his parents’ stone, he attempts to bridge one of the divisions by trying to understand why he should have found what he did. He concludes that it is not all the fault of the aerosolling skin: “Much is ours” (*Selected Poems*, 239). The ‘we’ implied by this is, presumably, the middle-class, since that is the readership in the main. What is less clear, however, (and the poem suffers as a result) is just what our collective responsibility is. The relative vagueness of this apparently indeterminate position lends a wishy-washy air to an otherwise forceful passage.

At this juncture the speaker does not sound much like an avenging skald. A clue as to why might be provided by the poem’s allusions to Hamlet: he too was a lone individual voice who could not ‘set it right’ alone.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps, then, the relative ‘weakness’ of the persona’s position in ‘v.’ can be understood in terms of Harrison using the poem in order to interrogate the ‘I’ voice. ‘Whose fault is it?’, asks the speaker, and we might be forgiven for thinking that

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, (1: ii), 75.

<sup>28</sup> William Shakespeare. *Richard II* [111: iv]. Ed. Kenneth Muir. New York: Signet, 1963, 109.

<sup>29</sup> See *Hamlet*, 1:v.

the answer is 'the inadequacy of the liberal poetic voice'. In this respect the persona is a site for the interrogation of the liberal poet: Harrison seems to be asking 'what can a lone poet do?' Hence 'v.' raises the question of whether the poet should be delivering social solutions, or is just there to articulate and express the condition? Terry Eagleton clearly believes the former to be true. He has criticised the poem as a partial political failure on the grounds that "the solace and unity 'v.' finally seeks in sexual relationships isn't abstractable from the destiny of nations".<sup>30</sup> Yet Harrison knows this, after all this is the basis of his assertion in *Durham* that "Fascism [and] the hot bad breath / of Powers down small countries' necks [ . . . ] are sex" (*Selected Poems*, 70). Hence Harrison's refrain of 'home to my woman' might not be problematical in the way that Eagleton suggests. For instance it can be understood in terms of the speaker's ironic awareness of the inadequacy of the liberal poetic voice. Hence the point is that 'v.' is not severely flawed, as Eagleton has intimated, but rather that it makes more sense to understand the politics of the poem in terms of Harrison's attempt to explore the limitations of this liberal response. According to Eagleton

Harrison's own dispirited political imagination, which belongs in this sense to the 1980's, is curiously at odds with the volume's linguistic vigour and technical high-jinks, as he approaches a cross-roads within himself in middle life between angry proletarian and bruised metaphysician. The choice is between being pained primarily by oppression, and being pained primarily by division and disunity - the difference, roughly, between radical and liberal.<sup>31</sup>

Eagleton's over-simplistic pairings of radicalism and "being pained primarily by oppression", and liberalism and "being pained primarily by division and disunity", point to a problem with some contemporary criticism of Harrison. I shall return to this matter later and for now content myself with suggesting that Eagleton is one of those critics whose assumption of a political radicalism on Harrison's part is based on a mis-interpretation of both his aims and his achievements. Consequently, when he fails to match up to their expectations, he is then criticised for not delivering a radical enough perspective. Yet what Harrison is actually attempting to achieve with his public poetry generally, and specifically in 'v.', is to manoeuvre himself into a position where he can develop his writing in such a way that it is able to reach the relatively huge audiences that he later finds for his film/poems. In this respect (and I argue

<sup>30</sup> Terry Eagleton. 'Antagonisms: Tony Harrison's 'v.''. *Bloodaxe*, 350. Hereafter referred to as 'Antagonisms'.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 349-350.

this at length below) Harrison's poem posits an idea of the poet as some kind of facilitator. Thus the speaker's role is not explicitly political in the sense that he advocates radical strategies but is implicitly political in that it strives to increase its audience/readership with the aim of enfranchising as many people as possible into the very processes which the poems themselves seek to explicate.

In respect of 'v.' we find that, on the surface level at least, there is an explanation for the graffiti in that it is revealed to be more a symptom of a deeper malaise for which we are again at least partly to blame. It is unemployment that fuels the desecrations as the only recourse available to the sprayers is to shock the living by defiling the tombstones:

*Ah'll tell yer then what really riles a bloke.  
It's reading on their graves the jobs they did -  
butcher, publican and baker. Me, I'll croak  
doing t'same nowt ah do now as a kid. (Selected Poems, 241)*

The first point to make here is that this stanza neatly parodies the opening stanza of the poem and draws attention to the speaker's sense of unease at having a job. It also re-emphasises language as the site which embodies, enacts and enforces cultural division and exclusion. The second point is simply that the gravestones in Holbeck cemetery endorse this view.

Wordsworth's, for example, says "In affectionate remembrance of Elizabeth Ann wife of Joshua Wordsworth, organ builder Leeds, born . . . ", etc.<sup>32</sup> The wife seems to have existed (and died) only in terms of her relationship to her husband and his job. The cemetery holds many more examples of the importance the Victorians attached to their jobs. The memorial stone of Benjamin Mitchell, for example, proudly boasts that he was "rates collector of Leeds for over 40 years". But be that as it may, the speaker still does not understand why the skins believe that "the 'Pakis', 'Niggers', even 'Yids' / sprayed on the tombstones here should bear the blame?" (*Selected Poems*, 240). He asks:

What is it that these crude words are revealing?  
What is it that this aggro act implies?  
Giving the dead their xenophobic feeling  
or just a *cri-de-coeur* because man dies? (*Selected Poems*, 241)

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<sup>32</sup> See photograph 5 in Appendix.

The speaker's ruminations, however, are dramatically ruptured by the voice of the skin who immediately hits upon the speaker's guilt about his education and subsequent estrangement from his parents and his class. Again the drama is partly effected through linguistic collision:

*So what's a cri-de-coeur, cunt ? Can't you speak  
the language that yer mam spoke. Think of 'er !  
Can yer only get yer tongue round fucking Greek?  
Go and fuck yourself with cri-de-coeur! (Selected Poems, 241)*

The speaker immediately replies and at this early stage of the confrontation there is a clear sense that he is affronted and shocked:

*'She didn't talk like you do for a start!'  
I shouted, turning where I thought the voice had been.  
She didn't understand yer fucking 'art'!  
She thought yer fucking poetry obscene ! (Selected Poems, 241)*

As we have seen, the themes of guilt, estrangement, and alienation from the class of origin are major strands in the *Eloquence* sequence. Indeed, one of the major elements of the skin's dramatic role in the poem is that of conveying the speaker's self-consciousness about the conflicts he feels about being a poet, and also to allow him to express his doubts as to the validity of his poetic response. Harrison's doubts as to the efficacy of poetry, what it can achieve, run through his work. It also surfaces in his translations of Palladas. In some instances they seem more like Harrison, more autobiographical, in a sense, than some of the supposedly 'true' sonnets. What, for example, do we make of the one that reads:

43  
Where's the public good in what you write,  
raking it in from all that shameless shite,  
  
hawking iambics like so much *Betterbrite*? (*Selected Poems*, 86)

In 'v.' the location of this guilt is mercilessly revealed — not only does the speaker have a job in the midst of all that mid-eighties unemployment but that job is being a poet. This was clearly very much on Harrison's mind in 1984, as an uncollected poem reveals. The general theme of 'Rubbish' is a guilt at writing rubbish, though not necessarily a guilt at being a writer. The speaker writes of how he doesn't "budge from [his] littered desk" when either



roofers, builder or window cleaner come to work on his house. When the dustmen come to take away the garbage, however, the speaker bolts from his study and goes to hide. The reason for this is that the speaker cannot abide:

being caught, pen in hand, while gloved men chuck  
black plastic sacks of old drafts on their truck.<sup>33</sup>

There's an embarrassment here, not just a guilt, an embarrassment that the writing of failures (the old drafts) actually makes work for someone else, i.e. the dustmen. This ambivalence, this uncertainty as to his own position is at the heart of much of Harrison's verse and this is certainly true of 'v.'. This is clear in the very first stanza of the poem. It is worth re-considering just what the effect of this opening is. In typical Harrison fashion, this takes the form of a direct address to the reader. It seems simple and straight-forward yet with a deceptive ease Harrison has established a dynamic between the 'I' speaking in the poem and the reader, and the directness of his approach helps to prepare us for the story that is going to unfold. There is no discussion, no debate offered by the opening line, no 'if you'd like', or 'perhaps'. Instead we have the insistence of "you'll have to". It is a case of 'I'm telling you something important. Listen'. Yet the sense of conviction implied by this position is in curious contrast to the way that the speaker speaks of "the family dead", by the listing of them in terms of their public roles, their occupations. Clearly Harrison feels the need to equate poetry with those other staples of life; beef, beer and bread. What Harrison is attempting to do is hack out a role for poetry. The contradiction between being a jobbing poet while surrounded by the ugly evidence of unemployment, this conflict within the poet himself, is an apposite starting point for a poem about conflict. In this sense it is Harrison's argument with himself, as Yeats would have it, for 'v.' is as much Harrison's skilful attempt to explore what it means to be a poet, and what the role of that poet should be in modern times, as it is a snarling indictment of Thatcherite capitalism. In this respect 'v.' is a poem about unemployment *and* employment. It is concerned with what it is to earn a living writing poetry about the dispossessed when a great number of those written about are themselves unemployed. In an early review of 'v.' Douglas Dunn recognised that Harrison was considering this very point: "How far can a poet like Harrison [ . . . ] draw from his loyalties while being employed at his writing, and remunerated by it, and living a life which to some

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<sup>33</sup> *Rubbish*. Uncollected poem. Published in *New Statesman*, 2nd March 1984. 26.

(like the skinhead growling in the graveyard) seems treacherous, but which others, leaning on a sentimental understanding of British democracy, might consider well-earned and deserved?"<sup>34</sup> This life does indeed seem treacherous to the skin who promptly attacks the speaker saying that when they bury him,

*They'll chisel fucking poet when they do you  
and that, yer cunt, 's a crude four-letter word. (Selected Poems, 242)*

This proves to be too much. It is this that makes the speaker respond in kind and from now on he seems to be locked into a competition to best the skin at swearing. The measured, reflective tone of the committed liberal we find in comments about the skin like "It isn't all his fault though. Much is ours" (*Selected Poems*, 239) has disappeared to be replaced by a voice whose method is "to smash nails on their heads regardless of whether he breaks his thumb with the mallet",<sup>35</sup> in Douglas Dunn's memorable phrase:

'Listen, cunt!' *I* said, 'before you start your jeering  
the reason why I want this in a book  
's to give ungrateful cunts like you a hearing!' (*Selected Poems*, 242)

While Dunn praises Harrison's 'v.' for not having shunned reality "in favour of pleasant, remote subject-matter"<sup>36</sup> his phrase implies a criticism of Harrison for sacrificing subtlety to crude efficacy. If this is indeed the case then the criticism is misplaced. It is misplaced because it is the persona who loses his temper and flails into a swearing match thus allowing Harrison the poet to dramatise the ongoing and seemingly inescapable inner contradictions of language and class within his persona, and thus enlarge on his investigation of the public and private interplay. In this respect the persona is a site for the interrogation of the public/private issues, a device that both allows Harrison to explore the validity of a liberal response and, in particular, to gauge the possibilities for public poetry. But, whereas the speaker's laudably positive view regarding the efficacy of poetry might well reflect Harrison's positive attitude to his craft, the skin's interjections (anticipated in the Palladas epigram of 1975) provide an insight into the negative side: "*A book, yer stupid cunt, 's not worth a fuck!*" (*Selected Poems*, 242). The confrontation becomes more heated now and through it the interrogation of the

<sup>34</sup> Douglas Dunn. 'Abrasive Encounters'. *Bloodaxe*, 347.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 347.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 347.

public, social role of poetry as well as of the private individual, the poet. The speaker is becoming more and more impassioned — though his original assertion was the need to provide a hearing for the skin he now raises the stakes:

‘The only reason why I write this poem at all  
on yobs like you who do the dirt on death  
's to give some higher meaning to your scrawl.’ (*Selected Poems*, 242)

This is treated scornfully by the skin: “*Don’t fucking bother, cunt! Don’t waste your breath!*”, (*Selected Poems*, 242) is his response. Later, when the speaker seeks to show empathy with the skin by describing a boyhood bit of “mindless aggro” (*Selected Poems*, 242) the skin retorts “*Yeah, ah bet yer wrote a poem, yer wanker you!*” Despite this, the skin hears the speaker out but his eventual response is damning:

*Don’t talk to me of fucking representing  
the class yer were born into any more.  
Yer going to get ’urt and start resenting  
it’s not poetry we need in this class war.  
Yer’ve given yerself toffee, cunt. Who needs  
yer fucking poufy words. . .* (*Selected Poems*, 244)

One curious effect of the skin’s speeches is that they sound like an epitaph — a poet’s epitaph, perhaps! The barb nestling in the “toffee” jibe is a case in point. I take this as an allusion to Demosthenes with his “gob full of pebbles” (*Selected Poems*, 122). In this instance the pebbles have been replaced by toffee — the effect would be to produce a sweetly, sticky, cloying poetry: “poufy words”, as the skin calls them. The whole aspect of the speaker’s doubts concerning the validity of a poetical response, and the interrogation of masculinity that we find in much of the verse is, in a sense, inseparable. It is worth considering this in more detail.

Harrison’s peculiarly male contest with the skin is connected with his ongoing concern with the conflict he feels between the ‘cissy poet’ and the ‘male’. In interviews he has frequently commented on how working class culture acts to marginalise poetic aspirations by describing that background as “an environment where poetry was only for the ‘lassy-lad’ ”.<sup>37</sup> In one poem he says:

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<sup>37</sup> Harrison. ‘Inkwell’. *Bloodaxe*, 34.

*There's something fairy ( I can hear him say )  
about a guy that watches snakes all goddam day ! (Selected Poems, 209)*

Similarly, while his friends are “off laikin”, or perhaps “off tartin’ ”, or “off to t’ flicks”, (*Selected Poems*, 116) the scholarship-boy persona is stuck at home unable to join them because he’s “gorra Latin prose”. The poem leaves him, his “bodiless head” poking out of the window “like patriarchal Cissy-bleeding-ro’s”. This reference gives a clue to the internal contradictions of adolescent working class masculinity. These contradictions are exaggerated for the poet because of formulations that define culture and art as feminine, in opposition to traditional working-class male occupations such as ‘working down t’pit’, etc.<sup>38</sup> In the poem the “bored kid” has been playing with his liana, which fits in with the Tarzan imagery but also which jokingly implies masturbation and thus, if the skin in ‘v.’ is to be believed, Harrison seems to be conceiving of poetry as wank! This hovers behind the reference in ‘Rubbish’ as well when the speaker tells us he feels guilty being caught “pen in hand”.<sup>39</sup> Significantly the pen is (*penis* ?) often the location for double entendre in Harrison’s work. In ‘v.’, for example, there is a pointed reference to “the sprayer master of his flourished tool” (*Selected Poems*, 237). Because of the use of “tool”, the slang term for penis, this is a comment which once again suggests ejaculation and applies, in a sense, to both the skald/speaker, the “wanker” (*Selected Poems*, 242) in the poem and, ultimately, to Harrison himself as writer. In ‘Me Tarzan’ the situation seems to have developed beyond the conflation of verse and onanism, as the bodiless head suggests, for if we hear the pun on “poking” it seems that there’s a suggestion that the scholarship-boy’s sexuality has been all but reduced to his temporal activity. Maybe this kind of analysis is too fanciful but the validity of this kind of approach is certainly suggested by his work. For example the scholarship-boy persona reveals in one poem that the father-figure had dubbed him “Paganinny”, saying: “Wi’ ’air like that you ought to wear a skirt!”, (*Selected Poems*, 139) thus reducing the boy to tears, and in the sonnet ‘Currents’ the gendered division between the public world of men and the private world of women certainly suggests just how ingrained working-class constructions of masculinity can be. The speaker has refused to eat from the tub larded with his father’s sweat and the insulted father spits out: “Next Sunday you can stay ’ome wi’ yer mother!” (*Selected*

<sup>38</sup> It is interesting that this tired old formulation was integral to many programmes in the 1980’s, in particular Carla Lane’s television sit-com, *Bread*, screened on BBC1. One son of the family was a poet . . . and effeminate, and indecisive, and ineffectual, etc.

<sup>39</sup> *Rubbish*. Uncollected poem. Published in *New Statesman*, 2nd March 1984. 26.

*Poems*, 151) Sex, of course, was one of the twin taboo subjects that can be a source of so much embarrassment in the father/son relationship, the other being death, the “twin taboos” at the heart of another poem, ‘Grey Matter’ (*Selected Poems*, 138).

By working against the gendered division of society Harrison is attempting to confront the kind of prejudice and self-divisions that working-class constructions of masculinity can lead to by trying to show that being a poet is only one part of being a person for, when he says in ‘v.’:

It was more a working marriage that I'd meant,  
a blend of masculine and feminine (*Selected Poems*, 244)

he is suggesting that we should all accept both the skald within, (are we all skalds?) and the skin, in other words the allegedly *other*. Given that a fundamental premise of ‘v.’ is that the confrontation between skald and skin works, in a sense, as a metaphorical parallel to the divisions prevalent in the nation as a whole then this kind of acceptance is vital. It is quite clear that the skin is presented as the *alter ego* of the speaker, *alter ego* being from the Latin for ‘other I’. An obvious implication of this is that we can never think of the first-person voice in a poem as *being* Harrison himself — the voice can only ever be a representation of one aspect of Harrison’s poetical imagination. The second thing to say about this is that the device of the *alter ego* is a particularly apposite technique for conveying both a sense of disjunction and the need for reconciliation. Given that every human word implies a real or imaginary other to whom the word is uttered, Walter J. Ong has argued that

it also implies that the speaker has a kind of otherness within himself. He participates in the other to whom he speaks, and it is this underlying participation which makes communication possible. The human speaker can speak to the other precisely because he himself is not purely self, but is somehow also other. His own ‘I’ is haunted by the shadow of a “thou” which it itself casts and which it can never exorcize.<sup>40</sup>

Ong continues by suggesting that this I / thou relationship is a kind of fracture, a “limitation inside our own beings.”<sup>41</sup> It is, however, a fracture which paradoxically allows a way to overcome this limitation for it is a fracture

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<sup>40</sup> Walter J. Ong. ‘Voice as Summons for Belief: Literature, Faith, and the Divided Self.’ *The Barbarian Within and other fugitive essays and studies*. New York: Macmillan: 1968, 52.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

which comes from our bearing vicariously within ourselves the other with whom we must commune, and who must commune with us, too, and thereby compensate for the rift, the limitation, in our persons. The other within must hear all, for he already knows all, and only if this other, this *thou*, hears, will *I* become comprehensible to myself.<sup>42</sup>

The alternative in 'v.' is the situation that the speaker claims is the skin's condition:

'You piss-artist skinhead cunt, you wouldn't know  
and it doesn't fucking matter if you do,  
the skin and poet united fucking Rimbaud  
but the *autre* that *je est* is fucking you.' (*Selected Poems*, 242)

'The *other* that *I am* is fucking you', says the speaker to the skin. At first sight the inference is straightforward — if the skin cannot tolerate the *other* in himself then it is no wonder that he will find it impossible to tolerate the *other* that other people represent. The speaker's appeal is for each of us to be aware of, and accept, the sometimes contradictory elements that comprise us. His awareness of the naiveté of such a liberal-moralist position is suggested, perhaps, by the fact that the skin all but ignores him. Harrison's interrogation of the persona leads us to another interpretation of the line as it seems to consist of a somewhat more personal plea to the skin: 'don't allow yourself to be fucked by the poetical side of yourself (i.e. me) as together we could be as united as Rimbaud'. While Harrison's urgings seem very laudable there is no denying that they seem to sit a little uneasily with the swearing competition: he seems to be keen to show that "behind the cissy poet is still a 'real man' who can trade swear-words with the best of them"<sup>43</sup>. Yet there is perhaps an explanation in literary tradition as the confrontation between the skald and the skin has an interesting correspondence with the ancient tradition of 'flyting'. Harrison's 'v.' has something in common with, or even owes something directly to, this tradition. Flyting is the tradition of exchanging ritual insults, or swearing-matches. That Harrison knows of this tradition is shown by his reference to William Dunbar, one of flyting's leading practitioners, in an early review in 1970. In this Harrison criticises Hugh MacDiarmid: "For all his love of the *makars* he has never learnt from the marvellous Dunbar and Henryson to move from aureation to lewd colloquialism, from fun to philosophy, with their formal grace and brilliance".<sup>44</sup> It could even

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>43</sup> Woodcock. 'Classical Vandalism', 62.

<sup>44</sup> Harrison. 'Beating the Retreat', 95.

be a description of the verse Harrison himself would begin to write as his career developed. Other evidence that Harrison knew of flyting is suggested by his use of the metaphor of the stuttering scold in 'On Not Being Milton' (*Selected Poems*, 112). He uses this to suggest that his own Leeds accent would insist on the right to be heard. The interesting thing about this is that the word "scold" is an example of the process in which words that were originally male or ambisexual have become feminised over a period of time. According to Geoffrey Hughes in his excellent study *Swearing: A Social History of Foul Language, Oaths and Profanity in English* (1991) "scold" has its origins in *skald*, the Old Norse word for a poet with probable associations of a lampooner which possibly derive from the practise of flyting".<sup>45</sup> In the context of 'v.', however, the interesting aspect of this is that flyting provides a model for the competitive element and the desire to wound with words: "The Old English root *flitan* includes the broader senses of 'to contend or strive", hence the competitive element, and from the earliest times the word had a strong verbal association, meaning 'to chide, wrangle or scold' ".<sup>46</sup> Hughes continues:

The Old Norse root, *flyta*, seems initially to be restricted to a heroic ambience [i.e. an argument between good and evil]. In this brand of flyting, the insults are particularly provocative, designed, to use another Northern word, to *egg* the opponent into action. Although the language is often gross, even grotesque and astonishingly scatological, there is also a certain element of play. Skill in barbed insult, dexterity in the wounding phrase, is very much part of heroic language of the North, where the complexity of word-play reaches astonishing proportions in skaldic verse, which was delivered *ex tempore*. It is the verbal equivalent of virtuoso sword-play."<sup>47</sup>

What is interesting is that this tradition of ritual insult obtained at the same time as the quite contrary convention of reticence, a quality considered a virtue in ancient Germanic society. Hughes argues that it seems likely that the acceptability of flyting in a relatively well mannered and moderate linguistic regime suggests that it had a kind of safety-valve function. This is what seems to be happening in 'v.' — the confrontation between skald and skin offers some kind of release for the tension that their encounter generates. That is not to suggest, however, that in flyting we might see an exact parallel with their confrontation but rather that the connections are too obvious to dismiss.

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<sup>45</sup> Geoffrey Hughes. *Swearing: A Social History of Foul Language, Oaths and Profanity in English*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991, 220. Hereafter referred to as *Swearing*.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

Flyting is traceable back to the “skaldic tirades”<sup>48</sup> of Erik Skallagrimsson, through the medieval debate poems *The Owl and the Nightingale* (c.1250) and Chaucer’s *Parlement of Foulys* (c.1382). Hughes tells us that in James Kinsley’s 1979 edition of Dunbar, flyting was described “(somewhat tamely) as ‘a blend of primitive literary criticism and lampoon apparently popular in fifteenth and sixteenth-century Scotland’ ”.<sup>49</sup> In a 1932 edition of Dunbar’s poetry a certain W. Mackay Mackensie defined the genre as a “verbal tournament *à outrance* ”.<sup>50</sup> As Hughes notes, Mackensie’s term seems more fitting than Kinsley’s since it reminds us that “the roots of flyting lie in competition and in the demonstration of skill, not solely in personal execration.”<sup>51</sup> This is in keeping with Harrison’s own view, as his comments about MacDiarmid attest. This combination is, in a sense, built-in in ‘v.’, in that the flyting by the skald and skin takes place in a crafted poem and, furthermore, the ability of the skin to wound the speaker is graphically clear. He also effects it with some humour. To give just one example in ‘v.’, the skin’s scathing observation “*Yeah, ah bet yer wrote a poem, yer wanker you!*” (*Selected Poems*, 242) is received with considerable laughter by the audience at the screening, as is Harrison’s intention presumably, in that it undercuts the poet-persona. It might also remind us of Harrison’s often referred to music-hall and Pantomime inheritance. In this instance the poet persona is the feed, the straight-man to the skin who represents the comic. The skin’s line is so effective because it embodies elements of real speech. At the risk of stating the obvious this is essential if a poet chooses to incorporate expletives in a poem. In this instance the effect is achieved by Harrison starting the line with the isolated strong stress of “*Yeah*”. The rest of the line is then a regular iambic line. Simple and effective.

In the examples that Hughes offers what comes over very clearly is a similar blend of technical skill and invective, what Hughes describes as “the fine art of savage insult”<sup>52</sup>. This is clear, he suggests, in such famous Scots pieces as *The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy* (c.1503), and *The Flyting of Montgomerie and Polwart* (c.1585), for example. Dunbar was a fascinating figure, a highly educated writer with courtly connections, a Franciscan preaching friar and a priest in the King’s service. Kennedy, who had similar academic qualifications, was greatly admired as a poet, and was of royal blood. Given the background of the protagonists, and the co-mingling of the sophisticated and the foul, the high and the low, in the texts, it is

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 119.



safe to suggest that they were intended for a sophisticated, not a 'common' audience, as Hughes notes: "Montgomerie and Polwart flyted one another in a variety of metres and forms which were designed to demonstrate their versatility to the court audience for whom the whole exercise was presumably staged."<sup>53</sup>

The fact that they occur in Scotland, a country with a fierce religious tradition against profanity, makes them even more striking, especially when we consider the content of these pieces. For example some of the language in *The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy* is astonishing. Dunbar begins by explaining the catastrophes that would occur should he choose to flyte. These range from burning seas, eclipsed moons, to shattered rocks. This conventionally flowery opening provokes from Kennedy the insult "Dirtin [filthy] Dunbar".<sup>54</sup> He continues:

Fantastik fule . . .  
 Ignorant elf, aip owll irregular  
 Skaldit [scabby] skaitbird and commoun skamelar [sponger],  
 wan fukkit funling [ill-conceived foundling]<sup>55</sup>

This is essentially the tone of the piece: personal; savage; insulting. But it is also virtuosic linguistically and metrically and in another important respect it also links to the echoes that we might detect in Harrison's verse of an Old English/Middle English alliterative metre. The similarities and correspondences between Kennedy's harsh consonantal sounds such as 'k', 'c' and 'sk', and the alliteration of 'f', and Harrison's opening section of 'v.', for example, where we find lines such as "butcher, publican, and baker, now me bard" (*Selected Poems*, 236) and "shored slack, crushed shale, smashed prop" (*Selected Poems*, 236), are clear.

In respect of the flyting we see that Kennedy's personal savagery is easily matched by Dunbar: "Cuntbitten crawdon [pox-smitten coward] ",<sup>56</sup> he ripostes. Dunbar's reply has an additional resonance of masculine contempt since "the sense of 'coward' derives from a cock which will no longer fight. The singular adjective intensifies the insult by playing on the various meanings of *cock*."<sup>57</sup> This attack on masculine prowess reminds us of the basis for the skin's jibe of "*wanker*" — a *real* man wouldn't write poetry, he would fight! No wonder,

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 121.

then, that in reply Kennedy calls Dunbar “ ‘A schit but wit [A shit without wit]’ ”.<sup>58</sup> Other lurid examples are those found in the *Flyting of Montgomerie and Polwart* (c.1585) where there is the invitation to “kis þe cunt of ane kow” (L817), while the *Answer to Kingis Flyting* (1535-6) contains: “Ay fukkand [fucking] lyke ane furious Fornicatour”.<sup>59</sup>

My consideration of flyting, particularly in respect of its ‘Northernness’,<sup>60</sup> might help to explain, at least in part, the linguistic and formal antecedents as well as the specifically male orientation of the confrontation in ‘v.’. The graveyard itself is represented as a male environment, in a sense, in that the poem depends on an emphasis on male employment/unemployment. The presentation of the skin, the focus on the jobs of the deceased and the speaker’s discomfiture as to his role attests to this. These are some reasons why theirs should be a male contest, then, but this does not really explain why the predominant swearword used, “cunt” — 17 times in all — should be one derived from the sexual parts of women. Feminists would argue that this is evidence that supports a view of language as a “male derived system of chauvinistic bias”<sup>61</sup>. It follows from this that since language is generated in such a culture then there has developed in males’ swearing a dominance of feminine-derived terms such as ‘cunt’ and ‘tit’. Clearly there is still a sense that swearing is “the language of power and assertion”,<sup>62</sup> and that swearing is a male thing to do (though its deployment is becoming more and more distributed between the sexes). Clearly swearing can be violent, a form of linguistic fighting. However, the curious thing about this is that “gender of origin and application do not relate at all.”<sup>63</sup> By this Hughes means that the feminine-derived terms are typically used against men. In the case of animal words, however, origin and application follow logically. By that I mean that, typically, words such as ‘cow’, ‘bitch’ and ‘sow’ are applied to females and ‘pig’ and ‘swine’ to males. Why men should choose to insult other men by likening them to an extremely personal part of a woman I feel unqualified to judge though there seems to be a case for arguing that the male use of feminine-derived words is evidence of a “phallogocentric dispensation”.<sup>64</sup> Perhaps it is to belittle men, to

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>60</sup> Harrison has referred to the poets Henryson, Dunbar and Douglas as “northern internationalists”, according to Michael Kustow’s introduction ‘Poet.Becomes Theatre-Maker’ in *Tony Harrison: Plays Three*. London: Boston: Faber and Faber, 1996, xxiv.

<sup>61</sup> Hughes. *Swearing*, 206.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 206.

demean them? In the case of 'v.' the reasons are more straightforward. What we have to bear in mind is the extent to which Harrison's choice of swear words is affected by metrical considerations. Given that he often needs to use a single syllable expletive he has very few options other than 'cunt' and 'fuck'. Moreover 'cunt' is preferable in that it is a noun, not a verb (to 'fuck') or adverbial ('fucking') in nature, hence it's easier to close a line with it. Other examples of rhythmical emphasis are Harrison's interplay of short and long words such as "yer fucking 'art'!" (*Selected Poems*, 241), "t' fucking dole" (*Selected Poems*, 241) and the combination of a long adjective and a short noun such as in "ungrateful cunts" (*Selected Poems*, 242) and "you piss-artist skinhead cunt" (*Selected Poems*, 242).

In keeping with the virtuosic element of flyting, with its emphasis on verbal vigour and display, it comes as no surprise that there is a considerable degree of technical accomplishment in Harrison's use of swear words in his verse — their deployment is anything but gratuitous. I have talked about the language of the confrontation, but it is as well to take a look at how Harrison uses swearing in the rest of the poem, as part of the narrative of 'v.'. These examples usually take the form of reported speech in that Harrison is recounting what he sees.

In 'v.' the first example of this occurs relatively early in the poem, in stanza eight.

Harrison describes how

Subsidence makes the obelisks all list.  
One leaning left's marked FUCK, one right's marked . . . SHIT  
sprayed by some peeved supporter who was pissed. (*Selected Poems*, 236)

The impact of this is quite as one would expect. Prior to this we have read a preponderance of regular lines. This contributes to the effect of the expletives and this effect is heightened by their capitalisation. On the one hand this reflects the way that words such as these are literally sprayed onto things, i.e. in capital letters. It also draws attention to the connections between an apparently personal situation and wider capitalist society, as was the purpose of "Art's" capitalisation in 'On Not Being Milton' (*Selected Poems*, 112). In 'v.' the point seems to be that language can be a commodity. This is the inference of lines that tell us that the inscriptions on gravestones included "rhymes whatever length they could afford" (*Selected Poems*, 237). Another reason for the capitalisation of the expletives is that Harrison is keen to fracture complacency not merely verbally but also visually, in terms of the typographical context. Once again he is working against the idea of poetry as polished and seamless — its effect should not be pretty, nor its appearance, not if a writer is keen to establish a connection

between the word and the world. The effect of the expletives is also enhanced by their placing in the line. Harrison is obviously keen for his swear words to have the resonances of everyday speech and the rhythm of the line enforces this. There is, for example, a strong stress on both “FUCK” and “SHIT” and the metrical weight of this is enhanced by the pause which is enacted immediately before “SHIT”. The rich verbal texture of iambics and expletives, the ever present conflict between the literary and the allegedly non-literary, is present in more subtle ways than just the co-mingling of the poetic and the demotic, however, as the example above reveals: “list” (or rather ‘Liszt’) is rhyming slang for “pissed” so in this instance it works simultaneously on two distinct levels, the linguistic and the political, as Harrison has embodied the theme of conflicting modes of articulation in the form of the poem. Moreover we might also note the implicit humour that we find here, something that the alliteration of the last line reveals. It is seldom mentioned but the humorous strand in Harrison’s verse, though bleak, is certainly there, as we shall see in his other work.

Metrical effects are also noticeable when the speaker lists some examples of the demotic to be found in the graveyard. These are included in the line: “to CUNT, PISS, SHIT and (mostly) FUCK!” (*Selected Poems*, 237). This is the last line of the stanza and it is interesting that this short line of eight syllables is the first irregular line since stanza ten. In fact, since the swearing in stanza eight there has only been one irregular line. The next nine are irregular — it is as if the unruliness of the demotic has thrown everything out of kilter. In this short line the expletives all carry strong stresses, reminding us of the “*Cunt! Cunt! Cunt!*” of ‘Next Door II’ (*Selected Poems*, 130) and in a curious way this short line almost seems to enact the previous line’s assertion that line length might be dependant on having the money to pay for it as Harrison is, ironically, offering a shortened line of only eight syllables.

Sometimes Harrison will organise his syntax in order to give greater emphasis to the expletives. This is achieved quite subtly. In fact all the examples I have offered seem to be voiced with a kind of quiet, muted tone of voice. This is what we find in stanza 20 where we have the example of “CUNTS” (*Selected Poems*, 238). Once again it is capitalised and emphasised with a strong stress. The organisation of the syntax is apparent here in that the impact of “CUNTS” is heightened by the way that the subclause, “in a reddish colour”, forces us to pause slightly, thus creating a degree of anticipation before “CUNTS” resolves the line. Here are the lines in question:

The prospects for the present aren't too grand  
 When a swastika with NF (National Front)'s  
 sprayed on a grave, to which another hand  
 has added, in a reddish colour, CUNTS. (*Selected Poems*, 238)

It is clear that swearing shocks, then, which is not too surprising. This propensity to make the reader uncomfortable, to *épater les bourgeois*, is part of Harrison's agenda of breaking down arbitrary distinctions between high and low art. He also uses the expletives to get attention, the rule-breaking that they represent indicate points of contact with others who share the same "enemies who want to offend or drive off a given authority".<sup>65</sup> Thus for the reader/listener the expletives are badges of non-affiliation from, "of not-being-like (because not talking like) that authority."<sup>66</sup>

Harrison uses the swearing in 'v.' in a similar manner as he does elsewhere in his verse, to mix high and low tones. In a fine example of mixed registers the skin says "*Go and fuck yourself with cri-de-coeur!*" (*Selected Poems*, 241). In another instance swearing is combined with the skin's inability to aspirate (aspire to?) an 'h'. Thus he is able to create a marvellous alliterative effect such as in: "*this fucking 'aberdasher Appleyard!*" (*SP*, p241). Other examples of mixing high and low tones are found in rhymes like that between the rather genteel "affront" and the somewhat more elemental "CUNT" (*Selected Poems*, 249), or the subtle rhyming of "book" and "fuck" (*Selected Poems*, 237). This is subtle because on one level the rhyme serves to diminish the cultural status of "book" but on a deeper level it enacts for the reader the same phonetic dilemma that the rhyme of "gas" and "pass" posed in *Book Ends* (*Selected Poems*, 126). Is it a full rhyme or a half rhyme?

How then are we to consider the function of swearing in Harrison's verse? Well, whatever we think of it the question is redundant, in a sense, as the poem could not exist without it. This is because for Harrison the poem *is* the style, in that the poem performs its subject, and in this sense Harrison's use of expressive language generally, and swearing in particular, is close to Brecht's notion of the 'gestic'. Brecht's 'gestic' is expressive language which captures the gestures of speech, voice or attitude of mind through inflections or idioms which themselves delineate these elements. This clearly offers dramatic possibilities, as Brecht himself indicated: "It must be remembered that the bulk of my work was designed for the

<sup>65</sup> Stephen Burt. 'High Windows and Four-Letter Words'. *Boston Review* 1997, Internet download, <<http://bostonreview.mit.edu/BR21.5/burt.html>> Hereafter referred to as 'High Windows and Four-Letter Words'.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

theatre; I was always thinking of actual delivery. And for this delivery (whether of prose or of verse) I had worked out a quite definite technique. I called it 'gestic' ".<sup>67</sup> In some respects 'gestic' has a correspondence with the obsolete English word 'gest' (meaning 'bearing, carriage, mien'), but it is more than that, as John Willet explains: "It is at once gesture and gist, attitude and point: one aspect of the relation between two people, studied singly, cut to essentials and physically or verbally expressed. It excludes the psychological, the subconscious, the metaphysical unless they can be conveyed in concrete terms."<sup>68</sup> Harrison's concern for the expressive quality of syntax has a clear purpose in that it allows a dramatic sense of a voice speaking from a definable position or attitude, embodied in a specific tone of voice. And this relates directly to his desire to dramatise the contradictions of the speaker as a speaker specified within history, history being presented as a process that is experienced at the individual level, rather than in the abstract. It is in this context that we might consider Harrison's use of Gray's *Elegy* as a model for 'v.'

Though the tone of the poem's rhyming quatrains might remind us of Gray's poem, Harrison's elegy written in an urban graveyard is really more of an 'urban blues', a bitter and angry blue-collar lament rather than a white-collar plaintive sigh. Indeed though Gray did mention the poverty of the rural people in his elegy, noting that:

Chill Penury repressed their noble rage,  
And froze the genial current of the soul <sup>69</sup>

which suggests a modest degree of empathy for the fate of those buried in the graveyard, he then followed these lines with the following stanza:

Full many a gem of purest ray serene  
The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear:  
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen  
And waste its sweetness on the desert air. <sup>70</sup>

William Empson criticised this stanza for "seducing the reader into thinking that 'we ought to accept the injustice of society as we do the inevitability of death' "<sup>71</sup>, a reading with which I

<sup>67</sup> Bertolt Brecht. 'On Rhymeless Verse With Irregular Rhythms'. *Bertolt Brecht: Poems*. Eds. Willett, J, and Manheim, Reid, 465.

<sup>68</sup> J Willett. *The Theatre Of Bertolt Brecht*, 175.

<sup>69</sup> James Reeves, ed. *The Complete English Poems of Thomas Gray*. London: Heinemann, 1973, 63. Hereafter referred to as *The Complete English Poems of Thomas Gray*.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

concur. This represents a fundamental difference between Gray and Harrison's perspective, Harrison's poem being quite the opposite of Gray's in terms of political consciousness. The point of this is not to criticise Gray (not that I think he should be excused) but to emphasise that Harrison's intention in alluding to, and using the metrical form of, Gray's poem is to draw attention to the way that oppressions and subjugations become culturally internalised by the dominant bourgeois forms. This is challenged in 'v.' by that poem's appropriation of Gray as a model, a challenge enacted, in a sense, by the confrontation between the poet and the graffiti-spraying skin. We can understand this in terms of it representing a dramatic parallel of how the dynamic forged as a result of the relationship between Harrison's form and content dramatises and enacts the linguistic war he is waging — the skin is the element in society that breaks the bourgeois taboos just as Harrison's voices of conflict challenge the hegemonic supremacy of the forms of classical prosody. This is the main point. In Gray's poem the subject is not allowed to speak — in 'v.' the structure and the feel of the elegiac form persist but are constantly threatened and destabilised by the voices of conflict in the poem. The tension this generates is a dramatic parallel to the tensions of mid-eighties Britain. It is in this respect that we can talk in terms of the whole poem being a 'gest'. This fusion, this integration of form and content, might even amount to a defining characteristic of political poetry since as an aspiration it is clearly something that other poets attempt. Sean O'Brien, for example, has commented that he too "wants a poem that's there going on, which represents its subject to the world without the kind of literary gap between the idea and its reflection".<sup>72</sup> He continues, suggesting characteristics of a form that could achieve this in such a way as to remind us of 'v.': "... a narrative monologue is a suitable form for that because you can make use [ . . . ] of autobiographical materials but you can fictionalise them."<sup>73</sup> For O'Brien, then, it follows that "... The politicised imagination isn't just a question of subject matter, a question of writing about certain issues that might be categorised as political, in inverted commas, but a question of technique, of embodying the politics in verse, of rendering the verse itself as political matter".<sup>74</sup> This has a direct bearing on what political poetry might mean to him. For O'Brien, poems "are not supposed to be talking about their subjects, they are supposed to *be* their subjects. I think of poets as heretics, taking the belief that the word

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., introduction, 17.

<sup>72</sup> O'Brien. *Third Ear*. In Woodcock. 'Poet as Heretic'.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

can be the deed.”<sup>75</sup> There are obvious connections with Harrison’s verse, then, and we can only conclude that the attempt to formulate some kind of distinction between the ‘political’ and the ‘poetical’ clearly seems quite at odds with what Harrison is doing so successfully — that is, creating a kind of speaking voice in verse in which no such separation is to be made. His poems, at their best, express the dialectical relation between personal experience and the social process, individual perception and history, in such an integrated manner that ‘the poetry’ and ‘the politics’ are no longer separable aspects but the same thing. The idea that these two elements are as one is the essence of Harrison’s politicised poetics, a strategy that forms the bedrock of both his attempt to dissolve the arbitrary separations between low and high art and his creation of a sense of shared intimacy.

When we consider swearing in this context of struggle and re-appropriation it can be argued that though the ‘common-sense’ perception is that swearing is offensive, and usually indicative of an impoverished vocabulary, it is also possible to argue that we can see swearing as the revelation of a suppressed language. In terms of poetry this is, perhaps, the only valid way to evaluate the expletives. The speech of the skin then becomes another suppressed tongue that Harrison is giving expression to in the same way that he cleared a literary space for Patience Kershaw (*Selected Poems*, 124) and Cornish (*Selected Poems*, 121), for example.

The typical interpretations of swearing are well known. One is that it is indicative of a greater degree of secularisation in society and, in fact, the history of swearing can be crudely reduced to the statement that whereas “people used mainly to swear *by* or *to*, [they now] swear mostly *at*.”<sup>76</sup> Another explanation of swearing is that it takes the form of taboo breaking. More often it is regarded as somehow ‘common’, as evidence of a lack of breeding and of vocabulary, a lack of language and thus constituting a cry for help. Of course it is true that habitual swearers have expletives as their *lingua franca* and as such their speech is characterised by a proliferation of what a dictionary might term “empty intensifiers”,<sup>77</sup> such as ‘it was fucking cold’, or ‘bloody hard work’, for example. But to dismiss the use of ‘bloody’ and ‘fucking’ in these examples merely as “empty intensifiers”, as grammatical aberrations, and define them in terms of a lack does nothing to suggest the importance that the speaker attaches to the emotion that he/she is attempting to convey. In this instance the use of the

<sup>75</sup> Woodcock. ‘Poet as Heretic’.

<sup>76</sup> Hughes. *Swearing*, 4.

<sup>77</sup> According to Robert Winder “One of the tail-end definitions in the dictionary says that ‘fuck’ is an empty intensifier”. Robert Winder. ‘Highly literary and deeply vulgar’. *The Independent* 13 October 1994, 18. Hereafter referred to as ‘Highly literary’.



expletives is evidence of a presumably non-standard, (though standard to some) form of expression — it represents a communication of severity. The point I am trying to make is simply that to always evaluate swearing in terms of a middle-class linguistic paradigm is to risk suppressing a rich vein of speech activity. These explanations are all true to a greater or lesser degree but the explanation of swearing that I am interested in here, along with the poem's virtuoso display, is the user's intention to wound.

One curious element of swearing is that, when used in anger, most people use swearwords that they know to be outdated. They are more interested in the word's ability to wound and the linguistic pleasure they will get from the utterance. One example of this would be the term 'bastard' which, historically, was used to denote illegitimacy. Meanings change over time, or simply lose currency, yet though meanings change the stigma attached to particular words is transferable. This is understandable given that the ultimate function of swearwords is to wound. Indeed, swearwords serve as a shorthand for a variety of assaults on a person's character—the point being to emphatically suggest loathing. Take 'fuck', for example. It is clear that its use seldom has anything to do with fornication. In 'v.', for example, the skin twice rhymes "book" with "fuck", (*Selected Poems*, 237 and 242) producing a conflation that can only convey utter contempt. Like most swear words the attraction for the speaker is the ability that the word has to wound and hurt, and the linguistic pleasure the speaker gets from speaking the word. 'Bastard' is particularly good in this respect. So is 'Fucking'. Sometimes more than one swearword is used in conjunction with another, as in the case of 'he's a complete fucking bastard'. It is unlikely, however, that the assailant means that the person is an illegitimate who is actually engaged at that precise moment in the process of fornication. What is occurring is something very different, as the following example shows. Hughes suggests that "the caustic observation 'Snooks is a penis of the first order, and his sidekick Smithers is a real little nipple' has no impact, since *penis* and *nipple* are not terms of insult, whereas their low register synonyms *prick* and *tit* are emotionally charged terms, the more so when accompanied by *little*."<sup>78</sup> The key point with this is that the "lower register" terms are more emotionally charged. This is interesting in respect of 'v.', it certainly seems to have an emotional sincerity, an emotional truth that an expletive-deleted language does not have . . . at least from a working-class perspective! And this is the nub. Expletives are

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<sup>78</sup> Hughes. *Swearing*, 22.

political to some, merely common and vulgar to others yet the latter response is itself charged with political currents, as we will see when we consider the response of the press to 'v.'

Rather than consigning swearing to the realms of the prosaic there is an argument that says that swearing warrants being raised above this. Though it is true to say that most swearing makes no attempt at originality it has in common with poetry the use of a highly charged language and a very metaphorical character: "extreme, pointed effects are created by alliteration or by playing off different registers of the word-hoard against each other, and rhythm is very important".<sup>79</sup> This is clearly the case in Harrison's 'v.', as we have seen. What seems to be unquestionable is that swearing has literary qualities, at least if we strive to move away from a class-bound idea about poetry and art. G. K. Chesterton was in no doubt as regards the plurality of poetry commenting that "The one stream of poetry which is constantly flowing is slang".<sup>80</sup> His appreciation of the demotic is endorsed in MacNeice's *Conversation* (1929). He writes that " 'Ordinary men:

Put up a barrage of common sense to baulk  
Intimacy, but by mistake interpolate  
Swear-words like roses in their talk<sup>81</sup>

Both writers presumably enjoyed the energy of swearing, the very life of it but, besides the emotional appeal of swearing, the venting of anger, and its unmistakable intimacy, it is clear that the uttering of expletives affords a considerable phonetic pleasure. Noting that the most used terms in English now start with the letters 'b' and 'f' Hughes asks whether it is the case that "voiced bilabial plosives and fricatives are the most satisfactory phonetic expression of emotional release? Or does the alliterating factor come into play?"<sup>82</sup> To which I would say: both. As, perhaps, might Mrs Mary Whitehouse if she could override her prejudices long enough. Ironically even she has an ear for poetry, it seems, though I feel that she would fail to make the connection. In a letter to *The Independent* she writes: "The four letter word, referring as it does to sexual intercourse has within its very sound, let alone context, a harshness, even brutality, that negates and destroys the nature of the love, sensitivity and

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>80</sup> Quoted in Hughes. *Swearing*, 22.

<sup>81</sup> Quoted in Hughes. *Swearing*, 22.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 23.

commitment which is or should be, its very essence.”<sup>83</sup> Which is, I suppose, precisely the reason why ‘fuck’ (or a variant) is the expletive of choice for the committed swearer. Clearly Mrs Whitehouse has felt the power of the voiced bilabial plosives and fricatives. Sound, then, is very important. Equally important is rhythm.

Billy Connelly, the Scottish comedian, once commented that he’d tried to drop the swearing from his act but had to reinstate it because he had lost all his sense of rhythm<sup>84</sup>. The implications for Harrison’s verse, at least for ‘v.’, would be the same. More generally the importance of rhythm in swearing is clear from the way that words are often broken up, or even stuck together “into stress components in order to fit a particular pattern, regardless of dislocations of meaning”.<sup>85</sup> This is as old as swearing itself, presumably. For example Hughes tells us that “the staple alliterative metre of medieval poetry also facilitated some memorable conjunctions, such as the reference (in the Chester Miracle play c 1500) to a ‘shitten-arsed shrew’.”<sup>86</sup> Hughes provides more modern examples of how rhythm can dislocate sense such as “*Not bloody likely!, abso-bloody-lutely* and the splendid Australian syncopation *kanga-bloody-roo* [ . . . ] This phenomenon is also known as the integrated adjective”.<sup>87</sup> This is also something that Harrison uses, consciously or otherwise. One example of this is found in ‘v.’ when the skin says “*St fucking Peter*” (*Selected Poems*, 242) and another in ‘Me Tarzan’ where he writes “*Cissy-bleeding-ro’s.*” (*Selected Poems*, 116) This kind of thing is an element of real speech, perhaps a specifically Northern trait, but real speech nonetheless.

The main charge against swearing is that it is ‘vulgar’ but it is interesting that this word has undergone a significant shift. The older meaning is “common, ordinary or vernacular language used by the majority”, but now there seems to be a more class-bound sense of the language used by those “not reckoned as belonging to good society”, or “lacking in refinement and good taste, uncultured, ill-bred”, as the OED defines the various categories.<sup>88</sup> In the context of a poet like Harrison this is interesting precisely because these kinds of formulation amount to a separation of language into that suitable for public expression (refined and cultured) and that to be suppressed, buried away and categorised as low, vulgar and, implicitly, working-class. Hence we might be able to see Harrison’s use of

<sup>83</sup> Mary Whitehouse, letter to *The Independent* Monday 2 November 1987, reprinted in v., 2nd ed. Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1994, 68. Hereafter referred to as v.

<sup>84</sup> Profile of Billy Connelly. *South Bank Show*. ITV October 1992.

<sup>85</sup> Hughes. *Swearing*, 24.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

swearing in 'v.' as being as much to do with blurring any distinction between the public and the private by showing how the allegedly private (the swearing of the poet and the skin) actually serve to constitute a new arena of communication and allow a considerable exchange of views, however raucous. In this respect the use of swearing in 'v.' helps to mediate and embodies the divisions of culture felt at the level of both the private individual and the wider social domains. This is amplified by the example of the author James Kelman. In an interview in *The Independent*, Kelman rounded on those who criticised his language in his fiction: "The real issue is to do with suppression, the standard English literary voice won't allow it. I mean, the term 'fuck' can be used in about 17 different ways, one of which is the cause of its exclusion."<sup>89</sup> In his acceptance speech for the Booker Prize in 1994 Kelman added: "My culture and my language have the right to exist, and no one has the authority to dismiss that."<sup>90</sup> In the same article the reporter Robert Winder reminds us that Roddy Doyle, whose novel *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* is the biggest-selling Booker winner ever (320,000 copies in paperback) "has not attracted the least opprobrium for his benign love of earthy slang. In a tender moment of reconciliation towards the end of *The Van*, the young Jimmy Rabbitt murmurs to his father: 'I love you, you fucking gobshite.' It is not merely a coincidence that this impish and good-humoured variety of swearing goes down more easily than Kelman's harsher, less transigent and much more politicised version."<sup>91</sup> A similar fate to Kelman's seems to have befallen Harrison's 'v.', and for similar reasons, as we can see from a consideration of the press responses to the broadcast of the film of the poem. Initially it is worth reminding ourselves of the scale of the initial protest:

'Before transmission, the IBA received 32 letters expressing concern about the decision to show 'v.' Seventeen were from Conservative MPs and one from a Liberal MP. The majority of these appeared to have been prompted by a letter sent by Mary Whitehouse . . . A further 16 letters were received . . . ; 14 expressed concern and 2 were congratulatory'<sup>92</sup>

Whitehouse's letter, in which she described 'v.' as "this work of singular nastiness",<sup>93</sup> was one of a tiny number of letters written in protest at Channel Four's intention to screen the television

<sup>89</sup> Winder. 'Highly literary', 18.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>92</sup> 'Public Response to 'v.', extract from the IBA's case-study 'Why did we broadcast v.? *A case study on how the IBA made its decision, and how the public responded.* Independent Broadcasting Authority, 1988, v., 73.

<sup>93</sup> Mary Whitehouse, President of the *National Viewers' and Listeners' Association*, commenting on 'v'. Letter to *The Times* Monday 26 October 1987, v., 59.

film of Harrison's 'v.' in 1987. Despite the modest protest the right-wing press still saw fit to assume its typical role of defender of morals. At the forefront of this struggle was *The Daily Mail* who, under the heading "FOUR-LETTER TV POEM FURY", warned that Channel 4 planned a programme featuring "a torrent of four-letter filth".<sup>94</sup> It claimed that the screening would "unleash the most explicitly sexual language yet beamed into the nation's living rooms."<sup>95</sup> So concerned was the *Mail* for the moral rectitude of the nation (surely a glittering paradox given their characteristic homophobic, xenophobic, and sexist attitudes) that it bravely saw fit to quantify the threat: somewhat mixing its metaphors the *Mail* then warned that this "cascade of expletives", (*cascading*, not *beamed* it seems), "will pour out to viewers at the rate of two a minute during the 45 minute show". According to these figures we should expect to hear ninety expletives. *The Sun*<sup>96</sup> also suggests ninety words and even the *Sunday Times* is not immune from incompetent numeracy, suggesting that there are "47 expletives in the 448-line poem".<sup>97</sup> But if we do a quick survey of Harrison's use of swearing in *The School of Eloquence* and 'v.', however, we see that there are only 77 expletives in total — nineteen in *Eloquence* (as of September 1998) and fifty eight in 'v.', and that is if we really scour the texts to include words like "flaming" (*Selected Poems*, 116) and "git", "nigger" and "'oles"<sup>98</sup> in 'v.', and not just highlight the obvious expletives such as 'cunt' and 'fuck', which seems to have been the case with the *Mail* who couldn't even specify the most feared word.

Ironically enough omissions of this nature are not restricted to the tabloids. In Carol Rutter's *Permanently Barred* (1995) we are presented with a study of Harrison's poetry with barely any mention or consideration of the swearing. It is as if we are being offered a sanitised version, a bit like drinking alcohol free wine when we expected something with more of a kick. It is not that the swearing has been censored as such, more that it is curiously muted — six poems with expletives are included in the selection but no mention of the expletives is made in the notes. In fact in one instance Ms Rutter deliberately chooses not to quote the expletives in her commentary. In the notes to 'Book Ends II' she is keen to emphasise the "animosities, the ugly sarcasm" that are evident in the fractured relationship between the father-figure and the scholarship-boy. To illustrate this she quotes: " 'You're supposed to be

<sup>94</sup> John Deans and Garry Jenkins, 'Four-letter TV poem fury', *v.*, 40.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> No byline. 'Battle to ban shock poem'. *v.*, 42.

<sup>97</sup> Geordie Greig. 'Literati back TV poem attacked by MPs as "filth" '. *v.*, 51.

<sup>98</sup> The construction "'oles" I take as an abbreviation of 'arseholes'.

the bright boy'; 'it's not as if we're wanting verse.' ”<sup>99</sup> In the poem the father-figure is chiding the 'son' because he cannot find the words for his mother's gravestone. But Ms Rutter has re-ordered two separate couplets in order to give the expletive-free version. This is how the poem reads:

*Come on, it's not as if we're wanting verse.  
It's not as if we're wanting a whole sonnet!*

and

*You're supposed to be the bright boy at description  
and you can't tell them what the fuck to put! (Selected Poems, 127)*

I cannot help but think that she would have made her point more emphatically if she had quoted verbatim. Given the introductory nature of her book we should expect it to introduce the major characteristics of Harrison's verse, and swearing is one of them.

This kind of censorship has a more natural home in the *Mail*, however, a newspaper so in fear of the powers of expletives that they have to warn their readers that "The crudest, most offensive word is used 17 times."<sup>100</sup> Though the *Mail's* attempts at numerical accuracy might at other times warrant our approval, this particular attempt unfortunately founders on the rock of an incompetent numeracy. Moreover this fumbled attempt at precision is mirrored by a stunning lack of linguistic precision: the *Mail* will not spell out the word, not even hint with asterisks, as, for example, in the case of *M\*\*\**. Hence when it talks of "the crudest, most offensive word" just how are the pruriently curious to know precisely which word is meant? It is gratifyingly ironic, then, that the only logical way of being sure which is the most offensive word is by counting them! Hence we can only speculate, after the most prudent calculations, that the Mail's trumpeting as to the occurrence of the "crudest, most offensive word" actually refers to the use of 'cunt' or a variant of it — in 'v.', "cunt" appears fourteen times and "cunts" appears three times, making seventeen in all. The most commonly used expletive, however, is "fuck", or a variant. "Fuck" appears seven times, "fuckers" once, "fucks" once and "fucking" appears fifteen times, as the following table demonstrates.

<sup>99</sup> Rutter. *Permanently Bard*, 135.

<sup>100</sup> John Deans and Garry Jenkins. 'Four-letter TV poem fury'. v., 40.

Table 1.

Occurrence of swearing in *Eloquence*:

## Occurrence in 'v.':

Expletive	#	Poem	Expletive	#
balls	1	'Currents II'	cunt	14
bleeding	1	'Me Tarzan'	cunts	3
bloody	1	'Me Tarzan'	dick	1
bugger	1	'Rhubarbarians'	farts	2
buggers	1	'Them & [uz] II'	fuck	7
crap	1	'Working'	fuckers	1
cunt	3	'Next Door II'	fucks	1
flaming	1	'Me Tarzan'	fucking	15
fucking	1	'A Good Read'	nigger	1
knacker-bare	1	'Working'	'oles	1
pee	1	'Changing At York'	paki git	1
piss	1	'Aqua Mortis'	piss	1
pissed	2	'Divisions'/'Changing At York'	piss-artist	1
piss-up	1	'Divisions'	pissed	1
prick	1	'Wordlists I'	prick-tease	1
shit	1	'Me Tarzan'	shit	5
			wanker	2

Ostensibly the campaign against the screening (and the personal attacks on Harrison himself) originated in a sense of outrage at the apparent condoning of expletives by a national television company. It is clear, however, that the allegedly offensive words that are at the centre of the debate are known (with their meanings) to practically everyone in the country, save for very young children. As Bernard Levin pointed out they are subject to a strict taboo "which is based on the conviction that, first, the words are *not* known to anyone other than habitual users of them, and that, second, if they are spoken in ordinary conversation they may provoke no more than distaste, but if they are published, either physically in a newspaper or verbally on television or radio, they will have generally unspecified but very terrible consequences".<sup>101</sup> It is interesting that the initial publication of 'v.' in *The London Review of*

<sup>101</sup> Bernard Levin. 'An adult's garden of verse'. v., 52.

*Books* some two years earlier had signally failed to lead to the total disintegration of the moral fabric of the country. If the storm of protest was not about the power somehow embodied in the words themselves then just what was it about? A hint as to the basis of attacks like that of the *Mail's* is suggested by another error they made when they claimed that the epigraph that begins 'v.' was in fact a dedication to "miner's leader Arthur Scargill", as did the equally right-wing *Daily Express*.<sup>102</sup> It is actually a quote from Scargill's interview with John Mortimer.<sup>103</sup> This is interesting, not just because it reminds us of the potency of Scargill's image as a kind of Grand Bogeyman of the eighties, but also because the willingness to mis-interpret this is evidence alone of the political dimension of the campaign against 'v.' and, for that matter, Harrison himself.

In the *Sunday Telegraph* Derwent May argued that the epigraph from Scargill was "perhaps more apt than the poet knows. Harrison, like Scargill, is using his skill with words to impose a private fantasy on his listeners, not to elicit a hard, pure truth."<sup>104</sup> It is clear that Derwent May didn't like 'v.'. In his belief <sup>that</sup> it was "an unhealthy poem, in the sense that it seems to emerge from a rather disturbed and unpleasant state of mind", May is referring to the speaking voice's anger at finding his parents' graffitied grave. It is interesting that May is totally relaxed about his self-appointed powers of divinity regarding truth. It is this that enables him to accuse Harrison of deception, of 'imposing a fantasy on his listeners', as if he has a monopoly on 'truth'. What these right wing critics do not like about the poem is not the four letter words, the obscenities, the cascade/torrent/stream of expletives — the focus for their wrath is what they perceive as the political orientation of the poem.

The essentially political basis of this campaign encompassed many elements. The obscure Tory MP for Cannock and Burntwood, Mr Gerald Haworth, described Harrison as "another probable Bolshie poet seeking to impose his frustrations on the rest of us".<sup>105</sup> Another strand of criticism was that offered by Martyn Harris, writing in the *Daily Telegraph*.<sup>106</sup> He writes with a studied air of smug indifference, an essentially patronising attitude that suggests that he is quite above the debate but, for the sake of his readers, he will endeavour to explain it. These are his criticisms of Harrison's 'v.': "It is difficult to quote, not because of the obscenity, but the prolixity. Harrison notes, for instance, the word 'United' sprayed on his

<sup>102</sup> No byline. 'Scargill poem is the pits'. v., 42.

<sup>103</sup> Published in the *Sunday Times*. January 10. 1982.

<sup>104</sup> Derwent May. 'A note on the poem'. v., 65.

<sup>105</sup> Deans and Jenkins. 'Four-letter TV poem fury'. v., 41.

<sup>106</sup> Martyn Harris. 'To show V or not to show V'. v., 48.



parents' tomb, which is a poignant little image. But he then insists on explaining, over several stanzas, that it is poignant because although it *actually* refers to Leeds United FC, it *could also* be taken to refer to his parents' union in heaven, *or even* to the disunited nature of modern society". With an alarming lack of self-consciousness (but not a lack of italics) Harris's complaint is that: "Harrison is the kind of pedant who will never let an image unfold in the reader's mind, will never make a point once if he can make it three times, and like a pub bore will never let you go until he is *quite sure* you have got the joke."<sup>107</sup> Moreover it is Harrison's style, indeed his entire output, that is culpable. Since 1970, Harris argues, Harrison's poetry "has been humourlessly didactic, crammed with 'relevance' and shackled to relentless rhymes and rumty-tum rhythms, like a kind of politicised Pam Ayres."<sup>108</sup> To defend Harrison against such rabid charges would simply serve to dignify them so I shall restrict myself to the observation that it is interesting to note once again the fear that the right have for "relevance", for which we might read social and political comment. Harris, of course, is being elitist, he is implicitly positing a view of art that would have it removed from the socio-economic sphere. Moreover he also seems to be worried by Harrison's attempts to create a public poetry for the subtext of his criticisms is that if something has to be explained then it cannot have any real value.

Harris then goes on to compare Harrison's 'v.' with Philip Larkin's 'Sunny Prestatyn', a poem which, he claims, has much in common with Harrison's. He says that Larkin's poem "uses the same image of graffiti as its theme, makes essentially the same point about the desecration of an innocent past, and even uses a few dirty words — but does it with grace, wit and in 24 lines."<sup>109</sup> The compass of 'Sunny Prestatyn', however, is much more limited than the Harrison poem. Harris's comment about the relative brevity of Larkin's poem is interesting, though, because it further testifies to his belief that much of 'v.' is irrelevant and meaningless. It is also interesting that Larkin is perceived as writing with "grace" and "wit". Admittedly there is a certain wit in the poem's conceit but a less partisan reading of the poem can see in the defacement of the poster a kind of linguistically-enacted rape of the female. Far from being graceful and witty, the savagery and violence in the poem seem to exhibit a particularly well developed form of misogyny. The poem refers to a tourist board poster

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 48.

which decrees "*Come To Sunny Prestatyn*". This is voiced by a girl who is provocatively posed kneeling on the sand in tight fitting clothes. Stanza two tells us that:

She was slapped up one day in March.  
A couple of weeks, and her face  
Was snaggle-toothed and boss-eyed;  
Huge tits and a fissured crotch  
Were scored well in, and the space  
Between her legs held scrawl  
That set her fairly aside  
A tuberous cock and balls<sup>110</sup>

The words "slapped up" refer on one level to the poster being pasted on its hoarding but also carry the unmistakable connotation of violence. As time passes, it seems that the violence becomes more evident — the woman is 'beaten' about the face, teeth fall out, and her eyes are damaged. Soon her breasts are swollen and magnified and her crotch mutilated. "Between her legs", in that un-nameable vacuum, the male genitalia are thrust; the penetration is complete. The humiliation of the woman is completed by Larkin writing of someone using:

a knife  
Or something to stab right through  
The moustached lips of her smile.

The speaker makes clear in the poem that the graffiti on the poster is the work of one "*Titch Thomas*" but the words of the poem are written by Larkin. That Harris reads this poem as being full of "wit" and "grace" is, I think, quite remarkable. The question is, how might we account for this? Well, in a sense he has not read the poem — the poem has read him. By this I mean that Harris has imbued the iconic status of Larkin to such a degree or is himself part of the same ideological hegemony that he reads the poem filtered, diffused even, through all the baggage that has been heaped upon Larkin, through all the things that he wants to believe about Larkin, through all his own value judgements about society, poetry, whatever. Given Harris' idea of Larkin as a poet of "wit" and "grace", then it's interesting to briefly consider the place of expletives in his verse. Larkin himself has suggested that his use of expletives "can take different forms. It can be meant to be shocking (we live in an odd era, when shocking language can be used, yet still shock - it won't last); it can be the only accurate word (the

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<sup>110</sup> Philip Larkin. *Collected Poems*. Ed. Anthony Thwaite. London: Faber and Faber, 1990, 149. Hereafter referred to as *Collected Poems*.

others being gentilisms, etc.); or it can be funny, in that silly traditional way such things are funny."<sup>111</sup> This is borne out in the poems where we find a variety of usages in examples like "pisses", "farts",<sup>112</sup> "arselicker"<sup>113</sup> and "arse",<sup>114</sup> and the speaker's advice in 'A Study of Reading Habits' to get drunk rather than read because "Books are a load of crap".<sup>115</sup> We also find instances where the usage seems altogether more bitter, rather than witty or naturalistic, more gratuitous, more brutal, rather than graceful. It is as if Larkin does not use swearwords as invective, as a way of cursing in a way that suggests they are part of his cultural inheritance, in a way that is suggested by Harrison's usage, for example; instead he uses them in what we might describe (somewhat obviously I grant!) as an altogether middle-class way. Sometimes this takes the form of an adjectival phrase as is the case in 'High Windows' where we read: "When I see a couple of kids/And guess he's fucking her . . ." <sup>116</sup> Similarly so in 'Love Again' where we read that the speaker ironically (yet knowingly) conflates love and onanism: "Love again: wanking at ten past three".<sup>117</sup> In the same poem certain words are used as nouns, as in the line "Someone else feeling her breasts and cunt" There seems to be a curious (and prissy) disjunction here in the mixture of the word "breasts" (why not 'tits'?) and the demotic vulgarity of "cunt". Though at times Larkin will use a synonym like "piss" (for urinate) in order to avoid a primness of tone the use of "cunt" lends an altogether more cynical air, as, indeed, does "fucking". This seems to suggest a certain sexual jealousy on the part of the speaker, a resentment at his sexual insularity. This might be a characteristic of Larkin's use of expletives, a marker for his speaker's apartness, so to speak. Stephen Burt, for example, has suggested that whereas both Harrison and Larkin "use dirty words as subcultural indicators, as powerful ways of calling into question who the poet sounds like, who he wants to sound like, and why [ in some poems ] Larkin not only appropriates the way kids talk, but also talks about his not being like the kids whose speech he has appropriated".<sup>118</sup> This is the case in 'High Windows', Burt suggests.

<sup>111</sup> Andrew Motion. *A Writer's Life: Philip Larkin*. London: Faber and Faber, 1993, 444. Quoted by Burt. 'High Windows and Four-Letter Words'.

<sup>112</sup> Larkin. *Collected Poems*, 177.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>118</sup> Burt. 'High Windows and Four-Letter Words'.

There are other examples of Larkin's use of expletives, of course, as in 'Sad Steps' where the speaker is "Groping back to bed after a piss"<sup>119</sup> and in the much quoted lines from 'This Be The Verse' where we find the clever pun: "They fuck you up, your mum and dad", the reason being that they "were fucked up in their turn".<sup>120</sup> Because of examples like these Larkin provides us with an interesting point of reference to Harrison, at least in the sense of my discussion here. It is an obvious comparison to make: they were contemporaries of a sort, in the public domain, well known. But it is interesting, (though not surprising) how Larkin has been elevated to a kind of quasi-Betjemanic status while Harrison (though held in very high critical regard) has not achieved the same kind of kudos among the more general (non-specifically literary) public. Larkin seems to have a much higher profile in the public consciousness. In this respect it makes one wonder if they automatically censor the expletives when they read him. Or perhaps they do not really read him at all. This might help explain his elevation and categorisation as an 'English' voice. It is noticeable that despite the usages I have listed it's interesting that Larkin has not encountered the same odure as Harrison and that a poem like 'Sunny Prestatyn' can be called graceful. The answer can be found, I suggest, in the perceived class position of the two poets — Harrison is perceived as working class (both by virtue of his origins, his subject matter and his writing style) while Larkin is (erroneously) representative of Oxbridge, Englishness, the world of letters, middle class, understatement, calm.

Harris's general line of argument, which claimed that if something has to be explained by a poet then it cannot have any real value, is similar to that of Brenda Maddox in *The Sunday Telegraph* who argued: "For my taste, a poem should not have to explain its meaning, and the line 'These vs are all the versuses of life' is as jarring as a glimpse of the strapless bra beneath the ballgown."<sup>121</sup> Leaving aside the peculiar sexual image Maddox has chosen to illustrate her argument, it seems that she also is totally unmoved by Harrison's attempts to achieve a public poetry. Accessibility is a problem to her as is decorum. Harrison, however, is keen to achieve an accessible poem, the meanings of which are clearly intelligible. Furthermore Harrison's strengths as a poet enable him to go further than this, to offer solutions for ways forward that might ameliorate the particular situation that he describes. This was the basis of Joan Bakewell's comments in *The Sunday Times* when she said that Harrison, though initially

<sup>119</sup> Larkin. *Collected Poems*, 169.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>121</sup> Brenda Maddox. 'Four and against'. *v.*, 64.

appalled by finding the obscenities on and around his parents' grave, became "thoughtful about the impoverished vocabulary, and finally generous towards frustrated lives. Isn't this the path of civilised concern?"<sup>122</sup>

A riposte to the kind of criticism offered by Harris and Maddox was offered by Bernard Levin. In *The Times* he wrote that the poem was "a meticulously controlled yell of rage and hope combined, a poisoned dart aimed with deadly precision at the waste of human potential, shaped by a master poet with a rich and instinctive feel for the language, a penetrating eye that misses nothing it looks on, and an exceptionally ingenious capacity for using innocent word-play to make a telling case."<sup>123</sup> He also included hefty segments of the poem. It was this, as much as Levin's argument, that generated a particularly indignant attack from Ronald Butt. His purpose in his article, 'Disdain versus manners', also in *The Times*, is, ostensibly, to attack Bernard Levin's defence of Harrison and criticise Levin for dealing in expletives without any warning to the sensitive reader, rather than an attack on the poem itself. In a manner reminiscent of many of Harrison's detractors in the right-wing press he begins by commenting that he is not offering literary criticism. The emptiness of this gesture is soon apparent, however, as he immediately contradicts himself by arguing that "the two verses" that Levin included in his article "could not be construed as poetry, if poetry has anything to do with heightened awareness."<sup>124</sup> It seems that for Butt the word "heightened" refers more to a rightist-defined cultural hierarchy than an increasing emotional or spiritual sensitivity but, this aside, the rights he implicitly claims in order to make his charges against the poem seem not to be altogether valid as it seems to me that Butt hasn't read the poem. For example he says that Levin quotes two verses when in fact there are five quoted. In his article Levin ran the lines from various stanzas together, making two large blocks of verse. Butt's mistake is due to the fact that he has identified the two blocks of quotations as two verses, even though one is comprised of twelve lines and the other eight. Moreover in the case of the second block Butt has failed to realise that Levin's examples are taken out of context, hence if Butt had read the text he would have known that the words of the skin were uttered as part of an exchange with the speaker not as an incessant tirade, as Levin's printing of them suggests. It might simply be a case of incompetent numeracy again, or just plain ignorance or honest to goodness prejudice.

<sup>122</sup> Joan Bakewell. 'Bakewell's View'. v., 58.

<sup>123</sup> Bernard Levin. 'An adult's garden of verse'. v., 52.

<sup>124</sup> Ronald Butt. 'Disdain versus manners'. v., 54.

This is the first quotation, as it appears in the *Selected Poems*, rather than how Levin presents it:

These Vs are all the versuses of life  
from LEEDS v. DERBY, Black/White  
and (as I've known to my cost) man v. Wife,  
Communist v. Fascist, Left v. Right,

class v. class as bitter as before,  
the unending violence US and THEM,  
personified in 1984  
by Coal Board MacGregor and the NUM,

Hindu/Sikh, soul/body, heart v. Mind,  
East/West, male/female, and the ground  
these fixtures are fought out on 's Man, resigned  
to hope from his future what his past never found. (*Selected Poems*, 238)

and this is the second:

*'Aspirations, cunt! Folk on t'fucking dole  
'ave got about as much scope to aspire  
above the shit they're dumped in, cunt, as coal  
aspires to be chucked on t'fucking fire. (Selected Poems, 241)*

*Yer've given yerself toffee, cunt. Who needs  
yer fucking poufy words. Ah write mi own.  
Ah've got mi work on show all over Leeds  
like this UNITED 'ere on some sod's stone. (Selected Poems, 244)*

According to Butt "The first was of harmless banality, describing the 'versuses' of contemporary life in doggerel of a kind that might be written by a politically minded youth who had well absorbed the sociological platitudes of the age about conflict [. . .] the second was simply concentrated obscenity".<sup>125</sup> The similarities between Butt and Harris are clear. It is interesting, for example, that the same distrust and fear suggested by Harris' use of the term "relevance" is shown by Butt's contemptuous use of "sociological platitudes". They also share that peculiar kind of right-wing arrogance that implies that they are somehow removed from the very thing they are writing about. Butt's arrogance is clear when he grudgingly allows that we can call v, a poem.<sup>126</sup> Interestingly the writers from the right-wing broadsheets, *The Times*,

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 54. Butt writes of Harrison: "So he wrote his poem (let us call it that)".

*The Telegraph*, etc., implicitly or explicitly concede Harrison's technical accomplishments whereas those from the tabloids don't.

There are other similarities between Harris and Butt — Harris accused Harrison of “prolixity”, Butt accused Harrison of writing doggerel — but the point at which they diverge is very interesting. Harris, we might remember, suggested that he is not one who has benefited from what he termed as Harrison's pedantry, referring to the alleged spelling out of the meanings of the poem. Butt, on the other hand, might benefit from this kind of thing very much indeed as he seems only able to respond to the most immediate, the most superficial level of meaning. For example Butt has interpreted the language of the poem in such an obsessively narrow manner as to make it meaningless. This is his interpretation of Harrison's “rich and instinctive feel for the language”, to use Levin's phrase. He argues that Harrison has “reproduced the filthy and aggressive abuse of speech which passes with skinheads as communication [ . . . ] If the purpose of poetry is to enhance understanding then the unrestraint of much of this versified reportage is not poetry. You can read it on walls all over the place”.<sup>127</sup> The tone of Butt's assault <sup>reminds</sup> me of some of the writings about the Empire. There is an ideological link between his writing about skinheads and colonial writings about the savages, the monsters of the jungle. I would hazard a guess that it is not really the expletives, perhaps not even Harrison himself, that is the object of Butt's loathing; it is society's skinheads themselves, the underclass, the lefties, social workers, lesbians, (we all know the mantra), that are the problem. The reality of his protest is that he cannot really cope with this ill-mannered intrusion into his ordered, safe world. He is not really interested in ‘v.’ nor, presumably, in poetry in a wider context. His sense of decorum is offended simply because he feels that Levin has chosen “to victimise those who, without being silly, ignorant, or prudish, do not wish to find themselves and their families faced with obscenity on the breakfast table, in what was clearly a gratuitous taboo-breaking exercise.”<sup>128</sup> It is not so much a bunker mentality, it is more the mentality of the bunker's breakfast-table! Indeed the imagery of the breakfast table suggests an insistence on the separation of the public from the private. It is anathema to consider that the outside world (i.e. society) could actually permeate into the world of Earl Grey and fine cut marmalade. I suspect that the arrogantly condescending tone of phrases like “speech which passes with skinheads” (suggesting they are another breed?) reveals that Butt's

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., pp. 54-55.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 55.

objections seem to have more to do with a sense of fractured decorum rather than a willingness to accept the harshness of certain aspects of contemporary culture. This suggests a contradiction on Butt's part for if he is right to suggest that one characteristic of poetry is its demonstration of a "heightened awareness" then it's a shame that he fails to realise that this is a two way process, that a poet might reasonably expect that a reader might strive to achieve a heightened awareness for his/her self.

Perhaps Harrison should be allowed the last word. In answer to a letter from a certain Hector Thomson in *The Times* Harrison wrote: ". . . I am very glad to be able to endorse all he said by swearing, if I may be permitted, that without the many years I spent acquiring Latin and Greek I should never have been able to compose my poem 'v.'"<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Tony Harrison's letter to *The Times* Tuesday 3 November 1987, v., 69.



## Chapter 5: Visual Imagery: Harrison's film/poems

The significance of the press response to *v.* is that it shows the increasingly public role Harrison has adopted through his TV poems, a public role that is located in his quest for a public poetry and the achievement of a sense of shared intimacy. He has described this process in terms of finding “a way of making people go on watching”.<sup>1</sup> In order to examine how he has done this in his newly-created genre of film/poem, we must return briefly to his first major engagement with film, and consider the 1987 broadcast that prompted such a furore: *v.*

Harrison has stated: “Everything about ‘v.’ was deliberately public, and public certainly means in our terms television, so that I was very glad that it was on television. That’s the kind of audience that I feel poetry should have.”<sup>2</sup> The film of ‘v.’, directed by Richard Eyre, was screened on Wed. 4th November 1987 at 11pm. This screening gave Harrison’s television career a huge boost, not least because of the furore generated by *The Daily Mail*. Yet this film is unusual in that it is a film of an already existing poem, one written during the miner’s strike of 1984-1985. Hence ‘v.’ uses archive material and only a limited amount of documentary material, by which I mean contemporary footage of the real/actual world in which the speaker is operating. It is a different story in the subsequent television work where we will see that the film and verse develop together in more of a symbiotic relationship.

The film of ‘v.’ begins with an aerial shot of Holbeck Cemetery, Leeds. We notice a solitary figure prowling around, Hamlet-like, a figure who is revealed to be Tony Harrison. He speaks to camera and tells us how in Holbeck, in May 1984, he remembered how his father had once told him that the graves were built on top of a worked-out pit. He then explains how the Harrison family grave overlooks two aspects of Leeds. In one direction the view is of the Town Hall, Leeds Grammar School and the University of Leeds. In another direction the graveyard overlooks Leeds United football ground. This geographical opposition neatly illustrates the cultural opposition in his verse, an opposition between the high and the low. This leads into Harrison’s explanation that when he thinks about returning to Holbeck to be

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<sup>1</sup> Winder. ‘Interview’, 3.

<sup>2</sup> Wilmer. ‘Face To Face’, 34.

buried “to be united with the people who are buried here already, the butcher, the publican and the baker, I have to ask myself how what I do, poetry, relates to what they provided, the basic essentials of life; bread, meat and beer.” This is, of course, what the first stanza of the poem tells us and, indeed, constitutes the philosophical enquiry that is one layer of meaning in the poem. Up to this point the film has been quite traditional. There is nothing surprising in the eerie wind noises and the images of the poet prowling around the gravestones. Indeed it is very documentary in nature but the mood established by Harrison’s introduction, his sombre snow flecked account of the poem’s genesis, is soon fractured for as his explanatory statement ends the film is sharply cut to an image of Winston Churchill brandishing a V sign. On the soundtrack we then hear this extract from one of Churchill’s speeches: “The day of Hitler’s downfall will be a bright one for our country and for all mankind. The bells will clash their peals of victory and hope and we will march forward together, encouraged, invigorated and still, I trust, generally united upon our common journey.” The inclusion of this is, of course, partly ironical in that part of the poem’s intention is to contrast the present with a past in which the country was, ostensibly, united, but it also reminds us of Harrison’s characteristic concern with the idea that for each victor there has to be a vanquished. Though ambiguous, these images contain a real sense of drama because, rooted as they are in war, they have a terrible beauty, a fascination due to their iconic status being firmly lodged, as they are, in the national psyche. However the possibility that these images might be in any way affirmative is soon held up for the folly it is as the image changes to a view of Hitler at a rally — thus the archive material continues. Against a soundtrack of bombs exploding, planes screaming across the skies we see footage of the blitz and crashing debris, of fighter pilots scrambling, of enemy aircraft being shot down. This is footage of winners and losers, victors and vanquished, of the unity of the victors and the disunity of the defeated. This material culminates with a cheery thumbs up from a fighter pilot who has just ‘downed a Hun’, a visual reference which is marked by the soundtrack’s lurch to the sound of wild, cheering crowds. Now on the screen we see a poster which comprises a silhouette of a town underneath a huge V and the slogan “Win The PEACE”. The images now move through familiar scenes of celebration and unity. We see V-Day parties and a segment from a propaganda film in which we see ‘V’ chalked on a wall. We also see some formation marching during which a squad of troops unite to form a ‘V’ on the parade ground. Then we move to the image of Churchill on a balcony overlooking a vast crowd. This is another victory celebration. Churchill is waving

his hand in a 'V' sign to them. Suddenly we are presented with a change of image. Now it is of Margaret Thatcher. This is an ironic juxtaposition for a variety of reasons, one of which being that she often claimed to have modelled her approach on Churchill's. Another reason is that when we look closer at Thatcher's hand we see that there is something alarmingly wrong with her 'V' sign. As I mentioned above it is the wrong way round. She does it with palms inward. This is not the 'V' for victory model, this is the 'fuck you' model. Just in case we missed it the camera goes in for a close-up, and stays there. All the time that this image is being presented the wild cheering continues. Even this image has a horrible truth contained within it — it is tempting to see this as a subtle reference to the fact that Thatcher was, in fact, cheered by many of those that she was sticking two fingers up at. The cheering even continues when Harrison's <sup>epigraph</sup> to 'v.' is featured:

My father still reads the dictionary every day. He says  
your life depends on your power to master words (*Selected Poems*, 235)

The dramatic impact of this is considerable, particularly, one would have thought, for those viewers who had not read the poem and had tuned in as a response to the farrago created by *The Daily Mail*. The <sup>epigraph</sup> is on the screen for a full eighteen seconds and it is only after twelve of these that its source is revealed — it is not Harrison, not even another poet or writer — it is from Arthur Scargill. This use of deferred attribution is something that Harrison is going to develop very successfully in *Blasphemers*. The effect in 'v.' is that it invites people to agree with the sentiment before they know that it was voiced by the 1980's bogeyman, Scargill. Significantly it is while this epigram is on the screen that the cheering falters and then dies away. Maybe this is an ironic dig at those from the right who would have withdrawn their agreement once they became aware that they were agreeing with Scargill. Or maybe the reason for the silence goes somewhat deeper. The cheering had originally been for an Allied victory over life threatening forces as represented by the Nazis but the <sup>epigraph</sup> suggests a parallel to an equally dark fate, metaphorically speaking — your life doesn't depend on vanquishing a foe but on 'your power to master words'. That is a matter of life and death in 1980's Britain. It is only now that the poem starts.

The first three stanzas are intoned by Harrison while we are shown more documentary scenes of the graveyard. By the time we reach stanza four the film has begun the process of intercutting between these images and images of Harrison reading his poem aloud at a poetry

reading. Given that Eyre's challenge was how to produce a film in which his vision as director did not conflict with Harrison's vision as poet, it was a very clever decision to make the reading the main structural device of the film. It neatly avoided the problems of attempting to recreate the confrontation between the skald and the skin while at the same time suggested the importance that Harrison places on the poet-audience dynamic.

The presentation of the reading is deceptively simple. We see Harrison reading from a copy of *v.* to people sitting at tables, holding the text with his left hand while his right hand forms 'O's' between thumb and finger, in order to punctuate and emphasise the delivery. According to Eyre Harrison is "a poet who performs rather than reads, without self-regard and self-indulgence, and without the spurious 'performance' values that actors often bring to the reading of poetry [ . . . ] He does not, however, neglect the demands of volume and articulation, the sense of event, and the awareness of his audience."<sup>3</sup> Eyre's assessment is borne out by the film. It seems simple and natural, there is no autocue, for example. The inclusion of the audience is an obvious yet brilliant device on the part of Eyre. It allows us to see and hear an audience's response to the poem and thus it reminds us that '*v.*' is often quite funny, as I suggested above. Another significance of seeing Harrison on screen like this is that it reminds the viewer that a real person wrote the poem, not some disembodied voice, not some Oxbridge aesthete but a man speaking to men, and women. This de-mystification of the poetic process is reinforced by the fact that the film keeps returning to the reading. This impulse towards demystification is apparent throughout Harrison's work. For example Harrison sometimes appears in his own stage productions. One notable example was in *The Labours of Herakles* (1995). Here he delivers a fairly long, moving speech on behalf of the poet Phrynichos in which he talks of art's ability to redeem destruction. He ends on a plaintive note saying:

Once more the mourning women trudge the roads  
of murderous Europe. Look at them, and sing your odes! (*Plays* 3, 145.)

to which one of the labourers on stage says: "Who the fuck was that?" This kind of approach informs Harrison's readings, in a sense. In fact, despite Geoffrey Grigson's dictum that "Poetry readings are for those too indifferent and too lazy to read for themselves"<sup>4</sup>, Harrison's

<sup>3</sup> Richard Eyre. 'Such men are dangerous'. *Bloodaxe*, 365. Hereafter referred to as 'Such men are dangerous'.

<sup>4</sup> Grigson. *The Private Art*, 146.

poetry readings are quite remarkable. Indeed the inclusion of the audience refutes Grigson's assertion in that it validates the performative aspects of Harrison's works. He is a justifiably renowned reader of his poetry, demonstrating quite clearly that he understands about performance. When I saw him read at the Hull Literature Festival of 1993 the first thing that struck me was his appearance. This is how it has been described: "Tony Harrison [ . . . ] came vested all in blue - trousers, socks, shirt, anorak-style top. On good days, the clothes look casual; on bad, mattress-pressed, the careless style of the man of libertarian attitudes . . ."<sup>5</sup> The same writer has also written: "No matter where you see him, Tony Harrison always seems to be en route to somewhere else - dishevelled, restless, in shoes that look scuffed and tired from overuse. [ . . . ] Like Bunyan's Pilgrim, Harrison comes onto the stage bearing his life's burden on his back: an old Karrimor rucksack in which he keeps his many notebooks, large, medium and small, of work in progress."<sup>6</sup> At Hull Harrison was no different. But what he also did was practice an inclusive reading style that is worth commenting on. For instance on more than one occasion he interrupted his poem's introductions in order to encourage latecomers into the hall. He also provided long introductions to his work that I found very useful, though I was told later that others found this tedious.

In *v.*, however, there is another aspect we can deduce from the film's depiction of Harrison reading to an audience. This relates to Harrison's belief that verse can help us face up to the unbearable. Harrison has long explained his verse in terms of his relationship with Greek tragedy, in particular the life affirming ethos espoused by much of that literature. Harrison is especially inspired by the rigour with which that art withstood the onslaught of appalling subject matters and also by that art's relationship with an audience. What concerns us at this point is the fact that Greek tragedy was played in the full light of day. The ancient theatre was, then, a place for seeing, where the actors brought dark events to "the light of day".<sup>7</sup> It was also a place where the audience saw each other "so that the bearing of terror was not only shared but seen to be shared, and that is very important. As it was seen to be shared, so was it communally endured."<sup>8</sup> It seems to me that this is, perhaps, something worth remembering

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Glover. 'Poetry's weakest suit'. *The Independent* 2 November 1994, Arts, 24. Hereafter referred to as 'Poetry's weakest suit'.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Glover. 'Postcard from Ilkley'. *The Independent* 19 March 1994, Weekend Books, 31. Hereafter referred to as 'Postcard from Ilkley'.

<sup>7</sup> Harrison. 'Facing Up'. *Bloodaxe*, 441.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 441-442.

when we consider the film of 'v.'. In this the audience can see each other and hence realise that they are not alone. There is another element to this for Harrison also claims that

the full light of day not only illuminates [the dark deeds] and the collective audience but also the landscape and life beyond the imagined realities of the stage [ . . . ] the actors could also see the audience. This shared space and shared light makes an enormous difference to the sense of theatrical communication. It creates 'obvious reciprocity'. It is harder to slide into some of the self indulgences of obscurity and some of the audience-dodging evasions of much modernism.<sup>9</sup>

Now, while the immediate context for much of Harrison's comment is his theatre work it is very interesting to consider some of what he says in relation to the film/poems. For example Harrison's emphasis on the time of the Greek performances, daytime, connects in a sense with what he wants his film/poems to achieve. Though these are screened in the evening his desire to create "a sense of shared intimacy" seems to me to aspire to the same goal as the ancient Greek tragedy: to show the respective audiences that they are not alone in their situation, not having to act alone in formulating a response to whichever tragedy they are privy to. Also interesting is Harrison's emphasis on communication and the need to avoid "audience-dodging evasions". This suggests the primacy for Harrison of the audience-poet dynamic. It is not enough for him just to write — his writing has to have a social function; there has to be a point to it, an end-product; he wants to make his art coincident with life.

In *v.* the image of Harrison performing his poem is intercut with images of the snow swept graveyard, or a photo of a V-Day celebration. But soon the images take a more disturbing turn as we are presented with images of the miner's strike of 1984/85. Here we see police and pickets clashing. These are followed by images of scrawled swastikas, of graffitied 'NF's and 'Cunts'. The anchoring point of all this is the reading of the poem and the scenes when Harrison is in vision. This also provides a stability without which the succession of changing images might be too bewildering. Having said this, however, the delivery of the poem is occasionally interrupted by pauses in which certain dramatic constructions are effected. One such example is when the film cuts to an image of the Harrison family gravestone in Holbeck. As the camera steadily focuses on it an image of a man and woman appears. This is an image of Harrison's parents, Florrie and Harry Harrison. This image glows radiantly till it all blurs into a kind of sub-celestial 'UNITED', which in turn tails off

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 442.

into typical examples of capitalist advertising. These sequences continue by showing us anarchic graffiti like “Keep warm, burn Britain!”, and “Black Bastod”[sic] and culminates with an image of James Anderton, the then Commissioner of Greater Manchester police, who famously asserted that homosexuals wallowed in a cesspool of their own making. Meanwhile the verse tells us that in Britain:

Arms are hoisted for the British ruling class  
and clandestine, genteel aggro keeps them up. (*Selected Poems*, 240)

This is an instance of how the images in the films sometimes work in a kind of counterpoint to the verse. In this way Eyre manages to avoid the trap of providing a visual image that merely replicates the poetic image. When it works the two comment on each other. Indeed, it is a characteristic of Harrison’s films that we are shown something and then have the rug pulled out from under our feet, so to speak. This is what occurred with the deferred attribution of Scargill’s <sup>epigraph</sup> The aim is to shatter comfortable preconceptions, an aim generally typical of Harrison’s poetry, of course. It is also reminiscent of some of the sonnets in *Eloquence* in that the rug-pulling has an air of a punchline associated with it. In the example in v., we see the smiling face of Anderton suggesting, perhaps, a trustworthy British bobby. The function of the quote is to undercut this, to draw attention to how the police can be (and are) used as agents of the state. But it works more subtly as well for ‘hoisted arms’, with its suggestion of fascist salutes as well as gun-bearing, suggests totalitarianism - a police state. Yet another possible layer of meaning is that the ruling class hoist (steal) the ‘arms/alms’ that are really necessary for the poor? This leads us to the realisation that “clandestine, genteel aggro” is used by hidden forces in order to promote hidden agendas. In this generalised sense the quote is a barbed reference to the hegemonic control exercised over the people of Britain.

Sometimes this is effected with the unassuming compliance of our fellow-citizens who possess a Blakean set of “mind-forg’d manacles”.<sup>10</sup> To give one example, Richard Eyre tells us that he learnt from Harrison that a parents’ action group had successfully lobbied the Manchester Education Committee “via the office of that renowned figure of the new enlightenment, James Anderton, to withdraw his poetry from the school curriculum”. Eyre’s response to this news was that he felt “once again that as in Russia poetry was dangerous. The Russian poet Gumilyov (who was shot) said that dead words smell badly. These are the words of the

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<sup>10</sup> Blake. ‘London’. *Blake Complete Writings*, 170.

acknowledged legislators of our world who proscribe, censor, inhibit and monitor what we should read and see and, by implication, think and feel.”<sup>11</sup>

Besides what we might term the traditional use of images — ones which illustrate the verse such as Hugh Gaitskill speaking at a rally, we have other, more subtle images. These include images of dusk which, because of the half dark/half light quality, amply invoke the poem's sense of a split self. Besides these the film/poem allows Harrison and Eyre to develop 'v.' in a way only available on film. What they do is to allow themselves a dramatic interpretation, in a sense, rather than simply a recourse to archive material. In 'v.' this is relatively modest in scope, at least compared to the later film/poems. We see, for example, images of dramatic reconstructions such as youths running through the graveyard, seemingly spraying the gravestones as they go. This seems quite gratuitous, however — it's difficult to know what this adds. More interesting are the film's experiments with superimposed elements. For example we are shown a blank screen upon which a picture of Harrison's then wife, Teresa Stratos, appears. On this the word 'UNITED' is superimposed. The letters of this fall like the May flower petals that the poem has already told us about. This interlude leads us back to the reading. Soon after, the picture of Stratos reappears and LOVE appears at the top and UNITED at the bottom. Another example is the end of the film in which the medium allows Eyre and Harrison to enact the end of the poem. By this I mean that the speaker's planned, chiselled epitaph is magically made to appear on the gravestone in Holbeck cemetery.

Though 'v.' was the film/poem that gave Harrison's television career its huge impetus it was with works like *Arctic Paradise* (1981) and *The Big H* (1984) that his explorations of this medium started. *Arctic Paradise* was a film about a young man who was a trapper in winter and a salmon fisher in summer - a modern pioneer in the Yukon. Harrison's task was to provide the verse commentary which he wrote in the style of Robert Service. Service is well known for such verse as *Dangerous Dan McGrew* and *Sam McGee* and it was his verse that had inspired the pioneer, comments Andree Molyneux, the producer of these two film/poems.<sup>12</sup> The film had been commissioned for the *World About Us* slot, a programme which served a family audience early on a Sunday evening so a straightforward course was steered. It was very well received, amassing viewing figures of four and a half million “the

<sup>11</sup> Eyre.. 'Such men are dangerous'. *Bloodaxe*, 366.

<sup>12</sup> See Andree Molyneux. 'Cutting His Teeth: working with Tony Harrison on *Arctic Paradise* and *The Big H*'. *Bloodaxe*, pp. 367-376. Hereafter referred to as 'Cutting His Teeth'.



highest figure that year for the series. It is often repeated and any transmission results in many requests for the 'book of poems' or for the script."<sup>13</sup> Molyneux's article reveals important suggestions regarding Harrison's developing techniques. For example she tells us: "we were both aware of the need for the pictures to give the verse room to breathe, for the film to move rather slowly giving the audience a chance to attend to the words. Obviously, later, in the cutting-room we found many different ways of making the two serve each other, sometimes fast cutting to the rhythm, sometimes cutting against the rhythm."<sup>14</sup> This is a technique we will see developed by Harrison later in his career, particularly in film/poems like *The Blasphemer's Banquet*. Molyneux also provides us with some telling insights into Harrison's attitude to the process: "Tony was full of ideas, all very practical and precise. Being told the number of seconds he could have, he would write something exactly the right length, tailored to the individual shots. He was as ready to rewrite lines or change a rhythm as to suggest an alternative way of cutting the film".<sup>15</sup> Nor was he precious about his verse if this process floundered for, as Molyneux explains, sometimes they had to cut some scenes which meant of course that they also had to lose some of Harrison's verse "which he sacrificed willingly".<sup>16</sup>

Harrison's next experience of television work was *The Big H*, a project which Molyneux talks of as being "Difficult to describe, extremely difficult to make, but for all of us who worked on it, terrific fun".<sup>17</sup> Harrison worked on this for a great deal of 1984 and was "involved in all the decisions; he had views on lighting, costume and design, and while clear about his own ideas, he was extremely receptive to alternatives and very understanding of limitations imposed by the practical nature of television."<sup>18</sup> The significance of this is that it is interesting that Harrison had had a taste of TV around the time that he was writing 'v.'. It seems reasonable to surmise that his ever expanding knowledge of the television medium, both in a technical sense and in terms of writing for it, helped to suggest the dramatic possibilities of such a poem.

This, then, was a very important part of the learning process for Harrison, so much so that when Peter Symes first approached Harrison in 1986, with a view to working together on what eventually became the four part documentary series *Loving Memory*, the poet was clear

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<sup>13</sup> Molyneux. 'Cutting His Teeth'. *Bloodaxe*, 371.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 369.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 370.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 370.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 376.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 375.

about what he wanted. Though obviously not a newcomer to television Harrison was less than fully satisfied with his experiences up to that point. He had some unequivocal demands, as Symes recounts: "his first was so obvious it took us all by surprise: he would do it, provided *all* the commentary was in verse, and provided we approached the commission as a true collaboration - he was no longer interested in producing a few verses to be tacked onto pictures."<sup>19</sup> Despite his misgivings, "no one I knew had ever attempted to drive a full-length documentary with a verse commentary"<sup>20</sup>, Symes assented. It is no wonder that Symes had misgivings if the traditional view of film and verse's ability to coalesce is anything to go by: "Poetry and film usually seem like oil and water. To most poets, film is too realistic, too sensational and fast, too - how shall we say? - unsubtle. To most film directors, on the other hand, poetry is namby-pamby - a self-indulgent way for sensitive souls to stroke their troubled hearts by wittering on about tear-stained pillows, sleepless nights and autumn leaves drifting o'er my dreams."<sup>21</sup> Fortunately Harrison's long-term collaborator Peter Symes took a much more constructive view. He argues that film is inherently metrical in that it is basically a succession of frozen images projected in such a way that they appear to move:

The still images are projected in front of us in a continuous stream, at twenty-four frames a second, and we immediately enter a make-believe world of movement. One second follows the next, and the process of juxtaposition is extended to scenes and amplified with sound, yet at its base lies this formal mechanism of stillness [ . . . ] What better vehicle for a poet to use? Are not the still words, combined into lines, undergoing a similar process, not for the eyes but for the ears? What more exciting process, then, but to combine the two? <sup>22</sup>

What more exciting project indeed?

The first time this was attempted was in 1987 with the series of film/poems, four in all, that were screened under the heading *Loving Memory*. As I said above 'v.' was not written for television — that is not to deny that Harrison clearly had the medium in mind and was very aware of its dramatic possibilities while writing the poem, but simply to remind us that the

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<sup>19</sup> Peter Symes. 'Introduction'. *Tony Harrison: The Shadow of Hiroshima and other film/poems*. London: Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995, ix. Hereafter referred to as 'Introduction'; *Tony Harrison: The Shadow of Hiroshima and other film/poems* hereafter referred to as *Shadow*.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>21</sup> Winder. 'Interview', 3.

<sup>22</sup> Symes. 'Introduction', vii.

poem was not commissioned for television. Moreover a work such as *The Big H*, for example, though screened on television, was as much a filmed theatrical production as anything else and *Arctic Paradise* was a film that had verse 'tagged on'. *Loving Memory*, therefore, represents an important transitional phase in that, generally speaking, Harrison maintains his critique of 'the poetic' but starts to explore the possibilities that film offers — in short he starts to turn into a film-maker.

*Letters in the Rock*, the first of the sequence to be screened,<sup>23</sup> starts with documentary material, with voices talking about departed loved ones. The film is concerned with the stories of four or five people who are, in a sense, almost like recurring characters who tell us "who they want remembered, how, and where." (*Shadow*, 105) As the film unfolds we are privy to their reminiscences, their stories of how they deal with the death of their loved ones, what they physically did with their remains and how they commemorate them. Sometimes the remains were cremated. In this case the families go annually to read the names of the deceased in a book of Remembrance, reading being an act of affirmation for them. Sometimes the remains are buried. There is some very moving material here, for example the testimony of the mother who lost her child because of Cot Death Syndrome. Harrison's verse is intertwined with this material, gently pulsing in and around it, leaving spaces and silences, little islands of remembrance.

The film's title testifies to one of its concerns as 'letters in the rock' refers to inscriptions on gravestones and memorials. This also refers back to Harrison's many references to language as a big block that has to be worked at and sculpted into meaning.<sup>24</sup> The title is also a punning reference to seaside sticks of rock. It is as if the verse is implying that the world is one great big rock factory: buried corpses will eventually rot back into mummified, calcified stone, or cremated people will turn into ashes — our ultimate end is, perhaps, the only thing that truly unites us. It is this idea of a seaside stick of rock that provides the film/poem with its central conceit and informs the speaker's upbeat, life-affirming conclusion. Though we cannot avoid the fact that "from the start life's lettered with our final fate" (*Shadow*, 104) we can scorn the inevitable outcome:

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<sup>23</sup> The original broadcasting sequence was: *Letters in the Rock*, 16 July 1987; *Mimmo Perrella non è Piu*, 23 July 1987; *Muffled Bells*, 30 July 1987; *Cheating The Void*, 6 August 1987. In a private correspondence Peter Symes, the director of these films, told me that they were repeated in 1988 "in an order that more closely reflected Tony's ideas; *Muffled Bells*, *Mimmo Perrella*, *Cheating the Void* and *Letters in the Rock*."

<sup>24</sup> See 'Blocks' *Selected Poems*, 164.

Life's stick of rock's still got a few sweet licks  
 and death lettered right through can't make it sour,  
 so lick your skullicious lollies down to sticks  
 and scorn for now the inevitable hour. (*Shadow*, 111)

The idea contained in the last stanza seems reminiscent of *A Kumquat for John Keats* (1981) and that poem's idea that death is the skin that gives life its zest. In *Letters* the speaker's closing image is suggesting that life is a lolly that just like sea-side rock has letters all the way through it. The letters spell DEATH. Thus death is inevitable but, even though life is underpinned by death in this way, though we give meaning to our lives by our awareness of death, life (and the lolly) are still capable of giving great pleasure.

One important aspect of *Letters* is that Harrison continues his use of personae. This is apparent early in the film where the speaker tells us that:

In Blackpool August 1936  
 Dad planted me inside my Mother's womb (*Shadow*, 103)

References like this, and a later one to the speaker's "Blackpool-loving dad" (*Shadow*, 111), suggest a development in the persona of the post-scholarship-boy, clearly intimating links between the speaker of the Blackpool poems in *Eloquence* and the speaker in the television work. In *Letters* the reference to "Dad" is interesting because on one hand it invites an autobiographical reading and, on the other, the use of plain "dad" (not "my dad", etc.) suggests that the speaker assumes that a reader/listener might know exactly who is being referred to. Or it is another example of the air of easy familiarity that Harrison creates in his verse, part of the sense of shared intimacy. Indeed, the viewer does not need to have any prior knowledge about the speaker, or know of any relationship that that speaker might have. It is sufficient that Harrison speaks through a mask that will both engage the attention and encourage an emotional response from a viewer.

One of the striking things we notice about this series of films is that, despite the subject matter of cremations, burials exhumation and commemoration, they exhibit a considerable degree of humour. This is interesting as it is not one of the characteristics that spring immediately to mind when we consider Harrison's work yet, surprisingly, humour is present in abundance, as even a cursory examination reveals. Perhaps it is because we are so beguiled by the deadpan delivery, the seriousness of much of the subject matter, that the humour, admittedly usually of a bleak nature, passes us by. But it is certainly there. In the

*Eloquence* sequence, for example, it is there in the vestigial traces of Harrison's music-hall inheritance, in the punchline elements that close many of the sonnets such as that which we find in 'Continuous'. Here we read of the father-figure's hands that:

they feel as though they've been chilled to the bone  
from holding my ice cream all through *White Heat* (*Selected Poems*, 143)

A similar effect is achieved in 'An Old Score' where we learn that the barber's shop that the scholarship-boy used to be taken to by his father is

now under new, less shearing, ownership,  
and in the end it's that that makes me cry -

JOE'S SALOON's become KURL UP & DYE! <sup>25</sup> (*Selected Poems*, 139)

Other examples include the tender jocularly we find in the last line of 'Illuminations I' (*Selected Poems*, 146) — "The penny dropped in time! Wish you were here!", and the, admittedly, determinedly grim humour of 'Marked With D'. (*Selected Poems*, 155) Here we learn that the father-figure's cremated remains, his ashes, are "not unlike flour" and are equal in volume to the amount required "for one small loaf". There are many examples, then, in *Eloquence* and this humorous strain is also detectable in the encounter between skald and skin in 'v.', as we have already seen.

Humour is part of Harrison's armoury against either taking himself too seriously or giving in to the pessimism inherent in our mortal existence, not that these two are mutually exclusive. It also affords the reader/listener a certain amount of qualified pleasure. We see this humour elsewhere in the *Loving Memory* sequence when the speaker refers to coffin making as a "dying trade" (*Shadow*, 72), and in *Letters* we see similar examples such as Harrison's pun on death as being "the last resort" (*Shadow*, 111), given the poem's initial setting in Blackpool, one of England's most popular seaside resorts. Harrison has always been fond of puns - he is also adept at irony. There is a fine example of this in the film where we see that Harrison's use of irony also serves to implicitly enact many of the concerns that we examined in *Eloquence*. For instance early in the film we see a mason designing an inscription for a gravestone on a computer. This reads "In Loving Memory of Thomas Gray".

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<sup>25</sup> At least up to April 1996 there is still a hairdresser's called KURL UP & DYE literally around the corner from Tempest Road (Harrison's childhood home), at the top of Beeston Hill. See photograph 6 in appendix.

There is another joke here — Harrison is ‘burying’ Thomas Gray and, by implication, all that he represents ideologically? Harrison asks if he could include a verse from Gray’s ‘Elegy’. When the operator explains how this will be done Harrison starts his recitation. All we hear, though, is “The boast of heraldry . . .”<sup>26</sup> This is very cleverly intercut with documentary material that reveals that the natural elements are no respecter of personage or status. We hear a salesman and customer discuss the fact that in a windy cemetery an ostentatious flower display will be blown away. Then the quotation from the ‘Elegy’ continues:

TONY   . . . *the Pomp of Pow'r*  
 HARRISON                                    *And all that Beauty, all that Wealth e'er gave,*  
   *new line -*  
   *'Awaits alike th'inevitable Hour.*  
   *The Paths of Glory lead but to the Grave.'* (*Shadow*, 104)

Now the speaker talks about the cost of the lettering. He suggests that besides the shock of losing a loved one there is the additional shock when one realises that the stone on which:

your dear departed's name gets lettered on  
 will cost eight hundred pounds . . . (*Shadow*, 104)

It is no wonder, then, that the wording is usually terse because

sandblasted and then squirted with gold spray  
 each letter costs you £1.32. (*Shadow*, 103)

Even on an apparently throwaway line (such as the second of this quote) Harrison’s technical bravura is very evident. Though the line looks very striking because of its inclusion of the pound sign and numerals, it is actually a line of regular iambic pentameter. Because of the emphasis that the verse places on the cost of the lettering we might sense an unspoken comparison between the masons and the earnings of those who write words for a living, in particular poets. Indeed, the cost of inscriptions might be another explanation for the terseness of the inscription in ‘Book Ends II’ One consequence of this expense is that abbreviations are sometimes used. For example “*In Memory's* sometimes shortened to I. M” (*Selected Poems*, 104) and so, in times when “almost no tombs now get lines of verse”

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<sup>26</sup> Reeves, ed. *The Complete English Poems of Thomas Gray*, 63.

Harrison's verse both enacts and parodies this austerity. Now "The paths of glory lead but to the crem" (*Selected Poems*, 104), "crem" being short for crematorium.

While *Letters in the Rock* shares many of the same linguistic and stylistic concerns with *Eloquence*, the second of the four films, *Mimmo Perrella non è Piu*, is very different. For instance the film begins in Italy. Though a lot less documentary material is included, just an excerpt of a prayer and the comments from some relatives, the narrative voice tells us a great deal about the funeral customs of Naples with what Lawrence Sail has termed an "admirably natural artifice".<sup>27</sup> In the film we learn that the practise is for the corpses of the deceased to be exhumed once they have dried out. This process takes approximately twenty months. Then they are taken to be wound in a winding sheet and stored. This process is designed to release the soul from its:

. . . clay-stained cage  
to struggle upwards, first to Purgatory  
and after, Paradise, the final stage. (*Shadow*, 81)

What then occurs is that the relatives of the deceased regularly visit the mummified corpse in the locker, urging the spirit to complete its journey to the next world. They "need their 'dear departed' to depart" because of the fear they feel:

that what we loved as father, or grandmother,  
might still turn back and haunt us as a shade.' (*Shadow*, 83)

Though I confess to being more than a little woolly regarding the theology of the matter, the point of the exercise seems to be that the spirit of the deceased lights the way for the relatives to follow when "Death unlocks [their] soul" (*Shadow*, 84).

The problem that Harrison and Symes faced was how to make a film that did not try to avoid the reality of the situation but also could be readily viewed, not an easy task given the many images of exhumed corpses and dilapidated skeletons. One such scene showed the images of the corpse of Vincenzo Cicatiello being exhumed. This was incredibly powerful, appalling even, the corpse looking like some kind of drugged monster. As the speaker in the film puts it, the body that is exhumed is "not what went under but some other thing [ . . . ] a wizened replica of what they knew." (*Shadow*, 84) Demonstrating his conviction that verse

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<sup>27</sup> Lawrence Sail. 'Harrison's Interno: *Loving Memory*'. *Bloodaxe*, 383. Hereafter referred to as 'Harrison's Interno'.

has properties that allow us to face up to the unfaceable, Harrison deals with this horror in an innovative, brilliant, yet quite simple, way — he turns the verse into the first person. It is a movement from the objective to the subjective, a movement Peter Symes describes as being that: “from a documentary record into a world justifiably imagined without in any way undermining the reality”<sup>28</sup>. This is how it works. At first Harrison writes in the third-person, graphically detailing what happens to an exhumed corpse prior to its viewing by relatives:

First alcohol’s sloshed on to wash him clean  
 then disconnected bones are put to rights  
 then liberal sprinklings of naphthalene,  
 then DDT to keep off flies and mites. (*Shadow*, 85)

As Symes recounts, when the moment comes to face the corpse Harrison switches the narrative from the third-person to the first-person ‘I’ voice of Vincenzo Cicatiello’s widow:

Was this the Vincenzo who I slept beside?  
*Vincenzo Cicatiello non è piu.*  
 Now, now I know you’ve really died.  
 Till now I only half-believed it true. (*Shadow*, 85)

In the next stanza, however, there is an almost imperceptible slippage back to the third-person — we are not even aware of the transition until it has occurred because Harrison ensures that the sentiment expressed is in keeping with the speech of the caring, grieving widow:

Being seen in such revolting tatters  
 wouldn’t suit him. He was much too proud!  
 Although he’s dead, she still believes it matters  
 that they make him feel he looks right in his shroud. (*Shadow*, 85)

The film *Mimmo* is distinctive not least because of the character of Mimmo Perella. Though it is not Mimmo’s corpse we see being exhumed the film is, in a sense, the story of the journey of Mimmo’s body, his corpse, and the journey that his relatives hope his soul will make. The idea of using Mimmo as a character in this way was Harrison’s and is important not just because it is a very successful dramatic device in *Mimmo* but also because it pre-echoes the idea of the shade as guide in *Shadow of Hiroshima* (1995). It is also in keeping with what we already understand about Harrison’s use of personas in *Eloquence* and ‘v.’ not least because

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<sup>28</sup> Symes. ‘Introduction’, xii.



of the dramatic sense that is created by the interaction between the 'I' voice of the narrative and the persona. It also suggests one of the techniques that Harrison deploys in order to create a sense of shared intimacy in the films because as his technique of creating personae develops the effect will be that viewers will better understand the personal consequences of something like the Hiroshima blast, for example. Thus the use of personae is integral to Harrison's aim in that they personalise a given situation and thus allow a viewer to identify with, and become engaged with, that particular situation.

According to Symes, Harrison was not present at much of the filming for the series. Indeed Symes tells us that he was only able to involve him "when about half the material had been shot".<sup>29</sup> Furthermore it appears that Harrison was not involved with the initial shooting of *Mimmo* at all. This much we can deduce from Symes' comment that during the editing process it became apparent that a second shoot in Naples was necessary, in order to cover the All Souls' Day celebrations in the cemetery. Harrison, says Symes, accompanied the crew on this trip. This was indeed fortuitous in that Harrison's poetic apprehension of the world provided a device on which the whole film was to be structured. While walking around the Naples cemetery he chanced upon an advertisement which by tradition was put up by the relatives of the diseased. It said *Mimmo Perrella non è Piu*. This means, literally, that 'Mimmo Perrella is no more'. Upon seeing this Harrison "quickly wrote and filmed a wonderful opening for the film, and then proceeded to use the idea of Mimmo as a representative shade to guide us through each processional stage of both funeral custom and film. He also grasped the power of the '*non è piu*', turning it into a rhythmical incantation of great power".<sup>30</sup>

*Mimmo Perrella non è piu*  
Mimmo Perrella is no more.  
This gate his body will be carried through  
he walked past into work not days before.

*Mimmo Perrella non è piu*  
Let's follow Mimmo Perella's fate,  
or, rather, not one single fate but two,  
that of the body brought in through this gate

and put under marble in a dark, dry hole  
where Vesuvius's soil makes it like leather,

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<sup>29</sup> Peter Symes. 'Blasphemy and Death', 385.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 386.

and that other fate, meanwhile, of Mimmo's soul  
exposed to an uncertain, otherworldly weather. (*Shadow*, 81)

Harrison wrote these quatrains to order, Symes reminds us, and recorded them to camera in the cemetery itself. The significance of this is quite extraordinary. Not only is Harrison having to produce verse on demand during a busy filming schedule, this is precisely what seems to be occurring during the editing process itself. Clearly those responsible for the project had little more than a sketchy outline of what might develop during filming so obviously Harrison could not have reams of pre-prepared verse ready for use. Moreover it is clear from Symes' account that Harrison had very little influence on the filming for much of the time. In the light of this for Harrison to have produced verse of the calibre that he did is astonishing. Harrison's involvement in the project is, then, another instance of how he uses his poetry, the word, to explain the filmed images, the world. Unlike 'v.', which was a film of a pre-existing poem, the film/poems in the *Loving Memory* series are works in which the verse and the film develop together in a symbiotic manner. Hence Harrison's technique allows for a liberating flexibility that gives his films a fluent, responsive, living quality precisely because his technique allows his films to develop organically. Thus in the series Harrison's verse seeks to explain the world rather than the verse itself being explained away by some visual images which, by their very nature, must either clash with the poet's images or be redundant in that they simply replicate the image. The kind of path Harrison steers between these two potential obstacles is suggested in *Mimmo* by the following example when the speaker tells us that:

Under a blanket with a yellow cross  
he clutches a crucifix in leather claw  
and leaves a wife and sister with the wounds of loss  
that won't heal till they too are 'no more' (*Shadow*, 85)

In this example, Symes comments, the on-screen image of the shrouded remains being carried on a tray (while covered with a cloth) is expanded and enlarged. The verse commentary goes beyond the visual and offers an interpretation of the image, and tells us what we can't know about what there is underneath the cloth. The movement is literally from the visible, the external, to the hidden — the crucifix clutched in leather claw — and finally to the invisible, the everlasting vacuum of grief caused by the relatives' loss.

Besides writing to order on location Harrison also writes verse on demand during the editing process. During this he writes verse for a succession of already filmed images (in the

main) which are being selected, altered, rejected, even as the very process is occurring. No wonder, then, that Harrison was to become a central part of the editing process of *Loving Memory*. And yet, as challenging as this obviously is, the techniques of the metrical poet, and the techniques of the film editor are not as dissimilar as one might rashly assume. In Harrison's case he quickly became very interested by the similarities, as Symes reveals:

He was soon intrigued by the closeness of the work of the film editor to his own techniques. In both, the creator manipulates image and rhythm; in both he is concerned with momentum, structure and repetition: and in both there is the same tinkering and fine-tuning, the same running and re-running of sequence and of whole until the process appears to be working. Tony would work from his notes and our research, writing and re-writing as we juggled with sound and picture, coming up not only with description and explanation but with ideas, powerful verbal imagery and structure.<sup>31</sup>

This was clearly extraordinary training for Harrison. In this respect the *Loving Memory* series can be said to mark the real beginning of the process of Harrison's film/poem making in that he is developing the strategies, techniques and flexibility which will serve to create the shared intimacy he seeks in the film/poem genre.

The third film in the sequence, *The Muffled Bells*, is a film about dying, not just of people but also aspects of rural life. Deeply elegiac in nature, the film mourns the passing of a certain way of life and tells us what impact the death of a local, much loved, character has on a small community. Community is a key word towards understanding the film — hence the emphasis the film places on the jobs that people do, the way their work relates to their fellow villagers. We note, for example, the emphasis on Stanley Hall, the Breamore miller, the man who, literally, provided the flour for the daily bread:

They're muffling the bells for Stanley Hall.  
Stanley Hall the Breamore miller's dead.  
Clappers in cowhide cladding peel and call  
all those who used his flour in their bread. (*Shadow*, 69)

Another strand that runs through the film is the contrast between the past and the present. To convey this more effectively Harrison utilises what we might term a reflective mode of address. This is how Harrison generates the elegiac tone in his verse, "his measured pace and

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp. 385-386.

naturally slightly doleful voice setting up a kind of elegiac hum".<sup>32</sup> With this he often incorporates subordinate sentence structures such as in the following example where subordinate clauses precede and interrupt the main clause:

Muffled curfew, flock of geese, the plough,  
 some things survive from 'how things used to be',  
 though much is vanishing and threatened now  
 Breamore's bells are pure Gray's *Elegy* (*Shadow*, 69)

The film makes clear where this threat originates:

The new commuters eye the empty mill,  
 the sequestered vale's a teeming motorway.  
 But in spite of creeping yuppies Breamore's still  
 the sort of graveyard known to Thomas Gray. (*Shadow*, 70)

The 'creeping yuppies' are the real harbingers of change in Breamore, asserts the speaker, and his contempt for them is clear throughout *Muffled Bells*. For example we see that the observation about the commuters and the empty mill is repeated several times in the piece, in references such as "men from outside Breamore come to 'view' " (*Shadow*, 79) Stanley Hall's empty mill. Indeed, such is their haste that even before Stanley Hall is decently in the ground, even as "The thudding sods [of earth] begin their grim drum roll" (*Shadow*, 79), there are commuters eyeing Stanley Hall's mill. We cannot fail to notice how the alliteration and onomatopoeia serve to enforce the speaker's disdain.

Stanley Hall was the last miller in the village hence his craft of milling has died out with him. With not a little bathos the speaker tells us that the bread his flour went to make has now been replaced by "pre-sliced *Mother's Pride*" (*Shadow*, 70). But, as the speaker reminds us, "If the job of miller's dated, so is mine" (*Shadow*, 77). This is the job of being a poet, a typical Harrison concern. It is given an ironic twist when we learn that a poet's skills are not required for Stanley Hall's tombstone:

A country churchyard burial in times  
 when most end up as ashes in cheap urns.  
 Pity the miller's headstone won't have rhymes,  
 quatrains as antiquated as his querns<sup>33</sup> (*Shadow*, 78)

<sup>32</sup> Sail. 'Harrison's Interno', 383.

<sup>33</sup> Harrison. *Shadow*, 78. Quern: Stone hand-mill for grinding corn [Old English *cweorn*; related to Old Friesian *quern*, Old High German *kurn*, Old Norse *kverna*, Gothic *quairnus* millstone]. *Collins*, 1230.

In *Muffled Bells* Harrison makes links between old crafts dying out through misuse and old words being vulnerable to the same fate — he grasps the connection between the craft of poet, suggested by the quatrains, and the craft of the miller, suggested by and embodied in the use of vulnerable old words like querns, for example. He cannot do much about the crafts but he gamely includes some threatened words such as the obscure dialect word “curfs” (*Shadow*, 73), a local Hampshire word. He has done this kind of thing before, of course, in *Wordlists III* where he skilfully incorporated the word “yagach” (*Selected Poems*, 119). Meanwhile the film’s concern with occupations continues — Stanley Hall’s occupation is not the only rural craft to be under threat:

Craftsman, wheelright, blacksmith, undertaker,  
 who also turned a skilled hand to the plough  
 gathered in harvests grateful to their Maker  
 are in decline, as Gray’s own craft is, now. (*Shadow*, 70)

The reference to “Gray’s own craft” refers to poetry, of course. Harrison uses Gray’s ‘Elegy’ in the film to act as a kind of counterpoint to his own meditations for a variety of reasons. According to James Reeves “The *Elegy* is by far the finest example of a genre that was particularly popular in the eighteenth century: the Retirement Poem that was also a meditation on death [ and included ] a particular emphasis on melancholy and a sometimes morbid fascination with corpses . . . ”<sup>34</sup> Another reason is that Harrison has based the metre of the *Loving Memory* films on the verse form (quatrains of iambic pentameter) used by Gray. While on an obvious level this provides a necessary framework, a structure for the film, it has another function in that Gray’s poem represents ‘tradition’. In this respect its use as a kind of template allows Harrison to undercut it by showing it as an example of an exclusive cultural practice that, implicitly or otherwise, patronised those that were written about. Little wonder, then, that stanzas 4 to 9 of *Muffled Bells* are not Harrison’s, but Gray’s, and they are not just the first six, consecutive stanzas either. Closer examination reveals that they are Gray’s first, second, fourth, nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first stanzas. They have, in fact, been carefully selected in order to emphasise the voicelessness of those about whom Gray is writing unlike those who are the subjects of Harrison’s verse, both in the *Loving Memory* films and elsewhere. That Harrison is keen to offset the kind of anonymity that Gray favoured

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<sup>34</sup> Reeves, ed. *The Complete English Poems of Thomas Gray*, 13.

for his subjects is clearly revealed by the film's use of photographs of Stanley Hall while the narrator intones:

This was the Stanley Hall who made girls cry,  
this is Stanley Hall in choirboy's gear (*Shadow*, 78)

In keeping with his aim of generating a communal intimacy Harrison is taking care to show what this person was like, albeit in a one-dimensional sense. Besides this we also have the anecdotal documentary material provided by his friends:

NORMAN  
DYMOTT            *'He's just part of the village and that's it. The village . . . cricket  
. . . shooting - he was a very keen shot and a good shot too, old  
Stan's one of the real old timers and very very sadly missed.  
(Shadow, 79)*

The film's use of photographs is an early example of what we are to find in *Black Daisies* (1993) where Harrison uses bridal photographs of the Alzheimer's patients as brides as a starting point for his dramatic reconstruction of their memories. In *Muffled Bells* the speaker tentatively speculates about Stanley Hall while we are viewing the photographs in undertaker John Shering's museum. Meanwhile the soundtrack is provided by children singing, rehearsing the musical, *Annie*:

Children singing        *. . . It's a hard knock life  
Yes it is  
It's a hard knock life . . . '*

Maybe Stanley Hall made this girl weep -

Children singing        *' . . . yes it is  
It's a hard knock life . . . '*

Maybe Stanley Hall pulled these girls' hair -

*' . . . it's a hard knock life -  
Yes it is!' (Shadow, pp74-75)*

The difference in approach is marked when we remember that in his poem this is what Gray wrote of his subject matter, "The rude Forefathers":

*Their sober Wishes never learn'd to stray;  
 Along the cool sequester'd Vale of Life  
 They kept the noiseless Tenor of their Way. (Shadow, 69)*

Noiseless. Speechless. Anonymous. Their impoverished legacy is paralleled by their memorials. The speaker in Gray's poem reports that they have "*uncouth Rhimes and shapeless Sculpture . . . Their Name, their Years, spelt by th'unlettered Muse*". Harrison takes this up and 'finds' an inscription chiselled "in the year/1750 when the poet Gray/first wrote the Elegy I'm reading here"(Gray wrote two versions). This is typical of Harrison in that one characteristic of his verse is his creation of a sense of just having stumbled onto the very scene he is writing about. As it develops this strategy is to become a tremendously significant element in Harrison's work and of major importance to his project of creating a sense of shared intimacy. The technique of appearing to notice something for the first time, just as the viewer does, serves to locate him/her in the same location, albeit subjectively rather than literally, as the speaking voice emanating from the television. In this respect it creates a terrific sense of immediacy as well as an inclusivity and accessibility that is integral to his aims. In *The Muffled Bells* a similar effect of inclusivity is achieved by the speaker saying of the inscription (paraphrasing Gray): "this rustic moralist what does he say?" That the question is posed at all suggests that the speaker does not know. Thus the viewer is allied once more with the voice rather than being at a remove from it. Neither speaker nor viewer <sup>know</sup>, The answer in the film is a typical graveyard homily that tells the onlooker that their doom is to know that they will end up in the same condition as the person whose gravestone they are viewing. As Donne said: ask not for whom the bell tolls because it tolls for you. This seems to provide a testimony to the film's ideas about community in that *Muffled* talks of both a sense of community in death as a result of life's mortality *and* a sense of community in life as a result of death's inevitability. Indeed the links and interconnections become clearer as a result of Harrison's brilliant image of two congregations at the church: "one, in seven layers [which] stays silent as the other sings the hymns". Together the two congregations form one choir, a choir which:

consists of thirty generations  
 though most of them are muffled underground.  
 The minority, this present congregation's  
 singing for the dead who lie all round. (*Shadow*, 71)

This reminds us of one of the meanings of *continuous*: the dead are always with us - they live on continuously in our memories. They provide a reference to our lives - give it shape and focus. These dead are our own remembered dead, our family, friends, etc. Hence they constitute a more specific group, a kind of more private (or less public) sphere of remembrance. There are also the dead of history, the “rabblement” (*Selected Poems*, 236) under Beeston Hill, those that suffered injustice, oppression, those that fought for trade union recognition, for basic human freedoms. This latter group might be said to constitute a kind of public sphere of remembrance because they can be known by all - they are available to the collective consciousness. This suggests a parallel of sorts with Harrison’s approach to the issue of the personal and the public. We might separate the dead into categories of ‘private’ and ‘public’ dead but we can all mourn for everyone else - so death, we are reminded, as well as life, is a communal experience.

This only holds true as long as the dead are remembered, however. But even this is debated in the fourth film of the sequence, *Cheating the Void*. This has at its centre one basic question: to what degree does our remembering and commemorating the dead help to cheat death of its ultimate victory? Hence *Cheating* is mainly concerned with the struggle between Memory and Oblivion. The film starts with the speaker’s rhetorical question of just which force is in the ascendancy when the film-camera switch is operated?:

Oblivion is darkness, Memory light.  
They’re locked in eternal struggle. Which  
of these two forces really shows its might  
when death’s doors are thrown open by a switch? (*Shadow*, 93)

The image we see is an archive film of workers coming out of a factory. The narrator tells us that a reviewer of this film, the Lumière brothers’ *Workers Leaving a Factory* (1895), said that death was no longer absolute for, as the speaker suggests of the people in the film:

Though they are silent and won’t ever talk  
their very movements seemed to cheat the void. (*Shadow*, 93)

The speaker asks if the reviewer was right in his assumption and, moreover:

Do our TVs and videos make that truer  
and help to make the dead seem more alive? (*Shadow*, 93)



This is typical of Harrison in that he always seems to be fully aware of the medium in which he is working, always questioning the worth of what he is doing whether it be a book-bound poem or a film/poem. It is a question for which each individual viewer must provide the answer. As we shall also see in Harrison's later television work like *Gaze of the Gorgon* (1992), *Black Daisies* (1993), and *The Shadow of Hiroshima* (1995), a crucial part of Harrison's agenda is to create a sense of shared intimacy on the part of the viewers. In bald terms this is achieved by his engendering sympathy on their part in order that they might empathise with what, and who, they are being told about in any particular film. So in that sense our TVs and videos *do* make that truer and help to make the dead seem more alive because, if the film/poem *Cheating The Void* is successful in creating that sense of shared intimacy then the viewer will assent to the speaker's question. This would implicitly suggest both that there is a point to writing verse (it is poetry that achieves the sense of shared intimacy in the film/poems) and that Memory is winning in the struggle against Oblivion. However a closer study of this film/poem suggests otherwise.

The film suggests that Oblivion works in this way: the first oblivion is death, then neglect, the third is when a gravestone's inscription has been obliterated either by rampant foliage or by the elements. The conflict between Oblivion and Memory is, it seems, being won by the former:

Time running out for Europe and for man,  
Oblivion in our century overtaking  
Memory, pursued here to Milan  
where men of stone bring God's heart close to breaking. (*Shadow*, 100)

No wonder, then, that the speaker asks just what it is that "Christ [gazes] down on from his cross?" (*Shadow*, 100) This is the depressing analysis — the speaker argues that our age is:

A century where innocence has died  
and mankind finds no meaning in the loss  
of millions almost worse than crucified (*Shadow*, 100)

A significant development in this film is the technique of using a subjective voice, in order to enable the viewer know what someone was thinking. It was in this film that this subjective voice (as given to Vincenzo's widow in *Mimmo*) was given to statues and to the dead. We see this in the case of the nutseller buried in a cemetery in Staglieno, Genoa. The persona of

the nutseller speaks for four stanzas. He has been brought to life, in a sense, by Harrison, in order to comment on what he sees in the graveyard. His dramatic function is to introduce an element of class consciousness into the film/poem — it seems that Memory's ability to withstand Oblivion is closely connected to the amount of money one might have available to erect memorials, as the speaker suggests. These commemorative statues might even have:

every feature Memory could trace  
provided the remembered had the cash (*Shadow*, 89)

The nutseller saved hard during his life in order that he could emulate this show of opulence but he seems to be aware that his presence is not particularly welcome as the other denizens of the cemetery:

. . . sniff a bit to see me at their side

They don't like hawkers in the colonnade  
and I sold necklaces of nuts and rings of bread.  
Though alive they might despise my lowly trade  
they can't feel quite so snooty when they're dead. (*Shadow*, 98)

The class dimension raised by the voice of the nutseller is interesting. Typically for Harrison, the politicised imagination is always at work, always being exercised. Even in a series of film/poems mainly concerned with death Harrison is keen to maintain the political offensive. In *Cheating* we see that while the comments of the nutseller connect with generalised comment about upper-class snobbery, (even in death!), they also lead us to Harrison's comments about Sir William Casement. He is, the film/poem informs us, "Late of Bengal" (*Shadow*, 97), a colonial, and though dead he still lords it over the oppressed:

Chuprassie, sepoy, subahdar,  
used to serve Sir William's slightest whim.  
Now, things being in Britain what they are,  
these have no choice but bow and scrape to him. (*Shadow*, 97)

Those who have 'no choice' are young people on what used to be 'job creation' schemes. Now they are called *Welfare to Work* by New Labour. In the film they are cleaning Sir William's "lichen-encrusted caryatids". Hence they 'bow' down in order to 'scrape' away the

dirt: thus they can be seen to be paralleling the subjugated chuprassie that used to look after Sir William Casement when he was alive.

The nutseller is not the only person to be empowered to speak by the verse: even Jim Morrison, the lead singer of *The Doors*, gets the chance when a quatrain is completed as a result of the exhumation of Morrison's line from the Doors' *Five to One* (*Shadow*, 99). A prose comment from Morrison is also incorporated into the verse a little earlier in the film. This kind of synchronisation of material is characteristic of Harrison's film/poems. In the context of *Cheating* it is thematically relevant because it testifies to the speaker's implicit hope that Memory can triumph over Oblivion. Hence the film's soundtrack contains music from Callas, Patti and Piaf. This is because

The void may well be cheated by a voice,  
composer's quill, the artist's brush or pen (*Shadow*, 95)

Art, the speaker asserts, can cheat the void, the: "Oblivion that all our art defies" (*Shadow*, 94). But, as the speaker reminds us ironically, this Oblivion is also our common fate.

One noticeable characteristic of *Cheating* is that there are less repetitions, less stylistic intrusions in the verse. The tone is altogether more sombre but even in this film we do not have to look too far to find humorous elements. In this instance by the word humorous I also mean not serious, a willingness to have a little fun as, for example, demonstrated by the subtle use of parenthesis in the lines:

"Mazzini buried here serenely stated  
(before he died) that Death did not exist (*Shadow*, 98)

Earlier the speaker tells us about a bronze of Géricault that is in the cemetery. It depicts him painting his *The Raft of the Medusa*. Harrison incorporates material such as this seemingly effortlessly, scoring points all the while about hypocrisy and censorship, and generating humour. For instance he is able to move on from discussing the way that Géricault's painting has been emasculated by the "sculptor/reproducer" of the commemorative frieze, to a consideration of a more phallically liberated philosophy as espoused by Jim Morrison. Here is the passage in question. We learn that the painting has been:

(Bronze relief of  
*The Raft of the  
Medusa*)

reproduced in metal but its sculptor/reproducer  
believing no male organ much suits graves

(Jim Morrison's  
tomb)

made the dying man more modest for the frieze  
and gave the death offending member a bronze veil  
But *Jim* who doesn't, *didn't*, care who sees,  
for unveiling his on stage, got thrown in gaol.

'Death and my cock are the world,' said Jim.  
That may have been but now I rather doubt  
there's not much left of that vaunted part of him  
or nothing that he'd feel like putting out. (*Shadow*, 95)

Even in *Mimmo*, despite the subject matter of exhumation and decay, Harrison is still able to continue his punning ways. A good example of this comes when he writes

The censer swinging on the creaking chain,  
the sobbing of a loved one half-suppressed (*Shadow*, 82)

The word "censer", which is a container for burning incense, has a close phonetic correspondence to censor, meaning suppress, as is clear in the passage quoted. It is not immediately clear that this has any real purpose other than to entertain, in a sense. Harrison includes these all the time in his verse, they are like little private jokes, word games, or tiny, two-fingered gestures of humour amidst all the bleakness. They are characteristic of Harrison who though usually serious, is never solemn.

Besides his continuing reliance on humour, it is worth noting that in *Cheating* Harrison has continued many of his key stylistic elements such as inventive rhymes and language. In one instance the speaker personifies "War" as a character who "came rabbiting to Hamburg from the skies" and "in just one day bagged 50,000" (*Shadow*, 101). At other times we see rhymes such as "whips / Apocalypse" and "kids / caryatids" (*Shadow*, 97), and lines such as "Paris pushed, promoted and PRed" (*Shadow*, 93). The use of "PRed" is typical of Harrison. He is referring to the machinations of the public relations (PR) machine. If this had occurred in one of the *Eloquence* sonnets we might also have recognised it as Harrison attempting to fracture the stylised appearance of the sonnet on the page. Here, in fact, it is the sound of the phrase that is most relevant and its unusual construction is more to do with Harrison's emphasis on producing rhythmically and audibly satisfying speech. It is also rhymed with Abelard (*Shadow*, 93), Harrison's characteristic yoking together of ostensibly high and low cultural elements.

Though he maintains pretty much the threads of the issues and the politicised poetics that we have considered in *Eloquence* and other book-based poetry it is clear that a film-making poet is beginning to emerge. Various elements are important in this respect, not least of which is that which we might term his creation of a documentary sense. By this I mean a way of working based on an ability to respond to documentary material, to what is actually out there in the real world. One consequence of this is that it creates a sense of authenticity which implies a certain ‘truth’, a cleverly contrived illusion of both objectivity and of shared and personally observed experience, which helps to draw the audience in. This is a consequence of Harrison’s technique by which he privileges the world over the word - a process which locates the poet ‘out there’, in the real, contemporary world that is recognisably ‘ours’.

In *Mimmo Perrella non è Piu* we see an example of this. On the screen we see a coffin loaded onto a coach. A man turns away from the sight. The speaker seizes on this, interpreting it as a sign that the person cannot ‘face up to death’. What seems to have occurred is that some footage of a funeral has been filmed on location. Harrison has noticed that a “man in grey” has turned away from embracing the sight of the cortege. Here, then, we see how the verse explains the world, how the poet responds to what he sees. Harrison’s gift is that of dramatising this process in his film/poems, as the clip demonstrates:

Some get close, but others aren’t so brave.  
Some cope by unconcern. That man in grey,  
while others maybe touch the box or wave,  
can’t face up to death, and turns away. (*Shadow*, 82)

It is a very simple thing, I suppose, but it is the voice’s response to things that we as viewers can see for ourselves that helps to create the sense of authenticity — he is keen to create the illusion of the speaker really being *there*, that what he is talking about is real. Sometimes it is very subtle as when the speaker self-consciously corrects his tense from the present to the past (in *Cheating The Void*) when he talks of Jim Morrison’s proclivity for exposing his member and his lack of concern for who saw it, saying:

But *Jim* who doesn’t, *didn’t*, care who sees,  
for unveiling his on stage, got thrown in gaol. (*Shadow*, 95)

Ironically this grammatical correction makes the line regular in terms of the number of syllables. Once more the emphasis is on the sound of the spoken word, not an abstract metrical patterning. As a result of his technique, at other times Harrison invites us to believe that the speaker has only just noticed something, in the same *real time*, so to speak, as the viewer at home, as I said above. We see this in *Cheating The Void* (1987). Here the speaker asks. "And that, what's that? . . . A bird?" (*Shadow*, 94) Well, Harrison knows its a bird - after all he is <sup>sitting</sup> in an editing room in London looking at something recorded weeks or months earlier! But in terms of the techniques and strategies of creating shared intimacy, such effects are crucial.

The *Loving Memory* sequence is a validation of Harrison's assertion that poetry is able to 'earn its keep', so to speak. It proves that poetry has a valid role in popular culture, that it can deliver, at least when in the capable hands of a practitioner like Harrison. In the sequence we have seen many emerging elements of Harrison's developing techniques. These include the choice of metre and its linkage to the film, the inclusion of (and synchronisation) of prose elements within the verse forms, the integration of documentary and archive material, the ability to respond to what is already there on location, the development of the subjective voice technique and use of personas. The next step would be to broaden the range of the film/poems, to address pressing contemporary issues. One such issue is the Fatwa announced against Salman Rushdie that called for his assassination and it led to the major film/poem *Blasphemers' Banquet* (1989) which we will take as our most detailed example of Harrison's art. Here, building upon the politicised poetics that are the bedrock of his public poetry, Harrison begins the process of developing these and other techniques in such a way as to suggest a redefinition of the public, a development culminating in a sense of shared intimacy.

## Chapter 6: *Blasphemers' Banquet*

The initial impulse of *Blasphemers' Banquet* (1989) is as a protest against the Fatwa issued against Salman Rushdie. He was considered to have blasphemed against the Islamic faith in his novel *The Satanic Verses*. In a wider sense *Blasphemers'* broadens into a more general statement in support of free speech. In this respect the film/poem offers a critique of the typical fundamentalist position that encourages, even demands, censorship and repression. *Blasphemers'* thus becomes an object lesson in fundamentalism, something that Harrison is keen to place in its historical context. This is clearly the intention that underpins the references to Molière, Voltaire, Omar Khayyam and Byron. The impact of fundamentalism in our own age is conveyed by Harrison's including himself and Rushdie as 'characters' in the film/poem. In the case of Harrison appearing in vision this is a development of the dramatisation of the poet persona that we discussed in *Eloquence* and elsewhere. Moreover it is a similar process to that which occurs in the film of 'v.'. The effect is to remind us that the verse is written by a man speaking to men, and women! It is, then, part of Harrison's general campaign of demystification. It is also worth remembering that because Harrison appears in vision he is able to offer a considerable gesture of solidarity with Rushdie, perhaps to persecuted artists everywhere, something, I imagine, that provided much comfort to Rushdie in what were surely very trying times. Harrison's personal courage in doing this should not go unremarked yet it is perhaps indicative of verse's low profile that no similar fate befell him!

I have argued that Harrison's 'I' voice is fundamental to his quest for a public poetry and the creation of a sense of shared intimacy. I want to extend and broaden this discussion in order to consider the ways in which Harrison's 'I' voice, and his verse generally, interact with the medium of film. In *Blasphemers'*, for instance, the techniques of word and world and Harrison's inchoate documentary sense are substantially developed. Moreover the techniques that Harrison deploys in order to create the sense that his 'I' voice is ostensibly present in a recognisable world is essential in terms of his ability to contrast the fundamentalist promise of a paradisaical after-life with the material reality of the here and now. In order to explore this and other ways in which verse and film interact my discussion of *Blasphemers'* necessarily represents a detailed examination of Harrison's development of the film/poem genre and techniques .

The film opens with an image of light fittings in what we soon realise is a restaurant. The lights hint that there is going to be some kind of illumination — they also suggest the idea of celestial bodies, of stars in their heavens. The camera shows people eating, then lingers on a close-up of red wine being poured into a glass. This is a potent image, the rich, red tones of the wine suggesting blood, perhaps life itself — certainly there is a sensuousness which implies celebration, despite the empty chairs. It is now that the verse begins, the first two stanzas introducing the central characters and suggesting the dominant argument of the film/poem:

The blasphemers' banquet table; there  
on mirrored cushions will sit Voltaire,  
me, Molière, Omar Khayyam, Lord Byron  
and that, that's Salman Rushdie's chair.

It's perfect for tonight's blasphemers' meeting,  
this place renowned in Bradford for good eating  
that used to be a church and gets its name  
from the poet who loves THIS life, however fleeting (*Shadow*, 53)

The restaurant is called the *Omar Khayyam*. It is an irony not lost on Harrison, nor that this attempt at celebrating life is taking place in a ex-church. Religion is as subject to transience as anything else, it seems. At this point, however, the speaker's attention is directed at establishing the opposition between the blasphemers, the life-affirmers, and the representatives of religion, the life-deniers. The blasphemers are to celebrate "this fleeting life", and affirm the right to blaspheme:

Often called the 'Voltaire of the East'  
Omar Khayyam will pour wine at our feast  
and I'll propose the toast to Salman Rushdie  
and all those, then or now, damned by some priest. (*Shadow*, 53)

It is impossible to miss the deliberately scathing, dismissive tone of "some priest". Hence it is no surprise that Harrison has invited the people that he has. Molière, for example, who made an enemy of the clergy who believed that certain of his plays were attacks on the church. The film/poem tells us that because on his death no priest "heard him swear that he abjured the stage" (*Shadow*, 56) church leaders refused to officiate at Molière's internment or to grant his body a formal burial. Voltaire, too, had his problems with the Church in France. Omar Khayyam, "Often called the 'Voltaire of the East' " (*Shadow*, 53), is best known to English



readers as a result of Edward Fitzgerald's 1859 translation of his *Rubáiyát*, a long, early-12th-century Persian poem. The poem is a collection of quatrains, 'rubaiyat' being the plural for quatrain in Persian, a series of haunting stanzas on love, death, and the passage of time which also celebrate sensual pleasure, as in the famous lines, "A Flask of wine, a Book of Verse - / and Thou / Beside me singing in the Wilderness."<sup>1</sup> There are, then, many reasons why Harrison uses Omar Khayyam's verse form for his film/poem. One is the popularity of Fitzgerald's translation — it has almost a folk ballad provenance in the popular mind and is often quoted. Also, using a particular verse form for a particular film/poem offers a thematic coherence which is obviously attractive to Harrison. In this respect we notice that Omar Khayyam was from Persia, the old name for Iran. It is fundamentalists in Iran who have issued the Fatwa, of course, so Harrison is able to maintain the contrast between a past time in which corporeal life was celebrated and an ugly present in which freedoms are curtailed. The use of Omar's verse form also signals Harrison's aim that his verses will celebrate sensual pleasure. Hence the guest list for, when we think of Byron and his proclivity for sensual, hedonistic expression, we see that it is easy to make connections between those invited. They are all people who share a libertarian, free thinking attitude, a determination to live life fully, to enjoy the here and now, at the expense of any spurious possibility of an afterlife. Harrison's act of placing himself amongst this gathering, albeit imaginatively, was not universally appreciated, however. The journalist Peter Lennon tells us, for instance, that "Some of his fellow poets were reported to have described it as an 'ego trip', irritated by Harrison putting himself blandly in among great poets of the past."<sup>2</sup>

I should not think that Harrison was too perturbed by this gossip. In his defence we might note that he too has been subject to bigotry and prejudice. In this respect we might remember the vitriolic onslaught that 'v.' engendered. There were also attempts to censor *Blasphemers*' by the Lay Adviser to the Archbishop of Canterbury. The alleged reason for this was because it might have been prejudicial to British race relations but, as Bruce Woodcock has suggested, the real reason was "because of its outright and unashamedly atheistical attack on all religion."<sup>3</sup> Indeed it has been suggested that Harrison's atheism represents a radical posture in the sense that this element in his work "derives from that long

<sup>1</sup> Omar Khayyám. *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*. Trans. Edward Fitzgerald. Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 1993, 25.

<sup>2</sup> Lennon. 'World seen from the gods', 21.

<sup>3</sup> Woodcock. 'Classical Vandalism', 61.

post-Nietzschean tradition amongst classicists [ . . . ] the attempt to get us really to think our way back past Christianity and the moral and social arrangement it has proposed. That is another form of radicalism, and perhaps the most dangerously transformative that an artist can imagine.”<sup>4</sup> In this context we might remember what Zamyatin had to say about heretics and art: “True literature can only exist where it is created, not by diligent and trusty officials, but by madmen, hermits, heretics, dreamers, rebels and sceptics.”<sup>5</sup>

The film/poem did not survive entirely unscathed, however, as the notes to one publication of the text of *Blasphemers* reveals. We learn that “Under legal pressure the BBC removed two quatrains from the film” (*Shadow*, 64). Though omitted from the text in Astley’s edition (Bloodaxe 1991) the verses are reinstated in *Tony Harrison: The Shadow of Hiroshima and other poems* (Faber and Faber 1995). These are the two quatrains in question, they would have been the seventh and sixth from the end:

The Ayatollah in his rich brocades  
sucking sherbets by shimmering cascades  
nods approval to the theologian  
who wants the world to kill all those with Aids.

Note the new name: Abdullah-al-Mashad,  
the latest mullah, dangerous and mad —  
‘Frankly, I wish I’d written a more critical book’ -  
Sadly, Salman, I sometimes wish you had! (*Shadow*, 64)

The basic opposition in the film/poem is between the life-affirming philosophy of the blasphemers and the life-denying stance of the fundamentalists. Omar Khayyam, for example, loved wine, and did not care

for those cascade-crammed castles in the air  
the Koran promises to those who sacrifice  
‘this fleeting life’ for afterlife up there. (*Shadow*, 53)

It is, then, precisely because life is fleeting that we must savour it. For the speaker’s part the spurious possibility of the afterlife must be disregarded in order to appreciate the pleasures of this fleeting life:

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Butler. ‘Culture and Debate’. *Loiner*, 106.

<sup>5</sup> Yevgeny Zamyatin. ‘I am Afraid’. *A Soviet Heretic: Essays by Yevgeny Zamyatin*. Ed. and trans. by Mirra Ginsberg. Chicago: London: University of Chicago Press, 1970, 57.

And of the afterlife I have no need.  
 What more could a godless mortal need  
 than a samosa and a can of beer  
 and books, like Rushdie's, to sit here and read? (*Shadow*, 55)

Bread, beer and books are the only soul foods necessary for a godless mortal, then. Here we note not only the multicultural conjunction of samosa and beer but also an intriguing connection with the first stanza of 'v.' and the legacy of the speaker's ancestors, the "beef, beer and bread". (*Selected Poems*, 236) Samosas can contain meat so it seems that the reference in *Blasphemers*' fulfils the same function — the point is that the bread and the drink, be it beer or wine, serve as a kind of atheist's mantra of sensual enjoyment, an infidel's menu in a contrasting parallel to the bread and the wine that is traditionally the centre of many ceremonies that occur in organised religions. There is a kind of reverse symbolism here, then, as the abstract religious symbols of bread and wine have been appropriated by the heretic, Harrison, and turned into 'real' things in order to celebrate blasphemy! The speaker tells us that Omar Khayyam

will pour for us his choicest flask of wine  
 while I pass round the Peshawari nan. (*Shadow*, 55)

This is not a meal that is taken symbolically to celebrate a religious event, this is a meal in which it is intended to imbibe real food in order to celebrate, and affirm, life itself. This affirmation of the here and now, the material, is defined by a rejection of the possibility of an afterlife, a premise typically postulated by most religions. The afterlife that the Koran speaks of is "a paradise of fountains and green shade" with wonderful gardens "where roses bloom forever and don't fade" (*Shadow*, 54). Seeing that the Ayatollah Khomeini is now dead then, according to the tenets of his faith, he will have attained this paradisaal state, as the speaker suggests: "the *Fatwa* Fascist lolls in Paradise" (*Shadow*, 54). The irony of this situation, the sheer injustice, suggests the speaker, is that this man "whose *fatwa* made the world afraid" (*Shadow*, 54) will be dressed in fine clothes "and be served sherbets by chaste virgins" (*Shadow*, 54). But, continues the speaker, in contrast to this paradise "where nothing changes and things last" (*Shadow*, 54), suggesting paralysis and stagnation,

down here where life is fleeting and time flies  
 a man I've asked to dinner has to hide (*Shadow*, 55)

This establishes one of the integral structural elements of the film's argument, the opposition between a concept of an afterlife and the life-affirming spirit that insists on privileging the material world, the here and now. We are continually presented with this contrast. Indeed it is presented as a fundamental part of the film/poem's critique of religion in a more general sense. Religion is condemned because its promise of the afterlife as a future reward for a life of repression and denial is perceived as essentially life-denying. This life-denying trait is not necessarily implicit either, it is manifested explicitly as the film/poem's quotations from the Koran testify. We learn, for example, that the Koran

. . . denounces unbelievers who  
quote 'love this fleeting life' unquote. I do.  
I'm an unbeliever. I love this life.  
I don't believe their paradise is true. (*Shadow*, 54)

It is significant that the speaker is at pains to show us that he is quoting. This is another element of demystification, then; it shows that the poetry is *written*, that the words have been worked. But it also shows his desire to appear to be recording the madness of bigotry exactly, an indictment all the more effective because of the intimacy generated by the 'I' voice with its repeated use of the first person and the bluntly sincere tone suggested by the simple, short statements.

It should be remembered that Harrison's critique is not simply directed against Islam but, rather, at fundamentalism generally, irrespective of the religious hue. Hence fundamentalists can be found in either "black turbans or dog collars" (*Shadow*, 56). That fundamentalism knows no geographical boundaries, that it is not simply a feature of Islamic countries, is graphically depicted by the clever use of archive material. After a sequence in which book-burning, Rushdie-hating crowds are heard chanting " 'Kill the bastard . . . ' " (*Shadow*, 62) the persona of Voltaire tells us of his play *Mahomet*. This was his own attack on fundamentalism, as Voltaire 'explains':

Though not much played since 1742  
a revival of my play's long overdue.  
By MAHOMET I meant all fundamentalists  
Moslem, Catholic, Protestant and Jew (*Shadow*, 62)

By way of illustration, the following words accompany the images we next see on our screens:

REV. IAN PAISLEY: *'We have to preserve and maintain in this island True Protestantism, and the Protestant way of life. And I have news for the Roman Catholic church in Ireland today, we Protestants are here in Ireland to stay.'*

RABBI MEIR KAHANE: *' . . . you know someone who wants to, who wants to kill you . . . get up first and go and kill him first, that is Judaeism, that is Judaeism, that is sanity.'*

MOTHER ANGELICA *'it is without question the most blasphemous, the most disrespectful, the most satanic movie that's ever been made . . . '*  
(*Shadow*, 62-63)

After these three examples of Protestant, Jewish and Catholic fundamentalism respectively, we are shown an image of the Ayatollah Khomeini, followed by one of a U.S. preacher. At this point there is no verse commentary — there does not need to be — the evidence before our eyes is cold and hard. These are 'facts', our brains tell us. The effect of the editing is one of validating and confirming what the speaker has already said up to this point. The point of these specific images, these accounts of multicultural bigotry is simple: bigotry, prejudice and dogma is present in more varied forms and is closer to home than you might have thought. And just in case the viewer might have missed the point the film chooses to identify these figures with the worst excesses of Middle Eastern fundamentalism. This is suggested by the way that the sequence ends. Here we see a slow-motion close-up of a boy with a bleeding head at a demonstration in Hyde Park, London. The people are beating/cutting their own heads, presumably as an act of penance or, perhaps, to signify the extent of their faith in Allah. In a truly disturbing sequence we see blood pouring down the faces of the people on the march and a close-up reveals that they are cutting themselves with blades of some kind. The camera pays particular attention to an adult male who is doing this to a child who appears to be only about three or four. Once again there are no words from the poet, nor need there be. The images themselves serve to draw together many strands of the argument by suggesting that though Paisley *et al* might differ in degree they are essentially no different from the Middle eastern zealots.

One reason that *Blasphemers*' was such an exciting, powerful film/poem was that Harrison was able to respond to events as they unfolded, both during the filming process and, perhaps more crucially, during the editing process. The genesis of the film/poem is interesting in this respect. From first discussions with Symes, Harrison started to form ideas about the project but it was really only when Symes and Harrison went for a three day tour of Bradford

(scene of some very public book-burnings of Rushdie's book) that they began to realise the possibilities that eventually were to lead to the film as we know it now. They had several loose ideas about defending Rushdie's right to free speech (even if blasphemous), the impermanence of religion as evidenced by derelict and redundant churches, ideas about blasphemy and blasphemers but no clear idea about where the film was going. Yet even so, according to Symes, Harrison felt that he had sufficient building blocks in place for them to begin filming. They filmed churches and found some inscriptions of Omar Khayyam in a local graveyard and, to the apparent bemusement of the film crew, filmed bits of graffiti and 'O's' wherever they could be found, whether on signboards or the 'O' of the Omar Khayyam sign as it was removed from the restaurant. It sounds chaotic yet this was fast becoming Harrison's favoured working method. That Harrison can produce work of such a high standard, in such short time spans, testifies not only to his technical abilities but also to his flexibility and to his political commitment to public poetry. It is this commitment, manifested in his poetic apprehension, that informs his quest for images, for the unusual and the profound and, presumably, informs and influences the filming of images despite him having very little verse already written.

Though *Blasphemers*' "was made with a passion born of intense anger in the ridiculously short space of about eight weeks" (*Shadow*, xiv), we know from Symes that Harrison had, in fact, been exploring the possibility of developing an opera about fundamentalism. Based on the religious stonings that had been taking place in Iran, it had the working title of 'Heads in the Sand'.<sup>6</sup> With typical Harrison ingenuity (and his characteristic bleak humour) the title refers both to ignorance and evasions and, more literally, the burial up to the neck of those condemned to death by stoning. Whereas he does 'write to order' it is clear that Harrison also has some ideas in reserve, so to speak. As was the case with 'v.' and the embryonic poem *A 'scanty plot of ground*, the film of *Blasphemers*' also had a predecessor. This was Harrison's poem *Satanic Verses*, printed in *The Independent* newspaper on 19. 2. 89, an immediate response on Harrison's part: the Fatwa was announced on 16. 2. 89. The poem reads like the film/poem in kit form, clearly exhibiting Harrison's courage in attacking fundamentalism. This is the poem in full:

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<sup>6</sup> Symes. 'Introduction', pp. vii-xxiv.

It seems that Salman's death is worth  
 some imam's million dollars.  
 I know that Salman's mind is worth  
 a million Ayatollahs'.

Give us this day our daily read,  
 newspaper, poem or novel,  
 but spare us the God-inspired screed  
 to which the gormless grovel.

All religion's had its day  
 especially when it insists  
 it is the one and only way  
 and fosters fundamentalists.

I've seen them in the US South,  
 heard them from Bradford and Iran  
 listening to the same loud mouth  
 vilify the works of Man.

I have to say that I'm incensed  
 to see the principles that are my guide  
 so blatantly blasphemed against  
 by Bradfordian bibliocide.

Burning books is an offence  
 against something even greater  
 than any god, intelligence  
 long chained by the 'Creator'.

And in a democratic nation  
 democracy's not founded  
 on creativity's cremation  
 nor creative minds Mahounded.

The works of Kafka, Brecht and Mann  
 were burned by zealots like yourselves  
 but though I can't speak for Iran  
 they're still on my bookshelves,

and I'm content to let them share  
 my shelf space with another two  
 volumes that I read with care,  
 though neither, I think, 's right or true:

the Bible with its glorious prose  
 though much of it has misled Man  
 and a book that Moslems ought to know 's  
 published by Penguin — the Koran!

So Bradford, Iran, Pakistan,  
homicidal fundamentalist,  
when you impose your Penguin ban  
the Koran's on their list.

And so am I and proud to be.  
No Penguin is an island, so  
who burns Rushdie's burning me  
and I want to let him know

'I shall not cease from *mental* strife  
nor shall my pen sleep in my hand'  
till Rushdie has a right to life  
and books aren't burned or banned.<sup>7</sup>

Harrison's broadside is a good example of how he crafts public poetry, a poetry born, in this instance, of an urgent response to a pressing contemporary concern. Integral to this response is his politicised poetics. This is apparent in the accessible style of the poem with its colloquial usages such as "had its day" and diction such as "gormless", and the inclusive use of "us", for example, which acts to align the reader with the speaker. Harrison's characteristic techniques are also noticeable in rhymes such as "dollars" and "Ayatollahs" and also the way that he typically uses rhyme to enforce a political point. We see this when the rhyme of "insists" and "fundamentalists" acts to enforce the idea that lack of freedoms cohere in fundamentalism.

The speaking voice in the poem is that of the poet-persona, as the specificity of the reference to Kafka's, Brecht's and Mann's books being "still on my book shelves" suggests. Indeed, the importance of literature to the speaker is clear. He even conflates the act of reading with the very stuff of life. For example in a parody of a Christian religious service the speaker intones "Give us this day our daily read", a line ghosted by the word we might have expected, 'bread'. Also indicative of the poet-persona are the studiously literary allusions such as that to John Donne's 'no man is an island'. In a generous act of solidarity the speaker tells us that "No Penguin is an island" and continues with a warning, suggesting that those who are burning Rushdie are also burning him. This leads to the speaker's allusion to Blake's 'Jerusalem' in order that he can articulate an imaginative resistance wielding a pen, rather than a physical one with a sword. However, whereas Blake wrote

I will not cease from Mental Fight,  
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Tony Harrison. 'Satanic Verses'. Uncollected poem. Published in *The Independent* 19 February 1989.

<sup>8</sup> Blake. Complete Writings, 481.



Harrison writes “mental strife”. Though this change affords a useful rhyme with “life” we can also see in Harrison’s down-grading from the implied physicality of ‘fight’ to the more abstract ‘strife’ a recognition that writing is not the same as fighting, despite the rhetoric of much of his earlier work such as ‘On Not Being Milton’, for example. Perhaps this is a tacit acknowledgment that he is not as politically radical as Blake, hence we might see in such subtleties another example of Harrison’s undermining of the poet-persona once more. Here too he is questioning the validity of the liberal poetic voice again, as we have already seen in our consideration of ‘v.’.

One major advantage of Harrison’s ability to write to order, to respond to what is there, is that it allows him a considerable degree of flexibility and gives him the opportunity to respond when something unexpected occurs, such as happened during filming *Blasphemers*<sup>9</sup> when news of the Ayatollah’s death was announced. Symes’ article gives us a fascinating insight into this process. It is worth quoting extensively as it tells us what occurs after the process of filming has been completed. The practice then is for Harrison occupy a room next door to the editing room. In here Harrison starts

to write, read and meditate [ . . . ] It was really only at this stage that the idea of the banquet became central to the whole, and was erected as the skeleton upon which the flesh of the argument could be hung. Working with certain strong ideas (the Islamic dream of a paradise of water and shade; the impermanence of religions as evidenced by the churches; the inability of creeds to ‘split the world of the spirit from the world of shit’) the film was roughly assembled . . . [ Then ] . . . he concentrated on using the material gathered in Bradford and Paris, where, after our experience on *Loving Memory*, we had been careful to obtain shots that could carry verse well. Long tracking shots, close and abstract shots, lengthy holds all offered better opportunities for Tony to set up strong ideas and strong verbal images. All of this against a constant backdrop of toing and froing between rooms, with everyone throwing in suggestions and ideas. Although risky, this flexible approach to film-making offers enormous benefits: images, words, music and sounds all contribute to the whole on their own terms, and not as some weaker accompaniment, so while the verse remains the lynchpin of the whole operation the other elements are never downgraded. The end result is a highly structured film, the structure always carried by the verse, but carrying with it sequences where image alone or sound alone or a powerful combination of the two are interwoven with the rest.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Symes. ‘Blasphemy and Death’. *Bloodaxe*, pp. 392-3.

An excellent example of this is found in the section of *Blasphemers'* that covers the Ayatollah's funeral. We see how the film/poem combines a variety of elements such as a verse narrative, documentary material (the news footage), song, music, quotations and skilful technical effects. All these work together in order to represent a multimedia critique of fundamentalism. It is a section of the film that merits close attention.

After the opening stanzas set in the restaurant, we are shown the main title which then cuts to an image of Rushdie who says " 'And frankly I wish I'd written a more critical book.' " (*Shadow*, 53) We then see images from a demonstration against him. This sequence cuts to an image of Voltaire's bust which has scenes of book burning projected upon it. Voltaire speaks, explaining how his works were burnt and yet how his monument is in "the Crush Bar of the Comédie Française" (*Shadow*, 54). The point is that art can outlast bigotry and that people can transcend persecution and outlive, in a sense, those bigots that attempted to kill the works and, in some cases, kill the artists who produced them. At this point Voltaire's image is reflected in a television monitor in the Crush Bar for a few moments until it dissolves into footage of the Ayatollah's funeral.

The juxtaposition of these two elements is dramatic. At first we do not know what is happening. This seems to be a deliberate technique in that it conveys, perhaps, the interjection of the news of the Ayatollah's death as it occurred in real life. In this respect it is worth noting that the filming of *Blasphemers'* started on May 27 1989 and ended in Paris on June 5th. The Ayatollah died on June 4th, the day before filming was scheduled to end, hence the inclusion of the footage of the funeral. Initially we see a disturbing aerial image of thousands of people swarming over what seems to be an open plain. Briefly we might be reminded of Eliot's "hooded hordes swarming/over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth" in The Wasteland (1922)<sup>10</sup>. The suggestion here is ironic, however. In these images it is belief (rather than lack of it) that has caused a 'wasteland'! As the sequence develops we see that the people are, in fact, mourners at a funeral. At this point the first of the film's superimposed quotations is seen: " 'I know that during my long life I have always been right about what I said.' " (*Shadow*, 54) The words are those of the Ayatollah yet the words are teasingly unattributed for about four or five seconds. Then the source is revealed. The effect of this is dramatic, rather like the revelation in the film v.' that Scargill was the source of the epigraph. The Ayatollah's chilling certainty precedes another superimposed statement, one that, in a

<sup>10</sup> T. S. Eliot. *Collected Poems 1909-1962*. London: Faber and Faber, 1974, 77.

sense, conflates unbelievers with bodily functions. This occurs after the funeral scenes during a section in which the speaker's description of the deceased Ayatollah lolling in Paradise is interrupted so we can consider Khomeini's views on impure things. Initially the viewer sees this:

*'These are things which are impure:  
unbelievers, (Shadow, 54)*

At this point, however, the viewer does not know that the quotation is incomplete. After about five seconds of this on the screen, the previously omitted words are restored in order to reveal the full quotation.

*'These are things which are impure: urine, excrement, sperm, blood, dogs,  
pigs, unbelievers, wine, beer and the sweat of the excrement eating camel.'  
(Shadow, 54)*

The effect of this deferred completion of sense is very powerful. It is bad enough to learn that this faith considers unbelievers to be impure; when the full quote is displayed we cannot fail to be struck by the sheer venom of the bigotry. One effect of a quotation like this is to demonstrate the irrationality of fundamentalist dogma — another effect is, curiously, (and presumably intentionally) that it ridicules the fundamentalists. For us in the West it is almost Pythonesque — the conjunctions in the quotation are so outrageous the whole thing reads like a parody of fundamentalism. But, the film tells us again and again, this is the real thing. Far from being humorous in reality there is a real danger in such entrenched attitudes, particularly in view of the previous quotation from the Ayatollah.

After the first quotation the more distant scenes of crowds are sharply edited to a scene of a coffin being borne aloft. As the scenes change, on the beat (to use a musical analogy), Dominic Muldowney's music provides an ominous, even sinister clanging sound which is subtly blended with the sounds emanating from the excited crowd. Everyone is trying to reach the corpse, trying to touch it. Then the film cuts to a scene showing the crowd being hosed down by water cannon. This has a literal function, obviously, but there is also a symbolic message: these people are overheated emotionally as well. With another strident clanging note on the beat, the film cuts to a new view of the coffin being borne aloft, each successive edit is drawing us closer to the action. The crowd are becoming more vociferous, and more successful, in their attempts to reach the coffin. There is a real sense of tension

now; the noise of the crowd rises in volume and melds in with the sound of the helicopter which, presumably, originally provided the documentary footage of the funeral. Shortly we cut to film of the crowd being hosed down again. There are hundreds of women in the foreground dressed in traditional dress and walking calmly, in direct (though unstated) contrast to the Muslim *men*. Harrison's repetition of this amounts to another subversion: he suggests that a defining characteristic of Islam is that it is patriarchal. He reminds us on two occasions that "the Paradise / [is] promised to Moslem *men* by the Koran, (*Shadow*, 57 and 63). Then we have a further cut to a scene of the coffin being borne aloft. This is the camera's closest view yet. We are being drawn right down into the centre of things. I should emphasise that all these effects have been generated as a result of the way that the documentary news footage has been edited, and its added soundtrack. It is, then, the effect of the edited collage that I am describing. The accumulative effect of this editing is very powerful, claustrophobic even, as now we see that the male mourners are even closer to the coffin, clambering about on the heads of others in an attempt to reach the corpse. Security guards are beating them off with their hands, and not before time as the crowd have started to unwrap the coverings from the corpse. Now another helicopter moves in to try to dislodge the mourners from the plinth where the Ayatollah's coffin rests precariously. Someone must have decided that the situation was becoming too unstable for now we see the coffin being borne away on the roof of some kind of vehicle. The greatest shock is yet to come, however, for the Western viewer used to sober, restrained funereal arrangements such as that witnessed in 1997 for Princess Diana. The camera goes in for a close-up which is enhanced by the use of slow-motion — the Ayatollah's corpse seems to be practically falling off the roof of the vehicle, his lower body, his legs are exposed and there is no sign of the coffin.

This is a very powerful sequence during which the poet is silent — the images do the talking. Narrative silences are an important feature of Harrison's films and there is a clear movement between verse narrative and documentary footage. In terms of this movement from a narrative presence to scenes such as the Ayatollah's funeral, and back again, it suggests that Harrison is working at normalising the presence of verse, showing how it fits in, so to speak, with the 'real world'. In a sense it seems surprisingly like a newspaper — blocks of text interspersed with images combine to make a news story. This is poetry as news, then, and shows that Harrison's achievement can be measured not just as a poet, but also as a broadcaster. The suspended narratives also serve to create an illusion that we have the

freedom to make up our own minds — the poet is letting images do the talking for him, as in the case of the funeral scenes. It is during these ‘silences’ that we see the use of superimposed quotations, hence there is also a huge contrast established between the *assumed* reasonableness and even-handedness of the narrator and the explicit unreasonableness of the Ayatollah!

Moreover these images provide a graphic illustration of fundamentalist fanaticism in that they serve to undercut the Ayatollah’s certainty and show up the ridiculousness of the arrogance, thus pointing up the inanity of the fundamentalists’ dismissal of the ‘other view’. Another way that the film does this is by appropriating a line from the Koran and turning it into a refrain that encapsulates the film’s affirmative spirit. This is first heard after the sequence showing the Ayatollah’s funeral. As the camera fixes on the limb dangling over the edge of the vehicle we hear the refrain: “ ‘Oh, I love this fleeting life.’ ” (*Shadow*, 54) This is sung by Teresa Stratos, Harrison’s then wife. Peter Symes tells us: “In its original context the phrase is used to warn against attachment to the world. Here it has been appropriated and turned into a hymn of praise for everything fleeting and lovely in this life.”<sup>11</sup> The Koran tells us that this life is fleeting, that it is merely a stage during which believers prepare for the afterlife. This is the crux for Harrison. It is precisely because life is so fleeting that it has to be affirmed, to be savoured and enjoyed. Hence Stratos’ defiant refrain. This reoccurs in various forms throughout the film, typically as a riposte to some brutal banality as, for example, when the sequence of the demonstration ends on the bleeding boy and fountain in Hyde Park the refrain is heard once more.

One notable feature of the film/poem genre as Harrison develops it is the way in which Harrison’s verse interacts with the images in order to both consolidate and develop the themes of the work. In *Blasphemers*’ this technique allows him to establish the film’s central opposition between a concept of an afterlife and the life affirming spirit that insists on privileging the here and now. Indeed it is precisely because of where the speaking voice locates itself — in an identifiable, corporeal realm of existence — that throughout the film/poem the speaker is able to contrast the spurious promise of an afterlife with the reality of this material world. Hence he gravitates between the abstractions of Moslem theology and the concreteness afforded by his poetical perspective. This contrast is clear in the way that the Islamic promise of a “paradise of fountains and green shade” (*Shadow*, 54) is echoed in the

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<sup>11</sup> Symes. ‘Introduction’, xvi.

fountains of the Bradford square and ridiculed, perhaps, by the apparently insignificant detail of the plastic cup which, on one level, might be taken as representing transience and, by extension, mortality.

In this section the image we see first is a fountain, or rather we are looking through the water jet. There is nothing else to see, only the plume of water. It might be taken to represent, in a simplistic sense, the life force. This image cuts to an image of calmer water in which pin-pricks of light are reflected. These are the “waters full of stars” (*Shadow*, 54) which go ‘flowing past’ in the Islamic heaven. It is upon this image of celestial tranquillity that the Ayatollah’s quotation about the impure is superimposed. The function of the filmed images here is to provide a kind of consolidation of the import of the words and in itself is straightforward enough — the film is giving us a literal image that affirms the lexical image. This is not merely a kind of visual padding as the visual images generally embody an ironical perspective. This is the function of the plastic cup. We are shown this when, after speaking of the Ayatollah “lolling” in heavenly Paradise the speaker turns his attention to “down here where life is fleeting and time flies” (*Shadow*, 55). It is at the precise moment that Harrison speaks the word “down”, that the image changes to that of the plastic cup. It reminded me of the Beatle’s song ‘All Across The Universe’, and the lines

words are flying out like endless rain into a paper cup  
they slither while they pass, they slip away across the universe <sup>12</sup>

It is tempting to see this as another instance of Harrison’s self-doubt as to the efficacy of poetry but equally useful to see the cup as a deceptively brilliant symbol of the transience of Man — the design of Man, like the cup, is inventive and cleverly serves a purpose — yet, just like the cup we too are ultimately disposable! In this context the workman then appears as a kind of jokey parody of the grim reaper who with his net scoops out both the cup, and a Rushdie-headlined newspaper. The sequence ends by reiterating the theme that Voltaire expressed earlier: while the fundamentalists might be able to censor Rushdie’s participation in life they are unable to suppress the ideas found in books such as his; literary works survive and outlive censorship. This is simply but effectively suggested by the device of having Harrison in view in the Bradford square (sat in a kind of green shade) where Rushdie’s book was burnt, producing the book, as if by magic, an act he achieves

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<sup>12</sup> Lennon-McCartney. ‘All Across The Universe’. *Let it be*.

By reading it, where fools had it cremated  
I bring it whole again, out of the air. (*Shadow*, 55)

It is a commonplace stunt on TV nowadays but one impossible to replicate on the page. Except, in a sense, by the wonders of the imagination. This is the only reality, suggests Harrison, our own imaginative constructions. It is here that we, too, can 'magic' books up. This general point about art is consolidated by the succeeding camera shot which, aided by a crane, soars away from a close-up of Harrison while he is sat in the square and ends on the domes of Bradford's Alhambra theatre. Just to prove the point that art has abilities to deny the censors, that it has a kind of immortality denied to Man, we are shown a little of what is being performed there. It is Harrison's own translation of Molière's *Misanthrope*. The work of blasphemers will survive, it seems, despite the best efforts of the book-burners *and* in sharp contrast to the impermanence of religions, something evinced by the images of derelict churches and the way that churches are appropriated for secular interests and concerns.

Scenes and examples like these in *Blasphemers* indicate how Harrison's film/poems work, in the sense that in the examples above the idea of the primacy of the imagination (signifying the blasphemer, the heretic), is embodied in the way that the camera in the film enacts the role of the imagination. The camera is an enabler. It suggests freedom, in a subtle contrast to the fixities and rigidities of fundamentalism. In this context the 'I' of the speaker is also an 'eye'. It too sees all and can choose what it presents. Hence both the 'I' of the speaking voice and the 'eye' of the camera swoop down and soar up, enacting the imagination's ability to re-locate itself. This relates to what I briefly referred to earlier as Harrison's 'poetic apprehension'. By this I mean the act of capturing or arresting, the faculty of comprehending, of understanding. Obviously Harrison is not unique in this in that all poets will view the world (in some way) and be stimulated to write about some aspect of that world. In this respect all poetry is, by definition, some kind of enactment of a poetic apprehension. But in Harrison's case it seems to me that something a little different is occurring. What is so unique and exciting about Harrison is that as far as possible he is maintaining the relationship of the word and the world that existed during that moment of apprehension. His words 'explain' the pictures of the world that are included in the film/poem. Whereas conventional films provide visual images to explain the already existing poems, with Harrison we are a step nearer the poetic process as the films recapture, in a sense, indeed enact, his initial, poetic response to the world. Hence we are able to understand his work as a kind of explication of

how a poet's apprehension of the world translates into a piece of art. What I mean by this is that, unlike anyone else you can think of, Harrison's situation is crucially different. His finished work actually enacts the whole process of response because of the way he writes to order during all stages of production, particularly after the location filming. Hence the filmed images represent the poetic memories, so to speak, the recollection of what the poet actually saw, and have the closest possible relation and sense of immediacy, between subject and object. The film/poem is then the finished poem rather than a succession of images being furnished in order to explain an already existing poem. Harrison's film/poems are the revelation of the poetic process reduced to its fewest parts.

The effect of this is quite extraordinary: Harrison's achievement is to make the use of poetry appear to be the most natural thing in the world. It has become public in the sense that it has become truly available as a result of his techniques, its inclusivity suggesting that it has become free of association with any one particular class or sector of society. A consideration of the section in *Blasphemers*' which shows us Scarface's graffiti will help to illustrate what I mean. The scene comprises a long tracking shot, achieved by the camera being wheeled down a kind of miniature railway line. As the verse begins its elaboration on the implications of such obscene daubings the camera accompanies it on its journey. In this section Harrison suggests that a desire to separate the material from the spiritual is a characteristic of fundamentalism. To some this might be an attraction, indeed, part of fundamentalism's appeal is that it simplifies life in ways such as this. For example if one embraces a single creed then at a stroke the agonising, the questioning, the *angst* of contemporary life has been swept away. All one has to do is to accept the word, unquestionably. But it follows from this that if one accepts the word as an act of faith (literally, without question) then the purity of that word, that faith, must be preserved at all costs. Anything that does not actually enforce or support that faith is, by its very nature, impure. Hence one must totally reject anything that undermines that faith. A consequence of this in orthodox Islamic theology is a desire to separate the material and the spiritual. The problem, suggests the speaker however, is that

. . . beauty  
is inescapably bound up with the obscene.

Various creeds attempt to but can't split  
the world of spirit from the world of shit. (*Shadow*, 59)



To blasphemers like Harrison there is only life itself. It cannot be separated into different categories such as 'spirit' and 'shit', or high and low art, or, for that matter, public and private. The film illustrates this by showing us Scarface's graffiti. It reads:

Scarface bumbed his Dad upside down. he licked his mum Fanny out 200  
Time a minute [sic] (*Shadow*, 59)

Notably, even Scarface has a voice to blaspheme, however illiterately. Rushdie is denied this by the Fatwah. The speaker argues that Scarface's scrawl, however distasteful this might be, suggests that

Crude scrawls and sacred scrolls come from one mind.  
Scarface subverts the saint and won't submit. (*Shadow*, 59)

Scarface's refusal to submit indicates that this blend of high and low may well be an inescapable aspect of the human condition. Certainly Harrison's poem 'v.' suggested as much. It is an attempt to evade the prosaic realities of the material world, of corporeal existence, that <sup>prompts</sup> Man to look elsewhere for beauty, suggests the film:

Man's fear of his own filth makes him go on seeking  
the unblemished beautiful in the untrue. (*Shadow*, 59)

It is typical of Harrison that he uses a word like "untrue". By this he means 'false', of course but this would not suggest a sense of delusion on the part of the fundamentalists — so he uses a word like this, rather like the way used car salesmen avoid calling something 'second-hand' by referring to it as 'pre-owned' It is, suggests the film, an evasion that has a parallel in the evasive measures taken by fundamentalists to avoid the questionings and doubts of modern living and helps to explain the barriers they erect in order to protect the purity of their vision:

The thorny whys and wherefores, awkward whences  
things that seduce or shame or shock the senses  
panic the one-book creeds into erecting  
a fence against all filth and all offences. (*Shadow*, 59)

The fundamentalist's yearning for something more beautiful, "some purer light" (*Shadow*, 59), is a result of the feeling that "life seems blasted by some blight" (*Shadow*, 59). In reality, Harrison suggests, paraphrasing Bertrand Russell, this yearning and the acceptance of the

dangled carrot of the afterlife are ultimately based upon Man's "deep fear of everlasting night" (*Shadow*, 59). Hence the adoption of a life of fundamentalism as a kind of insurance policy against the possibility of a hellish afterlife. But, argues the film/poem, because of their concentration on the afterlife these "pious frauds" (*Shadow*, 56) fail to realise that our destinies don't have anything at all to do with supernatural agencies:

We live and die and only time destroys us,  
falling forever into the big 'O'

That great big O of nothingness that swallows  
poets and priests, queens and Ayatollahs  
not only infidels but fundamentalists (*Shadow*, 56)

This is a forceful section, one that exhibits an exciting sense of immediacy, and it does so in part because of the way that the rhythms of the editing and the rhythms of the verse interact. For example when the speaker told us that the two Indian children were innocent of what Scarface's graffiti meant, precisely as the word 'innocent' was articulated, the image of the graffitied door appeared on our screens. Also, when the speaker in the clip talks of how "Scarface subverts the saint and won't submit" (*Shadow*, 59), etc., we see that the voice is perfectly synched in with the appearance of a scrawled 'Scarface' on a gate. The effect of such a technique is very powerful. The film becomes factual, almost documentary. More importantly, if it's 'real' in this way then the verse commentary becomes 'real' as well'. Most people will have long since forgotten to notice that the commentary is in verse anyway, what we see on our screens is so potent and powerful. This is a similar thing to a technique that Harrison characteristically enacts linguistically. By this I mean his use of quotations. The intention is to impress upon the viewer the authenticity of what he/she is being told. This is what occurs early in the film when Harrison includes a quotation from the Koran about how the Koran denounces those who "love this fleeting life", as I mentioned above.

As the tracking shot continues, the camera travelling over a wall to an Urdu notice which is translated for us as "LEAVE NO LITTER" (*Shadow*, 59). Heaped up beneath it on the ground is a mound of rubbish. The camera does not linger on anything of this, it just keeps moving along at a constant pace, now moving along a fence as the speaker talks of "the one-book creeds" (*Shadow*, 59) erecting fences against all that threatened the sanctity of their vision. In this context the fence represents the attempt to separate the spiritual from the material, "the world of spirit from the world of shit" (*Shadow*, 59). As the camera nears the

end of the fence it travels upwards, towards the heavens, ironically, and rests on an unfinished mosque. It is a relatively straightforward point well made and a good example of how the different media of film and verse interact. Because the visual tracking shot is paralleled by the speaking voice's four quatrains, the overall effect is one of "unstoppable momentum".<sup>13</sup> In this instance it culminates with our realisation that the fence marks the boundary of a mosque — a mosque fenced in, literally as well as metaphorically.

It is an impressive sequence, the 'eye' of the camera and the 'I' of the speaker located as one on the pavement, as if the speaker was taking a short cut down an alley, trying to understand the appeal of fundamentalism. In one sense it is as if Harrison has successfully united the inner and the outer life. In this respect the speaking voice functions as a kind of interior monologue which allows us to know what the speaker is thinking. Yet at the same time we can see what the speaker in the film sees. The result is, in a sense, a modified form of the stream of consciousness narrative technique. This is crucial to the techniques and effects of Harrison's public poetry — a fusing together of the public, what the speaker sees, and the private, what the speaker thinks, in such a way as to erode any dichotomous distinctions between the two.

After the section in the alleyway the film cuts to a hill overlooking Bradford. This allows a swooping shot back down to the next location, in this case the auction rooms which are in what was previously the Elim Foursquare Church. This movement of the camera as it traverses from low to high positions, and back again, seems to parallel (and hence reinforce) the general theme of the piece, the contrast between the promise of the promised after-life of Islam and the reality of the material world for the speaker. The camera's journey ends at the auction rooms, a journey accompanied by five stanzas which, as a result of Harrison's skill with *enjambement*, amount to one sentence, a linguistic fluidity that contrasts with the fixities and rigidity of the fundamentalists and also which enacts the flow of the camera movement itself. Here we learn that Man's "deep fear of everlasting night" (*Shadow*, 59) is fuelled in no small measure by what "false prophets make us dread" (*Shadow*, 60). This section bears quoting in full, not least because it is a useful example of how Harrison constructs his conversational, oratorical air. With characteristic flair the speaker lists the fears that contribute to our fear of what lies beyond the material world:

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<sup>13</sup> Symes. 'Introduction', xvii.

fear of that big O that swallows whole  
 both the human body and the soul,  
 fear of time that makes us live and die,  
 fear of trans ience that takes its daily toll,

fear of living, fear of being dead,  
 fear that what we love most's soonest fled,  
 fear of loving what is fleeting for itself  
 our fear of what false prophets make us dread

of doomsday with its dreadful but false dooms,  
 of time that bustles men back into tombs,  
 of that fleeting trans ience that can transform  
 the Four Square Gospel Church to auction rooms,

the trans ience that makes the life-warmed ring  
 dangle for buyers from a numbered string  
 and numbers us knick-knacks of nothingness,  
 the going — going — gone of everything. (*Shadow*, 59-60)

The alliteration of the first two stanzas and the repeated use of 'fear', suggest that Harrison is consciously parodying a preaching style, but the preaching style is that of an infidel, an atheist, someone aware of the trans ience of life. In the last two lines, for example, Harrison cleverly develops the theme of our mortality. He extends his enquiry from the physical location of the auction room to the metaphysical enquiry regarding eternity. The result is that the verse enacts the trans ience of our existence. The inclusion of real speech, the auctioneer's patois, the "going — going — gone" heralds in this instance not a sale in the auction room but the speaker's recognition of Man's mortality.

Here in the auction room Harrison continues with his impulse towards demystification, mocking himself and his own role as poet: not only does the auctioneer get his name wrong but *his* books are some of the flotsam that have washed up here, along with Joyce, Lawrence and Voltaire so, given that religion does not offer redemption to the atheist, though art might, 'what price art?' seems to be the implicit question.

The movement from the verse narrative to the documentary material in this section also works to undermine the serious tone upon which the speaker concluded, albeit with the beautiful lines referring to the "knick-knacks of nothingness, the going —going — gone of everything" (*Shadow*, 60). Perhaps Harrison was aware that he was in danger of taking himself too seriously — whatever, a joke fits in with the affirmative message better than seriousness does. The auction-room section reasserts implicitly the main theme of the film,

the need to become fully engaged in life, to partake of life's feast. In this respect the joke is also that the auction room does represent an afterlife of sorts, not the heavenly gardens promised to Muslims, but merely a clearing-house for our personal effects.

A section such as this demonstrates the kind of synchronisation between film and verse, between life and art, that I commented on earlier. The effect of techniques like these is the suggestion that the so-called 'real world' is validating the voice. Hence the film/poem as a whole becomes documentary, in a sense. It becomes, paradoxically, imaginatively factual. It becomes not a film/poem but, rather, just a film because, if the voice becomes 'real' in this way then the verse commentary becomes 'real', and consequently is absorbed into the whole experience of the film. In other words the cumulative effect of the interaction of verse and film becomes so powerful that the use of verse (indeed verse itself) becomes . . . well, *unremarkable* — poetry becomes 'normal'. While still conforming to Harrison's definition as "the word at its most eloquent"<sup>14</sup> poetry has become somehow 'unspecial', hence it is less vulnerable to appropriation by one class at the expense of another. This disinvests the word of any privileged social status, and works against poetry being appropriated as social symbol, because if the word can not be made to work by explaining the world, it has no value. It cannot function simply in an ornamental way, purely as a stylistic mode because the inadequacy of artificial, ornamented 'poetical' writing would be glaringly obvious if anyone was to try to make it work in the 'real world', so to speak, as Harrison does. His films remind us, then, that poetry is just shared words. They might be highly charged and concentrated — but they are still only words. This is Harrison's ultimate achievement (when he gets it right!), a truly public poetry in the sense of a shared access to visual and verbal experience.

Though television is commonly credited with an alleged propensity to create a social insularity, Harrison's use of the medium constantly works against this and, ultimately, culminates in his creation of a sense of shared intimacy. Yet he has not always been confident about television's ability to effect this sense of communality. In the introduction to *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* (1990), for example, he noted that a certain Alfred Harbage observed that Shakespearean "drama reached its peak when the audience formed a *great amalgam*, and it began its decline when the amalgam was split in two" (*Trackers*, p *xiii*). This split has persisted, suggested Harrison, in that "theatre audiences are composed of élite and privileged *sectors* of our society" (*Trackers*, p *xiii*). Though noting that television has access

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<sup>14</sup> Harrison. 'Preface', *Bloodaxe*, 9.

to an similar amalgam Harrison concluded that because “it is not present in the same space [ . . . ] TV viewers are not aware of each other attending, and therefore sharing not only the space and the light, but the illumination in the spiritual sense. When drama lost these conditions it became less able to bear and digest the worst things it could imagine. Dramas became texts divided into ‘high’ and ‘low’ art” (*Trackers*, p xiv). Harrison’s quest of a public poetry has set itself the task of overcoming these perceived limitations of television.

The received notion of television as an insular medium is connected to what some commentators have perceived as “the privatised and fragmentary character of the reception process”.<sup>15</sup> This is interpreted as a sign “that public life in modern societies is all but dead - not that the development of mass communication by itself has killed public life, but that the deployment of technical media, with their one-way flow of messages pouring into the privacy of the home, has sealed the coffin of a once-thriving public sphere.”<sup>16</sup> It is in an attempt to modify this “one-way flow of messages” that Harrison creates his public poetry in the hope that he can create an alternative public space. Harrison’s assumed role of public poet, and his implied political function as facilitator rather than as an explicitly political activist, consists in part in re-establishing the public as a space in which issues can be debated seriously once more, not least by his own personae, as was the case in v.. Television is the medium to use because, though the public used to depend on people being <sup>physically</sup> gathered together, Harrison’s television work attests to Johan Fornäs’s suggestion that “Communication creates an inter-subjective, social space which need not necessarily be a physical space.”<sup>17</sup> In this respect Harrison’s inclusive televisual poetic activities can be considered as what cultural theorists term a “mediated interaction in imagined rather than copresent communities.”<sup>18</sup> Yet despite the optimism of such statements clearly the possibilities for the involvement of the viewer in these “imagined” communities is open to question. It is worth considering this briefly, if only better to gauge Harrison’s achievement. For instance though the medium of television provides accessibility on a huge scale the extent to which it is capable of engendering an emotional involvement is debatable, for a variety of reasons. Not least among these is the notion that television is one-way: “the audience’s experience of broadcasting is constrained by relations of re-presentation in which the listener is fixed at the end of a chain of

<sup>15</sup> Anthony Giddens *et al.* *The Polity Reader in Cultural Theory*. Oxford: Polity Press, 1994, 34. Hereafter referred to as *The Polity Reader*.

<sup>16</sup> Anthony Giddens *et al.* *The Polity Reader in Cultural Theory*, 34.

<sup>17</sup> Fornäs. *Cultural Theory*, 88.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

mediation that runs through the medium of broadcasting into the home”<sup>19</sup>. Another factor is the suggestion that television as a medium actually

confirms the domestic isolation of the viewer, and invites the viewer to regard the world from that position. The viewer is therefore confirmed in a basic division of the world between the ‘inside’ of the home, the family and the domestic, and the ‘outside’ of work, politics, public life, the city, the crowd.<sup>20</sup>

It is this sense of estrangement that Harrison’s verse seeks to overcome. In order to understand how he achieves this it is worth considering some of the other technical elements of his film craft in order to explore how a sense of communal engagement is derived from an ostensibly insular medium. Notable in this regard is a characteristic that has already been mentioned in a different context, namely the way that the stanzas are separated into chunks of verse. This is one reason why his film/poems are more accessible. This follows naturally from the fact that his rhymes enact a certain closure so that the quatrains of the poem can be set out in sections: the pauses between the parts enables the verse to comment on the visual and vice versa. To accompany this separation there is a very skilful use of *enjambment*. As we have already seen this occurs not only across individual lines but also across stanzas. At the very beginning of the film, for example, we have a four stanza section. This breaks down into a four line sentence in stanza 1, an eight-line sentence running through stanzas 2 and 3, and another four line sentence in stanza four. It is this *enjambement*, allied with the relative freedom of an AABA rhyme scheme that helps imbue *Blasphemers*’ with its informal air, as well as the brilliantly controlled pace of the film. Moreover, in the opening stanza, it can also combine to suggest the quality of speech (a typical Harrison aspiration) in part as a result of the artfully placed semi-colon in line one. Harrison also continues to deploy the politicised poetics we have already discussed at some length in preceding chapters, a typical instance in *Blasphemers*’ being his incorporation of the Persian word “*rubai*” (*Shadow*, 57) and its echoing internal rhyme several stanzas later in the phrase “Omar’s ruby vintage” (*Shadow*, 58).

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<sup>19</sup> Bocoock and Thompson. *Social and Cultural Forms*. pp. 392-393.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 394. Terry Eagleton has reached similar conclusions and commented upon this development suggesting that “Private consumption and leisure [ . . . ] replace the forms of social discussion previously associated with the public sphere”. See Terry Eagleton. *The Function of Criticism: From the Spectator to Post-structuralism*. London, 1984, pp. 117-18. Also quoted in Bryne. *H, v. & O*, 184.

Besides the elements discussed above there are other elements that combine in *Blasphemers* to create a sense of shared intimacy. One crucial one is the specificity of the words used. They often have a directional, perhaps even a spatial kind of visual quality in that the words direct the viewers' eyes. This is evidence of a desire to authenticate the experience contained in the verse, symptomatic of a desire to suggest exactly what it is that is there. In this respect it is linked to Harrison's development of a documentary sense. Among the varied instances of this in *Blasphemers* are when we learn that the half-built mosque is so new that "it's still not felt a drop of Bradford rain" (*Shadow*, 57) and in the first stanza when the speaker says: "and that, that's Salman Rushdie's chair" (*Shadow*, 53).

This specificity, this creation of actuality, helps to explain Harrison's success with his films as he is a very visual poet. His is also a visual imagery in terms of the language used, which is often concrete and explicit: Harrison's is a poetry of the whole body, not 'poetry in the head', to paraphrase D. H. Lawrence's analysis of intellectual sex. This is entirely fitting given that he wants the whole body of society to be included in all aspects of culture. This outward-looking perspective is a direct response against much of the poetry Harrison read in the 1950's, verse in which "poets seemed too concerned to explore their own consciousness".<sup>21</sup> This was the wrong direction, Harrison felt. What was needed was a poetic perspective that could apprehend the material world, make it relevant in a way it wasn't for so many and, above all, would allow him to be truthful. This characteristic of Harrison's verse, its essential 'truthfulness', its 'honesty', because of its emphasis on what is really out there in the world, reminds us of what Willett termed as Brecht's special quality, a quality he described as "his ability to deal with precise tangible facts". Hence Brecht's favourite quotation from Hegel, Willett tells us: "The truth is concrete".<sup>22</sup> Once again we might notice the similarity with Harrison's work, given his desire to de-mystify poetry and the role of poet.

This specificity is a technique Harrison has developed in the films from roots which are widespread elsewhere in his work. In 'Study' the first line of the poem is: "Best clock. Best carpet. Best three chairs" (*Selected Poems*, 115). The effect of these short, verbless, paratactic constructions is to suggest that the speaker in the poem is registering these things visually — hence the statements are, on one level, thoughts. Though ostensibly these are 'private' observations the effect is panoramic, literal, concrete, visual, almost like snap shots -

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<sup>21</sup> Don Patinkin. 'A bleeding poet'.

<sup>22</sup> Brecht. *Bertolt Brecht: Poems*. Introduction, xx.



there are no “impeding allusions” here.<sup>23</sup> This is an attempt to register and store away a record of visual impressions as, for example, the line “Mi aunty’s baby still. The dumbstruck mother” (*Selected Poems*, 115) suggests. A similar effect is that achieved in ‘Me Tarzan’ where the speaker directs us in a close-up shot of the contents of his room that are immediately before him:

the foldaway card table, the green baize,  
*De Bello Gallico* and lexicon. (*Selected Poems*, 116)

and in ‘A Close One’:

Air Raid Precautions out of *Kensitas*.  
 A Victory jig-saw on Fry’s Cocoa tray.  
 Sandwiches. Snakes & Ladders. Thermos flask (*Selected Poems*, 160)

A similar visual inventory is offered in ‘Background Material’:

My writing desk. Two photos, mam and dad.  
 A birthday, him. Their ruby wedding, her. (*Selected Poems*, 171)

This is a film-maker’s sensibility at work here, indeed sometimes this technique is utilised to provide a description that is almost documentary in its intensity. This is what we find in ‘The Morning After’:

The fire left to itself might smoulder weeks.  
 Phone cables melt. Paint peels from off back gates.  
 Kitchen windows crack; the whole street reeks  
 of horsehair blazing. Still it celebrates. (*Selected Poems*, 157)

Harrison’s specificity is generally characterised by an absence of tropes but even when he uses descriptive imagery we see that this is usually of the real, often industrial world, as references to “hawsers”, etc. in ‘v.’ suggest. It is, then, often very graphic, simple and unadorned. This specificity contributes to the establishment of a real sense of place in Harrison’s verse, a sense of *being* there. This is clear in the opening lines of the early poem ‘Ghosts: Some Words Before Breakfast’:

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<sup>23</sup> Romana Huk. ‘Tony Harrison, *The Loiners*, and the ‘Leeds Renaissance’. *Bloodaxe*, 75. Hereafter referred to as ‘Leeds Renaissance’.

A *Scottish and Newcastle* clops  
 past the R V I and traffic stops  
 to let the anachronistic dray  
 turn right into the brewery.  
 Victorian, now that daylight's gone,  
 whitens, and a Park lake swan  
 loops its pliant neck to scoff  
 the bits of sandwich floating off  
 the boathouse jetty . . . (*Selected Poems*, 72)<sup>24</sup>

As Rosemary Burton has commented Harrison's ability to "capture and convey a scene is striking"<sup>25</sup>. Notice in this excerpt the detailing of the sandwich eating swan or the fact that Harrison records which way the dray turns. It is these small, seemingly trivial details that help to give his verse the power it has. This creation of a sense of actuality also originates in Harrison's technique of granting his poems' speakers the opportunity to incorporate artefacts from their own backgrounds. This is the case in the poems in which the speaking voice is that of the scholarship-boy or the poet-persona. Ostensibly real *actual* objects such as a chair, a paperweight, a boot, a knuckle-duster, dividers, etc., as we saw in *Eloquence* are commented on by the speakers. This occurs so often it is tempting to wonder how the poet-persona writes so prolifically for, if the poems are to be believed, his desk must be buried under these things! This stems from a desire to create an authenticity and thus are related to the creation of an autobiographical persona but they also demonstrate Harrison's ability to incorporate what we might term documentary material. This is a characteristic that is carried over into the film/poems. We see this in films like *A Maybe Day* (1994) in which Harrison writes verse that describes and explains the items on the flea-market stalls, for example. This is what Peter Symes has referred to as "the playful and clever transformation, in the verse, of documentary material discovered on location"<sup>26</sup>. One example that Symes gives is the Trotsky doll with revolving eyes in the flea market. The importance of this kind of thing is that it refers to material that Harrison could not have known about before he went on location. Hence it suggests Harrison's flexibility, his desire to make his films real and accessible, his desire for his verse to 'explain' the world.

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<sup>24</sup> This is also quoted by Rosemary Burton in 'An Introduction'. *Bloodaxe*, 30. Hereafter referred to as 'Introduction'.

<sup>25</sup> Burton. 'Introduction'. *Bloodaxe*, 29.

<sup>26</sup> Symes. 'Introduction', xxi.

Harrison has always been a particularly visual poet. This is related to the idea that he wants to be concrete, to write poetry that has a function and a purpose. He tries to make it explicit, tries to make his lines “direct and straight” (*Selected Poems*, 178) and one way of achieving this is to draw word pictures, to write about real things like Blackpool, or dray horses that ‘clip-clop’ by. A key element in the imagery is the very texture of the poetic voice and in particular Harrison’s ‘mode of address’. Romana Huk tells us that in an early Arts Council recording Harrison suggested that “perhaps the best English poetry could be heard through characters like Shakespeare’s speaking clearly to an audience”.<sup>27</sup> This aspiration of clarity is an integral element of Harrison’s visual poetry style. It is self-evident in his mode of address, by which I mean the constant theme of ‘me & you’, and in the importance Harrison attaches to the poet-audience dynamic. This is integral to Harrison’s aim of achieving a sense of shared intimacy and the techniques that Harrison has developed are fundamental to this, not least his creation of his speaking voice. He is not the first to have understood the need for a poetic voice that privileged the spoken word, a voice that works away at a process of demystification. Yeats, for example, suggested that he had “learnt that occasional prosaic words gave the impression of an active man speaking”.<sup>28</sup> For Harrison the development of a poetic voice that incorporates a politicised poetics, that is inclusive and intimate and capable of confronting more ostensibly public themes is a vital stepping stone on the path to his creation of a sense of shared intimacy in the films. At the risk of trivialising his achievements Harrison sounds to me deceptively like someone telling us something in a pub. There is a clarity of tone and meaning, as well as of diction, essential elements of Harrison’s quest for a public poetry. It is in this context that we can understand the meditations and the repetitions that we find in his verse. Not everybody, however, considers these characteristics as positive elements. For some critics certain elements of Harrison’s televisual style such as his implicit emphasis on the poet-audience dynamic, the clarity of tone and, most damningly, his politics, are problematic. Peter Forbes, for example, was particularly ascerbic about *Gaze of the Gorgon*, a film which he suggests became

basilisk television, threatening to turn the viewer to stone. I think that Harrison has been seduced by the apparent ease of the verse-into-voiceover technique [ . . . ] Most poetry is shorter and goes further than prose because it can dispense with ‘that’s the reason why’ and ‘And I suppose I ought to say’.

<sup>27</sup> Huk. ‘Leeds Renaissance. *Bloodaxe*, 79.

<sup>28</sup> Daniel Albright, ed.. *W. B. Yeats The Poems*. London: Dent -Everyman, 1994, 439. Hereafter referred to as *W. B. Yeats: The Poems*.

Harrison, for some reason, has always liked paddings whether metrical or syntactical. The result here is a Heine haunted by McGonagall.<sup>29</sup>

Somewhat more elegantly Bruce Woodcock has raised similar concerns, arguing that *Blasphemers*' is patchy and, hence, a partial failure in a political sense. This argument suggests that Harrison's regular forms inhibit the political rancour and lead to an easy meditative style. Woodcock further suggests that

there is an inescapable question as to whether Harrison's dynamic isn't also contained and defused by his choice of regular verse forms and whether his appropriation of middle-class culture has not in fact worked in reverse. It is an inescapable dialectic, since without the forms the poetry as such would not exist. The problems arise when the pronounced facility with which Harrison handles formal verse leads him into a prolixity near to doggerel, as in his more recent television work *The Blasphemers' Banquet* . . .<sup>30</sup>

Woodcock continues his discussion by suggesting that the form and style of the film/poem allows Harrison "to indulge to the full his tendency for a wry and sometimes stagy or even ponderous sense of 'The Tragic Realities of Life and Death'. It is a verse meditation on the Vanity of Human Wishes in a peculiarly classical mould."<sup>31</sup> Moreover, he asserts, in *Blasphemers*' "the writing skirts close to doggerel. 'v.' was attacked similarly but in the case of *Blasphemers' Banquet* I am less ready to accept Harrison's rejoinder to his critics that 'my ear is better than theirs'."<sup>32</sup> Woodcock's disappointment derives mainly from his perception that

Harrison had allowed the ponderous themes of Time and Death to upstage his political or even cultural anger at what has happened to Rushdie. At the same time, this seems to have prevented him presenting a more complex response to the problematic issues and personal realities stirred up by the whole incident. The form invites him into an easy verse-making, but because of the grand gestures invited by the tragic sense of the human condition, it could be argued that Harrison loses the political and satirical bite Shelley sustains in his broadside 'The Mask of Anarchy'. [ . . . ] Harrison seems caught between actuality on the one hand and timeless truths of existence on the other,

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<sup>29</sup> Peter Forbes. 'The Gaze Of The Gorgon. Poems by Tony Harrison'. Review. *The Guardian* 27 October 1992, 11.

<sup>30</sup> Woodcock. 'Classical Vandalism', 55.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>32</sup> Tony Harrison. 'Third Ear'. Radio 3. Interview with Paul Baily, 23 February 1988. Quoted in Woodcock. 'Classical Vandalism', 63.

journalist, elegist and celebrant of 'this fleeting life', but losing the historical urgency which drove him to write the poem."<sup>33</sup>

Woodcock makes similar criticisms of 'v.'. Of that poem's closing sections he writes:

Harrison extends the range of the poem's reflection on contemporary violence to include images of Ulster and the Gulf, but with an almost gratuitous ease. It is as if the formal facility of his verse writing invites him to package his meditations in too easy a form [ . . . ] Instead of being a badly needed 'Mask of Anarchy' for the 1980s, v. finally has more in common with Wordsworth's 'Immortality' ode, its rancour gagged by the elegiac strain and by a tendency to grand gestures.<sup>34</sup>

It has to be said that Woodcock's argument contains a lot of sense. In 'v.', for example, Harrison does seem to switch into a kind of universal sage mode. We see this after the high energy of the confrontation between 'skald' and skin. Here is an example of the kind of thing that Woodcock suggests. It is as if the verse forms dictate that he become meditative. Hence the energy that has been created is suffocated, snuffed out. Perhaps this is Harrison's way of coping — as he has said the "rhythmical thing" is his "life-support system",<sup>35</sup> his way of being able to get to the other side of the darkness of which he is writing. In one sense, however, we have to agree with Woodcock that it leaves him open to charges of tokenism in a poem like 'v.', for example, because the images he seeks refuge in are, perhaps, stereotyped and clichéd. Harrison uses the images of Ulster and the Gulf to emphasise his connection between personal self-divisions and societal divisions but it is a little too neat and tidy, now that the elegiac tone seems to have triumphed over the dramatic energy: he might have arrested his descent into 'the darkness' of his own being but only at the cost of becoming disengaged from the skin character. Despite the possibility that the poet does become disengaged from the skin, the skin has not completely disappeared though. And, perhaps, Harrison is honest enough to allow him to offer his opinion as regards the validity of Harrison's liberal poetic persona, (and my suggestion ?). We see this when the skin calls the meditative sage a "wanker":

. . . a voice that scorns chorales is yelling : Wanker!  
It's the aerosolling skin I met today's. (*Selected Poems*, 248)

<sup>33</sup> Woodcock. 'Classical Vandalism', pp. 63-64.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>35</sup> Hoggart. 'Conversation'. *Bloodaxe*, 43. See Chapter Two, above, for a full account of this.

If we remember that a chorale is a traditional metrical hymn-tune for congregational use then the skin's comment is subtly apposite. He seems to be attacking the skald's idealism, calling him a "wanker" because the idea that a poet can unite a congregation (the people) by writing metrical hymn tunes (poems) is, possibly, wank! This is another instance of Harrison's interrogation of the liberal poet-persona and this undercutting of the poet-persona's ideals, this deflation of the poetic ego is characteristic and symptomatic of Harrison's self-doubts, his self deprecatory style. Though this seems the most natural thing when we experience it in the poems and television work it is, of course, as 'unnatural' as anything else in the verse. But it serves a very useful purpose for Harrison and this is worth commenting on briefly. The first thing we might note is that it seems curiously endearing and serves to humanise the poet-persona. By implication it depicts him as fallible, as a mortal man though one — to paraphrase Wordsworth 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads* — who has a greater degree of poetical sensibility than most men. This sensibility informs Harrison's verse-making, often generating a humility which is, for instance, graphically and humorously clear in the section in the auction rooms in *Blasphemers'* where Harrison is mistakenly called "Mr. Nicholson" (*Shadow*, 61). Clearly one result of this is that it fleshes out the personas in the poems, makes them more believable and enforces the illusion that a person is speaking to us. Hence a reader/viewer is much more likely to suspend his/her disbelief and thus subscribe to the political import of a particular film/poem. The self-deprecatory style is, then, another technique that Harrison uses in order to slip his subversive message past our unsuspecting critical faculties! Given the subtleties hinted at here, I wonder if Woodcock's view of Harrison's style tells the whole story. By this I mean that because the film/poems are fundamentally different from book-based poems we might have to perceive the film/poems in a different light, might indeed have to view Harrison's aims from a different perspective. Firstly let us consider the specific complaint regarding *Blasphemers'* meditation on Time and Death.

It seems to me that the meditation on Time is integral to the logic of Harrison's film/poem. His aim is to hold the views of the fundamentalists up to ridicule. If the basis of this critique is that the premise of a paradisaal afterlife is spurious, and that the fleeting nature of life demands a sensuous fulfilment rather than a disengagement from corporeal values, then Harrison has to consider this in terms of a consideration of the time-life continuum. His main point is that Time is the only enemy to Man, not the threatened horror beyond the grave for those who embrace the material world. The impermanence of life is a central theme of

*Blasphemers*'. Time and again the film/poem asserts that the meaning of life is that life *is* fleeting; hence it must be savoured. Fundamentalism consists in a hatred of life precisely because of its transience, as the speaker suggests when he tells us about the girl in the abandoned Bradford graveyard:

It won't be long before she knows  
that everything will vanish with the rose  
and then she'll either love life more because it's fleeting  
or hate the flower and life because it goes (*Shadow*, 59)

This essential transience is conveyed in many ways in the film/poem. It is actually built into the structure because the hoped for life-affirming meal was to take place in the Omar Khayyam tandoori, an ex-church. Also what was the "Four Square Gospel Church" (*Shadow*, 57) is now the Auction Rooms. Moreover it is no accident that at one point in the film the sung refrain of 'Oh this fleeting life' is cut short and finally extinguished as the letters that make up the Omar Khayyam restaurant's name are taken down — it is their removal (Khayyam's rejection?) that cuts short the singing.

In addition to this, the theme of transience is suggested by the emphasis the film places on the changing role of church buildings. This is part of the film's general theme of the effects of transience on religion, something that the speaker's atheism equips him to have fun with in his characteristic manner. He puns, for instance, on the idea of religious 'Gods' and the 'gods', the cheaper seats up in the gallery, one finds in a theatre:

. . . Theatre, said Hugo, is a place for forming souls  
but the only gods it knows are those up there.

Believing only in this life below,  
these are the only Gods I'll ever know (*Shadow*, 56)

Atheism might afford an opportunity for fun, it seems, but not Islam. This joke on "Gods" and "gods" occurs at a point quite soon after a humorous excerpt from *The Misanthrope*. This intertextual reference, this allusion to a performance of Harrison's own translation of Molière's play, is deliberately included to heighten the contrast between unbelievers and fundamentalists because immediately after the inclusion we have another superimposed (and staggered) quotation from the Ayatollah Khomeini:

*There is no humour . . . . . in Islam*  
*There is no laughter . . . . . in Islam*  
*There is no fun . . . . . in Islam* (Shadow, 56)

Besides religion's decline leading to churches being used for other things than worship we also learn that they are abandoned and derelict. Hence the speaker quips that Molière would be gratified to see his 'blasphemies' "doing slightly better business than the 'Lord's'." (Shadow, 56) The only thing that seems to buck this trend is the building of mosques, it seems. Though it used to be the case that the only tangible evidence of the Orient was restricted to backdrops on a pantomime set for "*Ali Baba or Aladdin*" (Shadow, 57) the influence of "the fanatic Ayatollah" (Shadow, 57) is such that mosques are being built by the faithful, in contrast with the decline in Western religion presumably. It is tempting to detect in the verse a thinly veiled attack on the ostentatious nature of these buildings with their gold domes and ever increasing sizes. It is not unreasonable, perhaps, to criticise the mosque builders for displays of materialism such as these (if that is what they are) given their disavowal of the material world. Harrison goes further than this, however, and clearly suggests that there is little chance of real harmony between the Moslems and the secular world in which they build. Speaking of the incomplete mosque being built very near to the curry house he says:

And imbibers have a few months' grace before  
 these girders get their gold dome on next door  
 and muezzin's call sours Omar's ruby vintage  
 curdling the stomach of the currievore. (Shadow, 58)

Harrison's meditation on transience, then, is clearly central to the aims and concerns of the film. Indeed his argument that we need to accept that the transience of our mortal existence means that life must be cherished, not denied, is essential to his critique of fundamentalism. Without this consideration the critique, and hence the defence of Rushdie, is heavily compromised. Woodcock's article, however, also makes several criticisms of Harrison's so-called 'meditative' style, a style, it is implied, characterised by a certain rambling quality, a lack of linear progression, a verse *not averse* to repetitions, elements which self-indulgently cohere in a voice chewing over metaphysical problems of the nature of Man's existence. It seems to be the case that at the time of writing his article Woodcock perceived Harrison's film/poems in a similar way to how the book-bound poems were perceived. This is understandable but unfortunately omits any kind of evaluation of performative criteria. By this



I mean that such an approach fails to recognise that Harrison has developed the new genre of the film/poem. It does not, for example, consider the films *as* films, as a multimedia combination of image and sound. Nor does it attempt any kind of consideration based on the effect that the films might have on a viewer at the moment of transmission. Obviously we cannot grant Harrison a licence to write absolutely anything he wants but if we apply the evaluative criteria that we would ordinarily apply to a textual poem in isolation then we miss so much.

The way I approach this thorny area is to think of Harrison as a kind of oral storyteller, as a kind of witness to oral literature. Oral literature existed before people had writing. Despite this they still composed, remembered and recounted stories for audiences. It is also worth remembering that there is a sense in which poetry was originally intended to teach and therefore had a functional use. In this context Harrison's so-called meditative style becomes an integral element of an oral storyteller's craft because it enables a light and shade to be generated that both focuses and contrasts any rancour, rather than gag it, at the same time as it allows thinking time, in a sense, for the hearer. So, instead of seeing this meditative style as a weakness we might instead see it as a strength, in terms of Harrison's quest for a public poetry. Hence Woodcock's other argument, that the rancour is constrained by the forms, becomes redundant, Harrison's film/poems are simply not political in an explicit sense. He doesn't want to write in a polemical fashion. Yes, he wants to educate, to show people the political implications of certain acts and utterances and also seeks to delineate certain power relationships. But a major part of this process is to draw people into a closer political engagement with their world and this consists in his implicit attempt to redefine what we mean by public, as I have discussed above.

This idea of oral storytelling and an oral literature certainly seems to explain why Harrison utilises a meditative air in his films (and elsewhere). It also helps to explain certain stylistic elements that I have already discussed in *Eloquence* such as the enactment in the poems of the implicit assertion that poetry is speech, the expressive speech elements, the specificity of language, the creation of an air of authenticity and the creation of the autobiographical air. In terms of Woodcock's arguments it is undeniable that some of the elements he criticises are actually present. For example there is a meditative air associated with the speaking voice. One characteristic of this is the use of repetitions. The repetitions of *Mimmo Perrella non è Piu*, the repetitions (and close variants) of the line "Home, home,

home, to my woman . . .” in ‘v.’ (*Selected Poems*, 246), the repeated references to Salman Rushdie’s chair in *Blasphemers*, all these impede the linearity of the narrative. But I wonder how useful it is to interpret these elements in a negative way? I think they have a much more positive role than critics have realised, particularly in creating the experience of shared intimacy for a first-time television audience.

In his films Harrison is faced with a straightforward task, how to make them work first time for an audience. It is as if they are designed, like some of Harrison’s theatre work, for just one performance. Linked to this is the idea that Harrison doesn’t want to overburden the viewer, clearly there is a lot to take in during a film so he does not want to introduce new ideas on every line. He wants to keep himself (and the viewer) focused on the matter in hand. Hence the repetitions. They are part of the spell, of the incantation. Moreover, it is elements like this that suggest the orality of Harrison’s work. Repetitions are a feature of speech acts in oral cultures, suggests Walter J Ong in *Orality and Literacy - The Technologizing of the Word* (1982). Whereas in written works there is always an opportunity for reassessment because “Writing establishes in the text a ‘line’ of continuity outside the mind”,<sup>36</sup> in oral discourse, it is not the same. There is not the same facility for reference: “for the oral utterance has vanished as soon as it is uttered. Hence the mind must move ahead more slowly, keeping close to the focus of attention much of what it has already dealt with. Redundancy, *repetition of the just-said*, keeps both speaker and hearer surely on the track.”<sup>37</sup> We can see the repetitions as gentle reminders, then, which might be for the benefit of those a little slower on the uptake.

Precisely the same effects are achieved by the repetitions in the films of certain visual images. These include such things as the A Bomb dome in *Shadow*, the “O’s” and churches in *Blasphemer’s*, the repeated shots of the cranes in *Gaze of the Gorgon*. Sometimes the two are combined as in *A Maybe Day*. Here we are presented with the image of the bystanders at the market. The image (varied in terms of the actual individual yet essentially the same) is repeatedly presented. These people fulfil a poetical function in that they speak prose. They repeatedly intone the word “Kasakhstan” to the camera. This is integral thematically to Harrison’s work generally because instances like this are concerned implicitly with demystifying poetry making — ordinary people are necessary in order to complete the project.

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<sup>36</sup> Walter J. Ong. *Orality and Literacy*. London: New York: Methuen, 1982. 39. Hereafter referred to as *Orality and Literacy*.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

It also embodies the fact that Harrison is giving a voice to the voiceless expatriates with whom *A Maybe Day* is actually concerned as he is presenting their case as a sub plot of the film..

Besides this we might add that Harrison is usurping metrical conventions in that he is incorporating prose into verse.

The use of repetitions relates, then, to an idea of Harrison as an oral storyteller. This, in turn, relates to the fact that as we saw earlier Harrison (certainly from the *Eloquence* sequence onwards, if not before) has thought about, and apprehended, the world visually. He has always been a visual poet, always been interested in the objective 'out there' rather than an exclusively subjective 'in here'.

We need, then, to evaluate the film in its entirety and consciously ask different questions of it regarding its power as performance. Among other things this would need to recognise Harrison's awareness of the poet-audience dynamic, and realise that he is not writing for academics. Indeed he knows that a huge proportion of viewers are people who are not normally participants of the literary culture. This awareness is also clear at his poetry readings where his comprehensive introductions, explanations and anecdotes, and Harrison's general air of 'inclusivity' show an understanding that for many people there it will be their first time at a reading. This awareness of the poet-audience dynamic again links up with a characteristic Walter Ong examines in his book. Talking of this dynamic in oral cultures he says that the originality of these poets consisted less in their subject matters and more in their ability in "managing a particular interaction with this audience at this time — at every telling the story has to be introduced uniquely into a unique situation, for in oral cultures an audience must be brought to respond, often vigorously."<sup>38</sup> Now I am not suggesting an exact parallel with Harrison but it helps to explain his approach and, hence, indicates which ones might be more fruitful for *us* to pursue. Originally oral storytellers drew upon a common pool of themes and stories. Harrison is doing the same thing, in a sense, in *Blasphemers*' where he deals with traditional themes of good and evil (here couched in 'free speech' and 'fundamentalism'), knights on white chargers (poets) rescuing damsels (like Rushdie and 'Truth') in distress! It is his ability to deal with them and manage the interaction with the audience in terms of eliciting a response that we should be concerned with. In the case of *Blasphemers*', for example, the greater majority of the viewers would not be over concerned with which particular metrical form Harrison was using — to paraphrase Walter Ong they would have wanted to see how the

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 42.

film dealt with the themes, how it ‘talked’ to them, and what its entertainment value was. So, for me, the approach that I’m using to help me understand Harrison’s televisual style is to think of him as a skald, a poet around the village campfire, so to speak, a storyteller. He is a facilitator, someone who describes and explains, the person whose job it is to tell stories. Others might be carpenters or metalsmiths — someone takes on the job of skald. This is how I see him on my TV, as an oral storyteller incorporating, adapting and re-presenting inherited traditions (classical forms), making up and telling stories (the films) to people who have no written literature, (who don’t read poetry). We need, then, to evaluate the films in their entirety and consciously ask different questions of them regarding their power of performance. Perhaps we might use indicators as prosaic as viewing figures? Or we might even attempt to somehow evaluate the cultural ‘good’ Harrison’s poetry does — for example Simon Armitage decided to become a poet after watching Harrison on TV:

Most writers can identify a few moments in their early life that somehow pushed them into picking up a pen, even if they didn't recognise them at the time. For me, that half an hour of daytime television was one of them. When I eventually clapped eyes on the poems, read them, it dragged the memory out of its dusty box, and I heard that voice again, making cry-babies out of the blokes in the boozier. From then on Harrison became a new section on the bookshelf, not far from Hughes and Heaney.<sup>39</sup>

One starting point for us is to see that Harrison’s achievement is to have created a public poetry in which orality is a necessary component, rather than his work demonstrating a “prolixity close to doggerel”. If Walter Ong is right in saying that for an oral culture “learning or knowing means achieving close, empathetic, communal identification . . . ”<sup>40</sup> then the reinstatement of the oral sense seems fundamental in drawing people into a closer political engagement with their world via the creation of a sense of shared intimacy. This is what Harrison the facilitator is concerned with — he wants people to become involved, to empathise.

This is what we find occurring at the end of *Blasphemers*, with the direct address to Rushdie in which Harrison, looking straight at the camera, toasts *The Satanic Verses*, its “brilliance and [ . . . ] its blasphemy” (*Shadow*, 64). But the address is also to us, in a sense, for we, too, are in Rushdie’s place, certainly spatially in terms of our relationship to the TV as

<sup>39</sup> Armitage. ‘Tony Harrison is sixty’, pp 45-46.

<sup>40</sup> Ong. *Orality and Literacy*, 45.

viewers. This is because the speaking voice of the oral storyteller has placed us there, a voice inherently able to create a sense of shared intimacy in this way because, as Ong tells us: “as sound, the spoken word proceeds from the human interior and manifests human beings to one another as conscious interiors, as persons, the spoken word forms human beings into close-knit groups”.<sup>41</sup> So, if the film has worked then Harrison has created a sense of shared intimacy; we empathise with Rushdie’s situation, or with the critique of fundamentalism generally. But this is not to suggest that Harrison is letting anyone off the hook, though — there are no easy affirmations here, no glib resolutions. Harrison always suggests (uncomfortably for some) the complicity of the viewer. So we, as viewers, might have our own price to pay for any emotional or intellectual involvement with the film. This becomes clear when we see the closing credits. The story has ended where it began, with the Harrison figure alone in the restaurant, his story told, his job done. The credits of the film suggest the cost, however, both for poet and, perhaps, viewer. It is here we see Voltaire’s bust again. We’ve followed this from the beginning of the film, to the auction room where it was bought by the Harrison persona, and finally to the end. While the credits roll we are presented with a grimly ironic allusion to the self-mutilation of Moslems in the film who cut their scalps, and those of their children, in an absurd, grotesque act of humility — Voltaire’s bust seeps blood slowly down its marble dome. It is a depressing but honest ending signifying, perhaps, that for those of us touched by the film the pain will continue as we view the madness and oppressions of the world, but it also relates to an earlier line in the film when Voltaire heard “fanatics roar / *Death to the imagination*” (*Shadow*, 61). In this context the blood suggests an imaginative wound: it signifies the price Voltaire paid, that persecuted artists everywhere pay, the same imaginative and psychic price Wilfred Owen identified in *Strange Meeting* — “foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ong. *Orality and Literacy*, 74.

<sup>42</sup> Wilfred Owen. ‘Strange Meeting’. *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*. Ed. Jon Stallworthy. London: Hogarth, 1985, 125. Hereafter referred to as *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*.

## Chapter 7: The Gaze of the Poet

Despite its doubts and equivocations *Blasphemers*' tentatively suggests that art has a role to play in making the world a better place. At one point the speaker says that it is time "that France (and even Britain) read Voltaire" (*Shadow*, 61). The inference is that art (reading literature, for example) will improve society, somehow redeem it. The redemptive quality of art is a common enough theme in Harrison's work and finds its fullest expression in *Gaze of the Gorgon* (1992) and Harrison's subsequent works, *The Shadow of Hiroshima* (1995) and his Gulf War collection *A Cold Coming* (1991).

*Gaze of the Gorgon*, a single work that had originally been planned as part of a trilogy, is a film that explores the horrors of the twentieth century. This does not just mean the global wars but also contemporary horrors such as drug addiction and dictatorships. Hence the film seeks to make connections between the historical and the present-day horrors. The former focuses on the World Wars, the latter on an inner emptiness and coldness - an unfeelingness, a kind of emotional *anomie*. The device that unifies all this is the symbol of the Gorgon, the importance of which is apparent from the film's opening stanza:

From long ago the Gorgon's Gaze  
stares through time into our days.  
Under seas, as slow as oil  
the Gorgon's snaky tresses coil.  
The Gorgon under the golden tide  
brings ghettos, gulags, genocide. (*Gaze*, 60)

This opening stanza immediately introduces a chilling air. The alliterative qualities, and the way the iambic rhythm is fractured by the strong stresses of "ghettos, gulags, genocide", serves to conjoin a mythical creature from history with the more immediate horrors of the twentieth century. From this stem the connections that the film makes between the German Kaiser and the Gorgon. It was the Kaiser who unearthed a statue of a Gorgon on Corfu and it was the Kaiser who was complicit in plunging Europe into the First World War.

According to Greek mythology the Gorgons were three ugly sisters: Stheno, Euryale, and Medusa, the three daughters of sea-god Phorcys and Ceto. They had writhing snakes for hair and their gaze turned onlookers to stone. Of the three the only mortal Gorgon was Medusa. According to myth it fell to Perseus to kill her. His problem was that he had to

avoid looking directly upon Medusa, otherwise he would be turned to stone. He overcame this by using a polished shield and then, guided by the reflection of the sleeping Medusa, cut off her head. In an allusion to this myth the speaker ironically suggests that one way that contemporary society attempts to withstand or neutralise the Gorgon's stare is by building plate-glass windowed tower-blocks. These are the huge, phallic erections that litter the Frankfurt sky in the film. These are modern man's "polished shields", suggests the speaker, erected in order to neutralise the Gorgon's gaze. "But", he continues "what polished shields can neutralise / those ancient petrifying eyes?" (*Gaze*, p60). What indeed, we might well ask as the film shows us an image of a man urinating in public. This is not merely seedy, it's not solely an example of Harrison trying to demystify the process, it also suggests that modern man is 'pissing in the wind' if we think that we have banished the Gorgon. The evidence suggests not, the film tells us.

This is a film preoccupied with finding ways of countering the petrifying stare of the Gorgon and also, in a sense, of exploring what possibilities there might be for a satisfying, public, poetic role. For Harrison the two amount to the same thing in that integral to his project of creating a public poetry is his belief that poetry should help us to face up to the unbearable, of countering the Gorgon's gaze. One way that the film attempts to counteract the gaze is, ironically, by making statues (themselves petrified) speak. This also accords with the idea of orality and oral storytelling. In order to tell the story Harrison develops a technique that he introduced in the *Loving Memory* sequence in the film *Mimmo*. In *Blasphemers*' we might recall that he used the persona of Voltaire to act as a kind of guide. In *Gaze* it is the turn of the poet Heine, or rather his statue. We meet him in the city where the film begins, Frankfurt, Germany's financial centre. Heine is an apt guide. He was a republican poet, an outsider in terms of his Jewishness and ostracised and censored by the Nazis, and, in an act of cross-cultural understanding, the use of Heine places a German in the centre of a war poem. In this respect the use of personas also <sup>adds</sup> a thematic unity to the works, especially when Harrison uses the verse form of the persona, as was the case with Heine's verse form, and Omar Khayyam's in *Blasphemers*'. In terms of Harrison's poetics the use of personas has a wider function in that it seems, somehow, to reduce the potential for being patronising, or at least appears to have that effect. It suggests a suppression (albeit limited) of a poet's ego because Harrison's ongoing commitment to speaking for the voiceless disturbs the notion of an unified, authoritative narrative voice in that it works against the idea

of the 'poet as God', as ultimate authority figure. Indeed his giving a voice to the voiceless, of allowing those hitherto denied a voice to have one, or in the case of Heine in *Gaze*, to right wrongs and revert persecutions, is another form of poetic justice on Harrison's part.

Moreover we might say that this development of the subjective voice technique is also related to the ongoing idea that the public and the private are two points on the same continuum. For example, if Harrison is talking of allegedly public themes and issues such as war, politics, democracy, disease and he is developing personas with which to do it, then it seems to me that this is, implicitly, asserting that the personal and the private are not separate spheres. The point is that Harrison relates all these issues to a specific individual's subjective voice, rather than making grand gestures in the third person and talking smoothly, yet glibly, about some spurious Everyman. The irony inherent in this is that Harrison's film/poems argue against the idea of poetry being a private, subjective activity by, amongst other things, using subjective voices in conjunction with an ostensibly objective camera's viewpoint.

Harrison's use of personas is not solely a clever extension of the subjective voice technique, it is also a way by which he helps to establish the air of authenticity. By this I mean that if we accept the validity of Heine and Shadow San acting as our guides then we also accept the validity (and authenticity) of the narrator (who is really a persona of poet). It is very simple but extremely effective. But it is also more than this as the personas represent, in a sense, the imagination of the poet-persona. This explains why the guides are not always present. Often the poet-persona has to invoke them, or be surprised by them. In one instance, for example, the narrator says of Shadow San, the guide in *Shadow of Hiroshima*:

he stayed unseen and silent in the night  
until he stopped me at this sight: (*Shadow*, 13)

On another occasion the narrator says he "asked the Shadow to translate" (*Shadow*, 12). This helps to create the sense of authenticity in the films as, for example, when the narrator says "I swear I heard these words" (*Shadow*, 3) while he introduces Shadow San at the film's beginning. It is as if he is claiming the authority to be a poet, suggesting as he does that it is not an act of madness to hear voices in this manner. I think, also, that it is another example of Harrison's technique of demystifying the poetic process. He is keen to show how these thoughts and ideas (as represented by corpses being animated, etc.) occur to the poet persona. In this sense he comes over as a poet 'thinking aloud'. In addition the use of personas also



adds to the dramatic element of the films - they become as characters, each with a role and a dramatic function. Because of this they also serve to give the poet persona an outlet *within* the poem, rather than appearing as introspective and introverted. Thus the poet persona appears once more to be part of, and actively engaged in, the real physical world that we understand and relate to as our own.

In *Gaze* it falls to Heine's persona to tell us about the wanderings of his statue. This was originally commissioned for her summer retreat on Corfu by the Empress Elizabeth of Austria, otherwise known as Cissy. Heine was sculpted holding the text of a Schumann song in his hand. The song is "Was will die einsame Träne?" (the words being written by Heine), a song that features in the film. After Cissy was assassinated the German Kaiser took over her estate and evicted the statue. It was shipped back to Germany, eventually ending up in a park in Toulon. While the Kaiser was on Corfu he turned his hand to archaeology and in the years before the first World War excavated a large Gorgon's head. It had been part of an early Greek temple. It is this excavation that is the starting point for the film's exploration of the historical horrors of our century as the film uses the Gorgon as a metaphor for what the Kaiser set in train. And the film does not shy away from showing a good deal of that horror. We see amputees (in one shocking instance archive footage of an amputation), images of mutilated, war ravaged faces without mouths, scenes from the concentration camps of WW2, contemporary scenes of bomb-blasted Gulf War corpses, with skin ripped from faces yet, with what creates an surreal effect, a full head of hair, and contemporary images of drug addicts injecting themselves.

Much of the film's argument hinges on the way that Harrison is able to link the symbol of the Gorgon with the Kaiser. It is the Kaiser's excavation of the Gorgon that symbolises the release of malevolent forces in modern times.

The patient Kaiser, piece by piece,  
prepares the Gorgon for release  
the Gorgon he let out to glower  
above us all with baleful power. (*Gaze*, p71)

One way that the film enforces this connection between Kaiser and Gorgon is by its clever use of archive material. For example we see archive images of the Kaiser during the excavation. He is pictured in a trench, a big pit. The next frame is of corpses being flung into a pit, then WW1 servicemen burying their dead. The way that the image of the Kaiser blends with

images of executions suggests a sense of continuity, which enforces the idea that the Kaiser is responsible for the horrors that ensued. Overarching all this is the image of the Gorgon. Thus in the movement from exhumations to internments the connection is made. That we accept this kind of thing is due to our understanding of modern history, and Harrison's techniques, in particular the skilful way he uses archive material. One method he utilises is that of blending archive and contemporary footage. For example, at one point in the film, when we are looking at Cissy's palace on Corfu, old film and new film is mixed together by the use of a sepia tint, then it blends to colour film. Techniques like this help to give a documentary edge to the film, consequently it seems very authentic and factual. The film also suggests that the link between the Gorgon and the Kaiser's inchoate fascism does not merely consist in the fact that the Kaiser excavated an old statue. Indeed, the Kaiser was very drawn to the whole mythology of the Gorgon, even having the shield on his statue of Achilles decorated with a Gorgon. We learn, for example that:

The Kaiser in his notebook drew  
 where the Gorgon leads us to  
 step by step and stage by stage  
 he steers the Gorgon through our age.  
 Her hand on his unlocks the door  
 that never will quite close on war. (*Gaze*, p72)

While the speaker is telling us this on the screen we see seven images taken from the Kaiser's own notebook. They show doodles starting with a Gorgon which, by the time we see the seventh, has evolved into a swastika, the emblem of German National Socialism. As the last line of the quote is spoken we are looking at the painting, the *Triumph of Achilles*. Thanks to the magic of film, and Harrison's visual imagery, a door opens in the painting and we see an image of Neo-nazis on the march. They are another consequence of the Gorgon's gaze in a world still influenced by the Kaiser's actions, lumped together with the junkies as a result of Harrison's clever, inventive imagery of the clenched fist, the action performed by the junkies in order to raise a vein, to take a needle:

The junkie and the nationalist  
 both get their fixes with clenched fist.  
 And even in the ECU-world  
 the Kaiser's flag's once more unfurled. (*Gaze*, p73)

The Kaiser is one of the twentieth century figures like Hitler and Stalin, one of the “so-called ‘Eternal Beings’ [who] the Gorgon gulls us into seeing” (*Gaze*, p67). These are fascist dictators of the soul who embody the ethos of collectivism, able to manipulate the people with the power of their rhetoric, but the effect they have is disastrous in terms of the freedom of the individual spirit:

Each leader on his monstrous plinth  
waves us back into the labyrinth  
out of the meander and the maze  
straight back into the Gorgon’s gaze. (*Gaze*, p72.)

No wonder that the film tries to retaliate by showing repeated images of statues of these dictators being demolished. This sequence culminates with successive images of the dictators on a floor. They are being showered with, in Stalin’s case, rubble, in Hitler’s case, syringes but perhaps the most fitting end is reserved for the Kaiser. When his picture appears it is greeted with a cascade of golden fluid, clearly to be understood as urine. It might even literally be so. This is an honest response to the dictators, and understandable given what the film suggests are the effects of being under the Gorgon’s influence. Being in the Gorgon’s gaze, the effect of being in the sway of the Gorgon, can result in what the film terms “spirit suicide” (*Gaze*, p63). This consists in the subjugation of the self, a lack of individual freedom, intellectual as well as physical. It is clearly reminiscent of the charges Harrison made against the fundamentalists in *Blasphemers*. For example in *Gaze* we learn that:

The Gorgon worshippers unroll  
the barbed wire gulags round the soul.  
The Gorgon’s henchmen try to force  
History on a straighter course  
with Gorgonisms that impose  
fixities on all that flows,  
with Führer fix and crucifix  
and Freedom-freezing politics. (*Gaze*, p72.)

Besides resisting these fixities on a semantic level, even Harrison’s language tries to resist. We see this in the fact that <sup>lines three to eight</sup> of this quote are one sentence. This long, flowing, meandering style is designed to work against the fixities of totalitarianism in all its forms and might remind us in its curviness of the symbolism in Zamyatin’s *We* (1970) where

the curved line was equated with radicalism while straightness and uniformity <sup>were</sup> equated with rationality and reactionary conservatism.

One instance of this “spirit suicide” in the film is the contemporary horror of drug addiction. Heine tells us that:

The Gorgon has them closely scanned  
 these new lost souls of ECU-land.  
 The Gorgon’s glance gives them their high  
 then, trapped in her gaze, they petrify. (*Gaze*, p61.)

At this point the image of the junkies in the Frankfurt park is frozen, suggesting their petrification. But the film adds to this sequence, it augments the poet’s words rather than merely illustrating them. It does this by the simple yet very effective technique of fading the frozen image from colour to black and white. This neatly conveys the idea of the junkies as living a kind of death in life, a “spirit suicide”. The colour has drained from themselves, and their world. But there is hope, the film tentatively suggests, in that art can restore that colour. This is suggested in the way that colour returns as we hear Heine’s *lieder* being sung, even while we see images of addicts injecting. Harrison ends the sequence with the effective device of having Heine remind the viewer that it was his words that Schumann set to music. He suggests that, perhaps, the viewer might feel tearful after hearing it being sung “unless you grabbed for the remote!” (*Gaze*, p62). Later, after we have seen a different, close-up view of a junkie injecting themselves in the arm Heine asks:

What is the music that redeems  
 desperate kids in such extremes?  
 Do those I hope you’re watching need a  
 Schumann setting of my *lieder*? (*Gaze*, p62)

This shows us Harrison’s ongoing awareness of the poet/audience dynamic and indicates his sense of the possibility that audiences might shy away from an emotional involvement. It also suggests how keen he is to maintain this involvement and how vital his techniques are to achieve this. The evidence of this is not difficult to find in *Gaze of the Gorgon* and in the above examples of playfulness of ideas and rhyme. Indeed, the speaking voice created for Heine is integral to Harrison’s aim of creating a sense of shared intimacy in the films. It is a voice that typically utilises a heady mix of expletives, concrete imagery and the incorporation of the rhythms of real speech. For example, in a sequence which also illustrates Harrison’s

skill at incorporating documentary, the persona of Heine explains why his statue is not particularly grand. In this excerpt we find elements such as Harrison's typically accessible poetic voice utilising colloquial idioms in an attempt to suggest 'real speech', characteristically brilliant use of rhythm and *enjambement* and a varied line length. This is how it is depicted as text:

HEINRICH  
HEINE memorial

There are, I think, three reasons why  
my statue's not so bloody high:  
1. I was subversive; 2:  
(what's worse to some) I was a Jew  
and 3: I'm back here almost hidden  
because I was ten years bed-ridden  
with syphilis; this keep-fit freak  
scarcely suits my wrecked physique.  
This monument that's far more humble  
's to the voice you're hearing grumble  
that he's less on public view,  
Heinrich Heine, poet and Jew.

(*Gaze*, 61)

Elsewhere we find examples of Harrison's politicised poetics in lines that incorporate expletives with a deceptive casualness, as when we hear that:

Your average Frankfurt-am-Mainer  
doesn't give a shit for Heine (*Gaze*, p61)

At another point we learn that the German Kaiser said of Jews that they were: 'A poison fungus on the German oak' to which the speaker angrily tells us "to quote the bastard makes me choke!" (*Gaze*, p72) In another brilliant passage, presumably a fabrication on Harrison's part yet still strangely authentic for that, Heine tells us what occurred when the Kaiser first saw his statue in Corfu:

the Kaiser's eyes began to harden:  
I don't want his kind in my garden.  
He said straightaway: *Get rid*  
of Sissy's syphilitic Yid !  
Dammit ! the man's a democrat  
I've got no time for shits like that. (*Gaze*, p68)

Equally integral is Harrison's use of rhyme. I have considered this more fully in previous chapters yet it is worth noting that it is a practise continued in films like *Gaze*. It is hard to say whether this is any more playful or to what extent this has developed. Certainly it seems to be the case that Harrison is becoming ever more flexible with his rhymes. Presumably the stimulus is that with spoken rhymes there is a greater danger of them appearing to chime too easily. Hence he works hard at confounding our expectations. Here, in one notable example, the rhyme assumes a political dimension in that it is used to conflate elements of high and low culture such as in the rhyme of "Frankfurter" and "Goethe" (*Gaze*, p33). Sometimes Harrison simply, yet effectively, uses his rhyme to mix different languages together, in this case German and English, as when he rhymes "high"/ "Polizei" (*Gaze*, p63) and "style" / "HEIL !" (*Gaze*, p68) At other times Harrison's rhymes can be very funny, despite (or maybe because of) the occasionally lugubrious voice of what a critic has described as the "dread-toned"<sup>1</sup> Harrison. We see this, for example, when we learn about the statue of Achilles the German Kaiser had built. Here Harrison's alliterative critique ravages the Kaiser just as the hornets in the film ravage the statue. In this instance he brilliantly uses rhyme in order to deflate the grandiose nostrums of the Kaiser:

Though not quite equal in physique  
the Kaiser's there in his creation,  
emblem of his warlike nation,  
this bellicose, Berlin-gazing totem  
has hornets nesting in his scrotum.  
Envenomed hordes have gone and built  
their teeming nests in Prussia's kilt,  
and perforate the scrotal sac  
of the tutued 'Teutomaniac'. (*Gaze*, 70)

The disdain is obvious in Harrison's deflationary rhymes of "totem" and "scrotum", "sac" and "Teutomaniac", for example. Also it is apparent in the conjunction of the formal and archaic usage "envenomed" and the more demotic "gone and built". One critic wrote of this section that "To illustrate Harrison's rhyming couplets, the director, Peter Symes, picked out some arresting details (a hornets' nest snuggling up to the scrotum of a statue of Achilles.)"<sup>2</sup> This is to miss the point, however. Harrison is using his words to explain the world, not vice versa. In this instance the critic is implying that the verse came before the image but this analysis fails

<sup>1</sup> Jasper Rees. 'A Modern Poet's Anthem For Doomed Youth'. *The Independent* 11 May 1994. Listings, 18.

<sup>2</sup> James Rampton. *The Independent* 5th October 1992, Arts, 16.

to appreciate the importance of Harrison's achievement as we know that the image was discovered on his first visit to the island, as part of a research trip.<sup>3</sup> Then Harrison wrote the verse, in order to explain the image, the world. Other examples of this word and world technique, of this creation of a sense of authenticity, are the blood on Heine's statue, described with stark realism by Heine's persona. As he tells us that he wishes he were back in Corfu (as his statue had been), we see images of his head, splattered with what looks like blood, on his monument. Rather than being in Corfu he is

. . . here with bloodstains in my hair.  
 Europe's reluctant to shampoo  
 the gore-caked coiffure of the Jew,  
 the blood gushed from a botched injection,  
 in case it gives some infection,  
 or maybe Europe doesn't care  
 there's junkies' blood in Heine's hair. (*Gaze*, p62)

In another instance, near to the beginning of the film, the narrator is talking of the statues of Goethe and Schiller in the park. The camera shows us a shot looking down an avenue at a group of men walking towards us. The narrator tells us that the statues are often scorned despite the fact that:

. . . their scale  
 's, say, 50 times this can of ale). (*Gaze*, p60)

As the narrator refers to the can of ale that one of the walkers is holding, the camera pans straight up and ends its progress on Schiller's statue. The journey of the camera neatly enacts the narrator's rudimentary mathematics, seemingly enacting the narrator's thoughts as it does so. This is another instance of how things appear to us in the same 'real time' as they seem to unfold on the screen.

Another example of this is the use of recurring visual motifs. A sense of thematic unity is developed in the film by the repetition of images of such things as the cranes that are helping to develop Frankfurt's business centre. For example towards the beginning of the film we see a crane raising an enormous window high into the sky. The window is comprised of two panes. It looks like an enormous pair of eyes. It is unlikely that these are shields to reflect the Gorgon's gaze. More likely they are another symbol of the Gorgon itself, an

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<sup>3</sup> See Symes. 'Introduction', xx.

extension of the Gorgon's eyes keeping those in her gaze in her power. The image of the crane occurs many times in the film. It is this crane that is in the same frame as the view of the junkies queuing up for their replacement needles. As a result of the technique of recurring symbolism Harrison is able to accuse European capitalism of complicity in perpetuating the Gorgon's gaze. In this respect the garden symbolism inherent in the Frankfurt park is important. Nestled in the centre of the financial city the use of the garden mythology clearly suggests that there is something rotten at the core of this city/world. The reason that this situation is able to be perpetuated, suggests the speaker, is because ECU-land, (roughly corresponding to Central European capitalism) is too intent on spending its great wealth for the benefit for the few. That there is great wealth is not in dispute. There are "clouds of coins, cash cumuli/floating in the [ . . . ] sky"(Gaze, 64). Despite this:

The Europe of the soaring cranes  
has not seen fit to cleanse these stains  
or give new hope to the stainer. (*Gaze*, 62)

In marked contrast to all the new buildings rising up in honour of the ECU the only new things that the addicts receive are new needles in replacement for their used ones (*Gaze*, 64).

This anti-capitalist vein is even more sharply focused in *The Shadow of Hiroshima* (1995). The domination of American culture is one of the shadows that fall upon the city. In this film, written to commemorate the victims of the A-Bomb blast of 1945, Harrison uses the past, in the guise of Shadow San, to comment upon the present. In this way the film is able to draw out and comment upon ironies such as how America, the bringer of death via the A-Bomb, is now the bringer of such archetypal American commodities and pastimes as Coke, baseball and pinball. American imperialism is so dominant that Coke is the "crimson conqueror"(*Shadow*, pp. 12-13). The legacy of the bomb drop seems to be a rampant capitalism, a particular brand of capitalism that even uses the mythology of the bomb in order to make its sales. This is true of pinball, as evidenced by the name of the "shrine [ . . . ] *Parlor Atom*" (*Shadow*, 13), that the narrator and Shadow San visit. We also notice that Mitsufuji San's phone-card is adorned with an image of a silhouette of the A-Bomb dome. He uses this to arrange a date. On one level the dramatic idea is that some 'good', i.e. romantic love, can develop from the horror — certainly Mitsufuji San is amazed at the card's capacity to effect this. But on another level this is not the feeling we are left with, given his response to the awful events fifty years earlier: "He thinks it's better to forget" (*Shadow*, 10). In this context



the use of the image on a phone-card seems to be more of a tourist device than commemorative in nature. It is significant that in order to maintain the film's veneer, its illusion of objectivity, the narrator does not pass judgement on this. Nor does he comment on Mitsufuji San's rejection of the commemorative function of the image, but the camera does. In a manner that belies its apparent objectivity the camera sometimes picks out certain objects, seemingly at random, as it does in the scenes in the *Love Hotel*. It does not linger here, just alighting on seemingly incidental items like Mitsufuji San's cigarettes and matches. The brand name of his cigarettes is, ironically, *Peace*. He lights them with *Aioi* matches, *Aioi* being the name of the bridge over the Motoyasu river that the navigator of the Enola Gay used to take aim in preparation for dropping the euphemistically-named 'Little Boy' bomb in 1945. It is in this apparently casual way that the film/poem does pass judgement in that it is able to make connections between an appalling act of aggression in wartime and the voracity of contemporary capitalism in peace-time, yet without either the distancing or heavy-handedness that a recourse to the rarefied heights of the high moral ground might effect.

Mitsufuji San does not want to remember and, in a sense, who can blame him? This question, and others posed implicitly by the film, is posed more explicitly in *Gaze of the Gorgon*. Rather in the way that was suggested by the end of *Blasphemers*, *Gaze* asks a straightforward question of the viewer:

what are we doing with our art?  
are we still strumming the right lyre  
to play us through the century's fire? (*Gaze*, 64)

There is no easy answer, something obvious in the speaker's repetitions and reiterations of similar questions, but maybe the art of past times might suggest some possibilities. In the past, the speaker tells us, art had redemptive powers, as was true in Homer's case:

Homer brings  
the dead redemption when he sings. (*Gaze*, 67)

Compared to times when "Apollo's lyre / could save men from the petrifier" (*Gaze*, 66) today, however, the prospects for art (and for us) are altogether much grimmer:

The *barbitos*, the ancient lyre,  
since the Kaiser's day,  
is restrung with barbed wire

Bard's hands bleed when they play  
 the score that fits an era's scream,  
 the blood, the suffering, the loss.  
 The twentieth century theme  
 is played on barbed wire *barbitos*. (*Gaze*, 71)

Because of the Kaiser's complicity in instigating the horrors of this century the speaker says that the lyre, a symbol of artistic endeavour, is now strung with barbed wire. Consequently the poet's hands will be cut to ribbons when he/she attempts to produce a sound on this instrument that "fits" the pain-wracked cries of this century. In the images that accompany this section we see the horrors that generate the cries. We see images of amputees, of concentration camps, of mutilations and gnarled features. These people are in an advanced stage of petrification as a result of the Gorgon's gaze. In the sequence the speaker continues the musical analogy by suggesting that the theme of our times "the blood, the suffering, the loss", is the theme that poets ought to be writing about. Here Harrison is advocating grand themes for poetry. He is saying that though it hurts to confront these themes of nightmare, suffering and despair, artists and poets must attempt it. The argument appears to be that without this agenda there is no possibility of public poetry because without an agenda such as this art cannot have its redemptive function restored to it. It is an assertion of public poetry and public themes on a grand scale. The gaze of the Gorgon *can* be withstood, perhaps, by the gaze of the poet squaring up to it. If not the consequences are chilling. Once more the inspiration for the twentieth century poet comes from the past, this time the example is Homer's:

revered blind Homer and his lyre  
 the ancient poet whose ILIAD  
 was the steadiest gaze we'd ever had  
 at war and suffering [. . . ] (*Gaze*, 67)

Art, in the form of literature, can withstand the Gorgon's gaze, so this is what a modern poet has to do. He or she needs to "Gaze and create" because

If art can't cope  
 it's just another form of dope,  
 and leaves the Gorgon in control  
 of all the freedoms of the soul." (*Gaze*, 62)

The emphasis on the poet's gaze is very significant. It reminds us of the action of the camera in the films and the way that this reflects the point of view of the speaker. Thus the gaze of the poet is literally enacted for the benefit of the viewer. In another sense the images that we see leave us with a sense that what we are seeing is actually the mind's eye of the speaker. In this respect the camera is, as I said above, a metaphor for the poetic imagination. In the case of the film *Gaze of the Gorgon*, and Harrison's work more generally, the finished art work represents a mirror, perhaps even the polished shield that Perseus used to slay Medusa. The shield's function was to allow Perseus to gaze upon the horror by proxy. In this way he was able to deal with it and not be turned to stone. So it is with the viewer/reader of Harrison's verse. The mirror/shield reflects the horrors of our age yet allows us to gaze at the Gorgon (to see the horrors clearly) without either turning to stone or becoming apathetic and uncaring. For the poet it is not so easy. He must assume for himself a position analogous to that of the Gorgon itself in order to allow us to constantly slay the refracted form in the shield of his work. The toll that this extracts is clearly suggested by images such as Voltaire's bleeding bust, for example.

This is always assuming that people will watch the films and not simply grab "for the remote" (*Gaze*, 62) in order to change channels. It is worth noting that a work like *Gaze* suggests a possible contradiction to Harrison's aspirations for art in that there is a marked difference in this film's concerns from the material in 'v.' or even *Blasphemers*, which was located in a more national experience or consciousness. In *Gaze*, on the other hand, the 'grand themes' are inviting an engagement with international awareness. The ever present possibility is that viewers might not care about such issues if they feel they are not relevant to them. The task of the public poet is to make them feel that they are.

In this respect it is clear that Harrison's ideas about the classical role of a poet are very important. We can see the borrowing from this past in that his films implicitly embody the classical poet and dramatist's role of speaking for the people, while speaking to them as a storyteller. Hence one function of a modern poet, according to Harrison, is to speak out on public themes such as war. Yet an obvious response to Harrison's idealistic aspiration is to ask just how can the use of regular metrical forms hope to convey the fragmentary nature and disjointed horrors of life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with all its dislocations, divisions and fractures? To those who might suggest that the use of such forms is inadequate to achieve what Harrison

believes poetry to be capable of, Harrison is dismissive, as comments he made in an interview with Robert Winder suggest :

‘I love that thing Stravinsky says,’ he declares. ‘Show me the boundaries and I will fill them’. The whole point of poetry, he insists, is that it should address the hardest things in life, and the most powerful weapon it brings to the fray is its own form. ‘The whole idea of the Greek tragic vision,’ he says, ‘is to keep looking, and keep singing. But you have to use a spell-binding language. The ear will surrender even at those times when the eye wants to close, when the eye doesn’t want to watch’. <sup>4</sup>

This, then, is how verse can guide us in, can take us further than we would otherwise go. Ordinary language, or prose, is not able to achieve this because, as Harrison asserts, “you have to change gear. You have to find a way of talking that is not everyday. It has to be a squaring up. It has to bring something undefeated, something braver than the situation it is describing.”<sup>5</sup> His verse does this in two ways. One is by seducing us into keeping on watching when the screen has images we would probably rather not watch, as we see in *Gaze* with its images of slow-motion deathcamp-bulldozer-ballets. For instance while we view the images of men with no mouths, or half mouths seemingly twisted through forty-five degrees the narrator tells us, with a simplicity that conveys an extraordinary tenderness:

Before these Germans went to fight  
they’d been beautiful to kiss.

This is the Kaiser’s Gorgon choir  
their petrification setting in,  
grunting to the barbed wire lyre  
gagging on snags of *Lohengrin*. (*Gaze*, pp 71-72)

In the first two lines of the quote Harrison is keen to humanise these awful faces. They are people who once had a physical existence in the same way as everyone else. The obverse is left unsaid: now they don’t. We are gently led into looking, and thinking, about these people because of the simple, yet effective, devices such as these. This is Harrison’s strength. By fixing on one, small aspect that is immediately identifiable as a fundamental human gesture, a kiss, and contrasting it with facial mutilations, Harrison brilliantly provides a location for our pity *and* our anger because he is able to effect the movement from the abstract (the war which

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<sup>4</sup> Winder. ‘Interview’, 3.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

we haven't literally known) to the physical that we do know. And it is not merely a memorable phrase, for the verse works on a technical level at the same time. This is how verse can be seductive in the sense that its effects work on us without us consciously noticing this. We see this particularly in the last two lines of the quote with the consonantal alliteration of "barbed wire lyre" and the assonantal rhyme of "gagging on snags". Also the artistry is evident in the bleakly punning irony of the last syllable of *Lohengrin* — these faces will only grin as a result of their features having been permanently contorted in that position.

The second way that verse helps us to face up to the unbearable is more subtle. This can involve a complete absence of archive material, as is the case in *Shadow*, for example<sup>6</sup>. Here the narrator recounts the most horrific illustrations of injury and suffering while on the screen we see tranquil images of the Motoyasu river, and Hara San painting. The contrast between what our eyes see and what our brains tell us (as a result of what we hear) is very powerful. This section is worth quoting at length. Here Harrison wanted the verse to convey the horror in such a way that people would continue to listen, and to watch.. While we see beautifully filmed images of the Motoyasu river, and the artist creating his new work, we learn that for his water the old man is using water from

1           the river those flayed by the Bomb,  
               including all his friends from school,  
               jumped in, hoping it would cool  
               their burning and bomb-blackened skin,  
 5           here where he dips his bottle in.  
               His schoolmates' shrieks from blackened lips  
               haunt Hara San each time he dips  
               his brush in water from the stream  
               to give relief to those who scream,  
 10           all his dying schoolmates, those  
               whose skin slid off their flesh like clothes.  
               Like clothes, three times oversize  
               their flayed skin loosens from their thighs.  
               Burns and blisters, bloated blebs  
 15           burst as the Motoyasu ebbs,  
               the tidal Motoyasu trails  
               black flaps of flesh like chiffon veils.  
               Like kimonos with their belts untied  
               black sloughed-off skin floats on the tide.  
 20           This water mixed with children's cries

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<sup>6</sup> There is approximately fifteen seconds of archive film of the A-Bomb blast screened at the very beginning of the film, before the verse starts. In the film itself the A-Bomb blast is simulated by images of dead and burning birds.

paints the Dome, green trees, blue skies  
 and in that way, he hopes, redeems  
 something from his schoolmates' screams. (*Shadow*, p6)

There are many similar accounts of injuries. For example an Hiroshima grocer had this to say:

The appearance of people was . . . well, they had all their skin blackened by burns. They had no hair because their hair was burned, and at a glance you couldn't tell whether you were looking at them from in front or in back. They held their arms like this . . . and their skin - not only their hands, but on their faces and bodies too - hung down. If there had only been one or two such people perhaps I would not have had such a strong impression. But wherever I walked I met these people. Many of them died along the road - I can still picture them in my mind - like walking ghosts. They didn't look like people of this world. <sup>7</sup>

In the passage quoted from *Shadow* it is Harrison's control of language that achieves the effects that enables his verse to "guide us in", to "take us further than we would otherwise go". Harrison needs to make us feel in order to achieve this. In this respect it is interesting that he relies upon an extensive use of simile, rather than metaphor. This seems to add a gritty realism that the more abstract metaphor might not create because a degree of emphasis is generated in the repetition. It helps to make the verse and the images more realistic, more graphic and hence more intensely moving. Indeed the use of simile rather than metaphor also seems to do justice to the memory of those slaughtered in this way because it somehow seems a less precious, a less ostentatiously 'poetic' use of the poet's craft. The relative concreteness of a simile (based on finding correspondences between different categories) rather than the relative abstraction inherent in a metaphor (based on an implied resemblance) seems to imply, in a sense, that this is not a piece of writing that is intended to promote the poet at the expense of the poet's subject. Rather it is a piece of writing in which the poet is marshalling his talents in order to serve the subject, in this instance the memory of the appalling events on the day of the A-Bomb blast. And the way he does this is by making us feel. Primarily he does this as a result of the explicitness of the narrative, the use of simile, as I said above but other techniques include the extensive use of alliteration, as in "burning and bomb-blackened skin" (l 4) <sup>8</sup> and "Burns and blisters, bloated blebs / burst . . ." (l14-15). Given that it is schoolchildren that

<sup>7</sup> Nicholas Humphrey and Robert Jay Lifton, eds., *In A Dark Time*. London: Boston: Faber and Faber, 1984. 95. Hereafter referred to as *In A Dark Time*.

<sup>8</sup> These line references are ones that I have provided solely for this quote.

suffer this fate there is a certain ironic poignancy in the tentative hint of a pun in line one with its reference to “flayed”, not ‘played’. Besides this we have horrific images as in the “blackened lips” of line 6. This is why the use of simile is so significant in that in more conventional poetry, more third-hand than Harrison’s actualised performances - less committed, more detached poetry without an impulse for viewer involvement - this might have been mistaken for a metaphor. The horror of the situation is surely greater for our dawning realisation that phrases like “blackened lips” are not figurative at all. Hence Harrison’s characteristic emphasis in the film on the specificity of what he describes. The children jumped in “here where he dips his bottle in” the narrator tells us. This is how it was, it is implied. This is fact, the verse insists.

As we listen to the voice of the narrator this interacts with the visual images of the film, lending to the whole section an extraordinary intensity. The words seem to have a greater impact because they are not competing with the visual images. Indeed, as we hear the account of the children burning to death we see images of Hara San calmly painting his view of the A-Bomb dome. It is a kind of pilgrimage for him that he undertakes by way of atonement, perhaps, for having been away from the city on the day when all his school-friends were killed. He is old now, seemingly a kindly old man, something which contrasts starkly with the violence inherent in the lexical images. Indeed, this whole section with its combination of benign visual images and dreadful imaginative images generated by the verse is structured around the device of the painter. This is a clever, inventive stroke on Harrison’s part, helping to generate the effects already discussed. It is also worth considering as part of Harrison’s typical impulse to create a sense of authenticity. By this I mean that when the painter signs and dates his work (August 6th, 1995) this serves to confer an authenticity on the whole film, in a sense. It becomes pure documentary for a moment. It assumes a veneer of objectivity. Indeed, at other times in the film Harrison is careful to ‘authenticate’ his work. The film’s opening, for example, begins with this couplet:

I heard a sound I thought was birds  
but then I swear I heard these words: (*Shadow*, p3.)

In this manner the first narrator introduces Shadow San, the ghost of the past who is consequently able to comment on the present. The use of “swear” implies integrity, honesty, etc., so the film must be true! In respect of the dating of the picture this is also another piece

of Harrisonian artistry because for the date to be genuine the film would have had to have been filmed, edited and screened all on the same day, surely something beyond even as agile a film-maker as Harrison. In this respect we might say that the film actually demonstrates the fabrication, the artificiality of art, actually drawing attention to its artifice for even as it is saying, on one level, 'Look, this painter has signed and dated this work, obviously what you see on your screen is the truth', it is also telling us that this can't be so. This is like the instances mentioned above where Harrison is keen to show that his poetry is written - it does not just 'appear' in some miraculous way from the ether. And that it is written is very clear if we take the time to consider the technical accomplishment of a passage such as this, despite any uneasy feelings of literary voyeurism we might feel about this. I salve my conscience by thinking that by applying the principles of close-reading it at least allows us to not only appreciate the way that Harrison has utilised his skill in order to make us empathise with the children but also appreciate the ways in which his verse works on us in order to impress their suffering upon us. This is clear, for example, in the instances of onomatopoeia in lines 12 to 17. Here the repetition of 's' sounds in particular, and consonant sounds such as 'k' and 'ck' grimly invoke the hissing and crackling sounds of burning. Harrison accentuates this, accelerating the rhythm of the account by his typically exhilarating facility with *enjambement* and also the way that, at times, he reinforces a point. This happens over lines 17 and 18 where the oral storyteller's imperative is very apparent in that a succeeding line picks up and develops the simile in the previous line, e.g. ". . . like chiffon veils. / Like kimonos with their belts untied" There is also a particular horror conveyed by these images in that besides the fact that the clothes/skin analogy is perfectly suited to convey what Harrison is keen to convey, 'chiffon' and 'kimono' are typically associated with softness and gentleness. In Harrison's hands they are transformed.

Another way that Harrison makes us feel this 'public' horror intimately is by his characteristic method of personalising the horror. By this I mean that he relates a particular situation to a specific person or persons so that we can understand it on a human level. In general terms this is another function of the personas in that we can understand a particular situation more easily if we can perceive it in terms of one particular individual or group of people. Rather than just make generalised comments about huge fatalities Harrison offers us case histories. Once again this connects Harrison with the tragedians of Greek drama. Malcolm Heath, writing in *The Poetics of Greek Tragedy* (1987) has commented that



Aristotle's *Poetics* testifies to "the balance that must be kept between suffering that is so close to home as to be one's own [ . . . ] and that which is so remote as to be meaningless or incomprehensible".<sup>9</sup> This is precisely the challenge that Harrison faces in *Shadow*. It is also something that informs his documentary sense, his creation of a sense of shared intimacy. The challenge the Greek dramatists faced involved the requirement of Greek tragedy that "its characters be elevated, removed from ordinary people in status and condition".<sup>10</sup> The problem is then to render an identification with these characters possible. Heath suggests that an understanding of how this apparent contradiction was resolved lies in "the notion of deception (*apatê*) and vividness (*enargeia*) so important to Greek thinking about literary art; it is part of the dramatist's job to make the remote and improbable seem so vivid and credible [ . . . ] that the experience and emotions of the characters can be grasped imaginatively by the audience despite their remoteness and unfamiliarity."<sup>11</sup> This emphasis on "deception" and "vividness" sound extremely akin to Harrison's techniques, the terms suggesting both Harrison's creation of an illusion of objectivity and his sense of authenticity. Harrison's *apatê* and *enargeia* is evident in his strategy of locating the horrors of the blast in the context of personal histories. In *Shadow* the personalisation is evident, for example, when Shadow San and the narrator arrive at a school on their tour of present day Hiroshima. Here Shadow San remembers the burning children on the day of the blast:

When Shadow San set eyes on these  
 he began to sing in Japanese:  
 'Misu, misu kudasai,  
 water, water they'd all cry  
 burned and blackened, soon to die  
 if these pupils here had been  
 in this same room at 8.15  
 the 6<sup>th</sup> of August '45

None of them would be alive. (*Shadow*, p10)

The effect of this is that the present helps us to understand the past: even the most insensitive viewer could imagine these children suffering the fate that the speaker has told us of. In this way Harrison is able to put faces on the statistics of the A-bomb blast — 'they were people

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<sup>9</sup> Malcolm Heath. *The Poetics of Greek Tragedy*. London: Duckworth. 1987. 13.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

like you and me', is the inference. Later, in a more graphic example, Shadow San comments on the sleeping form of Sonoko in the *Love Hotel*:

Girls as beautiful, as young, as sweet  
were seared to cinders by the heat. (*Shadow*, p14)

Yet despite this we go on listening and watching: though we can only feel the pain by proxy, we feel that we can at least feel for those children. In this we are helped by the consolatory idea that art, Hara San's painting - created by blending paint with water from the river, (*and* Harrison's film) - can "give relief to those who scream" (19). Which is, for Harrison, one function - perhaps the major one - of art. He said as much in an interview with Michael Ignatieff for the BBC's *Lateshow*. This is a verbatim transcript of the exchange:

Harrison: I'm a huge self-doubter, somewhere I keep on doing what I do because I believe, since I don't have any religion, that Art is probably the only thing we have that (for want of a better word ) can redeem our suffering. But it always seems to me that in the midst of hopelessness, things that survive glow so much more brightly.

Ignatieff: And it's your business as a poet to point to the ember that's still glowing among the ash.

Harrison: 'In dark times the eye begins to see', I think the Chinese proverb has it, and in darkness you have [pause] I've always trained my eye to see the sparks.<sup>12</sup>

Ignatieff: This notion of art redeeming suffering, I've never understood what the word redemption means in that sense. What do you mean by it?

Harrison: One of the moments that is a great touchstone for me in all art, on this question, is the very end of the *Trojan Women* by Euripides, . . . the women are gathered together to be sent into slavery, children have been killed, their husbands have been killed, everything which held their identity — their city, their clothing — has been destroyed. And each time there is a flicker of hope it is immediately dashed: they have nothing to look forward to except slavery and in that moment the woman who has lost most, Hecuba, the woman who has been brought lowest, had everything destroyed, says as the last consolation to the women (and bearing in mind that she's in a play some thousand years later) " if we hadn't suffered we wouldn't be songs for future mortals" So that in that moment of the worst suffering the idea of being remembered in songs is the one consolation.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Compare Theodore Roethke's comment: "In a dark time, the eye begins to see." *In A Dark Time*, 59.

<sup>13</sup> Harrison. *Lateshow*.

The ideas expressed here relating to the need to face up, to square up to horrors in a way that is neither *debilitating* nor evasive, are fundamental in understanding how Harrison believes that “art can cope”. He has always been interested to learn how it was that the Greeks managed to maintain what he calls “a kind of celebratory route in the sensual and everyday to follow and emerge from their tragedy.”<sup>14</sup> He has looked for a style

with which we might be able to confront the worst things we can imagine, just as when I take the most traditionally literate form and subject it to an illiterate attack and see if it sustains it, so do I think that our need for celebration has to admit and openly acknowledge the huge darkness of the twentieth century in which it seems that the simple spirit of affirmation has been burnt out.<sup>15</sup>

At this the interviewer asks: “So behind all the darkness of the poetry, there’s a kind of hope present all the time.”, to which Harrison replies: “The poem itself is that act, I think the poem itself is that act of affirmation.”<sup>16</sup> To understand why Harrison places so much store in verse’s ability to help us face up to the horrors of our age its worthwhile briefly considering the importance of the Classics and Greek tragedy in Harrison’s work. This is best achieved through looking in detail at the arguments Harrison puts in his witty and informative essay *Facing Up To The Muses* (1988) .

Harrison tells us that the poet Hesiod’s *Works and Days* prophesied that Zeus would destroy the whole race of *meropon anthropon*, ‘men gifted with speech’<sup>17</sup>, in the fifth age of mankind, a time referred to by Hesiod as the Age of Iron. Harrison works up the idea of the age of iron into a metaphor for “the late terrible twentieth century”.<sup>18</sup> In support of this view he describes the decline of the state of health of the nine Muses from Hesiod’s time to our own time, seeing this as a metaphor of the upsurgent horrors of modern times. Though Hesiod’s *Theogony* “describes the flow of sweetness of the Muses as ‘inexhaustible’”, Harrison reminds us that more recently Byron called the Muses the “weary nine” and Keats’ *Endymion*, referring to Mount Helicon, the home of the Muses, suggested that “all is dark / Around thine aged top”.<sup>19</sup> Moreover there have also been less than positive reports about the spring of Hippocrene, the fountain of inspiration on Helicon. Writing in the seventeenth

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<sup>14</sup> Wilmer. ‘Face to Face. 35.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>17</sup> Harrison. ‘Facing Up’. *Bloodaxe*, 431.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 431.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 434.

century George Wheler found that it was frozen and in 1973 an American, Paul W. Wallace, drank from the fountain but, relates Harrison: “found its taste ‘so foul that [he] drank it only because nothing else was available’.” These less than positive accounts are, then, a kind of metaphor for Harrison of a general worsening of the human condition — the way that Helicon and its Muses are considered offers a kind of benchmark as to the state of the world. This is depressing because things have deteriorated considerably since Byron’s day: “This weariness of the nine, this erosion of the affirmative spirit in our times, this darkness, this *nepfos* on Helicon has been made darker by two World Wars, the terrors of Nazism, and the fearful conflagrations unleashed on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945”.<sup>20</sup>

This, then, is an alternative interpretation for the so-called “retreat from the word”<sup>21</sup>, as George Steiner characterised the reaction to this century’s terrible events — the Muses were unable to inspire writers into producing life-affirming works. That this is not so in the case of Harrison is clear. Indeed, he has explained that this “retreat” occurred at the same time as he was acquiring his appetite for language: “While the word of expression was losing its belief in the word I was busily acquiring mine. ‘Words! Words! For me, alas, there was no other salvation!’, as the great Cretan writer Nikos Kazantzakis wrote.”<sup>22</sup> It was, suggests Harrison, likely that the same impulse toward the word also turned him towards tragedy: “My feeling was then, and still is, although I have every poet’s despair at times, that language could take on anything and everything, the worst things perhaps above all, and this lesson I learned at that impressionable period of my life in Greek tragedy”.<sup>23</sup> Harrison tells us that it is Melpomene, the Muse of Tragedy “ ‘who deals with the most monstrous and appalling that life can offer, when it turns upon us its Medusa-like countenance of frenzy and despair’.”<sup>24</sup> It is this gaze, the “frenzy and despair of the fifth age of mankind, the iron age” that “turns men to stone and numbs their sources of affirmation,”<sup>25</sup> suggests Harrison. He then goes on to paraphrase Nietzsche saying that the function of tragedy is that it allows us to gaze upon the “frenzy and despair of the Fifth Age [ . . . ] yet without being turned to stone by the vision”,<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 435.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 436.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 439.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 439.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 440.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 436.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 440. Harrison includes the verbatim quote from Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* as one of three epigrams to *The Gaze of the Gorgon*: “Art forces us to gaze into the horror of existence, yet without being turned to stone by the vision.”

and reminds us that in *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche also called tragedy “the highest art to say yes to life.”<sup>27</sup> For Harrison the poet’s role is clear — he puts himself and his verse on the line and, in a memorable phrase that reminds us of *Gaze of the Gorgon* says: “You have to test your art in the wind-tunnel — atrocity, pogrom, holocaust,” he says. ‘I want to affirm flow against fixity.’<sup>28</sup>

The importance of facing up to these elements of our times, of not being turned to stone is that we “can’t celebrate our existence [ . . . ] simply by forgetting the terrors of the recent past or by ignoring the frightening future”.<sup>29</sup> Harrison quotes Robert Jay Lifton, an American professor of Psychology, who has studied the effects of Nazism and the nuclear holocaust on our imaginations: “and the deeply numbing effect of what must be the most petrifying Medusa-like gaze of all on our sense of futurity”.<sup>30</sup> Lifton has called for artists to discover “a ‘theatre that can imagine the end of the world and go beyond that . . . [a theatre] that can believe in tomorrow’, what he later has to call ‘a theatre of faith’.”<sup>31</sup> This tragedy, it seems, has as its central tenet a belief in the “primacy of the word. I think my obsessive concern with Greek drama isn’t about antique reproduction, but part of a search for a new theatricality and also a way of expressing dissatisfaction with the current theatre where I want to work as a *poet*.”<sup>32</sup> This recourse to the Greeks must not be interpreted as some kind of reactionary move on Harrison’s part, however, as a kind of ‘going backwards’ to the Greeks. Far from it, as Harrison himself explains. Its more a case of “forward to the Greeks, or forward *with* the Greeks”.<sup>33</sup>

It is, then, “the primacy of language that allows us to gaze into terror and not be turned to stone.”<sup>34</sup> The alternative is for people to become “silent voyeurs”. Harrison quotes the psychiatrist Anthony Clare’s suggestion that “ ‘the portrayal of Ulster violence has only numbed viewers into anaesthetised silent voyeurs’. They’ve looked into terror and been turned to stone. The Medusa-like countenance of the Fifth Age has petrified them. Silent voyeurs!”<sup>35</sup> “The Greeks in their tragedies”, says Harrison, “looked unflinchingly at the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 440.

<sup>28</sup> Kustow. ‘Where Yorkshire grit meets Attic wit’. *The Guardian* 1 October 1992, 25.

<sup>29</sup> Harrison. ‘Facing Up’. *Bloodaxe*, 440.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 440.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 440.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 440.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 441.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 445.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 445.

worst they knew about life. The subject matter of the Greek tragedies could not have been darker, but unless you come to terms with dark subjects, there's no measure of life at all. [ . . . ] When people today see reality from Somalia, Bosnia or elsewhere on their television screens," he says, "they watch only as much as they can bear to look at, and that is often not a lot."<sup>36</sup> Hence poetry's role in helping people to face up to the unbearable precisely because, as M. L. Rosenthal has also commented, "One function of art is to hold on to such images of revulsion, which could otherwise sink easily into the subconscious life, and to thrust them once again into the foreground of consciousness. It is important to do so lest we forget the realities that have shaped us and that must be remembered if we are to see ourselves and the world around us at all truly."<sup>37</sup>

Poetry can help to ameliorate this condition, Harrison believes, not only by helping us to face up to the unbearable but also because the very fact that it is written can itself be a source of inspiration. This needs a little clarification because it is not the case that Harrison believes that poetry itself can be a force for good, *per se*. In fact when Robert Winder asked Harrison if this was not the case he rejected the naiveté underlying such a question arguing that poetry, though equally public, was a different activity 'from the kind of public involvement that manifests itself in demonstrations on the street' ".<sup>38</sup> It is a distinction that might remind us of Harrison's status as a political poet in that his work suggests that his poetry's politics consist in his assumed role as a facilitator, rather than an activist. That the emphasis is on a process of engagement, rather than prescription, has been alluded to by Harrison himself:

When I was a young poet [ . . . ] I used to come on very strong, with a sort of Brechtian moral superiority over the audience, as if telling them they were responsible for the shortcomings of the world. Now I want to draw people in, not hit them over the head. I'm no longer saying, 'Look what you've done', but 'Look what we've done' ".<sup>39</sup>

When asked by Winder exactly how poetry was different from street-politics he replied "It's something to do with its apparent uselessness. There is something about the act of writing poems which seems futile in the face of Phantom bombers. A poem engages on a

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<sup>36</sup> Patinkin. 'A bleeding poet'.

<sup>37</sup> Rosenthal. *Poetry And The Common Life*, 98.

<sup>38</sup> Winder. 'Interview', 3.

<sup>39</sup> Kustow. 'Where Yorkshire grit meets Attic wit', 25.

different level. It reminds us of those other feelings we neglect in order to concentrate on destroying others like ourselves whom, for the purpose of the exercise, we call enemy-or less than human. Meaning, of course, less than us.”<sup>40</sup> In this respect poetry brings “something undefeated, something braver than the situation it is describing.” This is a sentiment that underpinned a comment that Harrison made to me in conversation. We were talking about Wilfred Owen and Harrison said that what people liked about Owen was that he brought something apparently useless to bear on something appalling.<sup>41</sup> His poetry fulfilled Harrison’s criteria of trying to make the reader see the enemy as human, indeed this was a characteristic of much of the best poetry from Sassoon and Rosenberg, for example, as well. There is also a curious similarity in that the sense of conflict in Owen between soldier and poet seems to parallel the division within Harrison between skald and skin. With both poets the poetry is born of this struggle, this ‘strange meeting’ between two contradictory impulses. Furthermore Owen’s fine poem ‘Insensibility’ might well have been an unconscious model for *Gaze*, particularly in view of its emphasis on lack of feeling. In the final stanza of a poem that is concerned with understanding the various kinds of insensibility the combatants exhibit, Owen concludes with a scathing attack on the non-combatants at home. Here he savages the numbness of those who do not care about the fate of the soldiers. Owen’s critique is all the more bitter because those at home have experienced petrification, made themselves “as stones”, immune to what for Owen is the single most important quality — pity:

But cursed are dullards whom no cannon stuns,  
That they should be as stones.

. . . . .  
By choice they made themselves immune  
To pity and whatever moans in man<sup>42</sup>

In an early review of D. J. Enright’s poetry Harrison suggests how the poet should view the world. He noted that Enright wrote about the “suffering, the starved and the poor of the various eastern lands where he has lived and taught” and though this subject matter were “matter enough to move immediately almost any heart and conscience . . . it does not justify Enright becoming, as he often does, too easily content with *reportage*. It is largely a modern heresy that art is not needed to make such important themes profoundly felt . . . His

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<sup>40</sup> Patinkin. ‘A bleeding poet’.

<sup>41</sup> Hull Literature Festival.

<sup>42</sup> Wilfred Owen. ‘Insensibility’. *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, 122.

[Enright's] journey is that of a reporter taking notes . . . But notes are not enough . . . *we need the product of vision rather than sightseeing*".<sup>43</sup> [My emphasis] This is testimony to the importance of art's role and also alludes to Harrison's commitment to a subjective, passionate response to the scenes that a poet witnesses. It is, effectively, what Harrison has achieved with his newspaper poems in the Gulf and in Bosnia more recently. If we might bridle at the thought of a poet being unashamedly subjective, with all the attendant associations of bias and prejudice, we would do well to remember Martin Bell's repeated calls for more subjective reporting in war zones. He has commented that when he started as a war correspondent for the BBC he "worked in the shadow [ . . . ] of a long and honourable BBC tradition of distance and detachment". Though at that time he felt such working methods to be necessary he "would now call it bystander's journalism. It concerned itself more with the circumstances of wars — military formations, tactics, strategies — than with the people who provoke them, the people who fight them and the people who suffer from them".<sup>44</sup>

We might also bear in mind the comments regarding the importance of art made in an impassioned article written by Richard Eyre (the director of the film of 'v.') in *The Independent* where, in an illuminating explication he argued that "balance was the enemy" of art. He also suggests that art provides a voice for those otherwise denied one:

Art can't be justified, except by what it is - either you get it or you don't. But without it, as a society, we would lack a soul and we would lack a voice. Throughout the Gulf war, we had a diet of unremitting news broadcasts; I searched in vain for a voice which questioned the wisdom and conduct of the war; its morality and its philosophy remained unexamined, drowned in the wash of 'expert' voices discussing the efficacy of SCUD missiles, Challenger tanks, F-111s, and desert strategy. Only when I saw a photograph of a dead Iraqi soldier in his armoured car, charred into a grinning skeletal death mask, and heard Tony Harrison read his poem about him, did I find a voice that echoed the outrage, confusion and despair that I felt about the whole event. This is what art does and journalism doesn't; balance is the enemy of art, and it is the essential premise of news broadcasting, and that is precisely why it is so difficult for those who run television companies to allow the artists to flourish - and precisely why it is so important that they do.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Tony Harrison. 'Some Men Are Brothers'. *Stand* Vol. 4. No. 4. 1960-1961. 51. Hereafter referred to as 'Some Men Are Brothers'.

<sup>44</sup> Martin Bell. 'Here is the war - live by satellite'. *The Guardian* Saturday March 8th 1997.

<sup>45</sup> Richard Eyre. *The Independent*. 28th October 1992. Arts. 18.



We need the product of a poet's vision, not reportage, then, in order to make important themes such as war profoundly felt. As we have seen, the efficacy of this vision, the poet's gaze, is examined and interrogated by the film/poems. In *Shadow* Harrison's awareness of the poet audience dynamic (and his eagerness to demystify the process) is evident in the question that Shadow San asks of the narrator. He says

Listen, can't you hear the choir  
of those who perished in the fire? (*Shadow*, 7)

When the narrator replies that he cannot, Shadow San becomes exasperated. He turns again to the narrator and says

'Dead men's mouths make only M,  
the M in *Dome*, the M in *Bomb*,  
tuned to the hum that's coming from  
the A-Bomb Dome that I hear hum  
all round this baseball stadium,  
still after all these fifty years  
reverberating in my ears.  
Can you *not* hear it? Or the choir? (*Shadow*, 7)

The narrator replies that he can only hear "a baseball hitting wire". Exasperated, Shadow San now addresses his question directly to the viewer:

And you, in front of your TVs  
which are no doubt, all Japanese,  
all you sitting there at home  
can you hear the humming Dome,  
the M, the M? . . . (*Shadow*, 7)

Harrison is asking if the film is working, if he's done his job well enough as a storyteller to make the viewer aware of the victims' presence in the contemporary world - or have they been forgotten? Only the viewer can answer this. A different kind of question is posed by the ending of *Gaze*. Here the question of poetry's efficacy is implicitly raised. The speaker suggests that the statue of Heine be allowed to preside over a projected meeting of "ECU statesmen in Corfu" in the hope that it will "keep new Europe open-eyed" (*Gaze*, 75). This is a mightily optimistic aspiration for poetry's powers, especially given the prophetic nature of the film's end and its prophetic reference to the horrors yet to unfold in the former Yugoslavia:

And judging by the news today  
 the Gorgon's still not far away  
 and has a clear commanding view  
 of Sarajevo from Corfu. (*Gaze*, 75)

This is similar to the ending of *The Shadow of Hiroshima*, when the speaker reveals the truth behind the symbolism of the commemorative 'peace-doves' released every year to mark the anniversary of the A-bomb blast. They are not doves at all but pigeons. Harrison reveals that the symbolism is . . . well, exactly that. It is just a gesture, a theatrical device, that makes us feel better about things. The implication is that a *real* action is necessary, rather than symbolism. Indeed the emptiness, the cosmetic element inherent in the symbolism is further suggested when we learn that a considerable number of these 'peace-doves' go missing every year, falling prey to the real (not symbolic) hawks that patrol the Hiroshima sky. If they survive they might turn scavenger and join the other strays, during which process "the symbol of man's peace-seeking soul/is a matter for pest control" (*Shadow*, 17). During this section Harrison manages to reveal the true nature of symbolism (a process of demystification that reminds us of how his poetics enact the same process regarding 'poetry'), and allude to the horrors of the A-bomb blast and other reminders of WW2. In a line that parodies the countdown to detonation (and the countdown to his own, poetic, bombshell of the film's ending) he tells us that the peace-doves join the strays from previous: "Peace Dove Days / from '94, 3, 2, 1." (*Shadow*, 17). The film ends by telling us of how the:

Pigeon/Peace-doves brawl and fight.

*Is the world at peace tonight?*

Or are we all like Shadow San  
 facing inferno with a fan? (*Shadow*, 17)

This ending represents Harrison's reminder that the horrors spoken of are still present in our time. Indeed this is the point of the revelations about the true nature of the symbolic 'doves'. In this respect the nature of the pun in the film's title becomes more apparent — the 'shadow of Hiroshima' is both Shadow San the shade and the way that the implications of the A-bomb hang over the rest of the century. Hence the viewer is asked to decide whether the world is at peace tonight. It is characteristic of Harrison to end the work with a question such as he does here. The viewer has a choice of course but not the one that you might think. The choice is

not that of saying the world is, or is not, at peace, because it patently is not. The choice that really confronts the viewer is whether or not to acknowledge this fact. It is a choice between empathy or evasion. This is one strategy that Harrison exercises as a public poet, that of putting pressure on the viewer/reader to make a decision. It shows once more his awareness of the poet/audience dynamic, as we note the specificity of “tonight”, for example. It also reminds me of the tendency to undermine reconciliation that is so evident in Harrison’s sonnet sequence. By this I mean the ‘punchline effect’ where the speaker pulls the rug away from us in the last line or two. The endings of *Gaze* and *Shadow* echo this strategy. Moreover, in the films the endings seem to be an honest attempt to reflect what Harrison has termed the simultaneity of experiences. For Harrison “the further we advance in this century [it] becomes one of the key problems. As we sit down to relish our food and our sexual experience someone is being burnt, and we know it. Someone is being tortured, and we know it. What does our joy mean in this kind of context?”<sup>46</sup> The connection between statements like this and Harrison’s comments on tragedy are clear. It seems that any attempts at celebrating our life must be performed with an awareness of contemporary horrors, not in a total avoidance of them but, rather, with some kind of awareness of the relationship between our joy and the pain of others. What the end result of this will be isn’t clear from Harrison’s work. This aspect is somewhat muddled or, perhaps, it’s more accurate to say that Harrison is avoiding being prescriptive. He is careful not to position himself as some kind of poetic agony-aunt. The viewer/reader must bring a response of their own, as he suggests in ‘v.’ with that poem’s pun on the word “solution” (Sp, p249), meaning both a chemical cleaner to remove the stains and also an answer to a problem. This might remind us that Harrison’s ‘shared intimacy’ is not necessarily consoling, then. It is also disturbing and thought-provoking.

Whereas he does not claim to have all the answers, he does claim the right to question and to get angry. This is the nub of the contemporary response for Harrison and offers us some kind of guide for understanding how we can deal with the problems that contemporary verse offers us. To this end it is clear that he has continued the development of his politicised poetics and seamlessly incorporated much of his television writing skills in his most recent newspaper work. This is fundamental to his ability to respond immediately to events that we are also witness to. This is one of Harrison’s great strengths as a poet aiming to link the public and the private, his ability to respond while the events are not just fresh in our minds

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<sup>46</sup> Harrison. *Lateshow*.

but often still on the front pages of the newspapers. This spontaneity invests his work with a credibility, a meaningfulness that it is hard to imagine being credited to more traditional work. In 'Initial Illumination' it was the devastation in the Kuwaiti oil-fields, the fires, the black smoke-filled daytime skies, the oil pollution lapping on shores and the appropriation of language by the military machine that impelled his protest. In 'A Cold Coming' it was Kenneth Jarecke's photograph of the charred Iraqi soldier, first published in *The Observer*. In these poems Harrison speaks for the voiceless once more, literally in the case of the Iraqi soldier, but he also fulfils another function of the modern public poet in that he also speaks for us, as Richard Eyre's article made clear. His angry treatment of public themes articulates our anger and frustration, in the newspaper poems as well as the films.

The product of vision, the poet's gaze, is evident in Harrison's fine Gulf War poems of 1991 'Initial Illumination' and 'A Cold Coming'. These are public poems of the highest order, first appearing in *The Guardian* on 5<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> March 1991, respectively. These very public poems typify Harrison's often urgent response to public issues. They also suggest a certain degree of moral bravery, perhaps, in respect of his swimming against the jingoistic tide in Britain. The urgency of Harrison's response is suggested by the fact that 'Initial Illumination' was faxed to the *Guardian* only a very short time after it was written on a train while Harrison was travelling to St. Andrews to give a reading, as the poem describes. Harrison has said that he derived a particular sort of pleasure from this, a "pleasure at working like a journalist."<sup>47</sup> This spontaneity is astonishing and has happened on other occasions. In Bosnia, for example, soon after Harrison arrived he was driven round some of the trouble spots in an armoured vehicle. They came under enemy fire, a frightening experience despite the armour-plating. Later, after Harrison and the journalists he was with were safely delivered to their accommodation, Harrison's response was "Bugger it, I've got to write a poem."<sup>48</sup> Within about an hour this poem, *The Cycles of Donji Vakuf* (1995) was beamed up the satellite link, heading for *The Guardian*.

Harrison has said that one of the most satisfying things about these newspaper poems is that they are published on the front pages or, at least, on 'normal' pages — not secreted away in a kind of Arts ghetto. They are published as news. This is apparent when we

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<sup>47</sup> Ilkley Literature Festival.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

consider the text of 'Initial Illumination' as it appeared in the paper. Under the banner headline

**INITIAL ILLUMINATION      A poem by Tony Harrison**

the poem appeared, separated into two columns of twenty four and twenty lines. It is not separated into stanzas - it looks just like the text in the rest of the paper. As a consequence the poem looks like the news it in fact is. Harrison's elevation of poetry to the front pages makes him a kind of war correspondent. It is an astonishing feat. In a political sense Harrison's newspaper work also allows us to see him as a kind of modern pamphleteer firing off salvos of satirical and politicised public poetry. This is the case in such satirical works as 'A Celebratory Ode on The Abdication of King Charles 111' and 'Deathwatch Danceathon'.<sup>49</sup> In these poems Harrison advocates Republicanism in the former and scurrilously comments on the amatory proclivities of our Royal family in the latter. Indeed after the Channel 4 screening of Harrison's film/poem *A Maybe Day In Kazakhstan* (1994) the text was made available as a pamphlet. Bearing both the text and images from the film the pamphlet was very effective. It rendered poetry as a 'normal' commodity just like a football programme, or a timetable.

Work of this kind appearing in newspapers suggests interesting connections with older forms such as 'broadsides'. 'Broadside' is actually the name given to the paper on which a street-ballad was printed, it does not refer to the ballad/poem itself: "The 'Broadsheet' or 'Broadside' was a single sheet or half sheet of paper with matter printed on one side of it."<sup>50</sup> This aside I think that there is a clear sense in which Harrison's urgent political import, laden with its satirical bite in the Gulf War poems, suggests that they might be considered in relation to the street ballad. Certainly he is aware of them, as his stinging criticism of Alan Bold's editorship of *The Penguin Book of Socialist Verse* (1970) suggested.<sup>51</sup>

Historically the broadside ballad has been a powerful propaganda weapon. In the introduction to an anthology of British ballad poetry, *The Common Muse* (1957), the editors, Vivian de Sola Pinto and Allan Edwin Rodway, argue that among others Blake, Byron,

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<sup>49</sup> Tony Harrison. 'A Celebratory Ode on The Abdication of King Charles 111'. Uncollected poem. Published in *The Guardian* 11 January 1995. Tony Harrison. 'Deathwatch Danceathon'. Uncollected poem. Published in *The Guardian* 12 October 1994.

<sup>50</sup> Vivian de Sola Pinto and Allan Edwin Rodway, eds. *The Common Muse*. Penguin, 1965. pp. 31-32. Hereafter referred to as *The Common Muse*.

<sup>51</sup> Harrison. 'All Out'. 91. See my discussion of this in Chapter 3, above.

Wordsworth and, in particular, Shelley utilised and borrowed from this form to great effect. Indeed: “When Shelley wanted to write in a popular manner, as in *The Masque of Anarchy* or *Song to the Men of England*, he used the street-ballad form and idiom, and acquired a directness and power which is rare enough in his other writings.”<sup>52</sup> Yet until more recently this is a form that has often been denigrated, something that might remind us of the criticisms sometimes levelled at Harrison’s very oral, public poetry. Sola Pinto and Rodway make the point that despite the fact that a number of great poets “knew, used and imitated street songs and ballads, in modern times it is mainly the political and social historians and antiquaries who have so far paid serious attention to them. Literary critics and historians mention them, if at all, only to dismiss them as ‘doggerel’ or ‘journalism in verse’ ”<sup>53</sup> Critics have tended to recognise only the traditional ballads of the Middle Ages and literary imitations by modern poets, such as Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner*, for example. The street-ballad has not been worthy, historically, of the literary critics’ attention.<sup>54</sup> The reason seems grounded in elitism and prejudice. Since the ballad form was, according to Pinto and Rodway: “a living form to be used when poetic diction, the Miltonic manner or the heroic couplet seemed inappropriate”<sup>55</sup> it was denigrated by the literary establishment because it “was vulgarly unromantic, it had little of that wistful idealism which the Victorians called ‘poetry’, and it was a product of ‘the lower classes’. Moreover it was contemporary.”<sup>56</sup> There are important correspondences here with what Harrison is trying to achieve in general terms with his verse and, in particular, with his newspaper work. This becomes more creditable when we consider some of the characteristics of street-ballads, as identified by Sola Pinto and Rodway. For example they suggest that “If there is one typical quality of street ballads it is that they tend to be ‘lowfaluting’: the opposite of whatever can be called ‘highfaluting’.”<sup>57</sup> Moreover a typical characteristic is a “touch of realism that keeps the street ballad down to earth.”<sup>58</sup> Not many

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<sup>52</sup> Pinto and Rodway, eds. *The Common Muse*, pp. 45-46.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>54</sup> An example of this neglect is the political broadside written by William Hone, ‘The Political House that Jack Built’ from 1819, the year of Peterloo and Shelley’s ‘Mask of Anarchy’. Hone’s broadside went through more than 50 editions at the time. It is now printed in the new edition of the *Oxford Book of Romantic Verse* but was ignored previously, and is missing from the 1994 edition of Duncan Wu’s standard course book *Romanticism: an Anthology*.

<sup>55</sup> Pinto and Rodway, eds. *The Common Muse*, 14.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

would disagree that this seems in keeping with what we understand of Harrison's poetics. Moreover more correspondences become apparent when we read that the street-ballad is:

intended for simple people and [is] therefore written in a simple and direct diction [ . . . ] The street ballad is certainly less independent of time and place than the traditional ballad; it is attracted to a more social (or anti-social) mode, and its meaning is more on the surface. It is not thereby *necessarily* superficial [ . . . ] simply, it is less akin to myth and primitive ritual and it rarely taps the deeper springs of the psyche. [ . . . ] The street ballad is usually more leisurely and circumstantial in the narrative [ . . . ] It is rooted in common speech".<sup>59</sup>

The editor's assertion that the street-ballad is "intended for simple people" is somewhat patronising. It serves as an example of what has been termed the 'Hoggart effect':

In the space between us and them, the authorial function decodes for a readership in whom is invested the powers of cultural validation. 'Us' with the help of the narrator quickly learn to appreciate 'them', and 'they' are all the more improved by this act of recognition [ . . . ] How does one write about or teach a previously overlooked area without compromising either the material or the reader/learner? While *proud* of one's own identity group, one can still subscribe to dominant values which disadvantage it by choosing implicitly to recognise another group as the present arbiters of (more or better) value.<sup>60</sup>

Despite the problem of 'the Hoggart effect', the editor's assertion that the street-ballad is "intended for simple people and [is] therefore written in a simple and direct diction" is related to a point I made earlier, namely that Harrison's verse is written with at least two audiences in mind. One is the literate readership who are used to participating in the literary culture, another is that new, unexplored audience typically neglected by poetry. These are those who, as I said above, do not ordinarily read poetry. Harrison's verse is now as much directed at them, as the former audience. These are the 'simple people' of Pinto's and Rodway's analysis, though not 'simple' in mine. More accurately they are non-participant in the literary culture. This parallels my point about Harrison's TV films. They too can be considered as oral tales for people who don't 'have' literature (who don't read poetry).

Other connections are more obvious. That the street ballad is more dependent on time and place than the traditional ballad accords with Harrison's contemporaneity and specificity

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., pp. 20-21.

<sup>60</sup> Sabina Sharkey. 'A view of the present state of Irish Studies'. *Studying British Cultures*. Ed. Susan Bassnett. London: Routledge, 1997, 119.

as does the considerable level of accessibility that he incorporates into his work. As with the street-ballad 'its meaning is more on the surface'. Even Pinto and Rodway's observation that the street ballad is usually more leisurely and circumstantial in the narrative could be said to relate to Harrison and the orality of his work, as I argued above in connection with the criticisms of *Blasphemers' Banquet*.

The contemporaneity of Harrison's Gulf War poems is evident in his use of contemporary cultural references such as that in 'A Cold Coming' to the "SUN" newspaper (*Coming*, 13). In 'Initial Illumination' there are references to the then President of the United States: "George Bush" and the "Pentagon" and, in addition, references to the very same images that we witnessed daily on news programmes. The immediacy of such communally available cultural references helps to generate the urgency in poems such as these, as well as the somewhat obvious fact that Harrison is writing about conflicts that were of contemporary concern. Harrison has dismissed any suggestion that contemporary references might risk obsolescence, insisting that "there is room for 'occasional verse' as political statement with a limited shelf-life".<sup>61</sup> Whether specific contemporary references will serve to fix a poem in a specific historical location, or that they might even constitute a prerequisite for public poetry, I cannot really say. But I think that Harrison's poems, like the best verse from World War One, will outlast the events that occasion them, precisely because of the art that Harrison brings to bear upon his subjects, as a consideration of his Gulf War poems demonstrates. That art is worthy of some detailed examination as the final stage of this discussion of Harrison's more recent productions.

'Initial Illumination' begins with the speaker on a train passing the island of Lindisfarne on England's north-eastern coast. It is "G-Day" in the Gulf: day one of the Groundwar. The speaker gazes on an idyllic scene of cormorants showering "fishscale confetti on the shining sea" (*Coming*, 4). The accessibility of the verse is obvious in that except for the reference to "confetti" the first thirteen lines of the poem are very literal there being an absence of figurative language. Yet, as Pinto and Rodway noted in relation to ballads, even though "its meaning is more on the surface. It is not thereby *necessarily* superficial"<sup>62</sup> as the simple though beautiful image of the cormorants suggests. Even in this seemingly concrete presentation we see that some of the poem's main concerns are hinted at.

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<sup>61</sup> From a private conversation between Tony Harrison and Anita Weston, printed in Anita Weston. 'Laikin, with glossolalia: Tony Harrison'. *English Studies in Transition*. London: New York: Routledge. 1993, 284.

<sup>62</sup> Pinto and Rodway, eds. *The Common Muse*, 20.



For example, in the relationship between the cormorants and their catches we have a sense of victor and vanquished. Perhaps the “fishscale confetti” might even suggest bombing of some kind. Certainly this opening section is structurally integral to the whole because the calm, sunshine filled scene is later to be horribly contrasted with the “slack-necked cormorants” pictured dead on the news in a “black laquered sea” (*Coming*, 5). It is significant that the peaceful image of cormorants off Lindisfarne is undercut in this way. No wonder, then, that even though the speaker is on his way to record a reading he is “doubtful, in these dark days, what poems can do” (*Coming*, 4). This honest slice of naturalism, this expression of doubt regarding the efficacy of poetry by the speaker is a bold stroke on Harrison’s part. It seems utterly spontaneous, purely without artifice - its confessional candour fractures the iambic rhythm to suggest real speech once more, and it gives a genuine sense of a person speaking to us. The effect of this is also to include us in a conspiracy of hope, in a sense. We feel that if, as Harrison has said, every poem is indeed a “momentary defeat of pessimism”<sup>63</sup>, or perhaps what he has termed an “alternative activity to violence and destruction”<sup>64</sup>, then our act of reading a poem is also a momentary defeat of negative forces. When we read it it is as if we realise we are not alone - we feel part of something greater than ourselves. With this thought the speaker’s thoughts drift off on a journey of reflection whose deviation from the straight and narrow satisfyingly suggests the idea the idea of being on a coastal train journey. These twists and turns are typical Harrison. At their best his poems’ trains of thought seem natural and unforced, often produced as much by an association of ideas, or word association, rather than the kind of precise, meticulous, intellectual logic that we tend to find in verse such as Donne’s *Songs and Sonnets*, for example. This is evident in Harrison’s poem as now the rumination on the seabirds <sup>leads</sup> the speaker to remember the cormorants that the “Saxon scribe/illuminator” Eadfrith incorporated into the initial ‘I’ of an illuminated board, around 600 AD. This refers to the *Lindisfarne Gospels*.<sup>65</sup> Despite the doubts of the speaker, the poem strives for a note of optimism and tells us that regardless of the presence of philistines and thugs, the kind of

<sup>63</sup> See Haffenden. ‘Interview’. *Bloodaxe*, 227. Here Haffenden reminds Harrison that he had said this elsewhere and suggests to Harrison that it implies that he (Harrison) share’s “Robert Frost’s sense of a poem being ‘a momentary stay against confusion’, except for the fact that ‘pessimism’ is the operative word”.

<sup>64</sup> Harrison to audience. Ilkley Literature Festival.

<sup>65</sup> The Gospels contain a gloss claiming “Eadfrith, Bishop of the church of Lindisfarne” wrote the book, while Ethilwald bound it, Billfrith ornamented it and Aldred, “an unworthy and most miserable priest”, overglossed it in English, according to Alan G Thomas. *Fine Books*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1967, 18.

raiders gung-ho for booty and berserk,  
 the sort of soldiery that's still recruited  
 to do today's dictator's dirty work (*Coming*, 4)

art can still survive. The proof of this for the speaker is that Eadfrith's work survives. Yet the survival of art is not so assured as this might suggest for though the form of the art work (the illuminated pages) survives the content has been reappropriated:

The word of God so beautifully scripted  
 by Eadfrith and Billfrith the anchorite  
 Pentagon conners have once again conscripted  
 to gloss the cross on the precision sight. (*Coming*, 4)

The criticism that Harrison is making against the Americans is clear. Not for the first time have the 'conners' in the Pentagon appropriated religion in order to give a spurious legitimacy to a militarist act of aggrandisement. This is also an act of appropriation in terms of language. Hence 'conners' does not merely relate to the hijacking of religion, it also applies to the hijacking of language. Indeed, one function of Harrison's war poetry is to attack this. He has said of his war poetry that he sees it as "restoring language's real function of truthfulness and power in opposition to language's corruption in time of war".<sup>66</sup> In this respect we might bear in mind phrases like "collateral damage", "friendly fire" and "ethnic cleansing". The first phrase is a military euphemism for the destruction of civilian property *and* civilian lives. The second one refers to a colossal blunder by someone which culminates in people being slaughtered by their own side and the final example refers to pogroms and programmes of eviction and extermination. This is not necessarily a modern <sup>phenomenon</sup> of course. We only have to think back to the poetry of World War One and its references to 'the sweet red wine of youth' instead of blood, and the strangely beautiful, yet redundantly empty, rhetoric of Brooke's description of England's <sup>predominantly</sup> working-class soldiery as "swimmers into cleanness leaping".<sup>67</sup> In 'Initial Illumination' the speaker's feelings concerning distortions such as these are made abundantly clear by his use of alliteration and the pun on 'conscription' - religion has been enlisted in order to legitimise the warmongering. This is seen quite clearly

<sup>66</sup> Harrison to audience, Ilkley Literature Festival. In this context see Jo Shapcott's poem 'Phrase Book' which has as its subject the corruption of language in wartime. In *Phrasebook*. Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 26-27. Also see *Poetry Review* Vol. 82 No. 2 Summer 1992 for a good selection of Gulf War poetry.

<sup>67</sup> Rupert Brooke. 'Peace'. *1914 and other poems*. London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1927, 11.

in the phrase “gloss the cross”. The word “gloss” means many things, as Harrison is well aware. On one level it refers to a lustre or sheen. This enforces the suggestion that the use of religion is merely a superficial attraction. In another, related, sense, it suggests a cover up of the real nature of the situation in that the ‘conners’ can be said to have ‘glossed over,’ or covered up, the truth with the superficial attraction of religion. Alternatively “gloss” also refers to a short or expanded explanation of a word or expression in the margin of a text. Perhaps Harrison as poet is going to “gloss” the events in the Gulf in order to let us know the reality of the situation there.

Yet even this doesn’t exhaust the possibilities of such a phrase because we might also note that in Harrison’s metonymic use of “cross” to stand for Religion, taken in conjunction with his reference to the precision sightlines on a modern weapon, he is able to represent not just the appropriation of religion by the Pentagon but also suggest how that ideological sleight of hand will work in practice. By this I mean that when the cross is glossed onto the precision sight then, in a sense, whoever is firing that weapon will be looking through the cross at the target. They will not be seeing the enemy for what he is - someone human, just like them - they will ‘see’ religion. Everything will be refracted through a religious filter. Now they will be fighting ‘for the Lord’. In this way the moral imperative is removed from the individual. He is free to kill, to fight for peace. We might be reminded by this of Keith Douglas’ poem from the Second World War ‘How To Kill’. Here there is no specific mention of a religious component but technological progress has enabled people to kill others at a considerable remove, both spatial and metaphoric. In this poem technology has de-humanised killing in war to the extent that the speaker is “amused” at his victim’s transformation from actualised human being into an empty sack, a husk, so to speak. The speaker, a sniper, has selected a target in his sights, taken aim and is in the process of shooting him dead:

The wires touch his face: I cry  
NOW. Death, like a familiar, hears

and look, has made a man of dust  
of a man of flesh. This sorcery  
I do. Being damned, I am amused  
to see the centre of love diffused  
and the waves of love travel into vacancy.  
How easy it is to make a ghost.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Keith Douglas. ‘How to kill’. *Poems of the Second World War*. Ed. Victor Selwyn. London: Melbourne: Dent/Everyman, 1985, 70.

Harrison's poetry is an example of a more public poetry than Douglas', a poetry that manages to juggle both a demand for accessibility and also the demands of a more sophisticated reader who seeks a greater intellectual gratification. In 'Initial Illumination' Harrison achieves this because of the intensity of his images and the straightforward, yet deeply provoking, contrasts between an age of old traditions and craftsmanship and contemporary high tech inversion of the natural order:

Candlepower, steady hand, gold leaf, a brush  
 were all that Eadfrith had to beautify  
 the word of God much bandied about by George Bush  
 whose word illuminated midnight sky  
 and confused the Baghdad cock who was betrayed  
 by bombs into believing day was dawning  
 and crowed his heart out at the deadly raid  
 and didn't live to greet the proper morning. (*Coming*, 4)

The satire is clear. The honest endeavour of Eadfrith is in marked contrast to Bush's treatment of the "word of God". This is suggested by words like "bandied" with its close correspondence to 'bandit'. This is also enforced by the text's allusion to Genesis and God's edict 'Let there be light'. This light heralded the dawn of life, something that is given much play in the poem, as the title suggests. In addition it refers to many things such as the fact that the poet is keen to illuminate the reader as to the implications of victory, hence the meaning of the initial 'V' will be revealed. It also refers to the initial letters decorated by scribes like Eadfrith and, besides referring to the very first time that light appeared on the Earth, refers to the dawning of true consciousness, the enlightenment that must occur if we are to experience peace. In contrast to this George Bush is a bringer of darkness. It is this darkness that makes people become "blackened" in Baghdad. This is a disturbing use of euphemism on Harrison's part, referring to the dead bodies. Whereas euphemism usually softens here the effect is to intensify the horror - "blackened" is used here as a noun or adverb, not merely an adjective. Because George Bush is a bringer of darkness in a metaphorical sense he becomes a kind of anti-Christ in the poem. In a grotesque parody of Genesis we see that it is Bush's "word", his executive order, that "illuminated midnight sky" in Baghdad. This inversion is enforced by another biblical reference, this time to betrayal. In an image calculated to remind us of Peter's betrayal of Christ we are told of the cock crowing at the light-filled night-time sky, tricked

into thinking it was dawn.<sup>69</sup> This sense of the natural order being usurped is also enacted linguistically. We might note, for example, how the use of “crowed” in the second to last line of the quote suggests ‘cried’, yet no-one is crying, and by the use of “morning” the idea of ‘mourning’ is suggested, though not articulated. The power of this section is related to *our* growing illumination, thanks to the poet’s glossing of the events, that we too have been betrayed by the rhetoric of the Western alliance ranged against Saddam Hussein. Harrison attempts to counter this by stressing explicitly the nature, and essential emptiness, of victory. The illumination of mankind, no less, is dependent on this realisation:

let them remember, all those who celebrate,  
that their good news is someone else’s bad  
or the light will never dawn on poor Mankind. (*Coming*, 5)

Harrison has suggested that the restrictions of a tight rhythmical form enable him to tackle distressing themes which might otherwise become overwhelming. In ‘Initial Illumination’ it serves to make the poem more powerful. This is because of the tension generated by the form’s containment of the anger. Thus the sense of restrained emotion seems somehow more dignified and authoritative than the passionate outburst that might result if looser forms were to be utilised. Indeed what makes ‘Initial Illumination’ the powerful critique that it is, paradoxically, is that after the studied formality of the first thirty seven lines Harrison, crucially, allows his personal feelings a greater freedom. This freedom arises directly as a result of using regular forms, as Harrison’s quoting of Stravinsky intimates in a letter to Peter Hall:

As Stravinsky wrote in *The Poetics of Music*: ‘My freedom thus consists in my moving about within the narrow frame that I have assigned myself for each one of my undertakings. I shall go even further: my freedom will be so much the greater and more meaningful the more narrowly I limit my field of action and the more I surround myself with obstacles. *Whatever diminishes constraint, diminishes strength*. The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one’s self of the chains that shackle the spirit.’<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Harrison to audience, Ilkley Literature Festival. He said that he had heard a cock crowing in the background while he listened to a news report from Baghdad at 3 am during the Gulf War.

<sup>70</sup> Tony Harrison. “20 September 1981, *Sunday morning*”. ‘*The Oresteia in the Making: Letters to Peter Hall*’. Bloodaxe, 280.

It is Harrison's 'spirit' that imbues the poem's concluding seven line sentence with his vitriolic indictment of those who fail to realise what a victory actually means to the vanquished. He first made this connection for himself when he was eight years old, during the celebrations for VJ day in 1945. He remembers a huge celebratory bonfire being burnt in the street, a scene recounted in the pair of sonnets *The Morning After* (*Selected Poems*, 157-8). The next day the young Harrison helped to clear away the ashes and "something made me connect this fire of celebration with the fire of destruction. I learnt then that the way you celebrate is also the way you create devastation and annihilation. It was an important lesson. The spectre at the feast arrived with the celebration of victory, and made me realise how hollow the idea of victory is".<sup>71</sup> The poem's concluding section, then, is an angry condemnation of those who do not realise the hollowness of victory. It is an anger that threatens the very forms which allow it to be expressed, even the sense of closure sometimes suggested by his rhyme schemes is all but exploded by the power of his rhetoric. Indeed it is easy to forget the rhyme in this section as Harrison's *enjambment* works against it, keeping his verse alive in a way that enables it to flow, aided by his use of internal rhymes and alliteration :

Is it open-armed at all that victory V,  
 that insular initial intertwined  
 with slack-necked cormorants from black lacquered sea,  
 with trumpets bulled and bellicose and blowing  
 for what men claim as victories in their wars,  
 with the fire-hailing cock and all those crowing  
 who don't yet smell the dunghill at their claws? (*Coming*, 5)

This is a tremendous closing section. Here Harrison picks up themes we might remember from *v.* and that poem's consideration of the idea of victims and vanquished. This is a further meaning of the title: Harrison is illuminating the reader about precisely what that "insular initial" represents. The speaker asks if it is "open-armed at all". Curiously I've always felt this sounded like someone surrendering, and this is maybe the point because a victory is dependent on a vanquished foe. Here 'V' is imagined as an illustrated letter but not in the way that Eadfrith might have illuminated it. Now it appears like one of Blake's darker, more disturbing etchings. In his poem Harrison imagines "that insular initial" being intertwined with the corpses of cormorants who have choked to death, who have drowned as a result of ingesting the oil spills. When I saw them on TV their corpses were gently lapping against a

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<sup>71</sup> Winder. 'Interview', 3.

rocky shoreline. The oil, as it ebbed against the rocks, made a clacking kind of sound. This is emulated by Harrison's use of onomatopoeia: "the slacked-necked cormorants from black lacquered sea" [My emphasis]. The initial 'V' would also have trumpets to decorate it. These might remind one of Keats' "silver snarling trumpets"<sup>72</sup>. In Harrison's hands they sound a note of empty triumphalism, a perfect accompaniment to the final additions of the decoration: the "fire-hailing cock and those gloating braggarts "who don't yet smell the dunghill at their claws". This indictment is as savage as it is apt — they might be stood at the top of the heap, but it is a heap of shit!

Harrison's skill as a pamphleteer-poet is also evident in 'A Cold Coming', a poem that exudes much of the street-ballad inheritance. Perhaps I should reiterate at this point that this is not necessarily a conscious impulse on Harrison's part, nor that his newspaper verses are definitive examples of the ballad form. They are not intended to be sung for a start though, interestingly, Harrison has often talked in terms of poets "singing from the flames" (*Selected Poems*, 168). But they are indisputably connected in that they are like modern, updated versions of the verse in Pinto and Rodway's anthology though of much higher quality. The connection is most obvious in 'A Cold Coming' with Harrison's use of a jokey kind of ballad metre and the poem's dark subject matter. Even this harks back to the peculiar mixture of verse and what Pinto and Rodway term "unhealthy sensationalism"<sup>73</sup> in the nineteenth century street-ballad. From them we learn that the epigraph to *Curiosities of Street Literature* (1871) was as follows: " 'There's nothing beats a stunning good murder, after all' (EXPERIENCE OF A RUNNING PATERER)"<sup>74</sup> The running paterer was the vendor of the street-ballad, often the author, who would run through the streets shouting out the contents of his broadsides. As Pinto and Rodway point out the quality of these ballads could not have been particularly high "since they had to be written with great speed (allegedly by the 'wretched victim' on the night before his execution) so that the Running Paterer could strike while the iron was hot."<sup>75</sup> Once again I am not trying to suggest that there is an exact correspondence between the street-ballad form historically and Harrison's work but the connection with the sense of urgency is apparent. Whereas 'Initial Illumination' was an incredibly quick response 'A Cold Coming' was somewhat slower yet, approximately, still only a creditable two weeks.

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<sup>72</sup> John Keats. 'The Eve of St. Agnes'. *John Keats: Poems*. Ed. Gerald Bullett. London: Melbourne: Toronto: Dent/Everyman, 1974, 179.

<sup>73</sup> Pinto and Rodway, eds. *The Common Muse*, 16.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

While this may not have the immediacy of an ‘eve of gallows confession’ at least the image of the burnt Iraqi will still have been familiar to readers given that it was printed with <sup>the</sup>poem and, anyway, the war continued unabated.

One of the first things we notice, then, about the poem is Harrison’s choice of an octosyllabic metrical form, each stanza comprising of one rhyming couplet: “The very jauntiness of the rhythm, the odd feeling of being caught in the middle of a merry ballad that has taken a wrong turn somewhere, sets up a powerful clash with the morbid intensity of the subject.”<sup>76</sup> This is apparent in the poem’s opening stanza where the speaker tells us that:

I saw the charred Iraqi lean  
towards me from bomb-blasted screen’ (*Coming*, 9).

This is, perhaps, the most memorable image of the Gulf War. Helen Dunmore’s poem ‘On The Obliteration Of 100,000 Iraqi Soldiers’ considers the same image and tells us:

That killed head straining through the windscreen  
with its frill of bubbles in the eye-sockets  
is not trying to tell you something -

it is telling you something.<sup>77</sup>

It is also on the cover of the Bloodaxe edition of Harrison’s Gulf War poems. It depicts a burnt corpse in a truck, ostensibly looking out through the windscreen. The speaker notices that the windscreen wiper is

like a pen  
ready to write down thoughts for men,  
his windscreen wiper like a quill  
he’s reaching for to make his will. (*Coming*, 9).

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<sup>76</sup> Robert Winder. ‘Mirrors against the petrifying stare of war’. *The Independent* 4th December 1992, 21. It is worth pointing out that Andrew Marvell also used octosyllabics in a jokey way, often with a darkly wry element to it, not unlike Harrison, most notably in ‘To His Coy Mistress’ etc.

<sup>77</sup> Helen Dunmore. ‘Poem on the Obliteration of 100,000 Iraqi Soldiers’. *Recovering a Body*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1994, 24. Hereafter referred to as *Recovering A Body*. This poem was first printed in an Avon Broadsheet ‘Writers on the Storm’, in the “heat of the battle”, according to Peter Forbes in *Poetry Review* Vol. 82 No. 2 Summer 1992, 5. Forbes’s comment suggests that Dunmore’s poem was contemporaneous with Harrison’s.



Already we can detect a tension between the ‘rumpty-tumpty’ of the metre and the disturbing content, something emphasised by Harrison in the next stanza where he links the horrific image with a childhood plaything:

I saw the charred Iraqi lean  
like someone made of Plasticine (*Coming*, 9).

Once again we might note Harrison’s characteristic use of simile, rather than metaphor. He is keen to ground his verse in reality, another trait of street-ballads, as Pinto and Rodway pointed out. It is after this opening that the dialogue between the corpse and the poet-persona begins. This is reminiscent of the dialogue between the skald and skin in ‘v.’: the action of both poems takes place in a graveyard, for example. The corpse tells the speaker that he had

‘ . . . read the news of three wise men  
who left their sperm in nitrogen’ (*Coming*, 9).

This, then, is the basis of the poem’s title — the nitrogen is used to freeze the sperm. Hence the matter in the container is “cold coming”. The epigraph of the poem, “A cold coming we had of it”, taken from Eliot’s *Journey of the Magi*, thus sets up a comparison between travellers who came to celebrate a birth and American servicemen who seek to privately cheat death on the one hand, while engaging in public acts of carnage and destruction. The speaker notes that the American’s desire to procreate by proxy is denied to the Iraqi:

On Saddam’s pay we can’t afford  
to go and get our semen stored.

Sad to say that such high tech’s  
uncommon here. We’re stuck with sex. (*Coming*, 11).

This is one of several jokes (if that’s not too strong a word) in the poem, many concerning sperm. Yet this is not gratuitous on Harrison’s part, though it would be wrong to deny the relish with which he rhymes “fate” and “ejaculate” (*Coming*, 49), and “sower” and “spermatozoa” (*Coming*, 52), for example. But allied with the humour is a more serious dimension in that the speaker makes connections between the Americans’ act of hubris and their materialism. Hence their sperm is “banked” (*Coming*, 49) and one of the soldiers has left his wife his “frozen wad” (*Coming*, 49). Moreover sperm is also linked with weaponry and

bullets. Thus sperm is referred to as “my last best shot” which was procured with “sample flasks and magazines” (*Coming*, 50). In one sense “magazines” refers to the pornography which is used as a stimulant during the procurement process but the clever pun on magazines (cartridge case/ammunition) also maintains the connection with weaponry.

The dialogue between poet-persona, the skald, and corpse (charred ‘skin’?) continues in this vein with the Iraqi arguing vehemently that, despite his terrible death, he does not regret having lived. This is in response to the poet’s introspective speculation that:

according to Sophocles i.e.  
‘the best of fates is not to be’ (*Coming*, 12).

This self-indulgent reverie is interrupted by the corpse, in a way that is reminiscent of the skin’s interruption in ‘v.’ The function of the corpse’s interruption serves to bring the ruminating poet back to earth: “ ‘I never thought life futile, fool!’ This is a significant exchange, given that the basis of the poem seems to be as much concerned with exploring what the role of a public poet might be, as much as anything else. One thing that is not within the remit of a public poet is to be less than affirmative, it seems. Now we see the poet-persona as merely a facilitator. The corpse has taken over, in a sense. He tells the speaker:

So press RECORD! I want to reach  
the warring nations with my speech. (*Coming*, 12).

This, then, might be a function of the public poet. He is to be a poet-recorder, a kind of shield that reflects the Gorgon’s gaze in order that we can gaze back at the Gorgon without being turned to stone. After all, when the corpse first began his dialogue with the speaker he suggested to him that:

Isn’t it your sort of poet’s task  
to find words for this frightening mask? (*Coming*, 9).

The poem is insisting that poets must speak out against outrages like this, they must give a voice to people like the Iraqi corpse with a “dumb mask like baked dogturds” (*Coming*, 53). If the poet fails in this then the mask of the Iraqi is reduced to

an icon framed, a looking glass  
for devotees of “kicking ass” (*Coming*, 13).

This renders him a kind of trophy for the militarists, the Stormin Norman's<sup>78</sup> who would see this picture as proof of both their masculinity and military superiority. But Harrison, as poet-recorder, is able to reappropriate this image via an act of speaking for the voiceless, of speaking for 'the other'.<sup>79</sup> There is a correspondence here, then, with Harrison's films in that the device of the Iraqi soldier accords with the use of statues in *Gaze of the Gorgon*: the Iraqi is also in a state of petrification as a result of being blasted by war; he too is a statue, though a macabre one. He was also a human being, something fundamental to Harrison's approach in the poem, yet easily forgotten, perhaps. Harrison's job is to work against the idea of seeing the enemy as less than human precisely as a result of seeing him *as* human, even when burnt to death. To make *us* see, to make *us feel*, is the *raison d'être* of this poet-recorder's creation of a sense of shared intimacy.

Thanks to *The Guardian*, and Harrison's poetry, the function of the mask, as represented by the charred man, is now to be a spectre at the victor's feast, a reminder for the multitude (whether heeded or not is unclear) of the consequences of victory. Hence the corpse becomes:

a mirror that returns the gaze  
of victors on their victory days (*Coming*, 13).

This is the role of the image in the newspaper in that it serves as a balance to the jingoism prevalent at the time. The mask serves as a reminder of the price paid by those who lost. Ultimately this image is so powerful and disturbing that it:

. . . in the end stares out the watcher  
who ducks behind his headline: GOTCHA! (*Coming*, 13).<sup>80</sup>

There are some clever, but difficult, ideas, in this couplet. In the correct hands, (presumably a poet's?) the image of the Iraqi corpse in the paper will outstare the watcher. The watcher is

<sup>78</sup> Colonel Norman Schwarzkopf, American commander of joint forces in the Gulf War. He was depicted in the officially sanctioned news reports as Stormin' Norman, a peculiarly Pythonesque sobriquet I thought, on a par with 'Tim the Enchanter', perhaps.

<sup>79</sup> See Ian Gregson. "How does it feel? Thoughts on Tony Harrison's poem 'A Cold Coming'." *London Review of Books*, Vol. 14 No. 9, 14 May 1992, 25. Here Gregson argued that Harrison should have let the corpse "speak in his own voice, / not like a Yorkshireman or James Joyce".

<sup>80</sup> Compare Dunmore's treatment of the same theme in 'Poem on the Obliteration of 100,000 Iraqi Soldiers': ". . . do not turn away, / for God is counting / all of us who are silent / holding our newspapers up, hiding". *Recovering a Body*, 24.

unable to keep looking at it because the image and poem works on him and forces him to confront the fact that the charred man was once a fellow human being. Perhaps the watcher is unable to face up to the horror of what it represents? Perhaps the image is capable of inducing a guilt at people's complicity in the warmongering fervour? Whatever the reason the 'watcher' will have to turn away and also, as Dunmore's poem suggests, paradoxically, hide behind one's newspaper and evade the truth. The "GOTCHA!" is an inspired touch, referring on one level to the idea that the image and the poem has somehow 'got' the watcher, has done its job, but also by suggesting that he/she is a *Sun* reader, with all the opprobrium that entails. It refers to an infamous headline in the *Sun* during the Falklands War. The *Sun* ran this when the Argentinean battleship *The Belgrano* was sunk by British forces, with considerable loss of life. This, then, is a timely and necessary reminder of the redundancy of victory, in a sense, particularly if we remember the horrific British losses on the ship the *Sir Galahad* during the same conflict. Images like that of the charred Iraqi are needed, suggests the corpse., the role of the image is vital — it needs to be seen: "Don't look away!" he urges, because, as the speaker reminds us:

. . . cabs beflagged with SUN front pages  
don't help peace in future ages. (*Coming*, 14).

The dangers of nationalism, of vacuous, imbecilic flag-waving and the indoctrination of children are all too clear:

Stars and Stripes in sticky paws  
may sow the seeds for future wars.

Each Union Jack the kids now wave  
may lead them later to the grave. (*Coming*, 14).

Besides being a facilitator, the corpse suggests another role to the speaker. He suggests that the poet can lie, suggesting that he should:

Lie that you saw me and I smiled  
to see the soldier hug his child.

Lie and pretend that I excuse  
my bombing by B52s,

pretend I pardon and forgive  
that they still do and I don't live (*Coming*, 14).

This appeal for fabrication culminates with the corpse asking the speaker to:

Pretend I've got the imagination  
to see the world beyond one nation.

That's your job, poet, to pretend  
I want my foe to be my friend. (*Coming*, 15)

The corpse's statements seem to represent more doubts on the part of the poet-persona about the role and efficacy of poetry. The corpse suggests that the job of the poet is to pretend that he has somehow learnt his lesson, that he accepts his fate as rightful retribution for his deeds in war. This would cast the poet in the role of propagandist for the victorious Western alliance, if he were to take the party line, so to speak, and say that the Western Alliance were totally correct in their actions in the Gulf War. But to have agreed to the lie would also have meant that the poem would not exist for if the Iraqi accepted his fate then he would not have accosted the poet in order to have his final say. It is as if Harrison is exploring his own conflict in the poem. He wants to affirm that life is worth living, he wants the reader to empathise with the fate of the Iraqi (if not with the Iraqi himself), but this is problematical as he is forced into the realisation that the dead are not simply some kind of romanticised poetical objects of pity who are suitable objects for poets to write about. They are not "flowers, / For poets' tearful fooling", as Wilfred Owen remarked.<sup>81</sup> Indeed the charred man seems to be equally as complicit in the horrors. We learn, for example, that the fire that killed the Iraqi also "burnt out the shame/of things (he'd) done in Saddam's name". Moreover there is a sense here that nothing else could have purged this shame. Whether this is tantamount to Harrison implying that the Iraqi had to die I don't know. Neither does Harrison, I suppose, because he omits to offer a clear answer to this and other questions that the poem implicitly poses. It is as if Harrison realises the enormous complexity of the issues involved. He is also careful to avoid the trap of providing glib conclusions. He leaves those for the reader.

I think that what is occurring here is that Harrison is once more ironising the failure of the liberal poetic persona, and an easy moralising tone, rather as he did in 'v.'. He is testing the inadequacy of the liberal poetic response, a response that requires him, in a sense, to broaden the range of the poem from essentially an anti-American position to include a criticism of the Iraqi forces as well. It is a typical liberal dilemma - there was a reluctant

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<sup>81</sup> Wilfred Owen. 'Insensibility'. *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, 122.

acceptance that Saddam could not be allowed to murder the Kurdish people, or invade Kuwait, yet the course of action instigated against Iraq was felt by many to be appallingly one-sided. To have attacked the Americans only would, by implication, have been to condone Iraqi aggression.

Whatever the import of this section that the poet persona is cast in the role of facilitator by the corpse is clear in the poem. And that the corpse is (literally) in the driving seat is clearly suggested by the fact that when he has had his say he brusquely dismisses the poet, saying:

I've met you though, and had my say  
which you've got taped. Now go away.' (*Coming*, 15)

The poet, though dismissed, is perhaps strangely fortified by this encounter. With a diction that reminds us once more of *Gaze of the Gorgon* the poet says that he "gazed" (*Coming*, 54) at the charred man. In 'A Cold Coming' this means, perhaps, that the poet is aware of his role. He will use the poet's gaze in order to withstand that of the Gorgon, by using his art to remind people of the reality of a given situation. But with a characteristically Harrisonian ending this possibility of affirmative resolution is undermined. After the poet seems to have armed himself with a gaze that can face up to the horrors he turns to look where the Iraqi was looking. They see what might be a mirage in the desert, the "frozen phial of waste" (*Coming*, 54) and "Rainbows seven shades of black / [that] curved from Kuwait back to Iraq". At the end of this rainbow is no crock of gold — "the frozen crock's / crammed with Mankind on the rocks" (*Coming*, 54). This is the 'cold coming' of the Americans, of course, the "congealed geni who won't thaw / until the World renounces War" (*Coming*, 54). For Harrison it seems to suggest a certain hope. It is "cold spunk" that is

never to be charrer or the charred,

a bottled Bethlehem of this come-  
curdling Cruise/Scud-cursed millenium. (*Coming*, 16).

The idea seems to be that this sperm is untainted. Hence it is "a bottled Bethlehem", expressive of hope and renewal, perhaps even a 'second coming'. But we should beware, as the allusion to Yeats' poem *The Second Coming* suggests. This concludes with this question:

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?<sup>82</sup>

This suggests the angst and sense of foreboding that Yeats felt in 1919. Joe Kelleher has also commented on this. He suggests that in Yeats' poem the poet, "attempting to mediate global crisis with the mere resources of his imagination, finds himself fashioning an Apollonian Gorgon of his own, of *himself* with 'a gaze blank and pitiless as the sun'. Such a terrifying vision is not to be rejected but coped with".<sup>83</sup> Presumably, given his suggestions that it is the public-poet's role to face up to the Gorgon on our behalf, this is the fate that befalls Harrison; he is faced with becoming a kind of Gorgon of his own, as Kelleher suggests. In terms of the poem itself the situation seems to be that he wants to be positive and affirmative: he wants to reach a position where we can feel that his poem has achieved a specific good, but he cannot because, as the poem tells us, he cannot imbue his poem with a false balance as a result of lying about the Iraqi. So at this point the speaker's liberal humanism is redundant - it is no measure for the Iraqi's crimes. Moreover if we look more closely at what the speaker says we see that there seems to be a problem with the development of thought here. For example the sperm is likened to a geni in a bottle. We are told that the renunciation of war will thaw this 'untainted stock' of sperm — presumably this is the only hope for a war-free future. Yet this is the seed of institutionalised killers (the American servicemen) so there is an implication that certain qualities might be inherited. If the sperm of sanctioned killers is to be used then, perhaps, Harrison is suggesting that the cycle of war is genetic. Perhaps a 'coldness' is inbred? The poem backs away from any closer consideration of this point and the poet leaves the scene, clutching his tape-recorder:

I went. I pressed REWIND and PLAY  
and I heard the charred man say: (*Coming*, 16).

The rest of the page is blank. The colon is the last typographical trace of the charred man. Our perception of what is occurring at this point depends, in a sense, of what we think of as the relationship between the poet persona and the Iraqi corpse. The poet-persona has a tape-recorder, an odd thing to carry around unless you see yourself as a journalist who seeks to

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<sup>82</sup> W. B. Yeats. *W. B. Yeats: The Poems*, 235.

<sup>83</sup> Joe Kelleher. *Tony Harrison. Writers and their work*. Plymouth: Northcote House, 1996, 67. Hereafter referred to as *Tony Harrison*.

interview the living. The corpse is patently not living so that could provide one explanation for why the page is blank — there is nothing on the tape, the poet imagined it, it was a fantasy. In this respect the persona of the Iraqi soldier is a metaphor for the poet's imagination. There is nothing existing on tape (always assuming that a text can make sound literally audible, which it cannot) because there was no exchange. Harrison has talked about this ending in an interview. For him it is indicative of his doubts regarding his right to speak on behalf of others. He says: "In 'A Cold Coming' I press a tape recorder. When I press the replay there's nothing on it. I've made it up! What right have I to make it up? I always try to build into what I do, the shadow of my own self-doubt, my own, perhaps, lack of confidence about whether I do have a right to speak for others."<sup>84</sup> Thus, as Kelleher attests, "the blank page reminds us that the dead say nothing [ . . . ] the poem was an impersonation".<sup>85</sup> Hence the poem is really about the response of a poet-persona to the picture of the charred Iraqi and, at the same time, it is a meditation as to just what is a suitable role for a public poet.

On the other hand the poem's formal structure of ninety two rhymed couplets, its ballad-like air might suggest other alternatives. The form seems suited to Harrison's intentions in another respect, namely that it promotes the idea of the dead Iraqi soldier as a kind of Ancient Mariner figure. In this respect Harrison's speaker adopts the poetic voice of the wedding guest. In this context we might perceive the last couplet of the poem as suggesting that the Iraqi's fate is to constantly retell his story via the medium of the poet-recorder. The critic Luke Spencer shares this view. He too suggests that "the poem ends with the possibility of an endless reprise of the soldier's words. The circularity suggested by the last stanza is a rueful acknowledgment of the need to go on repeating the anti-war message until it is heeded - which may mean for ever."<sup>86</sup>

Spencer has criticised both poems for lapses into what he terms "the most banal of platitudes".<sup>87</sup> In respect of 'Initial Illumination' he is referring to the "let them remember/poor mankind" section. This is, he argues, "a piece of overt moralising as heavy-handed as it is unnecessary."<sup>88</sup> In terms of 'A Cold Coming', Spencer argues that at the point when the Iraqi asks the speaker to lie, though this

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<sup>84</sup> Harrison. *Lateshow*.

<sup>85</sup> Kelleher. *Tony Harrison*, 67.

<sup>86</sup> Spencer. *Poetry of TH*, 119.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.



widens the scope of [Harrison's] condemnation in a morally valid and understandable way [it is] at the cost of blunting the poem's rhetorical edge. By so strongly insisting on the soldier's complicity in the war's horrors, and thus avoiding charges of simple anti-Americanism, Harrison turns the end of the poem into an anodyne plea for global peace: 'Mankind' will remain 'on the rocks' (both foundered and frozen) 'until the World renounces War', a statement as limply unchallenging as the 'poor Mankind' section of 'Initial Illumination'.<sup>89</sup>

Spencer's critique of what he terms Harrison's banality points to the problems of evaluating contemporary poetry because surely poetry that is written in response to urgent contemporary pressures is different from other forms, and requires a different critical approach. In short it has to be considered as part of the contemporary context in which it was written. Spencer, however, seems to imply that an urgent poetical response necessitates the inclusion of an in-depth economic analysis that would establish the global capitalist economy as the chief villain of the Gulf war. Which, I might add, is probably near the truth. But that is not the point at issue here, given Harrison's aims.

The question of how valid Spencer's criticism is seems to depend on two things. One is what we think that Harrison is trying to achieve, the other is what we would like Harrison to be achieving. There is a gulf of difference between the two and, in tending too forcefully toward the latter, critics often fail to see the significance of the former. This was the basis of Bruce Woodcock's criticisms of *Blasphemers' Banquet*. In Spencer's case it seems that in his implied criticism of Harrison's political stance he too has missed the point, he has failed to see the bigger picture, so to speak. He clearly does not think about Harrison in terms of oral storytelling, or as a street-balladeer in action, just as some have, erroneously, failed to detect the same characteristics in the films. It seems quite clear that Harrison is not the kind of poet that Spencer would like him to be. For example let us consider the quote from Terry Eagleton's review of *The Gaze of the Gorgon* (the collection, not the film/poem) that forms the basis of Spencer's critique:

There is a clenched, exposed engagement in all this work, incomparably starker and more impassioned than almost anything English poetry has to offer; but it is as though, in Eliot's phrase, we had the experience but missed the meaning . . . What we expect from a Harrison is a radical rather than a liberal

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 119.

perspective, since we aren't likely to get it from ninety percent of his literary colleagues.<sup>90</sup>

For Spencer Harrison's liberalism is

typified by the sort of hand-me-down generalisations about how horrible war is, and how it must stop [ . . . ] When we encounter such facile evasions of the challenge of explanation, we realise what promise the 'clenched, exposed engagement' of Harrison's interventions has held out to us - and how difficult it is to keep fulfilling it [ . . . ] Eagleton is none the less right to point out that the best of that work [ . . . ] has encouraged us to expect (or at least, hope for) something from the radical end of that spectrum, even if we are sometimes disappointed.<sup>91</sup>

I would think that it was quite valid to stress the sheer horribleness of war- to my mind it cannot be repeated sufficiently. Leaving this aside, it seems that Spencer is being a little disingenuous here in that he is citing Eagleton's generalised criticism of Harrison's collection *The Gaze of the Gorgon* in support of his argument that the Gulf War poems are characterised by "facile evasions of the challenge of explanation" and contained sentiments that were "anodyne" and "limply unchallenging".<sup>92</sup> Eagleton's assessment of these poems, however, was that they were "models of Harrisonian brilliance - not least the stunningly powerful 'A Cold Coming' [and] the superb 'Initial Illumination' ".<sup>93</sup> Moreover I think that Spencer misreads Harrison. For example he does not seem to appreciate just how scathing an attack on American materialist culture 'A Cold Coming' is and, more importantly, he never seems to realise how often Harrison subjects the liberal poetic persona to critical examination. This is abundantly clear in 'v.' and elsewhere, as I have argued above. Furthermore it is pointless to ask of Harrison's public poetry that it should work in the same way as poetry that is intended to be read in a different way, as part of a private, book-bound reading experience, for example. Though still a little adrift of Harrison's public aims, William Scammel was less so than Spencer when he commented in a review of Harrison's films that: "As poetry it's not in the same league as his best sonnets. As an intelligent use of the TV soapbox and shadow

<sup>90</sup> Terry Eagleton. 'Metre v. madness'. *Rev. Poetry Review* (Winter 1992/3), 54. Hereafter referred to as 'Metre v. madness'. Quoted by Spencer. *Poetry of TH*, 135.

<sup>91</sup> Spencer. *Poetry of TH*, 135.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>93</sup> Terry Eagleton. 'Metre v. Madness', 53.

theatre, however, it's vastly welcome".<sup>94</sup> This sentiment is true of the newspaper work as well with the proviso that, as we have seen, there is a new kind of art at work in both media which signals Harrison's continuing desire to engage and share with his audience the most difficult public events in terms of how we experience and understand them.

Harrison's 'A Cold Coming' is expressive of the conflicts that poetry finds itself in this "come-curdling Cruise/Scud-cursed millennium" (*Coming*, 16) of ours. Should it lie in an attempt to achieve a false poetical balance, as the Iraqi corpse suggests it should, or should it attempt to square up to the gaze of the Gorgon in spite of the fact (as the poetry of World War I suggests) that it is all but totally ineffective in actually helping to prevent physical conflicts? The probability that poetry is unable to effect real physical change is always acknowledged in Harrison's work. But poetry does have a valid role to play in terms of invoking a personal, human response for, ultimately, whatever the flaws of his verse might be, Harrison is at least attempting to articulate a response that is essentially *human*, as its sometimes contradictory qualities reveal. It is in the revelation of this humanity, Auden suggested, that poetry's real purpose is located: "The primary function of poetry [. . .] is to make us more aware of ourselves and the world around us. [. . .] I think it makes us more human, and I am quite certain it makes us more difficult to deceive, which is why, perhaps, all totalitarian theories of the State [. . .] have deeply mistrusted the arts."<sup>95</sup>

We must, then, applaud Harrison's attempts to transfer his voice to a more universal stage for, if we wish for a more tolerant, sensitive world, if we perceive poetry as having something to offer in that respect, we should acknowledge that the only way of ameliorating the 'voices of conflict' is by making them as audible as possible. We might also remember Harrison's statement that poetry, though equally public, was a different activity "from the kind of public involvement that manifests itself in demonstrations on the street."<sup>96</sup> Clearly there is a limit to what we can expect poetry to do — we should not ask the wrong things of it (or poets for that matter) as Spencer seems to for, as Auden has also commented, "Those who go to poetry expecting to find a complete guide to religion, or morals, or political action, will

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<sup>94</sup> William Scammell. 'The Shadow of Hiroshima and other film/poems by Tony Harrison'. Review. *The Independent on Sunday* 17th September 1995.

<sup>95</sup> W. H. Auden. 'Introduction'. *Poems of Freedom*. Ed. John Mulgan. Left Book Club. London: Victor Gollancz, 1938, 9. Hereafter referred to as 'Introduction'.

<sup>96</sup> Patinkin. 'A bleeding poet', 83.

very soon be disillusioned and condemn poets [ . . . ] Poets are rarely and only incidentally priests or philosophers or party agitators.”<sup>97</sup>

This is not to relegate poetry to some cosy corner, nor to dismiss it as irrelevant, but rather to understand that the efficacy of poetry lies in its strength as an imaginative response rather than as an intervention of some kind in the actual. This is what Seamus Heaney argued in his lecture, ‘The Redress of Poetry’. For him poetry represents “a glimpsed alternative, a revelation of potential that is denied or constantly threatened by circumstances”.<sup>98</sup> It is, then, an imagined response that offers a means of “tilting the scales of reality towards some transcendent equilibrium”,<sup>99</sup> a redressing, an act of compensation in a sense, as suggested by Simone Weil:

If we know in what way society is unbalanced, we must do what we can to add weight to the lighter scale . . . we must have formed a conception of equilibrium and be ever ready to change sides like justice, ‘that fugitive from the camp of conquerors’.<sup>100</sup>

For Heaney, though the poetic response is an imaginary one it “nevertheless has weight because it is imagined within the gravitational pull of the actual and can therefore hold its own and balance out against the historical situation”.<sup>101</sup> Moreover he reminds us that an act of imagining always precipitates a practical response to the prevailing conditions:

‘useful’ or ‘practical’ responses to those same conditions are derived from imagined standards too: poetic fictions, the dream of alternative worlds, enable governments and revolutionaries as well. It’s just that governments and revolutionaries would compel society to take on the shape of their imagining, whereas poets are typically more concerned to conjure with their own and their readers’ sense of what is possible or desirable or, indeed, imaginable.<sup>102</sup>

This process offers “consciousness a chance to recognise its predicaments, foreknow its capacities and rehearse its comebacks in all kinds of venturesome ways”.<sup>103</sup> In this way it is

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<sup>97</sup> W. H. Auden. ‘Introduction’, 7.

<sup>98</sup> Seamus Heaney. ‘The Redress of Poetry’. The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures. London

<sup>99</sup> Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995, 4.  
Ibid., 3

<sup>100</sup> Simone Weil. Quoted by Seamus Heaney. ‘The Redress of Poetry’. *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures*. London: Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995, 3. Hereafter referred to as ‘The Redress of Poetry’.

<sup>101</sup> Heaney. ‘The Redress of Poetry’, pp. 3-4.

<sup>102</sup> Heaney. ‘The Redress of Poetry’, 1.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 2.

valuable and rewarding for both the poet and his/her audience because: "It offers a response to reality which has a liberating and verifying effect upon the individual spirit . . .".<sup>104</sup> It is this effect upon the individual spirit that is key here, something Harrison achieves by facing up to the unbearable on our behalf. But, Heaney suggests, this is not sufficient for a political activist, nor Spencer for that matter presumably, because

For the activist, there is going to be no point in envisaging an order which is comprehensive of events but not in itself productive of new events. Engaged parties are not going to be grateful for a mere image - no matter how inventive or original - of the field of force of which they are a part. They will always want the redress of poetry to be an exercise of leverage on behalf of *their* point of view; they will require the entire weight of the thing to come down on their side of the scales.<sup>105</sup>

At this point I ought to anticipate the criticism that my position is unnecessarily defeatist or, in implicitly rejecting an explicitly political function for poetry, even reactionary. It is not that I am saying that poetry is useless, or denying the political component and necessity of poetry, or anything similar. Rather I am advocating two things. One is that we should see Harrison in terms of being a public poet, an oral storyteller who, as a result of his politicised poetics, has crafted verse capable of generating a sense of shared intimacy which in turn has achieved a huge (and therefore, meaningful) audience, *and* is working all the time to politicise and make that audience aware of the injustices and horrors of their world. The second point is that rather than seeing poetry as capable of effecting something in its own right, as a direct result of a specific policy that is espoused within it, we should listen more closely to what Harrison has to say and how he says it. By this I am referring to Harrison's constantly reiterated implication that poetry can inspire its readers and listeners and viewers to forge their own responses to Gorgonisms, wherever they might be. This is poetry as "countervailing gesture",<sup>106</sup> to use Heaney's formulation, an act of imagining that consists in a "violence from within that protects us from a violence without".<sup>107</sup> In such a way we could thus avoid the disappointments that dog critics such as Spencer. In this respect the role of facilitator that Harrison has carved out for himself as public poet is a valid one. As Wilfred

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>107</sup> Wallace Stevens. Quoted by Heaney. 'The Redress of Poetry', 1.

Owen famously wrote: "All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful."<sup>108</sup> Hence Harrison explicates a situation, describes the reality of that situation in an unashamedly opinionated, subjective manner, while also honestly confronting and articulating his doubts and fears. Moreover he typically poses certain questions and applies a certain degree of moral pressure on the viewer / reader, then leaves us to make a moral commitment either for or against, or leaves us to wallow in a condition of apathy and through his various strategies, techniques and language play of this new genre, he generates a complex and contradictory response in the audience. This is the function of the public poet who is grounded in the legacy of oral culture, of street-ballads, of the demotic. This is, perhaps, illustrated more perceptively by a viewer's letter included by Peter Symes in his introduction to *The Shadow of Hiroshima and other film/poems*. This is what the viewer wrote about the film/poem *The Gaze of the Gorgon*:

I don't know if it is the theme which is so strong and hits right at the heart and guts, or the power of the imagery which I can't seem to forget and which jumps out in my mind so vividly. I don't think I have seen anything on fascism that touched and excited me so and at the same time gave me hope. Usually films on the subject leave me depressed, while the *Gaze* left me with a sense of understanding, of facing up to that overpowering threat of fascism; fascism particularly as it is manifested all around us - yes, in the architecture and in things we take for granted and which intimidate and brainwash us - which often paralyse me and make me shrink. Perhaps this is because you can sense the intelligent individual standing so calmly but also so clearly and surely on the other front, making their statement and passing it on to those of us who allow themselves to be intimidated and overpowered by what we see and what we often feel is beyond our strength to stop or reverse.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Wilfred Owen. 'Preface'. *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, 192.

<sup>109</sup> Symes. 'Introduction', xix.

## *Conclusion*

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At the heart of Harrison's public poetry is his poetic gaze, the poetical countering of anything that undermines the human capacity for spiritual release. This poetic gaze is a means of providing an individual reader or viewer with a way of looking at things from which he/she would otherwise turn away. The imperative is for the individual not to lose his or her compassion, not to turn to stone under the gaze of the Gorgon. This informs his assumption of the public role of oral storyteller yet the engendering of this emotional response is also problematical in that it leaves Harrison vulnerable to certain charges that question his right to speak for the other and also suggest that he occasionally becomes sentimental. In order to consider these issues I will conclude my study of his creation of a sense of shared intimacy with a brief, and admittedly inexhaustive, discussion of Harrison's *Black Daisies for the Bride* (1993).

When the journalist Peter Lennon visited the Alzheimer's ward of High Royds Hospital, formerly the "West Yorkshire Paupers' Lunatic Asylum" (*Daisies*, 1), during the making of the film, he found that initially he was horrified. Speaking of the experience of meeting the patients he commented:

Nothing prepares you for the reality of this particular kingdom of human distress; no other sick ward or even death bed. It is a living combination of both; the decay on indecent display [ . . . ] In most of them, you can at first detect nothing but grotesqueness, which you are afraid might also hold some mad cunning [ . . . ] as the hours went by [ . . . ] you begin to detect the sketchy remnants of a personality in these people; quite quickly you no longer think of them coarsely as a group of irredeemably senile patients but as very distinctive personalities.<sup>1</sup>

Harrison's task in the film, specially commissioned to be screened during Alzheimer's awareness week in July 1993, is to effect the awareness that Lennon experienced "as the hours went by" within the space afforded by a 40 minute screening. His achievement is in presenting the patients as distinct personalities, as human beings, a remarkable feat.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Lennon. 'Rhythm goes on to the end'. *The Guardian* 14. 4. 1993 G2. Second Front pp. 2-3. Hereafter referred to as 'Rhythm goes on to the end'.



It is estimated that there are up to 750,000 sufferers of Alzheimers in the United Kingdom, a disease that destroys “memory and speech and strips away the self,”<sup>2</sup>. This is a theme explored by Harrison in an earlier poem, *Mother Of The Muses* (1987), where he asks:

If we *are* what we remember, what are they  
 who don't have memories as we have ours,  
 who, when evening falls, have no recall of day,  
 or who those people were who'd brought them flowers. (*Gaze*, 42)

*Black Daisies* is his tribute to these sufferers and also his attempt to answer the question “what are they”. It is also his “celebration of the human capacity to communicate and make meanings, even from within the blizzard of forgetting.”<sup>3</sup> Hence the film asserts Harrison’s belief that a sense of rhythm and music lingers on in the memories of the sufferers and is, ultimately, the last thing to wither in the onslaught of the blizzard. Harrison’s suggestion is that somewhere within us there is an elementary, spontaneous force that precedes language and which serves as a building-block of communication and meaning. This can survive until death itself. His belief in the primacy of this rhythmical component is embodied in the film by the way that his rhythms become conflated with the rhythms of the ward: the scrapings, the raucous shouts, the story-telling, the songs, the music, even the beat of Muriel Allen’s “sneakered feet”: (*Daisies*, 8) all combine in an aural montage. The effect is to emphasise that the world of the ward is full of rhythms, that rhythm is still a major part of the women’s lives, thus attesting to the primacy of rhythm and language.

At one point in the film, one of its brightest moments, we witness a validation of Harrison’s hypothesis. After serenading various women, Muttonchops, the hospital entertainer, passes on to serenade Kathleen Dickenson who is cleaning a central heating radiator with her fingers. When she hears his playing and singing she starts to dance and clap her hands. Her response to Muttonchops’ performance endorses the thesis that rhythm and music are instinctive and celebratory. At other times, however, certain elements that seem to validate Harrison’s aspirations for poetry and rhythm are only present as a result of the re-created drama of the bride’s songs or because of the way the film has been edited. For

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<sup>2</sup> Harrison. *Lateshow*. Extract from the programme’s report on Alzheimer’s disease.

<sup>3</sup>.Ibid., extract from Michael Ignatieff’s introduction.

instance in 'The Song of the Bride II' the actress playing the younger Kathleen Dickenson sings:

With Alzheimer's shredding all remembered time,  
 the blizzard's blowing, but Godammit I'm . . .  
 g . . . gl . . . gla . . . glad . . . I'm still Kath and alive!  
 I'm still Kath and alive!  
 I'm still Kath and alive! (*Daisies*, 19)

In another example Kelleher describes the "gestus of montage"<sup>4</sup> that suggests that Muriel Prior has heard her own song ('The Song Of The Bride III') and in answer to that song's closing refrain answers in the affirmative:

If life gave you back tomorrow  
 our memories, joy and sorrow,  
 not just the best, but all the rest,  
 would you want to relive them...?

MURIEL PRIOR (*The resident in Whernside Ward*)  
 . . . YES! (*Daisies*, 25)

Kelleher suggests that this is an instance of sentimentality,<sup>5</sup> a point echoed by Michael Ignatieff who hazarded that Harrison was "whistling in the dark" and, more specifically, that Harrison's emphasis on the celebratory had "an edge of desperation to it and perhaps an edge of sentimental <sup>ity</sup>"<sup>6</sup> The television critic Thomas Sutcliffe was less pointed yet no less uncomfortable. The proposition that Kath is glad she is alive left him with an "edgy feeling that the women were props in a production entirely outside their comprehension".<sup>7</sup>

It is a problematical area this, not least because this film was made as a result of a process in which Harrison and the crew talked and filmed for many hours on the ward. It is from this that the film's documentary element derives. This suggests an objectivity but, as I have already argued at length above, Harrison's creation of the documentary sense and the illusion of authenticity undermine the notion of <sup>an</sup> objective documentary — it is an illusory

<sup>4</sup> Kelleher, *Tony Harrison*, 61.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>6</sup> Harrison. *Lateshow*, comment made by Ignatieff.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Sutcliffe. 'Failing memory'. *The Independent* 1st July 1993, Arts, 15.

effect.<sup>8</sup> Joe Kelleher has also commented on the nature of the objective in Harrison's work. Citing *The Shadow of Hiroshima* he argues that the speaking voice in *Shadow* is "an interlocutor with the images, rather than as a transparent commentary upon what we see on the screen".<sup>9</sup> For Kelleher this suggests that "the film exploits a tension between the externality of the camera and the internality, so to speak, of the poet's speaking voice: playing between the 'objective' reconstructions of documentary and the 'subjective' reconstructions of poetry in such a way as to unsettle the assumptions of such a simple binarism."<sup>10</sup> That he is correct to comment on the allegedly simple binarism between the subjective and objective is suggested, perhaps, in that *Daisies* received two awards, one for being documentary, one for drama.<sup>11</sup> More evidence, should it be needed, that the symbiotic approach fusing verse and film works. Moreover this actually attests to the idea of public and private being two points on the same continuum because if the 'objective' isn't actually what it appears to be, then the suggestion is that the 'subjective' exists only with some kind of reference to the material world. In other words the subjective is related to, and conditioned by, external elements; the objective - reality - is similarly conditioned by, and related to, internal elements.

Kelleher, however, draws different conclusions from my own. He seems to perceive this illusory objectivity as a problem in that he suggests that the accessibility of Harrison's verse "is compromised by being so blatantly staged"<sup>12</sup>. For Kelleher the compromise is implicit in that Harrison is facilitating access to something that is not 'real'. I thought that was the point of Harrison's verse, actually. By this I mean that, yes, he is 'staging' his films in that he is explicitly seeking to develop techniques and strategies that will serve to demystify the process by redefining the 'poetic' and, thus, create a sense of shared intimacy. Moreover it is clearly obvious that the films are also "staged" in that filming of any kind is always going to be subjective in so much that the decisions as to which images to record (and, subsequently, to retain) have necessarily been taken in relation to a given set of criteria, however generalised these might be. In addition, what Kelleher terms a "compromise" is also another location of intimacy. For example if the subjective camera is understood as a metaphor, so to speak, for

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<sup>8</sup> See my Chapter 6, above, for a discussion of this.

<sup>9</sup> Kelleher. *Tony Harrison*, 73.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>11</sup> Symes. 'Introduction', xxi.

<sup>12</sup> Kelleher. *Tony Harrison*, 73.

Harrison/s poetic apprehension, the fact that we see the resultant images aligns us as one with the poetic process. This is another sense of intimacy, then, in that the viewer is intimate with, not at an adjunct to, the poetic process. At least Kelleher realises that one compensatory aspect of this “compromise” is “to question the facility of a fully *redemptive* fiction”.<sup>13</sup> This is the case in *Black Daises* where we see the characteristic undercutting of the impulse towards celebration as a direct result of Harrison’s ‘honest’ approach to poetry-making — by ‘honest’ I mean sincere. We see this, for example, in Harrison’s clear and open-eyed presentation of the disease and the way that the songs of the brides are undercut by presentiments of Alzheimer’s. These combine to undermine the impulse towards celebration that the temporary restoration of some of the women’s memory suggests. In this context his rational, intellectual knowledge of the disease has won out over his emotional desire for his hypothesis to be not only valid but also effect some less temporary restorative change. That this is not the case is graphically conveyed in the film, as the ending suggests. Though it is music, rhythm and verse that has achieved the reconnection of the women with their memories, albeit temporarily, the last note struck by Harrison is one of depression and negativity. In one of the final scenes we see the face of Maria Tobin looking through the door of the ward, Muriel Allen swinging the curtains and various faces of residents who appear to be hearing the blizzard destroying their memories. At this point, as the textual stage direction tells us, “The camera pans from the face of Doreen Mitchel up to a plastic arrangement of carnations, but this time there is no transformation into the resident as young bride. The blizzard intensifies.” (*Daisies*, 33) The suggestion is that Doreen is beyond help, all vestiges and traces of memory are finally eroded. This is a deeply moving section, not least because of the film’s implicit recognition of its own limitations. It is as if the film is admitting defeat, tacitly acknowledging that, ultimately, the rhythm of the verse is powerless in the face of such an onslaught. We are left with the image of Maria Tobin’s face at the door of the Ward. She says: “Goodbye darling, thank you very much, don’t go far.” (*Daisies*, 33) This is the film’s final appeal. Maybe the women cannot remember, but we can. We can remember them as people, as individuals, not simply as patients, as Alzheimers sufferers. Once again we hear on the soundtrack the voice of the young Maria singing Puccini:

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

ah, love me a little,  
 Oh just a very little,  
 As you would love a baby.  
 'Tis all that I ask for . . . (*Daisies*, 34)

This is, however, cut off in mid-flow by the ward door. In the corridor is the hospital tug that is normally used to move the dinners between wards and collect rubbish. It bears yellow and blue rubbish sacks that trail confetti. Harrison has said that, for him:

yellow and blue mean Matisse, Van Gogh, it means something enormously celebratory but as the hospital tug pulls away it has the sound we've been using all the way through the film, of disintegration. Instead of hospital dinners on it, this time it has waste sacks and out of the sacks trail confetti. It's like saying 'I've brought my imagination, I've offered my imagination to try and serve what I've felt were the needs of these disintegrating personalities : what does it amount to?'

The question 'what does it amount to?' is Harrison's implicit question to the viewers. Only they can decide what the film amounts to and whether Harrison's art has in some way redeemed the women's suffering. In this respect it is a typically, and deliberately, unresolved ending. To paraphrase Kelleher the facility of a redemptive closure is not merely questioned, it is totally rejected.

This also seems to argue against the charge of sentimentality yet, at the same time, there is clearly a strong sense in which the film is actively seeking to make us *feel*, and *feel* together, to become engaged, rather than to evade and shun. The ability to feel empathy for the suffering of others is, after all, what makes us human. Not to do this is to be as those who have been blasted by the Gorgon, who have been petrified under the Gorgon's gaze. It is this aspect that finally helps us to understand his term "a sense of shared intimacy" as it is with this process of engendering sympathy that Harrison's shared intimacy is located. *Black Daisies* is a film concerned with this because the film, like all his television work, only fully works if it solicits an emotional response, if it engages a viewer on an emotional level, something tentatively explored by Wordsworth in 'Simon Lee':

It is no tale, but should you think,  
 Perhaps a tale you'll make it.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Wordsworth. 'Simon Lee'. *Lyrical Ballads*, 60.

The “you” in this instance is the reader. It is the reader who can make a “tale” of the particular situation that is described, as a result of an act of empathy. Or they will if he or she ‘thinks’, that is engages subjectively and imaginatively with the art work. This reminds us of Owen’s *Preface* once more and its suggestion that “the poetry is in the pity”<sup>15</sup>. And of course it is, but only if we effect what he also termed a “reciprocity of tears.”<sup>16</sup> Yet we should also remember that Owen claimed that his elegies were “in no sense consolatory”<sup>17</sup>: nor are Harrison’s films. In this respect Harrison can once more be perceived in his public role of facilitator in that the primary function of the pity seems to be that if we recognise the sufferers as fellow humans it does not then require a great imaginative leap on our part to understand that the same fate might be in store for us. It is precisely this coupling of emotion and warning that absolves Harrison from charges of sentimentality. By this I mean that pity is indeed a redundant emotion if it exists in isolation, if it leaves us with nowhere to go. In this context it would indeed be merely gratuitous if, by shedding our tears, we merely felt a little better. As a consequence the charge of sentimentality would be a fair one — if this was all Harrison’s films amounted to then they would indeed be consolatory. But in Harrison’s poetry pity is almost never in isolation; it is seldom gratuitous and, usually, carries a disturbing warning. This is because it is inseparable from whatever the film signifies in terms of a revelation of truth about some aspect of the human condition, if that is not to make too grand a claim for his work. In terms of *Black Daisies* pity is necessary in order that we perceive the sufferers of Alzheimer’s as human beings, as people just like us, an element that, incidentally, curiously invokes the sense of a parallel with the idea that the audience of Greek tragedy were aware of both the actors and their fellow audience.

The inference in *Black Daisies* is simple yet fundamental to our existence — we should ensure that we live life to the full. This is why we hear the children’s choir singing

If we could give them voices, we would hear them say:

Gather all your mem’ries, savour every day (*Daisies*, 32)

The importance of this line for Harrison is that

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<sup>15</sup> Owen. ‘Preface’. *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, 192.

<sup>16</sup> Owen. ‘Insensibility’. *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, 122.

<sup>17</sup> Owen. ‘Preface’. *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, 192.

we must savour the day [ . . . ] *carpe diem* is always translated as 'seize the day'. It's wrong! *Carpe* in Latin means to pluck a fruit, or to pluck a flower so that you live your life as if you are gathering something ripe. And for me [ . . . ] almost the only consolation for living, for mortality, is that mortality heightens our awareness of life.<sup>18</sup>

There are many instances in the film of elements that are designed to engage our pity. The songs, for example, both celebrate the memory of the women but also heighten the contrast between 'then' and 'now'. Also the choir of children, ("I use children's voices so that people wouldn't be afraid of looking at what was happening - if children are leading us here then don't be afraid of watching<sup>19</sup>) singing 'In the bleak Midwinter':

What can I give him, poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;  
if I were a wise man I would do my part,  
yet what I can I give him - give my heart. (*Daisies*, 30)

I'm also thinking of the many contrasts between 'then' and 'now', and things like the carol in the forest when they sing of Maria Tobin:

And the bride who wore this glove, wore this glove  
bids us all remember songs and love. (*Daisies*, 32)

In this respect the film's final scene with Maria's appeal of: "Goodbye darling, thank you very much, don't go far." (*Daisies*, 33) serves as an appeal to the poet himself *and* to the viewer.

Yeats excluded Wilfred Owen's war poetry from the *Oxford Book Of Modern Verse* because he felt that "pity had no proper place in poetry".<sup>20</sup> But, logically, pity and empathy is a pre-requisite before any other response, as Stephen Dedalus remarks in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916): "Pity is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the secret cause".<sup>21</sup> It is also important to remember that Harrison is working to a brief — the film was commissioned in order to raise awareness of Alzheimers and the engendering of 'pity' is a key

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<sup>18</sup> Harrison. *Lateshow*.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>20</sup> Kelleher. *Tony Harrison*, 52.

<sup>21</sup> Joyce. *A Portrait*, 209.

element of this. It is, then, another example of how Harrison can make poetry 'do a job'. We also need to remember that the film is designed for one performance and its success or failure ought, ideally, to be considered in this context. The television reviewer Lynne Truss commented of *Black Daisies*, for example: "In its quiet, challenging way, it was magnificent."<sup>22</sup> Another reviewer commented that it avoided the traps of "piety" and "sentimentality"<sup>23</sup>. He concluded by arguing that "pity is not the least of emotions and, if television can inspire it in this way, with programmes of such deep seriousness, then we are all beneficiaries".<sup>24</sup> Hugh Herbert, writing in *The Guardian*, commented that the film "is an important experiment, because it tells us things we might prefer not to know in ways we had not foreseen."<sup>25</sup>

In *Black Daisies* Harrison's public role of oral storyteller is paramount in that he speaks for the voiceless, in this case the sufferers of Alzheimer's. He perceived what he saw as a need on the part of the woman to communicate, to tell their stories. Therefore one important element of the film is the way the women address us directly "like news-readers or storytellers, but in their own form of progressively disintegrating English" (*Daisies*, 1). When we experience this in the film Harrison's perception seems entirely accurate. Even when taken out of context the expressive quality, the insistence is there, as this example shows:

MARIA TOBIN

O murals, the babble of ewes,  
beautiful Jews.  
I said 'Oo . . . Mm . . . I'll come and buy another two.'  
(Laughs.)

He said, 'Everything is right!'  
I said, 'Oo, That's good!'  
Yes, it would be better.  
It's nicer when they come in  
and they're not worrying all the day.

DOROTHY CHAPLIN

Oo flippin' 'eck it . . . it's like . . .  
Oo'eck . . . 'eckykyeck.  
And then . . .  
t'bloomin' clegs have to come down a bit

<sup>22</sup> Lynne Truss. 'Black Daisies for the Bride Tony Harrison's poetic report on Alzheimer's Disease'. *The Independent* 5 July 1993, 25.

<sup>23</sup> Max Davidson. 'Bleak mid-winter burial'. *The Daily Telegraph* 1 July 1993, Television page.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., Television page.

<sup>25</sup> Hugh Herbert. 'Television'. *The Guardian* 1 July 1993.



and, er . . .

(Claps.)

Oh get down stairs, them . . . them bloodysteps!

(Laughs.)

(*Daisies*, pp. 1-2)

The film's presentation of these women is, then, in keeping with a major strand of Harrison's work which is to speak for those that are unable to, or not permitted to, speak for themselves. It also serves to show to those that are able, just how heavy a price some pay in their inability to enjoy that articulacy. Moreover the film suggests that Harrison has been provided with a warrant, of sorts, by the very women he is speaking for. For example it is with what seems like a considerable urgency in her voice that we hear Mabel Frost's repeated "Come, come, come" (*Daisies*, 3) and Gladys Middleton's insistant "Tell us!" (*Daisies*, 3). This latter comment is ambiguous. It might mean 'include us, tell us a story' or it might suggest a request on behalf of the women for Harrison to tell us of the [uz] that the women are. In other words the suggestion is that they want to be 'told' into being. We might then, perhaps, also interpret Maria Tobin's voice-over "but it has to be told" (*Daisies*, 4) as Harrison's warrant. But we cannot ignore the fact that these voice-overs occur where they do because of the way that the film has been edited. This raises the spectre of sentimentality once more and goes to the heart of Harrison's commitment of speaking for the other. This is how Harrison responded when asked by Michael Ignatieff what right he had to say that Kath was "still Kath and alive!" (*Daisies*, 19):

TH: We know from Kathleen Dickinson's relatives that she went dancing every week. We know that she enjoyed growing flowers, we know that she enjoyed cooking, that she enjoyed children, that she played the accordion, that she played the piano. All of these things are the activities of someone who relishes the world. [ . . . ] I'm absolutely positive that she still relishes life. And I said ' I'm glad I'm still Kath and alive' *before* the tune was played to her and she danced. So I felt, that on that occasion, the muses had blessed the enterprise!

MI: But the Muses will only bless the enterprise if you get the warrant to say what you want to say as a poet, from her, from the person involved.

TH: Yes. Yes I think that everything I wrote came out of either what was told me by relatives, or what I gleaned from sitting and spending many many hours with the women themselves. I walked, Kath was a great walker, we used to walk up and down, up and down the ward and although we had a conservation

of a kind it wasn't a conservation of which the language was recognisable or reproducible.<sup>26</sup>

The key to this point, and Harrison's justification of his public role, is 'remembrance'. The things he writes of, these pasts, these people, need to be remembered. Otherwise "the rest is silence".<sup>27</sup> Only by this can there be a chance of redeeming the suffering. Otherwise everything is futile. It is not really the significance of a particular story or poem or film when it all comes down to it, it is the fact that it is done at all. In this respect Harrison is an unacknowledged facilitator striving to create a sense of shared intimacy in order that we may feel, and feel together. As regards his right to speak for the voiceless it makes sense to see him as a poet who, in Richard Eyre's words, is trying to "provide a narrative, trying to make sense of disordered impressions and feelings and ideas about the universe and the human condition because all poetry is, in a sense, providing an alternative narrative for people who are unable to express it for themselves."<sup>28</sup> In the context of *Black Daisies* this works in two ways. In one sense Harrison is speaking "not simply on behalf of the sufferer who will never be aware of what has happened, but [also] on behalf of those people who also suffer with the person afflicted."<sup>29</sup> When Ignatieff suggests to Harrison that there is "a sense that your poetry can restore, and this film can restore, Maria Tobin as she was to those that loved her" he replies: "To those that loved her and, by example, to other people who are in a similar predicament".<sup>30</sup> To do this, to speak for these two categories of the voiceless, Harrison has developed what I term (albeit clumsily) a metaphysic of honesty. In order to provide a poetic justice he has developed a technique of using his poetic apprehension to try to perceive what it is that people want him to tell. We might understand it an organic development of the word and world technique in that this is a case of the poet offering himself in public service by providing a truly public poetry. Fundamental to this is the research that Harrison undertakes, a research impelled both by his metaphysic and, crucially, informed by his poetic apprehension. For example Peter Lennon has spoken of the "elaborate system of continuous consultation with the families of the patients".<sup>31</sup> In addition Harrison has spoken of the signals he felt

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<sup>26</sup> Harrison. *Lateshow*.

<sup>27</sup> *Hamlet*, V.ii.

<sup>28</sup> Harrison. *Lateshow*. Richard Eyre speaking in report on Alzheimers.

<sup>29</sup> Harrison. *Lateshow*. Comment by Tony Harrison.

<sup>30</sup> Harrison. *Lateshow*. Comment by Tony Harrison.

<sup>31</sup> Lennon. 'Rhythm goes on to the end', pp2-3.

emanating from the women. Thus he perceived the need to communicate, an intention so strong "that it seemed to me that I had to use what skills I had developed as a poet, as an articulate artist, to help them tell this story".<sup>32</sup> Moreover he felt that, somewhere, he could "perceive in Murial Prior a need for love, to find an echo, sending out these signals that require an echo of love".<sup>33</sup>

Given Harrison's achievement in *Black Daisies* the charge of sentimentality is misplaced. Rather there is an intensity of feeling, a certain reaching out and co-mingling of our emotional response and Harrison's public art, an unfolding awareness of our humanity that culminates in a sense of shared intimacy. Ultimately the individual reader or viewer has to answer for themselves the question 'what right has Harrison to adopt this role?' There is no easy answer to this. For my part I am comfortable with Harrison's justification that he is a storyteller. If he can't tell their story, who can?:

I want them to be given the chance to speak to us because it's only when you listen (the first reaction is 'that's gobbledegook') if you listen a little longer you see the person - you know that she still wants to share an act of communication - she wants to tell a story . . . and the intention must be honoured, and who better to honour it than a writer? That's what I mean by an obligation. Who else can tell the story except a story-teller if that person whose story it is, is unable to?<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Harrison. *Lateshow*.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

## APPENDIX

All photographs are the copyright of the author.

Photograph 1: the Harrison family plot, Holbeck Cemetery, Beeston, Leeds.



Photograph 2: the location for the planned epitaph.



Photograph 3: a view of a defaced gravestone, Holberck Cemetery..



Photograph 4: a general view of Holbeck Cemetery.



*Photograph 5:*  
the grave of  
Wordsworth,  
Holbeck.



*Photograph 6:*  
the salon at the  
top of Beeston  
Hill, near the  
corner of  
Tempest Road,  
Beeston, Leeds.



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