An Inky Tribute

In his *Apology for Poetry* (1595), Philip Sidney explains that he never consciously set out to be a poet. But he could not help writing poetry: 'over-mastered by some thoughts, I yielded an inky tribute unto them.'[1] This is my inky tribute, albeit in prose, to Tony Harrison. Ink is the physical liquid in which he writes his poems, using his fountain pen. And ink is an image binding these essays across the eight decades of his life, from a story book he read in his childhood to his speech accepting the Pen/Pinter prize in 2009.

Harrison has never explained the title of a short essay he wrote in 1971, included in this collection, 'The Inkwell of Dr Agrippa'. The essay illuminates some of the poems in *The Loiners* (1970), because in it he describes some of his earliest memories of growing up in Leeds. Understanding the full significance of Dr Agrippa's inkwell for Harrison requires looking at an illustrated children's book which made a profound impression on him when he was small. 'The Story of the Inky Boys' is told in *The English Struwwelpeter, or Pretty Stories and Funny Pictures for Little Children*, first published by Friedrich Volckmar of Leipzig in 1848. A copy of this much reprinted English-language text was possessed and read by Harrison. It is anonymous and in rhyming couplets. Although Hoffmann's striking pictures are reproduced without alteration, the words offer a free version rather than a translation of Heinrich Hoffmann's original German verses of 1845. Despite being rebuked by Dr Agrippa, three racist little white boys are cruel to a black boy:

> Then great Agrippa foams with rage—
>
> Look at him on this very page!
>
> He seizes Arthur, seizes Ned,

Takes William by his little head;

And they may scream and kick and call,

Into the ink he dips them all;

Into the inkstand, one, two, three,

Till they are black as black can be;

Harrison has told me that he particularly likes the grave expression on Dr Agrippa's face in the drawing reproduced here [**FIG]**: putting the naughty boys morally right is a serious business.

Curiously, in the German version the tall bearded sage is named Saint Nicholas, Santa Claus. It was the anonymous author of the English text who changed him to Dr Agrippa, a mythologised version of the famous early 16th-century German polymath and occultist Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim. This learned Dr Agrippa was in 1848 culturally familiar, having recently featured in works by both Mary Shelley and Søren Kierkegaard.[2] But by the 1940s none of this will have concerned a little boy in Leeds. What is fascinating is the way that the image and the story stayed in Harrison's mind to re-emerge in the title of his short psycho-biographical essay thirty years later. The rhyming couplets of English popular verse, typified in this children's book,

fundamentally affected his evolution as a poet. He explains this process in his essay here on translating Molière.

Such a fusion of 'high' and 'low' culture—the significance of children's rhymes to the translation of canonical French drama—has been central to all Harrison's work, above all *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*. It is here personified in the august figure of Dr Agrippa. The celebrated Renaissance man of letters, a representative of elite intellectual culture, appears as a moral exemplar in a popular book for children and speaks like a good fairy in a pantomime. Baptism by ink in the inkwell of an illustrious thinker is, moreover, a suitable image for a poet's initiation rite. A poet whose voice has always been activated in the cause of the voiceless and oppressed will have been drawn to the 'moral' of the tale, that ink can be instrumental in the exposure of racism or any other narrow-minded form of prejudice or inhumanity. And Arthur, Ned and William are made to realise, through their submersion in Dr Agrippa's inkwell, that, as human beings, they are indistinguishable from their black victim; their rite of passage could symbolise the progress of the human soul as it learns about universal human values by being refined through experiencing fine poetry. This collection of Harrison's essays could therefore as well have been entitled *The Inkwell of Dr Agrippa* as *The Inky Digit of Defiance*.

A visual memory from his youth which Harrison *does* describe, in the same 1971 essay, is of the windows over the altar in the chapel of Leeds Grammar School. There were figures, he writes, representing possible professions which the pupils might later follow. One was MILES ('soldier') and another MERCATOR ('businessman'). In my favourite sentence in this volume, Harrison writes that he can't remember the figure portrayed between them, but in adulthood,

> when I close my eyes now I see *Poeta*, the poet, sometimes as poised, saintly and acceptable as his worldly flankers, sometimes like some half-naked shaker in the throes of a virulent *scribendi cacoethes*, being belaboured by public school angels wielding gamma minuses like immense shillelaghs over their glossy Cherry Blossomy hairstyles, driving the poet from the Garden of Eton.

The vocation of POETA and Harrison's working-class identity were thus indissoluble from the start. But it turns out that there were in fact *two* other figures portrayed in the chapel window, an academic, SCHOLASTICUS, and a BENEFACTOR, 'philanthropist'.[3]

The chapel has long since been turned into the Business School of Leeds University. The British educational system, in which under-privileged children like Harrison could once hope for free grammar school and university educations, has been taken over by commercial interests, like England in Shakespeare's *Richard II*, 'bound in with shame, / With inky blots, and rotten parchment bonds.'[4] But the two figures in the window which Harrison had forgotten are not irrelevant to his achievements. He is certainly a scholar: the range and depth of his reading and research are staggering, as the notes at the end of this volume, detailing the sources of most of his rich range of quotations and citations, reveal. He is also a benefactor. It is true that in the public imagination he is primarily associated with his most snarling poetic voice—his characteristic, embittered railing against stupidity and injustice, which made him identify with the cynical epigrammatist Palladas in the fourth century A.D. Palladas' biting epigrams, a selection of which are here reprinted along with Harrison's essay introducing them, scoffingly deprecate the fall of pagan literary and artistic culture to the intolerant theocrats of the new Christian regime. Yet for all his bitterness, the fundamental outlook of Harrison's poetry is always humane and benevolent. There is a philanthropic 'charity' in the

best sense, a non-judgemental, inclusive social vision, even in his most superficially harsh and most controversial poem *v.* (1985).[5]

As an example of his breathtaking erudition, the title of his poem 'Newcastle is Peru' (1969) was drawn from an obscure poem attributed to John Cleveland, 'News from Newcastle; or, Newcastle Coal-Pits'. Cleveland was a 17th-century satirical poet, little read today, whose scathing tone (although not his Royalist politics) Harrison admires. Cleveland's biographer said that he struck people as a '*Vates* in the whole Import of the Word, both Poet and Prophet.'[6] *Vates* is the oldest Latin word for a creator of poetry. In 1977, the retired Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford, E.R. Dodds, wrote in his autobiography, 'With the possible exception of Louis MacNeice, Yeats is the only poet I have known or encountered who looked just like what he was, a poet—no mere rhymester, but a *vates*, a poet in the full, ancient, arrogant meaning of the term. He behaved like the consecrated priest of a mystery—the mystery of words, which alone are certain good.'[7] All four of these men—Cleveland, MacNeice, Yeats and Dodds, who himself wrote poetry as a young man—are quoted approvingly by Tony Harrison in this book. I gasped when I read Dodds' description, because it fits Harrison perfectly. Charisma, magnetism, a human energy field—none of this language is adequate to describe the effect of his physical presence and his way of talking. He habitually speaks in a manner not too far removed from the sound of his poetry—intermittently elated or playful, but dominantly sardonic and caustic, uncompromisingly honest, sometimes explicit, and always in the resounding Leeds accent of his northern childhood.

The difference lies in the matter of rhythm, for he does not normally converse in metre. But he has devoted his whole life to writing poetry, and has made every penny of his livelihood from it, as a true 'consecrated priest of the mystery of words'. He has published, in comparison, little prose. This makes this volume unique and indispensable to understanding

the man, his voice in conversation, his methods, and biography. Its title alone, *The Inky Digit of Defiance* (the title also of the published version of his speech on accepting the Pen/Pinter Prize in 2009), is informative. He tells us in the eponymous essay that he first heard the phrase on radio in 2009. In Afghanistan, some courageous women exercised their right to vote. This was in the face of intimidation, even though the Taliban's ban on women entering polling centres had supposedly been rescinded following the fall of the Taliban government in 2001. Listening to the BBC World Service, Harrison heard the reporter speak 'of women coming from the polling booth proudly displaying fingers marked with indelible ink to show they had voted. "The inky digit of defiance", the reporter called it.' This reminded Harrison of his Uncle Harry, who was deaf and dumb and needed to use signs to communicate. A famous teacher of rhetorical gesture was praised in a 1644 poem for using his hands so eloquently that 'every Digit dictates and doth reach / Unto our sense a mouth-excelling speech'.[8] But Uncle Harry also used a dictionary to communicate, licking his finger to flick through the pages and point to words, often to express anti-Tory opinions. The ink in which the dictionary was printed stained his digit-tip.

These two anecdotes, unified by the image of the inky finger, speak volumes about Tony's attitude to human life. He has been consistent in his defiantly dissident stance in a class-ridden, sexist world. He has always used his poetic gift as a public vehicle to give voice to the poor and the oppressed. The essays here reveal him speaking up for women everywhere abused, insulted or repressed by men, but also for causes less frequently espoused by the establishment Liberal Left. We hear his praise of Cuban poets of the 1960s for their revolutionary project and insights they gained from Marxism; we feel his sympathy with socialism and his support for the highly unfashionable cause of the British miners during the 1984 strike; we come to understand his uncompromising dislike of monarchy and the parts of the establishment that fawn upon the British royal family; we respect his sense of

fellowship and a project shared with the all other republican, rebellious and revolutionary wordsmiths who have used their art as a vehicle for public dissent, and often suffered marginalisation, ridicule or even persecution for it: Milton and May, Shelley and Hugo, Heine and Brecht, Holub, Ritsos, and Zargana, the imprisoned Myanmar poet with whom Harrison chose to share the Pen/Pinter Prize in 2009.

Dodds' word for describing Yeats as a poet, *vates*, is suitable for Tony in other senses. Dodds, as a classics professor, was aware that *vates* was the primordial Latin word for a poet, related in the most remote human antiquity to the Sanskrit verbal root *vad*, 'speak' or 'utter'. The Romans used the word *vates* to describe not just singers or the composers of songs, but the sacerdotal men in what they saw as the barbarian countries to their north, such as Britannia. It was to the barbarian *vates* that communal rites were entrusted; his role included safeguarding the tribe's understanding of 'the philosophy of nature'.[9] In this volume, Harrison is seen most intensely in touch with his 'barbarian' northern roots in the chapter 'Egil and Eagle-Bark', describing his quest for a poetic diction in which to translate Aeschylus' *Oresteia* for the National Theatre. This took him back beyond the language of the medieval Mystery cycle to Old English and early Teutonic poetry and thence to the visceral 'kennings', new words compounded out of two existing elements, in Old Norse and Icelandic. He discovered a linguistic ancestor for his own raw, compounded, consonantal version of Aeschylus, 'eagle-bark' and all, in the tenth-century Icelandic poet Egil Skalla-Grimsson, who once lived in England himself.

The word *vates* fell out of use for a time amongst the culturally insecure ancient Romans. They came under the spell of Greek literature, began to distrust their prehistoric Italian heritage with its 'vatic' priests, and instead used their Greek word *poeta* when they meant a civilised 'poet'. The term *vates* was reintroduced by Virgil, a poet with whom Harrison has had a long and intense relationship. In the 1960s he published, as 'T.W.

Harrison', two academic articles on the 18th-century reception of Virgil;[10] much more recently he served as President of the Virgil Society. But he has moved, as he explains in this volume in the essay 'The Tears and the Trumpets', from admiration and emulation of Virgil's craftsmanship to an increasing unease with his political stance as celebrator of the Augustan imperial project.

Virgil liked the term *vates* because it has a visionary connotation, meaning 'seer' as well as 'poet', and he wanted to convey the idea of a bard with a sacred task of transcending time to gaze into the future imperial destiny of the Romans. Harrison, who is not a religious man, makes no such oracular claims. He is constitutionally incapable of using poetry to celebrate any political regime, let alone an empire on a massive scale. But his work, if not oracular, has nevertheless proved consistently prescient. Those scholarly articles on the 'reception' of Virgil in the 18th century prefigured the emergence in the 1980s of Classical Reception Studies, now a central sub-discipline of academic Classics. In the 1960s, when he was writing them, and in the 1970s, he visited and lived in places which few British poets have ever experienced: Nigeria immediately after it secured full independence from Britain in 1960, Cuba in the early years of the revolutionary government, Cold-War Czechoslovakia during the Prague spring, Brazil at the height of the hard-line dictatorial regime. His prose pieces provide shrewd and humane witness to these places at momentous historical moments. They are both prescient and riveting.

Aikin Mata, his 1964 adaptation of Aristophanes' comedy *Lysistrata* to fit local north Nigerian voices, performance styles and social structures, was years ahead of its time. With student actors at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, he evolved an unprecedented theatrical language transcending the cultural divisions between Europe and Africa. Within Africa this subsequently encouraged indigenous, especially Nigerian writers to consider the ancient Greek plays when mounting new stage productions. This in turn led to a flowering of

homegrown adaptations by writers including Ola Rotimi and Femi Osofisan.[11] Globally, it anticipated the explosion of interest in performing Greek drama which is now in the professional repertoires of significant theatres in every continent, a development which has been traced precisely to the last years of the 1960s.[12] But in grafting the Aristophanic situation of a war between Athens and Sparta onto the contemporary tribal rivalry between Yoruba and Ibo peoples, and utilising their indigenous rituals and performance traditions, *Aikin Mata* broke new ground. It anticipated by a decade the 'intercultural or 'transcultural' trend in world theatre, which saw directors abandoning narrow ideas of national or ethnic theatre traditions to mingle 'eastern' and 'western' repertoires, performance styles, rituals and ethnology: the Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki using Noh conventions to realise Euripides from the late 1970s, and the Russian-French-English Ariane Mnouchkine harnessing Kathakali, Kabuki and Balinese mask and dance traditions to Aeschylean tragedy in her *Les Atrides* in 1990.Tony's production was infinitely less well funded and far less widely reported, but he and his collaborator, James Simmons, were some of the earliest pioneers of 'intercultural' Greek theatre.

In *Aikin Mata* Harrison required some of his male actors to perform female roles. A mixed group of Yoruba and Ibo *men* were required to forget their tribal rivalries and merge identities as a chorus of old Hausa *women.* Such gender-role-inverting or 'gender-blind' practices are familiar enough in serious theatre today, but in the 1960s and 1970s they were regarded as shockingly avant-garde or vulgarly suggestive of the drag roles in children's pantomimes inherited from the Victorian music-hall tradition of burletta *en travesti*. So when Harrison insisted on using an all-male cast for the *Oresteia* at the National Theatre, being convinced that the full misogyny of the trilogy could only be realised by having all the female roles delivered by male actors, as they had been in in the ancient theatre, he encountered opposition from a range of viewpoints. Feminists objected to female actors being deprived, as

they saw it, of the opportunity to star in an important production, and aesthetic aficionados disliked seeing men in female costumes, which they felt inappropriate to the dignity of 'high art'. But Harrison's fascination with the light which cross-dressing can throw on restrictive gender ideology has persisted. His most recent play, *Iphigenia in Crimea*, to receive its premiere on BBC Radio in 2017, features British soldiers in 'drag' taking female roles in a burlesque version of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris*. For the performance they wear frocks they have looted from a deserted aristocratic house near Sebastopol—something which Harrison, with typically scrupulous research, has discovered actually happened in the British camp, located on the site of the ancient Greek city of Tauric Chersonesos, during the 1854-5 siege.

The unfair treatment of women in professional theatre as in society is something of which he is well aware. His account of *Aikin Mata* ends with the wry observation that 'the most enthusiastic reception of the play came from the small, embattled group of female students'. I have always thought of Tony when I read the magnificent line in Sophocles' *Antigone* about Haemon, who is supporting Antigone and her insistence on burying her dead kin, in the face of his father Creon's fury: ὅδ', ὡς ἔοικε, τῇ γυναικὶ συμμαχεῖ, 'It seems that this man fights as an ally of the woman' (740). Harrison planned to conclude the all-male *Oresteia* with a satyr play, as Aeschylus' trilogy was originally followed by a satyric *Proteus* (which sadly did not survive the centuries). He wanted women to 'play the half-men/half-goats and wear the phalluses as a mode of comment and redress.' This was made impossible by industrial disputes at the National Theatre, but Harrison's determination to have women play male roles eventually found fruition in *Square Rounds* (1992), which he had started planning as early as 1975, and in which women took almost all the roles. Using female voices to explore the invention of TNT and Chlorine Gas had the obvious advantage of exposing the intimate relationship between militarism and the masculine identity endorsed by patriarchal

society, a synergy which Harrison also exposed in his second adaptation of *Lysistrata*, combined with Euripides' *Trojan Women* and entitled *The Common Chorus*. This was set at the women's peace camp outside U.S. missile base in Berkshire. It has never been performed in full, although Glenda Jackson delivered some of the speeches on a programme, 'The Memory of Troy', broadcast on BBC Radio 4 on 28th August 1988. *Square Rounds* was staged at the National Theatre, and some critics slammed it for its affinities with vaudeville and cabaret. But the twenty-one women and two men performing in *Square Rounds* were a huge success at the Taganka Theatre in Moscow, where non-realist theatre has historically been rather better understood and appreciated.

Harrison's profound originality can also be seen in his idea of creating a new play out of the fragments of an ancient drama in his *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*, which was voted one of the best hundred plays of the 20th century in the National Theatre Millennium Poll. His essay in this volume explains his lifelong attraction to the almost lost genre of satyr drama, in which august heroes and gods were forced to revel in subversive musical-comedy versions of mythology with a chorus of satyrs, half men and half goat, wearing huge semi-erect artificial phalluses. But in piecing together, translating and augmenting the fragments of a satyr play, *The Trackers*, by Sophocles, Harrison was, once again, way ahead of his time. Putting together a powerful modern drama out of the fragments of ancient Greek plays subsequently became a familiar practice. *Trackers*, which premiered in Delphi in 1988, was swiftly followed by Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Love of the Nightingale* (based on Sophocles' *Tereus*, 1989) and Silviu Purcărete's *Les Danaïdes* (Avignon, 1996), which supplemented the surviving parts of Aeschylus' *Danaids* trilogy.

The essays here, presented in the chronological order in which they were written, provide unparalleled insights into Harrison's development. 'Fellowship' and 'Shango the Shaky Fairy' show him experimenting with the prose essay as an art form. But they also

reveal his urge to dramatize—to write direct speech bringing the conversation with people he had encountered to life, breaking through his first-person narrative, especially where the subject-matter is painful. The speech he writes in 'Shango' for the Cuban revolutionary exploring his hopelessly reactionary views on homosexuality is a fascinating case in point. Reading these essays also illuminates his working methods—the endless drafts and the voluminous scrapbooks, now housed in the Brotherton Library in Leeds, into which he pastes quotations, newspaper cuttings, photographs and ideas as he writes. Harrison's prose reveals a candid, sometimes frustrated and disappointed creative artist. He has often not received funding he needed for important projects, especially film poems. He has frequently suffered attacks by critics who have meretriciously disguised political disagreement as aesthetic judgement.

These prose works also enrich our knowledge of Harrison's personal biography. Although many of his important memories and relationships feature in his poetry, in his prose we catch different glimpses of his early life with his uncles and neighbours in Leeds, of travel with a young family in Cuba and Nigeria, and of innumerable thought-processes and conversations with collaborators over delicious bottles of wine. His insights into his friendships with giants of twentieth-century culture are required reading: Hollywood titan George Cukor, stage designer Jocelyn Herbert, writer Harold Pinter, as well as directors and actors including Richard Eyre, Diana Rigg, Peter Hall, Glenda Jackson, and his own long-term partner in private life, Sian Thomas. But his accounts of encounters that shaped him with individuals enjoying no such fame are equally significant: Terezinha, a homeless little girl living under the ramp of the National Theatre of Brazil; the elderly Yorkshire woman who gave him a bust of the poet John Nicholson after seeing *Poetry or Bust*, saying, with mordant Yorkshire wit, that it was as much use to her 'as a chocolate fireguard.'

In a touching paragraph, he tells us that he learned a great deal about the use of cameras in film from his son Max, before Max was afflicted in early adulthood with a cruel psychiatric illness. The least familiar works of Harrison are those using a camera—his film poems. All the scripts have been published, but most of the films themselves, for complex copyright reasons, have not been made widely available and have therefore not been properly understood and valued. This makes his precious essay 'Flicks and this Fleeting Life', as well as the others which talk extensively about film, even more valuable. Although he as an ardent moviegoer as a child, and saw every classic of world cinema that was shown when he was studying at Leeds University, his first experience of editing came with the montage of martial clips from documentaries and newsreel with which his Nigerian *Lysistrata*, *Aikin Mata* had opened in 1964—once again proving his prescience and appetite for innovation. Although it is now ubiquitous, the incorporation of 'video' within live theatre, although not altogether unprecedented in eastern Europe performances, was unheard of in Britain in 1964. In that production, Harrison tells is, his Lysistrata put a sudden stop to the combatants on film by throwing a water-pot at the screen on the back wall, thus exploiting the power of the 'hard cut'. Years of experimentation with mutually reinforcing both word and image through careful editing of clip against metre, producing what he calls 'the scansions of edited sequences', came to a climax in his powerful 1998 feature film *Prometheus*. This confronts the viewer with 'a procession of arresting images leading from northern England to eastern Europe and Greece, via the bombing of Dresden, the collapse of socialism and the Holocaust. This procession advances—its sequential logic dictated by poetic values rather than strict chronology—with a measured pace enhanced by Alastair Cameron's meticulous camera work and by precision editing.'[13]

Alongside his creation of the moving images of film, flickering through time at twenty-four frames per second, these essays reveal the extent of Harrison's engagement with

‘static’ works of visual art. The reader of almost any of his poetry will have noticed his fascination with statues and sculpture and their political uses and abuses. In the film poem *The Gaze of the Gorgon*, he adopts a statue of Heine as narrator, exploring the tragic history of European warfare in Heine’s own verse form—the couplet: he knew that the statue of the poet, who was Jewish, was removed from the Bavarian royal family’s summer palace on Corfu on the orders of Kaiser Wilhelm II. Harrison’s play *Poetry or Bust*, performed at Salts Mills in Bradford in 1993, uses the bust of the ‘wool-sorter poet’ John Nicholson as a symbol of a poet who ‘sells out’ his political principles in return ‘for the praise of genteel admirers, money or fame’. But the essays here reveal the extent to which Harrison’s imagination has been aroused by contemplating artworks from all over the world. They include carved wooden images of Shango (the Hermaphroditic thunder-spirit in the Yoruba religion), and the poets Arion and Orpheus, painted in the 15th century by Andrew Mantegna on the ceiling of the bridal chamber of the Ducal Palace in Mantua. Harrison’s poetry has been informed equally by a fresco in the Naples Archaeological Museum depicting a verdant Mount Vesuvius *before* the eruption which destroyed Pompeii, by Rembrandt’s ‘Descent from the Cross’ and in *Phaedra Britannica*, his translation of Racine’s tragedy to India under the British Raj, by erotic 18th-century art from Rajasthan in north-western India.

Harrison has adapted works by all four great classical Athenian dramatists, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes. Yet he has not translated any tragedy by Sophocles, held by Aristotle and the Victorians to be the most ‘perfect’ of the tragic poets. He relished, rather, working on Sophocles’ theatrical style as exemplified in the more boisterous, rowdy, comical key of satyr drama, as he explains here in ‘The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus’. Yet there is much that is Sophoclean about Harrison’s own theatre: a pleasure in the ‘plain words’ for which Sophocles was admired in antiquity, in letting poetry work its own effect without over-elaborate visual effects, in unflinching acknowledgement of the absolute

unfairness of human life and the undeserved extremes of human suffering. The famous view of Matthew Arnold, that Sophocles 'saw life steadily, and saw it whole' (in the sonnet 'To a Friend', 1849) often comes into my mind when I read Harrison's writing. This may seem incongruous. The anger and demotic verve of Harrison's poetry may seem a world away from Arnoldian elegiac wistfulness and urbanity. But Harrison's poetry reveals that he has stared at the best and worst that human existence affords, if not with absolute steadiness, then with unflinching steadfastness. He has seen it steadfastly and he has certainly seen it 'whole.'

For everything he has ever done, said, and written is underpinned by an unerringly consistent and coherent intellectual structure. He looks at the material world from a perspective fundamentally informed by Marxist analysis, in turn grounded in the ancient atomism of Epicurus and Lucretius. Harrison's cosmos is in constant flux; plants, humans and other organic bodies are in a perpetual process of coming to be and passing away, the matter that constitutes them dispersing, as they die, back into the environment. He is intrigued by horticulture, compost, cooking, alimentary processes, and decomposing rubbish heaps.[14] While his work is located in real, specific places, and gains much of its power from its physical particularity, his geopolitical perspective as a human being is never the less than global. He is fascinated by cartography, physical geography, geology, and the history of science—the last being most clear in his fascinating with the way chemistry, physics and technology have been used in the development of weapons: machine guns, explosives, chlorine gas and nuclear bombs. He has no religion and believes in no afterlife; there is no providential god for Harrison, and all his work laments that life is short and too often brutal, that human history has consistently disappointed utopian dreamers and that apparent 'progress' takes us backwards away from the light. For these reasons, like the ancient Greeks who have so consistently inspired him, he believes in savouring happiness and sensory pleasure from landscape and sunshine, food and wine, love, sex, friendship, and literature.

Harrison's passion for the products of human artistic creativity is inexhaustible. To say 'passion for the Arts' would be a ludicrous distortion, since 'the Arts' are not normally taken to include all the countless forms taken by words and images, across the social and cultural spectrum, which he has enjoyed and which have enriched his imagination. As Richard Eyre has put it, 'Tony wants the whole body of society, not just its head, to be involved in art.'[15] These essays complement his poetry by detailing the sheer diversity of his cultural experiences and how they have informed his own creative output. The most canonical high operas by Monterverdi, Verdi, Smetana and Orff jostle here with working-class entertainers George Formby and Vesta Tilley. Films only seen in arthouse cinemas, by Eistenstein, Torre Nilsson and Tarkovsky, appear alongside James Cagney in *White Heat* and Disney's *Bambi*. Almost forgotten translators like Edward Powys Mathers and minor novelists like Nancy Bogen rub shoulders with Dryden and Dostoyevsky. The work in which he offered his most eloquent exploration of the way the Arts have been used to create and maintain social divisions was *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*, where the human-animal hybridity of the satyr, and what Adrian Poole has aptly called 'ribald generic indeterminacy' of satyr drama,[16] allowed him to meditate on the chasm in his own previous theatre between the supposedly 'high' culture of the *Oresteia* and the folk culture of *Bow Down* (1977) and *The Mysteries*. But Kelleher points out that Harrison had previously chosen, for the cover of his translations from Martial, a photograph of a carved stone satyr, serving as a kind of mask for Harrison's persona as a translator. This persona is neither neutral nor self-effacing, but has 'a diabolically gleeful grin, suggesting that the transformation of poetry from the ancient language to modern vernacular is the work of a personality with 'an inscrutable agenda' of his own.[17] The same applies to the satyrs in *Trackers*. His clog-dancing satyrs perform his own manifesto not only on the gulf that separates elite art from popular culture, but on the system of social stratification that has always silenced the poor, the hungry, the oppressed

and the persecuted (above all represented in the flayed body of Marsyas) and excluded them from the rights and privileges enjoyed higher up the class system.

It is no accident that Harrison has found in classical antiquity his most fruitful medium for discussing the class politics of art. The boys at Leeds Grammar School studied Latin and Greek to make them feel superior to other children, but it did not work on the Loiner Poet. Harrison has faced up to the quandary of working in a medium whose consumers are not of the same class as that into which he was born—and to which he remains loyal—through his own brand of classicism. His radical treatment of classics has underpinned his quest for a public role for a poet who never forgets the way the upper and middle class's prosperity has been built on the working class's deprivation. Harrison uses classical myth in the attempt to forge an inclusive public poetry rather than an exclusive curriculum. He uses a classical tradition of public in a way that is consistently class-conscious and oppositional: itis, in Patrick Deane's acute formulation, 'the deft and opportunistic annexation of classical authority by a poet not born to it.' These essays, especially those on the *Oresteia*, *Phaedra Britannica* and *Prometheus*, show Harrison dipping his pen into his inkwell to use ancient Greek and Roman culture in ways that to help us confront the darkest, most tragic elements of human experience.

Yet, in the final analysis, it is the exuberance of his classicism for which he may be best remembered. I have always felt that much of his work shares an attitude with the final scene of Jacques Offenbach's uproarious *Orpheus in the Underworld* (1858), where the Olympian gods hold a party in Hades. Bored by Zeus's old-fashioned taste in sedate dances, they invent the riotous 'infernal gallop', better known as the can-can. Critics were appalled by the irreverence Offenbach had shown towards ancient Greek culture, his 'profanation of holy and glorious antiquity'.[18] But another way of looking at it was that Offenbach was using the Greeks to take society and entertainment into the future, or, as Harrison puts it in 'Facing

up to the Muses', to take the human race '*forward with the Greek*s.' To use his own inimitable phrase in another essay, 'The misanthrope: Jane Eyre's Sister', the whole life's work of this *vates* from Leeds has truly been 'a Jack and the Beanstalk act'. He has braved 'the somnolent ogre of a British classical education to grab the golden harp.'

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[1]*An Apologie for Poetrie,* Written by the right noble, vertuous, and learned, Sir Phillip Sidney, Knight (London: Henry Olney, 1595).

[2] Dr Agrippa appears in Mary Shelley's short story *The Mortal Immortal* (1833) and in Søren Kierkegaard's *Stages on Life's Way* (1845).

[3] These Leeds Grammar School chapel windows were unveiled in 1931 and there is a description of them in *The Yorkshire Post* for September 21st, 1931, p. 6. I am very grateful to Anna Reeve, a graduate student in the Classics Department at Leeds University, for helping me research these windows.

[4] From John of Gaunt's speech in Shakespeare's *Richard II*, Act II scene 1.

[5]*Harrison's charitable worldview*: see the letter by Tom Phillips to the *Independent*, quoted in Christopher Butler, 'Culture and Debate,' in Sandie Byrne, *Tony Harrison: Loiner* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977) p. 114.

[6] *The Works of Mr John Cleveland, containing his poems, orations, epistles, collected into one volume, with the life of the author* (London: R. Holt, 1687) p. 3.

[7] E.R. Dodds, *Missing Persons: An Autobiography* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1977) p. 57.

[8] John Bulwer, praised in a poem by John Dickenson prefixed to Bulwer's *Chirologia: or the naturall language of the hand. Composed of the speaking motions, and discoursing gestures thereof* (London: Thomas Harper, 1644).

[9] Strabo, *Geography*, 4.4.4

[10] T.W. Harrison, 'English Virgil: The Aeneid in the XVIII Century,'*Philologica Pragensia* 10 (1967) 1-1 1 and 80-91.

[11] See further Kevin J. Wetmore, *The Athenian Sun in an African Sky: Modern African Adaptations of Clasical Greek Tragedy* (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland, 2002).

[12] See the 'Introduction' to E. Hall, F. Macintosh and A. Wrigley (eds.) *Dionysus since 69: Greek Tragedy at the Dawn of the Third Millennium* (Oxford: OUP, 2004).

[13]Edith Hall, 'Tony Harrison's Prometheus: A View from the Left', *Arion* 12 (2004) 129-30.

[14] See Edith Hall, 'Classics, Class and Cloaca: Tony Harrison's humane coprology', *Arion* 15 (2007) 111-36.

[15]Richard Eyre, 'Tony Harrison the Playwright,' in Sandie Byrne, ed., Tony Harrison: Loiner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) p. 45.

[16] Adrian Poole, 'Harrison and Marsyas', in Lorna Hardwick (ed.) *Tony Harrison's Poetry, Drama and Film: The Classical Dimension* (Milton Keynes: Open University, 1999) p. 57.

[17] Joe Kelleher, *Tony Harrison* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1996), pp. 20, 34, 64.

[18] Jules Janin, in *Journal des Débats* (1859).