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Author(s): Edith Hall

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Tony Harrison's *Prometheus*: A View from the Left

EDITH HALL

*Fire and poetry, two great powers
that mek this so-called gods' world OURS!*

Old Man, who has become Pro-
metheus, to an audience of miners¹

IN 1998 TONY HARRISON'S first feature film was screened at some esoteric venues, broadcast on UK Channel 4 television, and subsequently disappeared almost completely from public view. Outside the UK it has made little impression. Nobody got very excited about Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* in 1820, either. Yet I am convinced that the eye of history will later view Harrison's *Prometheus* as the most important artistic reaction to the fall of the British working class as the twentieth century staggered to its close, a fall symptomatic of the international collapse of the socialist dream. The film also offers the most important adaptation of classical myth for a radical political purpose for years, and (with the possible exception of his stage play *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*) the most brilliant artwork Tony Harrison has yet produced.

Harrison believes that the ancient Greek tragedy entitled *Prometheus Bound* is by Aeschylus, the poet of the Athenian democratic revolution. Aeschylus' Prometheus is wilful, stubborn, audacious, gloomy, inspirational, intellectual, poetic, and has a diachronic view of history allowing him to see far away across the world, far into the past and equally far into the future. Harrison's film is also wilful, stubborn, audacious, gloomy, inspirational, intellectual, poetic, with an international perspective and diachronic view of history. It escorts its audience on a procession of arresting images leading from northern England to eastern Europe and Greece, via the bomb-

ing 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.

The originality of the visual images is immense: the opening sequence offers an unforgettable Kratos and Bia, masked nuclear power workers, looming menacingly through the steam of cooling towers. Another episode involves the wild-eyed Io finding a moment of respite as she tenderly embraces the monumental gold statue of Prometheus which dominates the later stages of the film. The image which lingers most powerfully in my personal memory is the Oceanids (women workers at a fish canning factory), their pale veils of fishnet (what else?) fluttering across sad, beautiful masks designed by Jocelyn Herbert. They float on a raft down the River Humber, in one of Britain's industrial heartlands, to Richard Blackford's atmospheric music, sounding forth from the Humber Bridge's suspension cables. Hermes (whose connection with the lyre Harrison has previously explored in *Trackers*), has struck the sound from this cunning steel construction, a potent symbol of humankind's ability to overcome natural obstacles through a combination of Promethean intelligence, which transforms the world at the level of mind, and Promethean industrial fire, which transforms it at the level of matter.

The role of Hermes, played with menace by Michael Feast, is upgraded from the Aeschylean archetype. Hermes' dialogues with Prometheus constitute the intellectual kernel of the film. Feast's upper-middle class English accent, hard and brilliant as cut glass, contrasts sharply with Walter Sparrow's Promethean Old Man, who puts his warm, northern, working-class smoker's voice to superb use. The oratorical highlight is his nostalgic monologue on smoking (27–29), which ruminates on the extraordinary *pleasure* and sexual allure cigarettes, at least as represented on screen, used to offer: "Who smokes now? Them were the days / when women smoked in negligées." The Old Man's smoking habit constitutes, in

Marxist terms, a perfect example of the Dialectical Unity of Opposites. To smoke is a sign of working-class identity and even solidarity (smoking is very much a class issue in the UK), and the ultimate sign of the personal liberty which the Old Man refuses to yield to his capitalist masters. Yet it is ultimately forced upon him by big business concerns in the form of multinational tobacco corporations and is, of course, killing him. Some unintelligent anti-smoking campaigners in the UK complained that Harrison's film was an apology for cigarettes. It is not. Harrison does not smoke. The Old Man is dying of his addiction; the actor playing him, Walter Sparrow, died of lung cancer soon after the film was made.

Classicists will want to know the nature of the film's relationship with the Aeschylean archetype. It is not a translation nor an adaptation but it is inspired by the Greek tragedy and is throughout informed by its dialogues and confrontations. The cast includes familiar figures—Prometheus, a chorus of Oceanids, Hermes, Io—plus some extra miners, a miner's small son, his mother and grandmother. The screenplay at one point even quotes the ancient tragedy in ancient Greek: Hermes' first apostrophe to Prometheus (*PV* 976–78) is in Harrison's version addressed with contempt and malice to miners descending a mineshaft (18). Elsewhere Harrison uses English translation of the Greek, notably in the early scene in which the boy's homework requires him to study a trenchant version of Prometheus' "philanthropy" monologue (*PV* 447–53), "Men had eyes but didn't see . . .," concluding with the statement (6–7),

With Prometheus life began
to flourish for benighted Man.
My gift of fire made Mankind free
but I stay in captivity.

Yet the film is just as much about what the figure of the Aeschylean Prometheus has meant to later generations of humankind, especially to romantics, radicals, and revolutionaries. It is a late twentieth-century antiphonal response

to Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, with all its choric plurality of voices, its frustrated revolutionary power, and its sense of the torment implicit in the march of human history. Harrison himself invites us to draw such connections between his film and Shelley's poem in "Fire and Poetry," the introduction to the published screenplay of the film, much of which he wrote in the Baths of Caracalla, where Shelley penned *Prometheus Unbound*. But he also points out the important relationship between the Prometheus myth and the history of Marxist politics, and some of the film feels like a rhapsody on ideas developed in the classics of Marxist theory. It uses word and image to explore the material and economic processes that have underpinned capitalism and twentieth-century communism: there has certainly never been an artwork more aware of its own contextual mode and means of production. Coal is extracted from the earth, cast into fire, and miners' bodies are transformed visually into bullion—a horrific metamorphosis from concrete to abstract labor and thence to Symbolic Capital.

Harrison's scholarship never stands between him and the real people with whom he is dealing. His classical heroes never overshadow his local heroes. One of the reasons he likes film is that "the cinema screen can give heroic stature to the most humble of faces . . . an essential requirement in a film where the most unlikely wheezing ex-miner is slowly made to represent Prometheus himself" (xxii). For the main reason why Harrison's film has been little watched is probably that it draws epic inferences from a very specific and very controversial political event, albeit the landmark conflict in British postwar socio-economic history. Twice in the early 1970s, under Edward Heath's Conservative government, the National Union of Mineworkers had brought Britain to a near-standstill by striking in protest against sudden pit closures. In both 1972 and 1974, the country was forced to work a three-day week in order to economize on energy consumption. The strikes improved miners' pay, conditions, and status, so the Conservatives never forgave them. The Right

Wing's new warrior, Margaret Thatcher, returned to power in 1983, after defeating Argentina, "the enemy without," in the Falklands War. Her priority was now the defeat of the "the enemy within."

In early 1984, the National Coal Board threw down the gauntlet by announcing the closure of twenty pits (in the event far more than that have closed down). The closures would necessitate making over twenty thousand men redundant, removing the income from hundreds of thousands of British people in mining and allied industries, and destroying dozens of communities across the poorest regions of Wales, Scotland and Northeast England. Although Harrison's *Prometheus* is set in its own "present" of the 1990s, the strike is unambiguously signalled as the point at which Kirkby, the northern English community it portrays, was thrown into crisis; an important early image is the Old Man's coal carving of a figure in Promethean pose captioned "Striking Miner, 1984," and the eighth sequence includes a newspaper article tracing the pit closures back to the strike (5).

Trackers concluded with the final transformation of the satyrs into the homeless sleeping rough on the south bank of the river Thames in London. In the 1980s, the number of homeless rose exponentially as a result of the same Conservative government's policy of ejecting large numbers of mentally ill people from hospitals and leaving them to their own helpless devices, a policy entitled, with Orwellian cynicism, "care in the community." But in defending the mining communities, Harrison has accepted into art heroes even less acceptable than destitute vagrants. It is one thing for a poet to support oppressed causes which have been legitimized by mainstream western liberal ideology, such as women and ethnic minorities, in whose name countless productions and adaptations of Greek tragedy have emerged over the last three decades. It is quite another to make heroes out of the white male working class, especially the National Union of Mineworkers. During the strike they were almost universally presented as violent thugs; the right-wing press insinuated

that they were not only corrupt but in league with Libya and even with the Soviet Union (a ludicrous claim in the UK, where Communism almost completely failed to take root in the working class). Mainstream media unquestioningly set about discrediting Arthur Scargill, the President of NUM, by implying that he was a corrupt, avaricious bully, and even a traitor. One of the reasons for the opprobrium heaped on Harrison's poem *v.*, first published just after the end of the strike in 1985, was that it is prefaced with a quotation from (although not a dedication to) Scargill: "My father still reads the dictionary every day. He says that your life depends on your power to master words."

Prometheus shares subject-matter with one film which has received international exposure, Stephen Daldry's *Billy Elliot* (2000). This example of "sentimental realism" portrays an eleven-year-old working-class boy's desire to study ballet. Its context is Easington, one of the toughest colliery towns in County Durham, during the 1984–85 strike. Billy's father and brother are miners, daily attending the picket line. The film is broadly sympathetic to the miners (although critical of their narrow construction of masculinity). But its message is ultimately about the individual's need and ability to transcend his class origins and tribal culture; *Prometheus* on the other hand, which shares a similar focus on a young miner's son, is about all humanity's collective need and desire to transcend its own tragic history. The shift from the individual to the collective, from the specific to the general (in the terms of Aristotle's *Poetics*, chapter 9, from the historical to the philosophical), is made precisely by grafting the particular struggle of the British miners onto the transhistorically significant ancient Greek myth. It is this fusion which constitutes the total originality of the film. This is the Classical Tradition at its most potent and most important. If nothing else, it provides overwhelming proof that Capitalism and Classicism need not go hand in hand.

The film which *Prometheus* superficially most resembles is probably Theo Angelopoulos' meditative *Ulysses' Gaze* (1995),

with which it shares the idea of a journey through disintegrating regions of east European communist industrialization, an interest in monumental civic statuary, a subordination of narrative to an exploration of themes, and movement backwards and forwards in time. The two films also share a commitment to examining the nature of the cinematic gaze and film as the medium of memory, but Angelopoulos' cognitive and epistemological concerns are replaced in *Prometheus* by a much more vibrant and class-conscious view of the role of cinema: the Old Man spends much of the film in the derelict building of the Palace Cinema in Knottingley, a real relic of twentieth-century working-class culture. More importantly, *Ulysses' Gaze* is not a verse film/*poem*, a genre of which Harrison is one of the earliest and most important exponents, if not quite its actual inventor. He has now made a dozen such film/*poems*, including the excellent *The Shadow of Hiroshima*, broadcast on Channel 4 television on 6 August 1995, the anniversary of the bombing. Harrison is fascinated by the rhythmic parallels between the movement inherent in 24 or 25 frames per second, the metrical beats in lines of verse, and the rhythm inherent in what he calls "the scansion of edited sequences" (xxvii). Moreover, the special diction of poetry can allow important illuminations of everyday images: he believes that "film and poetry have a good deal in common," and poetry can "enter the inner world of people in documentary situations" (xxiii).

An important influence on Harrison has been the legendary British 1936 film documentary *Night Mail*, which follows the journey of the night mail train from London to Glasgow in Scotland, matched closely to words by W. H. Auden and music by Benjamin Britten. *Night Mail* is unique; superb editing matches word and images of steam locomotion in near-perfect harmony. On 10 March 2002, Independent Television (ITV) broadcast Harrison's new film/*poem*, *Crossings*, which revisits *Night Mail* in innovative ways. One major difference is that Auden composed poetry to accompany pre-existing footage, whereas for Harrison, as always in his film/*poems*, the process of verse composition is inextricable from the

recording and editing of the moving image. But, for the viewer, an even more important difference lies in the political vision. *Night Mail*, despite its date, avoided the realities of unemployment and poverty in 1930s Britain, an erasure of which Harrison is absolutely incapable. Seventeen years after the 1984–85 strike, the miners are still on his mind; as the train in *Crossings* reaches the north of England, the narrator views the ruins of the once-proud industrial landscape (its farmland also recently devastated by the terrible slaughter of cattle during the foot-and-mouth epidemic of 2001):

The modern Nightmail threads through the map
of mining communities thrown on the scrap,
collieries culled like Shilbottle, Shotton,
winding gear felled, and workforce forgotten.
Along with culled cattle, culled kingdoms of coal
one dumped on the bonfire, one on the dole.

Nearly two decades on, large numbers of people still live in terrible poverty in the former mining regions, with no work, no money, failing schools, and worthless real estate. Tony Harrison is the only serious artist in Britain still refusing to allow his audience to forget these destitute communities.

Prometheus is so original, so dense, so visionary, and so erudite that it is unusually difficult to discover critical avenues by which to approach it. Since Durham, where I teach, is only fifteen minutes from Harrison's home in Newcastle, I took the train through forgotten coalfields to talk to him about the making of the film. His study is lined with row upon row of notebooks for each of his works, notebooks soon destined for the University Library in Leeds, where Harrison studied classics. His arduous creative labors include the collection of a huge variety of materials; for *Prometheus* the notebooks include newspaper and magazine cuttings about the mining industry, about industrial pollution local and global, photocopies of reference works on myth, images of Prometheus from ancient Greek vases to the

high temple of capitalism constituted by the Rockefeller Center, sketches for different cinematic sequences, photographs, postcards, and ideas jotted down as they occurred to him during the evolution of the film. There are careful transcriptions from *LSJ* of whole entries under items of Greek vocabulary. Poetry, of course, figures large: passages of Hesiod pasted in Notebook 1 show how carefully Harrison has thought about pre-Aeschylean poetic narratives dealing with Prometheus' theft and gift of fire.

Other words are written out for contemplative purposes: on page 563 of the third notebook, Harrison has simply written "*Sprengbombe*—high explosive bombs," "*Vernichtungsfeuer*—annihilating fire," and "*Vernichtungslager*—extermination camp." Reflection on such terms underlies one of the film's least noticed achievements, the way it uses resonances from classical poetry to find a poetic voice in which to address the most challenging of artistic topics, especially for a non-Jew—the Holocaust. In the cattle trucks, the industrialization of death in the abattoir, Io's suffering, movingly portrayed by the athletic Fern Smith, and the melting down of the miners, Harrison has put images suggested by the Aeschylean drama to the most sombre possible use. It reminded me slightly of the allusive use of myth in Primo Levi's "The canto of Ulysses," which also revolves around hell fires, added in 1958 to *Survival in Auschwitz*. Harrison told me that he wanted his viewers to see, with brutal literalness, what it means to be turned into a cow (or into a human treated like a cow) destined for a death chamber.

A remarkable feature of *Prometheus* is the charitable vision of the countries of the former eastern bloc. Harrison spent eighteen months in Prague in the mid-1960s, and experienced at first-hand the effects of communism gone bad in the period leading up to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. But his first wife's father had been a communist under Hitler, and lived in East Germany. Harrison does not engage with the propaganda images on which the west was fed such an undiluted diet during the Cold War. His

eastern bloc countries are always viewed with a humane, sympathetic, and rational gaze. Bulgaria provides the film's most searing image of simple, generous, humanity, when a poor baker woman gives the desperate Io a loaf of bread. Yet the eastern bloc of his film also provides, with uncompromising truth, the most horrific images of industrialization and pollution—one of the terrible prices twentieth-century socialism had to pay in the name of the progress and triumph of the proletariat. When the statue of Prometheus reaches Nowa Huta, one of the most polluted industrial complexes in Poland, Hermes wantonly muses on the delight a misanthropic god can take in the chemical poisoning of man's environment. Seeing it as the punishment the industrial working class must pay for their political insouciance, he concludes:

So such Promethean shrines,
chemical and steel works, mines,
still anger Zeus because they stand
for the Promethean contraband,
nonetheless make him content
by blighting man's environment.

(63)

The film was made on a pitifully small budget of only 1.5 million pounds. Sometimes it shows. Some of the most cataclysmic sequences, when the whole world seems involved in endless struggle and conflagration, might well have profited from sleeker production values. But the tiny budget may have had a beneficial impact: Harrison believes that great art requires almost preternatural effort, and the fact that the film was physically extremely arduous to make (especially for the actors playing Io and Hermes) probably enhances the sense of exertion and struggle which is conveyed throughout. And yet at times this epic on the horror and hope of humankind is extremely funny, especially when contemplating its own aesthetics; in one hilarious episode the Old Man hu-

morously develops the conceit that it is the political machinations of the Conservatives which have driven him into perpetual rhyming couplets (22).

Prometheus is on a grand conceptual scale. It is by far the most ambitious of Harrison's works to date and deserves a much wider audience. Since it is unlikely to be screened in commercial multiplexes, its audience will inevitably consist of members of the liberal intelligentsia, many of whom will not be able to abide Harrison's committed (these days known as "unreconstructed") politics. But others will recognize that *Prometheus* is less a protest piece or left-wing agit-prop than a tearful threnody for a lost dream, a lost hope, a lost utopia.

In 1937 an English socialist poet, John Lehmann, fell in love with Soviet Georgia. He published a fascinating book entitled *Prometheus and the Bolsheviks*, read by few outside the British Left, which Harrison discusses in "Fire and Poetry." Lehmann recounts the "Hesiodic" dream he experienced while sleeping in a deckchair on a Soviet steamer crossing the Black Sea. He is visited by Prometheus, the longest resident of the Caucasus. The titan has been liberated by Bolshevism, and is about to take out party membership. Even our historical awareness of the squalid future and fate of Soviet communism can not wholly obscure the buoyancy and idealism of this dream. Lehmann's narrative closes on the most optimistic of notes: the people of Georgia are on their way to equality, freedom and *hope*, the hope of the best society mankind has ever known.

Psychologists say that hope is essential to human well-being. The weekly purchase of a lottery ticket allows us to dream that personal wealth is imminent. Sick patients recover when simply offered a new treatment. And from the early nineteenth century until the 1980s, everyone who could not tolerate the many intolerable aspects of capitalism has been able to participate in various versions of the dream of ideal socialism, a dream in which humans are free, equal, and not forced to service the profit margins of others in order to feed their children. Communism, socialism, the labor movement and trade unionism all offered forms of group

consciousness which helped humans all over the world to imagine that progress to a better society was not only possible but was beginning to be effected in reality. However, during the last twenty years, in the west at least, socialism has become totally discredited and has disappeared from the public radar. Our society has neither lottery ticket nor new medicine; no hope of collective wealth or health. The impact of the absence of utopian thinking has yet to be felt; society needs to be able to *imagine* itself into improvement before it can legislate with that purpose. Harrison's film is a howling lament for the death of aspiration, an indictment through word and image of the dangerous *hopelessness* of our cynical millennial Zeitgeist. Go see it, if you are not too cynical.

NOTE

1. Tony Harrison, screenplay to *Prometheus* (London 1998), 84. All references are to this text or to "Fire and Poetry," the introduction to it, published in the same volume. I am grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Board for funding the research project at Oxford's Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama, which has facilitated the writing of this essay.