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Statuary and Classicism in Harrison's *The Loiners* and Beyond

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ABSTRACT

A recurring element of the landscape of Tony Harrison's poetry is the sculpted image, especially the classical artistic figure, which still haunts the modern world's visual field – the realistic human form metamorphosed into metal, stone or timber. This essay identifies some of the aesthetic and political functions which they fulfil in a selection of his works, starting from his documented fascination with Nietzsche's statement that tragic poetry, like the tragic mask, or Perseus' mirror, allows humans to look at intolerable suffering entailed by the human predicament without being turned into stone. The last part of the essay stresses Harrison's portrayal of the processes of flux, change and metamorphosis of matter, processes which produce or are symbolised by anthropomorphic artefacts (above all the moment when the miners are melted down in the furnace to produce the statue of Prometheus) and argues that these crucial moments in his works are an expression both of his fascination with the visual as well as the literary forms inherited from classical antiquity, and of his fundamentally materialist philosophical outlook.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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In 2009 Tony Harrison accounted for the presence of sculptures in his poetry in these terms: "Statues are one of the ways I try to test the traditions of European culture against the most modern destructive forces".¹ Yet, despite the general agreement that visual artworks—statues, paintings, photographs—occupy a prominent place in his poetry, critics are divided on the efficacy with which such visual media are used. John Lyon goes so far down the road of negative assessment as to argue that Harrison's words "are premised on, and subordinate to, the visual", his "sentimental and domesticating verse too often [doing] a disservice to such images, blunting and blurring their capacity to disturb and challenge."² There is also a general agreement that Harrison's poetry is marked by a distinct "classicism", although critics are equally divided over its precise nature. Is it constituted by the frequency of references to Greek and Roman authors and to the "classic" poets of the English canon? Or is it a more formal absorption of metrical and generic traditions (iambics, sonnets)? Or perhaps the Greek tragic model of the poet as the "teacher", who addresses citizens on matters both private and political in a

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¹Harrison, *The Inky Digit of Defiance*, 469.

²Lyon, 13. He may be misinterpreting Carol Rutter's (ed.) intention, when she included several photographs in her selection of Harrison's poetry as implicitly critical of the poet's interest in visual culture.

public arena? Or is it relentlessly “oppositional”, using the classical aesthetic only to challenge the hierarchical nature of the societies which produced it?³

This essay has the aim of taking a tentative preliminary step in clarifying these inter-related questions—the instrumentality of the referenced visual artefact in Harrison’s poetry and the nature of his classicism. It addresses one particular type of artefact—the statue or sculpture—in one particular collection, his pivotal *The Loiners* (1970). To investigate the function of visual artworks across his large and diverse *oeuvre* would require a monograph, and intense research amongst all his work-in-progress scrapbooks, now held in the University of Leeds’ Brotherton Library, into which he has pasted so many images over the decades. I here attempt something much less ambitious. I simply argue that *The Loiners* acquires some of its imagistic unity from the pervasive presence of statuary, and that it establishes certain key functions of the material artwork in Harrison’s poetry in ways that anticipate the more ambitious and sustained uses of visual artefacts in his later works. But it also suggests that thinking about the central image of the statue is a helpful route into Harrison’s complex experiential world, since it is intricately associated with other recurring elements in his subsequent poetry—not only with his classicism and attraction towards the ancient Greek epigrammatist Palladas in 1975, but also his political outlook, transhistorical vision (David Kennedy has called him a “poetic time-traveller”⁴), his concept of poetry as a craft, his sense of physical embodiment as a human being with a capacity for acute sensory experience, and attitude to death, mortality and sex. Finally, it argues that certain distinctive aspects of Harrison’s technique are derived directly from his encounter with ancient versification, which the ancient poets self-consciously theorised partly through using the analogy with visual art, “sculpting” words, and attempts to clarify some of the ways that a reader of Harrison unfamiliar with ancient Greek can appreciate the full extent of the influence of the verse forms and diction of the ancient language he loves so well.

Harrison the *world*-traveller always notices statues. His prose works often mention the stone figures he has visited abroad—the monumental Cervantes beneath which he dozed one hot afternoon outside a public library in Cuba, the stern, disapproving gaze of the grand actress Mlle Mars at the Comédie-Française in Paris, contrasted with the more affable statue of Molière beside his favourite Parisian hotel.⁵ He also has a personal collection of statues—or rather, busts of poets—as he has described in his speech “The Inky Digit of Defiance”, delivered when he accepted the inaugural PEN/Pinter Prize in 2009:

... the first thing you will see in my hallway is a large eighteenth-century bust of Milton, who stares at me as I watch TV and reminds me of the grave and seriously committed role of the poet, and who, though he was blind, had one of the most unflinching and unswerving gazes of all English poets. He is one of my great heroes. I have a mini-version of this bust looking at me as I type in my attic. I have small busts of Homer, Dante, Byron and Strindberg, and framed engravings of Molière, Shakespeare, Kipling, a photo and a manuscript of Yeats.⁶

In works Harrison published later than *The Loiners*, such busts and statues of public figures and writers sometimes feature metapoetically, as part of a self-reflexive discussion

³See further Hall, “Classics,” 111–37; Gill, 164.

⁴Kennedy, 167.

⁵Harrison, *The Inky Digit of Defiance*, 76, 325.

⁶*Ibid.*, 470.

of his own role in the history of poetry and his relationship with his predecessors, both those he admires fraternally and those for whom his feelings are more conflicted. The Milton bust appears as “a constant inspiration”, to be lovingly dusted, in “A Celebration of the Abdication of King Charles III.”⁷ On the other hand, the idea of the portrait bust took on a particularly ironic role in his 1993 *Poetry or Bust*, the “ribald verse-biography” of John Nicholson,⁸ the minor nineteenth-century Saltaire poet. A working-class wool-sorter with a drinking problem, Nicholson went to London to commission a bust of himself (now in Harrison’s possession) after his employer published a volume of his verse. For Harrison, the bust here symbolises the venal moral and political “selling out” of all artists who have ever compromised their art or acquiesced to the demands of the ruling class in return for a stipend, a few days of celebrity, or an honorary title. In the less self-conscious and less confident poetic idiom of *The Loiners*, however, before he himself had to negotiate the pitfalls and temptations of fame, this particular use of the artwork is not manifested in his poetry. Nor is the link between the type of immortality which the poet can hope to achieve through song, a way of surviving death even more enduring than a monument cast in bronze or structured in stone like the pyramids, as Horace definitively expressed it in the famous opening stanza of his *Odes* 3.30. The uses to which Harrison puts statuary in *The Loiners* are diverse, and they include precisely the function of statue similes and metaphors in Greek tragedy—occurring in contexts dominated by eros or thanatos, or in meditations upon the nature and function of poetry.⁹ But in *The Loiners*, talking to other poets about intertextuality, or mulling on poetic celebrity and immortality, are not yet amongst the obvious tasks of the textually embedded artefact.

In 1983, Harrison himself defined *The Loiners* as dealing with “sex and history: the intimacies of the private life are a kind of earthing area for the lightning of history and of political struggles”.¹⁰ In *Allotments*, he remembers early erotic encounters, during his very young manhood, in the graveyards of Leeds, where

after love
we’d find some epitaph
embossed backwards on your arse and laugh

—a humorous inversion of the traditional equation of sex and death, his lover’s body itself receiving the imprint of funeral verses.¹¹ Establishment doctors are compared in “Manica” to “Starchy Baptist cherubim”; medical officials disapprovingly performing tests for venereal disease here become envisaged as chubby ecclesiastical sculptures.¹² And in “The Curtain Catullus”, the image of the statue is central to his report of a vivid but disturbing sexual encounter with a woman in Czechoslovakia during the Prague Spring.¹³ In a taut refashioning of the poetic motif of “Love versus War” so beloved of the Latin love poets of the first century BCE, beginning with Catullus, the monumental

⁷Harrison, *Collected Poems*, 321.

⁸Hickling.

⁹Hall, “Visible Women.”

¹⁰Haffenden, 231.

¹¹Harrison, *Collected Poems*, 20.

¹²Ibid., 37.

¹³Ibid., 53–4.

architecture of the city is made to contrast with the monumental civic statues of the city: “I’m not so sold / On all this Gothic and this old Baroque”¹⁴.

The woman, a Communist Party tour guide, points out the monument of Jan Hus, Protestant reformer burnt at the stake in 1415, and “Kafka’s ball-less eyes caked up with snow”. In addition to these statues of famous Czechs, the poet’s voice invokes Astraea, the mythological maiden long associated with the return of the Golden Age. He pleads with her to descend and make “piecemeal” the statue of Stalin, “chocolate-Santa-Claus- / like”. He wants her to fill the niches once featuring the images of Christian saints, but also to “crumple” (a verb with a gently sexual overtone) a statue far away in London—one which, more than any other, represents the history of British militarism, jingoism and imperialism:

Descend like a snow maiden from the air.
Fill Chrysostom’s or Basil’s empty niche,
Crumple stiff Nelson in Trafalgar Square¹⁵

All the statues—Christian, Soviet or British Triumphalist—become equivalent. The eastern bloc, for Harrison, does not hold a monopoly on oppression.

The sexual encounter allows the poetic “I” voice and his lover, briefly, to escape from the macro-political chaos that surrounds them. The contrast between tumultuous history of European conflict and the warm flesh of the lovers, “human, young, and lustful, sick of wars”, is made concrete in the contrasting images of statues of dead men and his “gorgeous red bird”: “I’m tired of stone bodies. I want yours.” But his lover resumes peering “at huge saints”, and “some Church soldier launching a gold spear against the Turk”. The history of European colonialism, inseparable from the history of European Christianity, leaves as yet uneradicated marks on the visual and material environment. But the poet sees sexual union—however unsatisfactory, and even overheard by sinister secret service officers—as one possible response to this gloomy history. “The Curtain Catullus” concludes with an uneasy invitation to other Slavic women to come to his “bugged bedroom”, leaving behind “mausoleum, / church, museum”.¹⁶

By reading his sexual encounter against a Prague cityscape in which the serial historical figures and their ideologies—the Church Fathers, the Crusades, the Reformation, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Soviet Empire—remain visible in the material fabric of the buildings, Harrison is exploiting the contrast between the temporal dimensions of poetry and the visual arts respectively. He sometimes uses statues to establish a strong transhistorical frame, in which the artworks of one era can speak across the centuries to another. Material artefacts can physically transcend time, but are not themselves fluid and subject to change in the way that languages and ideologies are. Yet, individual artworks are unable to *represent* movement through time in the way that poetry can narrate diachronically. Even a statue like Myron’s “Discobolus”, which gives the impression that the discus is upon the point of being thrown, arrests the athlete’s body at a single nanosecond. It was not until Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s seminal essay *Laocoön* (1766) that this difference between poetic and visual mimesis was understood in temporal terms: Lessing’s view was that art is static but permanent, arresting its

¹⁴ibid.

¹⁵For all quotations in this paragraph, see Harrison, *Collected Poems*, 53.

¹⁶For all quotations in this paragraph, see Harrison, *Collected Poems*, 53.

object at a particular instant in time, whereas literary mimesis (especially the transient art of theatre) represents its objects as moving through time, between presence and absence.¹⁷

Harrison, however, is more influenced by the key ancient Greek and Roman notions of the relationship between literature and art. First, the ancients saw the most important difference between the two not as temporal but as *sensory*. Visual art makes no sound, and the “voicelessness” of the material artefact is a frequent trope in ancient poetry. Harrison knows these tropes well: the blank, vacant stares and muted voices of statues and the silent screams of figures in photographs often appear in all his work, notably in “A Cold Coming”.¹⁸ But the ancient poets also understood that poetry, in isolation, offers nothing material to see. They responded to this challenge by continuously developing the technique known to rhetoricians as *ekphrasis*: this entails careful description of sights appealing directly to the visual imagination, a technique which included detailed description of artefacts. These begin long before the extended description of the mythical scenes embroidered on the bridal bedspread in Catullus’ “Ariadne epyllion” (poem 64) and Ovid’s tale of Pygmalion and Galatea in *Metamorphoses* book 10. Important examples feature in the very earliest surviving Greek poems, notably in the scenes of war and peace which Hephaestus/Vulcan hammered and inlaid onto Achilles’ new shield in *Iliad* 18, and the description of the gods’ creation from clay, and adornment of Pandora, the enticing first woman, in both Hesiod’s *Theogony* and his *Works and Days*.¹⁹ The abundance of artworks in Harrison’s poetry, to which Lyon so objected, is therefore a crucial aspect of Harrison’s formal classicism.

In the final three of the five Petrarchan “Curtain Sonnets” in *The Loiners*, located behind the “Iron Curtain” in what was then called Leningrad and in Prague, the contrast between public artefacts and private lovemaking is further developed. “Summer Garden” is set, ironically, in a wintry neoclassical Russian snowscape. Harrison reminds us of the devastating fatalities suffered by the Soviet Union in World War II, and of the military heroism of the male populace, commemorated in massive modernist statue groups, by his image of “Leningrad’s vast pool of widowhood” chipping away at the pavement ice. The same lonely women also act as janitors in the city’s public museums and amenities,

who also guard the Rembrandts and rank Gents,
who stand all day with stern unbending gaze
haloed with Tsars’ crowns and Fabergés,
their menfolk melted down in monuments.²⁰

Leningrad itself is presented as one vast public cemetery, where all the dead Soviet soldiers have metamorphosed from animate humanity into metallic sculpted friezes. This, of course, anticipates the fascination with inscribed gravestones and cemeteries which develops in *The School of Eloquence* and comes to full fruition in *v.* and the Westminster Abbey “Poet’s Corner” scenes in *Fram*.²¹

These Leningrad monuments are grimly guarded by the dead Russian soldiers’ bereaved womenfolk, themselves associated with the metallic artefacts associated with

¹⁷*Laocoön* has been published repeatedly in English translation since Lessing; for discussions of these concepts see Park.

¹⁸Harrison, *Collected Poems*, 313–20.

¹⁹On *ekphrasis* in classical epic, see Becker; and Putnam. On statues in ancient Greek literature, see Steiner; and Hall, “Visible Women.”

²⁰Harrison, *Collected Poems*, 58.

²¹*Ibid.*, 119–262; *Ibid.*, 263–79; Harrison, *Fram*.

the even older, Tsarist regime. Harrison implies that these strict female guards do not approve of the woman with whom he's walking around the Summer Garden,

between the statues VERITAS, HONOR,
and PSYCHE whom strong passion made forget
conditions of darkness and the gods' taboo.

For those who have visited the famous Summer Garden, its avenues, lined with baroque white statues of female personifications, are here made instantly recognisable. For those who haven't, a similar scene is instantly conjured in the mind's eye by the orthographic capitalisation of the statues' names, implying the lettering on plinths, on ancient inscriptions and beneath public sculptures. TRUTH and HONOR, in the poem's moral landscape, call into question the judgemental attitudes of the older women, the servants of a corrupt regime. But the statue of PSYCHE, bending with her lantern in the darkness to look at the sleeping body of her beloved Cupid, serves another, more surprising purpose.

This arresting statue group was created in the early eighteenth century from a design by Giovanni Lorenzo Bernini. The ancient source is Apuleius' Latin novel *Metamorphoses*. Psyche and Cupid were secretly lovers, despite the disapproval of Cupid's mother Venus. But Cupid banned Psyche from looking at his face. She broke the ban by using a lamp, and woke him when a drop of oil landed on his skin, but suffered many ordeals in reprisal. Here, in Harrison's poem, she transcends the conceptual divide between the inanimate matter of the public artefacts and Harrison's preoccupation with his lover; the "conditions of darkness" and taboo he experiences in Cold War Leningrad suddenly bring him close to the experience of the desirous stone Psyche, suffering under diverse prohibitions.

After this fleeting, mysterious identification with Psyche's predicament in "Summer Garden", Harrison's persona moves indoors. The artefacts in the fourth sonnet, "The People's Palace", are the personifications IUSTITIA and POMONA, justice and the fruit-harvest, closed from public view.²² They are "wired to a U.S. import anti-theft device" and secretively stored in crates, viewable only by an academic researcher and the ebullient man who polishes the floors. The secrecy, paranoia and elitism which marked Leningrad life in the 1960s is conveyed with supreme economy in the concealment of the virtues both of moral justice and abundance of fruit—the latter being in Harrison's conceptual world always a marker of human love, generosity and the short-lived sensual pleasures which make human existence privately bearable. This trope is later developed in fullest form in "A Kumquat for John Keats", "The Red Lights of Plenty" (which also centres on a statue, that of Plenty with her cornucopia in Washington), "The Pomegranates of Patmos", "Fig on the Tyne" and "Fruitility".²³

In the final sonnet of "Curtain Sonnets", where the action shifts to a bitterly cold Prague on his birthday, 30 April 1968, the day before the traditional May Day parade, Harrison breaks new ground in his use of a sculpture to examine his responses to history and the world. For the first time in his published poetry, in "Prague Spring", his own perspective comes near to being entirely fused with that of a stone visage.²⁴ It belongs to a stone gargoyle depicted playing a lute in a nest of carved cherries, high up on a city building, one of

²²Harrison, *Collected Poems*, 59.

²³Ibid., 220–3; Ibid., 231–3; Ibid., 291–9; Ibid., 389–95; Ibid., 355–63.

²⁴Ibid., 60.

those Gothic cathedrals Harrison was visiting in “The Curtain Catullus”. In the first quatrain, Harrison describes the gargoyle, high up in the clouds, who seems to have been turned into stone with his mouth wide open—whether to scream, sing or vomit:

A silent scream? The madrigal’s top note?
 Puking his wassail on the listening throng?
 Mouthfuls of cumulus, then cobalt throat.
 Medusa must have hexed him in mid-song.²⁵

The trope of petrification subsequently became central to Harrison’s thinking about the ancient Greek tragic mask, and unifies the collection *The Gaze of the Gorgon*. The gaze of the mask-like face of the decapitated Medusa is quite literally petrifying—it turns the viewer into rock.²⁶ Yet Harrison would later evolve the Nietzschean idea he found in *The Birth of Tragedy* that Dionysian art allows the masked performers and viewers of tragedy to view unbearable suffering *without* being turned into stone.²⁷ The singing or screaming not-quite-human, semi-grotesque gargoyle also foreshadows Harrison’s later fascination and indeed identification with other semi-human cast figures, such as the garden gnomes of *Prometheus* and especially the ancient Greek satyr in *Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*—half-goat, half-man; even the brilliant stage set of that play, designed by Jocelyn Herbert, incorporated a kneeling figure modelled on the stone satyr whose back still supports the masonry of the stage where the actors played in the ancient Athenian theatre of Dionysus. Harrison particularly identifies with the figure in that play of the satyr Marsyas, an expert musician who screamed when he was flayed after rivalling the upper-class god Apollo in his song.

In a deft move, the poet does momentarily identify himself with the gargoyle, in the next quatrain adopting his/its own lofty visual perspective on the Prague cityscape, anticipating his/its privileged view of tomorrow’s parade. The gargoyle-as-spectator thus adumbrates Harrison’s use of artefacts as mouthpieces, above all in using the bust of Heine as narrator in *The Gaze of the Gorgon* (1992):

The finest vantage point in all of Prague’s
 this gagging gargoyle’s with the stone-locked lute,
 leaning over cherries, blow-ups of Karl Marx
 the pioneers ‘ll march past and salute.²⁸

The gargoyle, simultaneously screaming, singing and feeling nauseous, is an appropriate enough congener of the poet surveying the absurdities and horrors of the Prague Spring.

Harrison was later to find the Czech gargoyle’s “Free World” alter ego in the stone satyr which peered into his room “in apt. 841 of the Hotel Ansonia on 73rd and Broadway, New York” while he was translating some of Martial’s epigrams. He has written that he responded to the stare of the satyr and “the eyes of his co-satyrs taking in the multifarious life of New York and missing nothing”; this “combined to season these versions.”²⁹ The visual perspective from a high position allows the poetry of “Prague Spring” to “pan”

²⁵Ibid., 60.

²⁶See especially the influential essays “Death in the Eyes: Gorgo, Figure of the Other” and “In the Mirror of Medusa” in Vernant, 111–50.

²⁷Nietzsche, 80; Hall, “Aeschylus,” 194.

²⁸Harrison, *Collected Poems*, 60.

²⁹Ibid., 104, note.

like a camera fixed high on a building but pointing downwards—a technique which Harrison uses again in “Newcastle is Peru”, as we shall see below, and also in his film poems, especially *Prometheus*. But in the final six lines of “Prague Spring”, Harrison vertiginously reverses the roles of viewer and viewed, the poet’s voice now expressing the social and political disintegration of Soviet Czechoslovakia through examining the corrosion of the gargoyle’s plate surface, and the melting snow of the late thaw dribbling “as spring saliva down his jaw”.³⁰

The last three poems of *The Loiners* return Harrison, disoriented from travel in Nigeria and eastern Europe, to northern England. In each one of them statues play pivotal roles. In “Newcastle is Peru”, he represents himself “as a kind of Ulysses returned to his native country in a rather desolate state”.³¹ Hungover and dazed, he remembers swinging through the air on a fairground ride called the Chair-o-plane (which was indeed popular in the north of England from the 1930s onwards). He pictures a circular tour of Leeds offering him an aerial view of its landmarks:

Venus, Vulcan, Cupid stare
out vacantly on City Square,
and *Deus iuvat impigros*
above the bank where God helps those
who help themselves, declares
Leeds purposeful in its affairs.
Mercator; miles, school chapel glass
transparencies to blood and glass.³²

Harrison imagines himself actually on eye-level with civic statues representing history and sex in his Leeds home town. A Victorian Vulcan, smith-god and patron of industry, does indeed stare out from beside his forge by the dome of the old bank building (now a nightclub) on Boar Lane; the Venus, goddess of sexual love, made by Canova for merchant banker and art collector Thomas Hope, is the centrepiece of the Leeds City Art Gallery. The images of the merchant and the soldier, however, are not statues, but figures depicted in the stained glass of the chapel of Leeds Grammar School, which Harrison attended. He has described these windows in more detail in a 1971 essay. The figures were chosen to represent possible professions which the pupils might later follow. One was MILES (“soldier”) and another MERCATOR (“businessman”). In one of the most scintillating prose sentences he has ever published, 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 cacothetes*, 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.³³

The classical 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, an

³⁰*Ibid.*, 60.

³¹Späth, 48.

³²Harrison, *Collected Poems*, 65–6.

³³Harrison, *The Inky Digit of Defiance*, 83.

academic, SCHOLASTICUS, and a BENEFACTOR, “philanthropist”. These four figures were the anthropomorphic visual images which haunted his Leeds school days, and his fascination with stained glass images was to resurface in the portrait of Aeschylus in the window of the Westminster Abbey sequences of *Fram*.

The British educational system, in which under-privileged children like Harrison could once hope for free grammar school and university tuition, has been taken over by commercial interests. The chapel has long since been turned into the Business School of Leeds University, and the windows removed. But Harrison’s memory is accurate: the window figures were unveiled in 1931 and there is a description of them in *The Yorkshire Post*.³⁴ Nor are the two figures in the window which Harrison had forgotten irrelevant to his achievements. He is certainly a scholar: the range and depth of his reading and research are staggering. He is also a benefactor. 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 or early fifth century CE, Palladas’ biting epigrams, a selection of which Harrison translated in 1975, rail at the fall of pagan literary and artistic culture to the narrow-minded theocrats of the new Christian regime. Yet for all his bitterness, the fundamental outlook of Harrison’s poetry is humane and benevolent. There is a benefactor’s “charity” in the best sense, a non-judgemental, inclusive social vision, even in his most superficially harsh and most controversial poem *v*.³⁵

In the next stanza of “Newcastle is Peru”, Harrison’s dizzying bird’s-eye-view veers back to Prague, and the rooftop of St Vitus’ Cathedral, which is indeed topped, as he recalls here, with a weathervane cockerel. But then the hallucinatory fairground ride swerves back to northern England, and this time to Newcastle upon Tyne, where Harrison imagines himself standing on the towering plinth which supports his adopted home city’s most famous statue. The “Grey Monument”, which looms over the city centre at the head of Grey Street, commemorates the passing of the Great Reform Act of 1832 under the premiership of Charles Grey, the second Earl Grey. The column is forty metres high. The statue, placed atop it in 1838, shortly after the accession of Queen Victoria, was the work of Edward Hodges Baily—the very same sculptor whose famous Trafalgar Statue of “stiff Nelson” Harrison has asked Astraea, representative of utopia, to “crumple” in “The Curtain Catullus”. But he now pairs Earl Grey’s solemn monument with one of Neptune:

Swirled detritus and driftwood pass
in state the 1880 *Sas-*
inena Cold Storage Co.,
and Neptune gazes at the Tyne’s flow
seawards, where the sea-winds “boast
and bluster” at the North East coast,
the sluggish Tyne meandering through
the staithes and shipyards of Peru.³⁶

³⁴*The Yorkshire Post*, 21 September 1931, 6. I am very grateful to Anna Reeve, a graduate student in the Classics Department at Leeds University, for helping me research these windows.

³⁵A letter by Tom Phillips to the *Independent*, quoted in Butler, 114.

³⁶Harrison, *Collected Poems*, 66–7.

The statue of Neptune, standing with his trident on two dolphins and flanked by a pair of fishwives, was designed for the Old Fish Market in the late 1870s by a sculptor named George Burn. It is folksy and diminutive in comparison with the Earl Grey monument, but to the people of Newcastle it is just as familiar and more loved. The building was indeed converted into a cold storage facility at the time Harrison was writing *The Loiners* (it is now a nightclub). The stony fishwives reappear in a slightly different form as the chorus of Oceanids (transformed into female factory workers at the fish canning factory) in *Prometheus*.³⁷ But here, in *The Loiners*, the civic statues of Europe are thus markers of cartography, topography and historical change as well as of the poet's visual perspectives on his material environment.

The view downwards from atop a cathedral is once again the chief poetic visual trajectory in the penultimate poem of the collection, "Durham". Harrison's voice surveys the three institutions of that city, where he held a post as Poet in Residence—"University, Cathedral, Gaol" (a line which echoes the "mausoleum, / church, museum" of "The Curtain Catullus")—but now adopting "Quasimodo's bird's-eye view".³⁸ Naming the protagonist of Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* reminds anyone familiar with the classic novel that it was from a gallery high up Notre Dame that Quasimodo watched Esmerelda, the Romany woman he loved, pray before her execution, and from which he slid down a rope in an attempt to rescue her and persuade the Parisians to give her sanctuary. One of Harrison's personal heroes is the dissident, republican Hugo, whose *Le Roi s'amuse* he was in 1996 to translate as *The Prince's Play* for the National Theatre. But in this poem he figures himself, rather, as Quasimodo, trying to persuade a woman to lunch and bed, to find together some kind of sanctuary from the harsh realities of the prison system and global politics.

The poem's central image is the architecture of Durham's massive Cathedral Church of Christ, Blessed Mary the Virgin and St. Cuthbert, to give it its full name, which dominates the city along every sightline. Towards the end, Harrison returns to the image of the gargoyle established in "Prague Spring", and once again partially identifies with a grotesque stone visage:

On the *status quo*'s huge edifice
we're just excrescences that kiss,
cathedral gargoyles that obtrude
their acts of "moral turpitude".³⁹

These lines immediately follow the explicit emergence of the theme of sculpture, at the point when Harrison's poetic voice has asked how retreat into private intimacy can be reconciled with "the public mess":

At best we're medieval masons, skilled
but anonymous within our guild,
at worst defendants hooded in a car
charged with something sinister.⁴⁰

³⁷See Hall, "Tony Harrison's 'Prometheus,'" 130.

³⁸Harrison, *Collected Poems*, 72, 70.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 72.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 71.

“Ordinary” people, if unfortunate, end up criminalised and on their way to Durham gaol. The best possible option is to live like “medieval masons”, working away cooperatively, without fame or recognition, but nevertheless skilled at our crafts—whether lovemaking or poetry. Harrison has always insisted that poetry is a craft, which requires hard work to learn and is equivalent to any other trade or profession. This was partly his response to the working men of his family, above all his father, the baker. The opening quatrain of *v.* remembers them as “butcher, publican, and baker, now me, bard, / adding poetry to their beef, beer and bread.”⁴¹ He has said that the “idea of becoming a master of something, of learning something, was very important to me, and partly to show off to *them* [...] But I also wanted it to be real work—in the sense that my father’s work was real work”.⁴²

This is not, however, the whole story. Harrison found in the classical authors he read at school that the dominant language in which poets and poetry are discussed in ancient Greek concerns the skill or trade (*technē*), which the poet learns by hard graft and by which he earns his keep. “Poet” (Greek *poiētēs*, Latin *poeta*) simply means “maker” and can apply equally to someone who makes pots or chairs. In Homer, there is a profound underlying analogy between the epic bard and the smith who embosses images and actions—humans *doing things*—onto artefacts, above all in the *ekphrasis* when Hephaestus creates Achilles’ shield in *Iliad* book 18. In the *Odyssey*, the closer analogy is between the poet and the carpenter: Odysseus, who tells much of his own story and becomes in the process a bard himself, is also an expert in woodwork: he is a creator of ships, Trojan horses and olive-wood marriage beds. The women of Homer are experts in weaving, creating great artefacts, on which heroic scenes of action are depicted, the fabric equivalent to the stories sung by bards. The Greek lyric poets, above all Pindar and Bacchylides, almost obsessively develop a metaphor in which they figure themselves as craftsmen,⁴³ sharpening their tongues on whetstones and hammering their songs on anvils. In comparing his skilled work with that of a medieval mason, Harrison is, paradoxically, placing his own conceptualisation of his craft in an unequivocally pre-medieval, classical Greek tradition.

The final poem of the collection, “Ghosts: Some Words before Breakfast. For Jane”, is one of the most painful and explicitly autobiographical works in Tony Harrison’s whole *oeuvre*. It is a reaction to the appalling road accident his daughter Jane suffered on 5 April 1968, when a ten-ton lorry hit her and nearly destroyed both her legs. The poem explores the experiences and emotions he underwent in the Royal Victoria Infirmary, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, waiting overnight for his little daughter to come round from surgery. The poem opens with the clapping sound made by the hooves of a horse drawing an “anachronistic” beer wagon, implicitly contrasted with the enormous lorry. It is followed by the sight of the marble statue of Queen Victoria which stands outside the hospital’s main doors, whitening as the daylight fades. This recalls the other “White Queen” of the Juvenalian *Satyrae* much earlier in *The Loiners*—the British homosexual in Africa whose voice asserts neocolonial rights to sexual relationships with young black men. The hospital monument also provides visual context. But the statue’s prominence in the poem is a result of the way it sets its political compass, being cryptically

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 263

⁴²Quoted in Bertram, 23.

⁴³See Ford, ch. 4.

addressed as “Empress, Queen”, but also symbolising a set of restrictive Christian moral and ideological views which have played havoc with Harrison’s own family life. The statue is held responsible for Harrison’s own mother’s puritanical disapproval of sex. This led her to interpret the stillbirth which concluded the first pregnancy of Harrison’s wife as retribution for the baby being conceived before they were married: Victoria’s

clean-
living family image drove
my mother venomously anti love,
and made her think the stillbirth just
retribution for our filthy lust.⁴⁴

The stone statue of Victoria, lifeless, cold and static, also serves a physical purpose as Harrison’s voice describes how he willed the conscious child to live, to breathe inside her oxygen tent,

... each heaved breath
another lurch away from death,
each exhalation like death throes ...⁴⁵

Her bodily struggle to breathe, along with the image of funeral flowers, is conveyed by the way he apprehends “her pain / through stuff like florist’s cellophane”.

He begins to share the struggle in the waiting room, “an airless space”, and also while he paces the hospital corridors, for he feels he is about to suffocate. The boundary between living, breathing organic bodies and lifeless simulacra or corpses is bizarrely reflected in the comics which litter the waiting room. The first of the interplanetary heroes he encounters is “STONE BOY of the planet Zwen / who turns to stone and back again.” The second is “MATTER-EATER-LAD”, who is fighting against a mad scientist called Dr MANTIS MORLO! Who may “smash / our heroes into lunar ash.”⁴⁶ These heroic children of the interplanetary future have superpowers, allowing them to challenge the physical laws of nature and avoid death and destruction by metamorphosing in and out of stone, or actually eating mineral matter. The use of classical, epigrammatic capitalisation here implicitly recalls the statues of the Summer Garden in Leningrad. There is a stark antithesis between the smashed body of his own child, for whom there would be no recovery from the immobilising coldness of death, and the fictional STONE BOY and MATTER-EATER-LAD. Yet the absurd, hyperbolic argot of Sci-Fi comics, far from diminishing the power of these lines, augments Harrison’s expression of his incomprehension of the catastrophe and of his grief.

In the early 1970s, Harrison worked on translating French classical dramas, and by 1976 had also completed for publication the first ten poems of *The School of Eloquence*. But his first major poetic publication after *The Loiners* was his translation of a selection of poems by Palladas in 1975. Indeed, Palladas is the only ancient Greek poet of whom Harrison has published an extended selection of versions. By way of conclusion, I would like to suggest that one of the attractions of Palladas to Harrison, besides the snarling, disenchanted authorial voice, was the interest in the uses to which statues could be put in poetry which he had already demonstrated in *The Loiners*.

⁴⁴Ibid., 73.

⁴⁵Ibid., 74.

⁴⁶For both quotations see Harrison, *Collected Poems*, 75.

Palladas worked in the fourth or early fifth century CE in Alexandria. This city, like all others in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds, teemed with statues of gods, legendary heroes, civic notables and Roman Emperors. Most of Palladas' poems are epigrams, which means that they belong to a genre of short, pithy poems—a genre which originally evolved for inscribing on stone slabs, often to place beneath such statues. Three of Palladas' poems to which Harrison was attracted are explicitly concerned with statues. Palladas was writing at the time of the death throes of the old pagan culture, as it gradually disintegrated in the face of the spread of Christianity, and the early Christian iconoclasts systematically destroyed the statues of the pagan gods, whether by smashing them, dismantling them limb by limb, or melting the metal ones down. For Palladas, statues thus symbolise the demise of the beautiful culture he loved (he was a professional teacher of classical Greek literature) and of the Olympian religion.

In one poem, three hexameter lines are imagined as being inscribed beneath some pagan statues which have succeeded in avoiding being melted down, and turned into coins, by converting to Christianity:

“Baptized” Olympians live here in peace,
spared Treasury finance and coiner's mould,
the fires of revolution and small change⁴⁷

These “baptized” statues both signify and defy the revolutionary shifts in ideology that marked the triumph of Christianity—a cultural transformation on which Harrison's later work often meditates. They also mark the chasm between the world of art and the world of commerce and lucre which yawns across the entire body of work by this self-avowed socialist poet. The chasm is here symbolised by the coinage into which they have as yet avoided being transformed. And Harrison has repeatedly returned to the image of fire, from the fire he tries to start in the semi-stupor of “Newcastle is Peru” onwards, perhaps most memorably in the death speech delivered from his funeral pyre by the hero of his 1995 play *The Labourers of Herakles*.⁴⁸ In Harrison's poetry, the furnace or foundry cauldron, moreover, comes to be seen as a fiery vessel in which artefacts can be made or destroyed. He consciously adopted from the film-maker Andrei Arsenyevich Tarkovsky the metaphor of “smelting” a text during the creative process before it realises its finished form.⁴⁹ In his feature film *Prometheus*, the striking miners whom he makes the subject of his art are themselves melted down for bullion in a vast furnace; we also witness the production of the monumental golden statue of Prometheus which dominates the later sequences of the film.

The analogy between the work of the poet and the smith holds together the shortest of Palladas' “statue” poems translated by Harrison, in Greek just one terse epigrammatic couplet:

The blacksmith's quite a logical man
to melt an Eros down and turn
the God of Love into a frying pan,
something that can also burn.⁵⁰

⁴⁷*The Greek Anthology* 9.258 = Harrison, *Collected Poems*, 95, no. 66.

⁴⁸Dougherty, 129.

⁴⁹Harrison, *The Inky Digit of Defiance*, 240, 304; Tarkovsky, 134.

⁵⁰*The Greek Anthology* 9.773 = Harrison, *Collected Poems*, 94, no. 64.

Here, the melting down of the bronze statue of Eros into a kitchen utensil again signifies the end of pagan culture and religion. But Palladas is playing with the time-honoured metaphor of sexual desire as fire (a continuous figure in *Phaedra Britannica*), and also making use of bathos. In Harrison's own poetry and above all in almost every line of *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*, the juxtaposition of the "elevated" aesthetic image, of which statues of the Olympians are emblematic, with an unglamorous, everyday object, repeatedly signifies the harsh divisions between social classes and their different claims on and uses of art.

The final "statue" poem by Palladas which Harrison chose is formally a much more complex affair, involving direct speech from both Palladas and the hero Heracles himself. Palladas is appalled to come across a statue of Heracles toppled from his plinth, and addresses his shock to the demigod. But in the final two lines, Heracles appears to Palladas in a dream, and says even gods have to bend with the times:

That night he stood at my bed-end
and smiled and said: *I can't complain.*
The winds of change are blowing, friend,
*your god's a weather-vane.*⁵¹

The use of short fragments of direct speech, the dream and the conceit whereby an elevated cultural figure chats colloquially, all these techniques are exemplified in Harrison's subsequent poetry. What is far less easy for all the readers of Harrison who do not read ancient Greek to appreciate is the extent to which he has absorbed the key features of the epigrammatic genre—a sardonic, often gnomic tone, lapidary precision, austere economy with the number of words, syntactical run-on over line-end, disciplined yet intricate use of aural echoes both internal to the line and at verse-end, along with alliteration, assonance and rhythm manipulated to pack as emphatic a punch as possible in the shortest possible poem. In his own poems most of these qualities are reproduced in his colloquial English, the tension between his formal control and exuberant demoticism creating his utterly distinctive poetic voice and soundscape. Harrison, after his creative experiments with statues in *The Loiners*, which have been explored in some detail here, thus chose to immerse himself in the most disciplined, haiku-like ancient Greek poetic genre he could find, and one which itself reflects its own "classicising" drive for formal precision in its consistent engagement with the poetry/artefact analogy.

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⁵¹*The Greek Anthology* 9.441 = *Ibid.*, 95, no. 65.

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