A hanging newspaper clothes pegs keep open
on the kiosk across from the shut, smashed hotel
has a whole half-page picture of a poet I know well.

So, in his acclaimed elegy 'Polygons', published in the *LRB* in 2015, does Tony Harrison launch his memorialisation of his friend Seamus Heaney. News of Heaney's death came to Harrison when he was himself convalescing on the rocky precipices around Delphi, making his 'coeval heart' judder 'with lurches of scree fall'. Later in the poem he remembers Ted Hughes as well. Harrison is the only survivor out of these three post-war titans of poetry associated with regional dialects of the English language, and he shows no signs of slowing down or moderating his radical politics, despite publishing prize-winning yet sometimes scandalously controversial poetry for more than half a century. On April 30th he celebrated his 80th birthday, and he has admittedly faced serious obstacles over the last two decades. But the man widely regarded as Britain's greatest living poet is still going strong. A ribald yet heart-rending new play *Iphigenia in Crime*a, inspired by Greek tragedy, was broadcast on Radio 3 on 23rd April. A major retrospective of his work was held at the British Academy later that week, at which tributes were paid by, amongst others, Andy Burnham, Vanessa Redgrave, Melvyn Bragg and Simon Armitage. An unprecedented selection of Harrison's prose essays, *The Inky Digit of Defiance*, which I have edited, was published in May.

Harrison is best known as the author of several frequently anthologised poems about his working-class Leeds childhood and his difficult relationship with his relatives. Studying Classics as a scholarship boy at Leeds Grammar School and then Leeds University, he became increasingly aware of the chasm that his ever-widening intellectual and cultural horizons had exposed between him and his family. His painful attempts to come to terms with his alienation from his mother and father, while remaining committed to the cause of the working class, is explored at length in his pivotal 1978 collection *From The School of Eloquence and Other*

Poems; several of the pieces expressing the impact of his mother's death on his relationship with his father, a taciturn baker, are studied by teenagers at GCSE. At A Level, the poem of choice is his "*v*," written during the 1984-5 miners' strike.

A modern response to Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1751), "*v*." recounts Harrison's visit to a cemetery in Beeston, Leeds, to visit his parents' grave. Now a haunt of local skinheads, the graveyard has been defaced by racist and obscene graffiti. This prompts meditation on the divisions (as in v for versus) caused by class and racial conflict in his society; it is followed by a dialogue with a skinhead in Leeds vernacular. The poem is now regarded as a classic of late 20th-century literature, and a special performance was broadcast on Radio 4 in 2013 to mark the 25th anniversary of the film version, directed by Richard Eyre, seen on Channel 4 in 1987. That film involved the longest and most dense cluster of sexually explicit words ever broadcast in Britain at the time. It made Harrison headline news. Mary Whitehouse protested in the Times. The *Daily Mail* was horrified, denouncing it as a "torrent of filth." Gerald Howarth, a Conservative MP, tried to have the broadcast proscribed (although he had not even read most of the poem) by tabling an Early Day Motion in parliament entitled "Television Obscenity."

The rumpus ensured that a much larger audience tuned in. But the scandal obscured the fact that the aspect of "*v*." to which the right really objected was its resolute sympathy with the working class. It is important to remember the vilification to which the miners were subject at the time, and the suffering entailed by the disintegration of organised labour. Swearing might proliferate in Harrison's work, but that is not because he wants to shock. It is because it reflects the authentic speech of his embattled class. The furore surrounding "*v*." was only the most public of the controversies with which Harrison has been involved. His breakout 1970 collection *The Loiners* (a local word meaning residents of Leeds), while winning the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize, offended some in the poetry

establishment because it frankly discussed sexual relations with several women and seemed to imply that political oppression in England did not differ greatly from that behind the Iron Curtain. Then in 1981, when Peter Hall used his translation of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* in a path-breaking production at the National Theatre, Harrison set a trend by insisting on an all-male cast. He was convinced that the misogyny of the trilogy could only be realised by having the female roles delivered by male actors, as they had been in the ancient theatre. Such "gender-blind" practices are familiar today, but then they were regarded as shockingly avant-garde. 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" and vulgarly suggestive of the drag roles in children's pantomimes.

Some also criticised Harrison's diction, which was designed to be delivered in a consonantal working-class Yorkshire accent. Benedict Nightingale fulminated in the *New York Times* that it sounded "like a collaboration between the author of Beowulf and some street-cafe poetaster in jeans." As so often with criticism of Harrison, unease with his class politics masqueraded as aesthetic derision. The real problem was that Olympian gods and the Argive Royal Family sounded like dockers from Hull.

Class consciousness met classical drama again in Harrison's profoundly original *Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*, which premiered in Delphi in 1988. It created a new play out of the fragments of an ancient satyr drama by Sophocles found on papyrus. Harrison was once forced, on account of his working-class accent, to play the role of the savage Cyclops in a school production of Shelley's version of Euripides' satyr drama, and has been fascinated by this almost lost genre ever since. It entails august heroes and gods obliged to revel in a subversive musical-comedy with a chorus of satyrs, half-man and half-goat, wearing semi-erect phalluses. Trackers, revived earlier this year at the Finborough Theatre, is a manifesto on the

gulf that separates “elite art” from popular culture, and the system of social stratification that has always excluded the poor, the hungry and the oppressed from the rights and privileges enjoyed higher up the class system. This was made even more explicit in the new conclusion that Harrison wrote for the National Theatre revival that opened in London in 1990, the year that the Thatcherite National Health Service and Community Care Act precipitated large numbers of mentally ill people into vagrancy. Here the satyrs underwent a transformation into the hordes of homeless then sleeping rough on the South Bank. Harrison was arguing that great art doesn’t matter if people lack the basic necessities of life, symbolised by the shreds of papyrus which the satyr-vagrants end up using as toilet roll. This conclusion outraged the same constituency that had objected to “v” critics in the press denouncing the play’s “mundane” and “preachy” ending.

A lifelong opponent of the monarchy, Harrison takes inspiration from Milton, whose large marble bust dominates the modest hallway of his terraced house in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. In 1995 he published “A Celebratory Ode on the Abdication of King Charles III,” in which he imagines the day “when Britons lose their taste for fawning/on Lords and Ladies, Dames and Knights/dubbed by bepurpled parasites/ and will demand a Bill of Rights.” He persuaded Eyre to put on his version of Victor Hugo’s play *Le roi s’amuse* as *The Prince’s Play* at the National Theatre (Harrison refuses to call it the Royal National Theatre). His reading of Hugo’s riotous anti-monarchical satire, banned after just one performance in 1832, relocated the plot from 16th-century France to Victorian London. It identified the philandering rapist Crown Prince with the future Edward VII, ancestor of the incumbent bepurpled parasite Queen Elizabeth II. There was an obvious parallel with Prince Charles, whose relationship with Camilla Parker Bowles had come under scrutiny since his divorce from Princess Diana. Although a resounding success in theatrical terms, aided by the stellar performance of Ken Stott as Scotty Scott, the Prince of Wales’s favourite comedian, the critical reception was nervous.

Harrison began to fall out of favour even among the radical intelligentsia shortly afterwards, when he publicly derided Eyre for accepting a knighthood and Melvyn Bragg for becoming a peer. The money for film poems dried up and he received fewer invitations from theatres. The downturn was exacerbated because one of his few admirers with financial clout, Bradford entrepreneur Jonathan Silver, had died in 1997. When it was rumoured in 1999 that Harrison was being considered for the post of Poet Laureate after the death of Ted Hughes, he published the witty, caustic poem "Laureate's Block," in which he pre-emptively ruled out his candidacy. He imagined the monarchy ceasing with the death of Elizabeth II, to spare the country "some toad's ode" at Charles's coronation, for Harrison would "like all suchlike odes there've ever been,/binned by a truly democratic nation."

Harrison's unpopularity was compounded by the unabashed socialist politics of his first feature-length film-poem, *Prometheus* (1998), which vanished almost completely from public view shortly after it was broadcast. In this version of the Greek tragedy, which previously inspired Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, Harrison embraced the ideal of fully-fledged, economically levelled socialism, and celebrated the miners who had struggled in the early 1980s. This of course ran counter to New Labour ideology. By the millennium, it put Harrison beyond the pale even of the more leftist members of the chattering classes. It is one thing for a poet to support causes which have been legitimised by liberal ideology—such as women, gay people 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. *Prometheus* is a complex artistic reaction to the fall of the British proletariat as the 20th century staggered to its close, a fall symptomatic of the collapse of the socialist dream. It points out the significant relationship between the Prometheus myth and Marxist politics, and explores the material and economic processes that underpinned both capitalism and eastern-bloc communism. Coal is extracted from the earth, cast into fire, and

miners' bodies are transformed visually into bullion—a horrific metamorphosis from concrete to abstract labour and thence to symbolic capital.

The suffering entailed by war, especially by the arms industry, has been another preoccupation. Harrison wrote a play, integrating parts of ancient Greek dramas, about the Greenham Common women. Glenda Jackson was going to star, but it was never performed for the good reason that the cruise missiles were removed. *Square Rounds*, his Brechtian satire on the invention of firearms, explosives, mustard gas and cluster bombs, was panned by critics in London but, provocatively, was a resounding success at the Taganka Theatre in Moscow. The Holocaust haunts *Prometheus*, which includes a searing sequence at Auschwitz, as the Japanese nuclear Holocaust haunts another film-poem, *The Shadow of Hiroshima* (1995). The anti-war poems in *The Gaze of the Gorgon* are outstanding, notably "A Cold Coming," put in the mouth of a dead Iraqi soldier, leaning through the window of his burnt-out vehicle, whose photograph was published in the *Observer* on 3rd March 1991. By imagining the dead man's thoughts, by acknowledging that the targets of the allied forces were human beings, Harrison demanded his western audiences question their foreign policy.

He is one of the few contemporary British poets who can claim to be truly international. It is not just that he has won awards such as the European Prize for Literature (2010) and that he is these days arguably more acclaimed in Italy and France than his native land. More importantly, despite being primarily associated with north-east England, his poetry, theatre scripts and film poems are all informed by his long spells travelling and working abroad. He visited Nigeria immediately after it secured independence from Britain in 1960, Cuba in the early years of the revolutionary government, cold war Czechoslovakia during the Prague Spring and Brazil at the height of the hard-line dictatorial regime. Some poems and prose pieces provide shrewd and humane witness to these places at momentous historical moments. They are both prescient and riveting.

Literary historians group Harrison with several other “committed” poets associated with Leeds of the 1950s and 1960s, especially Jon Silkin and Geoffrey Hill. In the public imagination, he is one of that triumvirate with Hughes and Heaney. But there is not one line in his oeuvre that could be mistaken for one of theirs. Four features unite his diverse poems, whether designed for page, stage or screen. First, his unique fusion of demotic speech—the English of the pubs and streets—and formal control. For all the scatology and sexual frankness, even his harshest critics admit that he is a master of the sonnet, the elegy, the couplet and terza rima. Second, his snarling, trenchant voice, influenced by all the “disgruntled poets” he admires, including the Greek epigrammatist Palladas and the Latin satirist Martial as well as Heine and Hugo. Third, his idiosyncratic but profound classicism. His expertise in Greek and Latin have continually taken him back to the foundational authors of the European tradition, and their conviction that poetry was not a private or spiritual medium but a humane craft which should be harnessed to the public good. But perhaps most significant is his unswerving commitment to the idea that poetry can help represent, however inadequately, the social underdogs who throughout history have struggled to make their voices heard or leave any trace whatsoever. Workers, children, conscripted soldiers and women are prominent in all his work—in my view he does not deserve the criticism he has received for his supposedly “unreconstructed” working-class masculine identity. Poetry helps to make redress for mutedness. The quotation from Scargill which opens “v” reads: “My father still reads the dictionary every day. He says your life depends on your power to master words.” Harrison memorialised two uncles who struggled to speak in his poem “Celebrity”—Joe and Harry, “one was a stammerer, the other dumb.” He has written that these “early experiences of family inarticulacy were what drove me, I see now in retrospect, into a passion for language and languages, and for what is still for me the supreme articulacy and eloquence of poetry.” But that fascination with how whole communities are marginalised and silenced, along with his

sensitivity to class issues and poverty, may explain why Harrison has lately been attracting renewed interest, especially among the young. This development has been helped by actor Daniel Radcliffe's publicly stated admiration for his poetry. With social class and the anger of the economically deprived so firmly back on the public radar since Brexit and the US election, we just may be about to witness a mainstream comeback by the uncompromising Loiner bard.

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