Poet Tony Harrison: a classical voice

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Tony Harrison, who has died aged 88, was one of the most compelling English poetic voices of the last 60 years. He was always faithful to his vocation. “I hate being called poet/dramatist/translator/director,” he said. “Poet covers it all for me.”

Harrison was determined that the “quest for a public poetry” should not abandon the artistic accomplishments of the past. His commitment to accessible cultural achievement gave him a political fire. “Yes, I’ve got inwardness and tenderness, but I also get angry and vituperative, and you have to honour that as well.”

He wrote classically informed verse in the working class language of his native Leeds, and there was nothing patronising or embarrassed about it. He was committed to high art being accessible and popular.

Harrison embodied a striving for more than has been afforded the working class. His father was a baker, and after his death Harrison called him

> The baker’s man that no one will see rise
> and England made to feel like some dull oaf

(“Marked with D”)

He won a scholarship to Leeds Grammar School, then studied classics at Leeds university. *The School of Eloquence* (1978) and *Continuous* (1981), published after the death of his parents, are powerful on the gaps he felt from his background because of these opportunities. Hearing his gang’s whistled invite to go “*off laikin’*,” he curses “*Ah bloody can’t ah’ve gorra Latin prose*” (“Me Tarzan”). Sitting with his father after his mother’s death, he found that

> … what’s still between’s
> not the thirty or so years, but books, books, books.

(“Book Ends”)

Part of his drive came from hearing the working class voice and language of home belittled by middle class educators. “Them & [uz]” recounts a teacher mocking his accent as he reads Keats:

> 4 words only of *mi ’art aches* and … “Mine’s broken,
> you barbarian, T.W.!” *He* was nicely spoken.

The attempt to nullify working class accents also neuters the very classics these middle class guardians of literature think they are defending:

> All poetry (even Cockney Keats?) you see
> ’s been dubbed by [?s] into RP,
> Received Pronunciation…
> You can tell the Receivers where to go
> (and not aspirate it) once you know
> Wordsworth’s *matter/water* are full rhymes…

Harrison can be heard reading this here.

He appeared in student revues with the comedian Barry Cryer and the Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka, later Nobel Laureate. That friendship led to him taking a job at Ahmadu Bello University in Nigeria in 1962. His first poetry pamphlet was published in Leeds in 1964, while he was producing his first play in Nigeria. *Aikin Mata* was a version of Aristophanes’ anti-war comedy *Lysistrata*, a play he would return to repeatedly, both in the Cold War anxiety of the 1980s and at the time of the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

After a year teaching in Czechoslovakia, he returned to England in 1967. His debut collection *The Loiners* (residents of Leeds), in 1970, won the Geoffrey Faber Memorial prize. It placed him back in the working class community of Leeds, while reflecting his experiences abroad.

Its sexual frankness offended many but reflected his classical reading. More significant was his opposition to political oppression. This rubbed against the petty bourgeois sensibilities he would identify, and resist, in *The School of Eloquence* and *Continuous.*

He looked to the nascent working class political movements of the early 19th century, including the Leeds-made hammers used by the Luddites against the shearframes:

> Each swung cast-iron Enoch of Leeds stress
> clangs a forged music on the frames of Art,
> the looms of owned language smashed apart!

(“On Not Being Milton”)

He also found another medium for his writing. National Theatre (NT) director John Dexter challenged Harrison to address why French classical drama rarely worked on the English stage, without abandoning its form.

Harrison worked at Molière and Racine’s alexandrine rhymed couplets until he could produce his own poetry in them. His couplets translated the comic anger of Molière’s *The Misanthrope* (1973) brilliantly, beginning a productive association with the NT. Harrison later described himself as “the man who came to read the metre.”

In 1975, Harrison transplanted Racine’s tragedy *Phèdre* to the British Raj. This was using the classics to probe social malaise more widely, which would become more marked over the next decade.

He also worked with music, producing a new libretto translation of Bed?ich Smetana’s *The Bartered Bride* (1978) for New York’s Metropolitan Opera. The previous year, the NT staged *Bow Down*, the first of several collaborations with composer Harrison Birtwistle.

His two biggest NT productions were also translation/adaptations. *The*

Mysteries was begun in 1977, but the full trilogy was only presented complete in 1985. Based on the mediaeval mystery plays performed by craft guilds over the course of a whole day, its alliteration-rich language gave Harrison full scope to explore and celebrate demotic life and language.

The atheist Harrison found in the mediaeval religious drama and in the pagan classical theatre a richness of language and a poetic way of expressing a contemporary social cohesion. One of his early television pieces, music-drama *The Big H* (1986), revisited the biblical Herod story with Leeds schoolchildren.

Harrison had a strong visual and theatrical sense, based on historical models. Theatre designer Jocelyn Herbert commented approvingly that "Some writers just write and have little idea what it will look like, but Tony always knows exactly what he wants."

Director Peter Hall challenged Harrison to translate Greek tragedy into verse to be heard, rather than read. The resultant NT version of Aeschylus's *The Oresteia* was a landmark.

Attention may have focused on the technical qualities of the text—Harrison insisted he was not writing "a Yorkshire Oresteia," but that Aeschylus and he both wrote flat vowels—but more important was its triumphant conclusion in social cohesion.

He was frustrated that theatre productions in translation were rarely revived, with managements preferring to commission new translations. This contributed to his producing new pieces of his own.

The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus (1988) flowed from Harrison's Greek translation. It was a play about the papyrologists Grenfell and Hunt, who discovered a lost Satyr play by Sophocles. It merged the papyrologists themselves with Sophocles' text in a theatrical mix of clog-dancing and earthy poetry.

In Greek theatre, a trilogy of tragedies would be followed by a satyr play, a rambunctious mix of comedy and tragedy with strong physical, sexual, scatological components. This was ideal for Harrison, who wrote that the "essential catholicity of Greek drama, the unity of tragedy and satyr play, has been betrayed into divided and divisive categories, 'high' and 'low.'"

It was possible, Harrison demonstrated, to overcome this division. He never invoked the classics from pretension, but because they were still vital. He introduced "Them & [uz]" saying "I know more Latin and Greek than TS Eliot and Ezra Pound put together, but I don't put it in my poetry. Except for this word…"

The word was "????", used in Greek tragedy for grief. It also sounds like a music hall shout.

The demotic impulse led Harrison to television, and some groundbreaking film-poems. *V* (1985) was denounced as "filth" by the *Daily Mail*. In 1987, Tory MPs attacked a proposal to broadcast it.

It is a remarkable work, written during the miners' strike, about visiting his parents' grave and finding the cemetery "vandalised by obscene graffiti." In his imagined dialogue with an unemployed skinhead, Harrison ties the poetry that took him from this landscape with the coal beneath his feet and the social devastation of the Thatcher era. (He returned to the strike in 1999 through Greek myth, with *Prometheus* showing the theft of fire as an act of class war against the gods).

Yet *V* remains optimistic:

> If love of art, or love, gives you affront
> that the grave I'm in 's graffitied then, maybe,
> erase the more offensive FUCK and CUNT
> but leave, with the worn UNITED, one small v.

Richard Eyre, *V*'s director, called Harrison "popular without being populist… thoroughly accessible, and thoroughly and unapologetically elitist—if that means believing in the absolute values of good and bad art and refusing to talk down to people from the class you were born into."

Harrison had become a public poet, and a political one. The television films marked the best of this work and continue to attract hostility. *The Blasphemer's Banquet* (1989) was written after the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie. The Archbishop of Canterbury called on the BBC to withdraw it.

War was increasingly central to his work. The film-poem *The Gaze of the Gorgon* (1992) tracks the exile of a statue of poet Heinrich Heine over a century. The gorgon's petrifying stare is a metaphor for the horrors unleashed by those moving the statue, with the gorgon's "long shadow still cast across" the late 20th century.

Harrison was invited to contribute poems on the first Gulf War to the *Guardian*. "A Cold Coming," its title taken from Eliot, was a response to Kenneth Jarecke's iconic photograph of an Iraqi soldier burned to death.

> Rainbows seven shades of black
> curved from Kuwait back to Iraq,
> and instead of gold the frozen crock's
> crammed with Mankind on the rocks,
> the concealed geni who won't thaw
> until the World renounces War…

The Guardian also sent him to Bosnia, publishing his "The Cycles of Donji Vakuf" as a news article. The paper published the text of his film-poem *The Shadow of Hiroshima* (1995) on the 50th anniversary of the atomic bombing.

Harrison's turn to occasional verse was a response to the global developments. His anger demanded an outlet. Its immediacy may have made some of this less durable—although there is much to admire in the republican who denounced monarchy in his scabrous dismissal of the post of Poet Laureate—but it burns the more ferociously because of that. One of his demands was to be

> free to write what I think should be written
> free to scatter scorn in Number 10
> free to blast and bollock Blairite Britain.

("Laureate's Block", 1999)

In 2009, accepting the inaugural PEN Harold Pinter Prize, he called for continued vigilance against censorship and injustice, saying some regimes put their poets in prison, while "we put ours in Poets' Corner! I sincerely hope to be spared both."

He continued to explore big issues. His 2008 play *Fram*, back at the NT, explored environmental disaster and the imagination through the Greek scholar Gilbert Murray, actress Sybil Thorndike and explorer Fridtjof Nansen.

Acknowledging his range and the fallow periods in his writing, he said "It's all one work. You know, maybe the life is really about dodging about to achieve moments where the work can happen."

In 2009, Harrison insisted that "A poet's rage has as much place in his poetry as [Wordsworth's] 'emotion recalled in tranquillity.'" He spoke of being recalled from delight in his apple trees by the "horrors … from Blair, Bush and their coalition cohorts, and the illegal occupation of Iraq." As he put it, "The contemplation of the apple blossom is continually broken by rage at political events."

It was a healthy instinct, and his artistic seriousness and integrity should be celebrated.

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