ALL THE VS OF LIFE:
CONFLICTS AND CONTROVERSIES
IN TONY HARRISON’S POETRY
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From the Authors

When we went in 2009 to interview Tony Harrison in his house in Newcastle we were struck by his hospitality, and, what became more than apparent during the conversation, his modesty. More to the point, being well-acquainted with his works, some of which, apart from verbal dexterity, are also charged with verbal weaponry, we had not expected Tony to be a gentle person with such a composed perspective on his achievement. Yet he was, not a man of war (of which in different forms he writes), but a man of a quiet outlook who looks back not with anger, but with a reflection which is partly philosophical, partly humorous, and is at odds with most critics’ perceptions of him as a one-dimensional dogmatist with an axe to grind. This is not to intimate that his political passions have been quenched, far from it, as his eyes light up at the mention of the previous Labour government and their betrayal of the principles on which they were founded. His opinions on the post of Laureate have also remained completely unchanged in the ten years since his vitriolic attack in The Guardian.

A few months after our interview we went to Leeds, not only to look at the archive collection of Tony Harrison’s manuscripts, held by the Leeds University library, but also to ‘inspect’ the place where the poem takes place: Holbeck cemetery. We went to see the graveyards, which, unlike those in Poland, where by and large graves are well-kept (admittedly, sometimes turned into shrines whose form seems to be somewhat exaggerated), turned out, in general, to be neglected, often simply vandalised, or just left to rot – in extreme cases being nothing short of a small pile of rubble marking the resting place of someone who had once been part of the Leeds community and its history.

The picture was not at all one of a place where memory is nurtured by the present. Some of the graves had graffiti (though not of the calibre depicted by Harrison in the 1980s), in many cases blocks of masonry were overgrown and hidden behind the evergreen ivy, and there was the omnipresent damage and neglect, mostly in the shape of rubble-strewn remains of what once was intended to be a memorial plot. The picture was even grimmer owing to the guinea graves, slabs with lists of names for the poor, often children who died at infancy as a result of high Victorian mortality.

Among the inscriptions, or at least those which were still discernible, most were clichéd, ‘in loving memory’ or the likes, though, ironically, their content did not comply with the declaration of those who had them inscribed, or simply did not stand the test of time, according to the universally acknowledged and hard to refute truth that the world belongs to the living. In British culture there is a pragmatic tendency not to dwell on the dead, which certainly distinguishes...
it from its neighbours across the water in Ireland, who often celebrate the presence of the dead amongst the living, whether in literature, most famously in the cases of Yeats, Joyce and even Heaney, or in culture, as the Halloween customs illustrate. There are rare, isolated, examples in twentieth-century British literature of authors mining this vein, such as Malcolm Lowry or Lawrence Durrell, all of whom are viewed as outsiders, as is the case with Harrison’s position in contemporary literary circles.

It seemed that the interred in that Leeds cemetery had no living company, except for an occasional lonely figure out walking with a dog, with no reason or intention to ponder upon the very nature of the place where the dog happens to perform its daily bodily functions, and at that particular moment, two academics trying to find a spiritual link with the poet and his poetry. For a poet whose work is so steeped in personal biography and as deep-rooted in place as the apple and hawthorn trees that populate the graveyard, this seemed to make personal sense to two long-time aficionados of Harrison.

What struck us there, as we tried to find our way to Harrison’s family grave, was that at least within the context of Harrison’s poem V it seemed odd that for his setting of conflict the Bolshie bard chose a setting where, by definition, there should be no conflicts, as all one would expect to find there is best abbre-viated by the cliché-deadening phrase RIP.

It was in reflecting on this moment that we then decided to focus our book on ‘all the versuses of life’ to which Harrison refers in his longest, and most controversial poem V; both his own and those of the class-divided Britain of the Eighties. We took the quote from V, but we believe that all of Harrison’s poetry is based upon a juxtaposition of various social, political and cultural issues, which most often remain in conflict and stir controversy, much as the setting of Holbeck cemetery may seem controversial and disclose conflict. We also believe that the issues undertaken in Harrison’s poetry directly refer to a number of problems afflicting Britain and its inhabitants, which are in fact universal from both a spatial and temporal aspect, thus being of great value to readers in other countries, both at present, and in subsequent years. The result is the present book, in which we attempt to explore divisive conflict, the ‘versus’ element, as a constant characteristic of Harrison’s poetry, and examine the social, cultural and political nature of verse-making.

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Introduction

The relation between the author’s life and his literary work has long been a topic of discussion among different critical schools whose preference was either to perceive a literary work chiefly, if not exclusively, as a reflection of its author’s biography (often including the socio-historical background), or to diminish, if not disregard, such a connection. One has to admit, though, that much as it is the work of literature that is of value, rather than the facts concerning its author, there are cases where the biographical and sociological context cannot be detached from the literary work itself. If we accept this stance, then it is Tony Harrison who seems to be exemplary of such a connection. In point of fact, the case of Tony Harrison’s life and his work, like a system of communicating vessels, seem to remain in a constant attempt to mutually reinforce each other.

There are two principal elements that constitute this connection. First of all, it is Tony Harrison’s background. He was born in Leeds, in 1937, and his Yorkshire origins are more than transparent in his work, be it poetry, plays or films. A case in point here are his adaptations of medieval plays for the National Theatre, in which the characters spoke with Yorkshire accents. Harrison’s insistence on this matter was not, however, a manifestation of regional nationalism, but a much broader issue connected with defending one’s identity, without being blended into what may be regarded as ‘proper’ or ‘standard’ identities. As Harrison explained: ‘God in my version speaks the same language as the people he is talking to’.1

There is, of course, more to it, so when Joan Bakewell makes a comment about Harrison, stating that one ‘can feel the Northern grit between his teeth’,2 it is not only the language, but the spirit of the North, based primarily on economic and class factors. And it is class that is another issue permeating Harrison’s work, or, to be more exact, his poetry. Harrison grew up in a working-class family, and received primary education in one of the County Primary Schools. However, he turned out bright enough to pass the Eleven Plus examination and was rewarded with a scholarship at the Leeds Grammar School, a fact which was to change his life completely.

Harrison’s case, in fact, reflects a bigger social problem of the post-war years, namely the selective system of education, in which children of working-class origin were occasionally given access to grammar school education, thus becoming what Andrew Gamble labels ‘a parvenu elite picked for their brains’

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1 Brown, Andrew. 1993. ‘Harrison forward: Andrew Brown meets Tony Harrison, whose poetry goes straight to the heart and to the mind.’ The Independent & The Independent on Sunday, 23 January.
What Gamble refers to is the fact that although children like Harrison descended from the working-class, they received a scholarship at a grammar school, a fact which on the one hand allowed them to ‘upgrade’ their social status, but on the other hand alienated them from their own family and social background.

As has already been mentioned, this didn’t just affect Tony Harrison, for the problem had a broader social dimension, one which has been quite extensively discussed in literature, and superbly defined in the title of a book by Frances Stevens which refers to children like Tony Harrison as ‘the new inheritors’.

The post-war selective system of grammar schools was exactly what Harrison experienced, much as many other pupils who were accepted to a grammar school despite their working-class origin. This created a dichotomy between the family background and the status offered by grammar schools. The fact, as Worpole observes, led to a feeling of estrangement from class and family (1991: 61). As he further explains:

The clever ones had to be sorted out, particularly the boys, and this was achieved by the ‘11 plus’ examination which swept thousands of homes each year like an icy wind, and which in many places destroyed the cementing ties of family and each other, sometimes for ever. (1991: 62)

It is interesting to look at statistics here which show that many of those children, whose parents were traditionally Labour-oriented, made a shift of about 65-73 per cent toward Conservative views as a result of their grammar school education (Jackson and Marsden 1962: 194).

The dichotomy mentioned earlier between the social background and the one offered by a grammar school education was most apparent in the kind of language the working class children used, which was a clear indicator of their origin, and which is so important in Tony Harrison’s poetry. In interviews, Harrison often recalls how his accent was a subject of mockery:

an English teacher that I had at Leeds grammar school, would always, as soon as I opened my mouth to read a poem would stop me

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4 The question of relation between language and class became an important issue, particularly in the 60s and 70s as a result of various theories put forward by Basil Bernstein in his publications. See, for example, Rosen, Harold. 1974. *Language and Class: a critical look at the theories of Basil Bernstein*. Bristol, Avon: Falling Wall.
because I had a thick urban Leeds accent. I’d say ‘Me ‘eart aches in a drowsy numbness’ ‘Please, stop’.

It comes as no surprise that he recorded this fact in his acclaimed poem *Them & [uz]*, which contains a direct reference to his teacher’s lecture on the superiority of Received Pronunciation – ‘We say [uS] not [uz]’ (Harrison 1982: no pagination).

Harrison’s secondary education, apart from the obvious advantages, made him acutely aware of how language and class are intertwined and to what an extent language can determine social status. A good example here is a guide for the BBC newscasters, published in the early 1980s, in which Robert Burchfield made the following comment:

it is assumed that the speaker uses Received Standard English in its 1980s form. The form of speech recommended is that of a person born and brought up in one of the Home Counties, educated at one of the established southern universities, and not yet so set in his ways that all linguistic change is regarded as unacceptable. (1981: 9)

It has to be emphasised that RP, both then and now, is a variant spoken by only a small percentage of the population. Yet, to a large extent it is the language that can influence social status and determine one’s position. What runs through much of the poetry of Tony Harrison is precisely this passionately felt sense of inferiority about speech (Warpole 1991: 66). It is thus not surprising that Harrison should be particularly keen on having his own tribute to the vernacular, a good example of which is the project he undertook during his stay as a lecturer in Nigeria, which led to staging *Aikin Mata* (1964), a version of Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* translated with James Simmons into the Pidgin English used by a native tribe. Nigeria was one of the many places Harrison visited after graduating from Leeds University, where he studied classics and linguistics, and which was his choice of an education in a more comprehensive environment than the one he was exposed to in the grammar school. He then travelled extensively, initially as a teacher of English, (Nigeria and Czechoslovakia), and subsequently as a recognised literary figure, to a number of countries, including Russia and Cuba.

The staging of *Aikin Mata* is just one example of Harrison’s versatility, for his work ranges from sonnets and film-poems to plays and opera libretti and, as has already been mentioned, translations. As regards translation (and adaptation) Harrison has regularly collaborated with the National Theatre,

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5 http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/johntusainterview/harrison_transcript.shtml; 1.08.2011
where he staged his version of Molière’s *Le Misanthrope*, as well as his own first play *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*.

However, what Harrison is, and what he considers himself to be is first and foremost a poet⁶, and not just a poet who addresses a limited audience of poetry lovers, but one who is renowned for his poetic engagement in social issues, ranging from those that relate to class and social background, through various historical and political agendas and topical issues of the day, to areas that touch upon more personal dimension of existence in the modern world. All this can be found in a number of published volumes, including his early poetry that became reference points, namely *The Loiners* (1970), *From the School of Eloquence and Other Poems* (1978), *Permanently Bard: Selected Poetry* (1995) or, more recently *Laureate’s Block, and Other Occasional Poems* (2000), as well as *Under the Clock* (2005).

It would not be fair to talk about Harrison’s achievement without at least a mention of the awards he has received, among which there are the Cholmondeley Award for Poetry (1969), the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize (1972), The European Poetry Translation Prize (1983), The Whitbread Prize for Poetry (1982), The Wilfred Owen Poetry Award (2007), and The European Prize for Literature (2010). These, of course, do not include a number of fellowships, awarded to Harrison by various institutions such as UNESCO (allowing him to extensively travel throughout Africa and South America), the Universities of Newcastle and Durham, or the Royal Society of Literature.

Harrison has not so far been appointed as poet laureate, seemingly contrary to his literary achievement, as well as the social impact of his works. As Gilbert notes, Tony Harrison ‘has been tacitly acknowledged as poet laureate of the hard left for many years’ (1999: 18), but apart from this informal appraisal, he has not yet received a formalised appreciation. Not that it matters to him, in fact, as he openly offers his refusal to be appointed Britain’s poet laureate, should such an offer appear, which he refers to in his poem titled *Laureate’s Block*, that can be found in his collection of the same name⁷. Writing about *Laureate’s Block*, Gilbert suggests that ‘One can’t help feeling that the post might have forced him to write poetry that spoke beyond the narrow confines of his dogma and helped him to return to the more reflective mode that gave his early poems such power’ (1999: 19). However, it seems doubtful whether such an appointment could in anyway influence Harrison’s work, for even if some of his

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⁶As Harrison puts it in an interview: ‘Poetry is all I write, whether for books or readings; or for the National Theatre or for the Opera House and Concert Hall; or even for television. All these activities are part of the same quest for a public poetry.’ See http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/johntusainterview/harrison_transcript.shtml.

recent work does not carry the same weight, he has for years been quite consistent in his output.

What makes Harrison unique in a way is that he is not only a poet, but, as he puts it, a poet with a public mission, that is a public poet. In one of the interviews he says that his poetic activity is ‘all about searching for a public forum, finding a public voice’\(^8\). All these make Tony Harrison a public figure who employs poetry to discuss the burning issues of the modern world. His being public is largely made possible because of the medium that he uses, that is television. He has written a collection of poems that became more widely known, due not only to television broadcasts, but, as in the case of V, on a much smaller scale, because of the press interest at the time of its public transmission. Among the poems that were intended to exist within the film realm, the main ones are *The Gaze of the Gorgon* (1992), *Prometheus* (1998), *The Shadow of Hiroshima* (1995) or *The Blasphemer’s Banquet* (1990).

The film poems enabled Harrison to give his poetry a new, public dimension, in the form of media documentary, more accessible to the reader and going beyond the limits of printed poetry volumes, allowing Harrison to confront, as well as attempt to interpret, a number of vital issues, ranging from twentieth-century evils, such as German National Socialism with all its implications, imperialism and nuclear threat, to social matters touching upon class-division and economic inequality. Yet, paradoxically, these film poems also attempt to go beyond documentary realism to render the inner texture of people’s thoughts such as in *Black Daisies for the Bride*, which attempts the seemingly impossible: to portray the thought processes and memories of people suffering from Alzheimer’s. This is one of Harrison’s least politically engaged works, yet its surrealist filmic techniques are consistent with much more politically oriented works such as *The Big H* or *Prometheus*, which completely eschew any standards of documentary realism in their fierce polemics.

All the aspects of Harrison’s poetry listed above are framed within the concept of conflict, which is present in a variety of forms. First of all, war as the archetypal embodiment of dissension, for which Harrison uses references to the 1939-45 world war, as well as modern armed conflicts. This is deeply ingrained in Harrison’s memories of childhood, and his view of the human condition. As Maya Jaggi writes, quoting Tony Harrison:

> For Tony Harrison, the ritualised beauty of poetry answered his ‘existential unease with war’. Shocked by newsreel footage of concentration camps in 1945, when he was eight, he became obsessed, he

\(^8\) Butler, Stephen and Klepuszewski, Wojciech. 2009. ‘It’s a grand trade to be in – interview with Tony Harrison.’ (unpublished)
says, with ‘how you could measure even simple pleasures against such images – when the violent events of history seem to cancel out joy and meaning’\(^9\).

War is a recurrent image in Harrison’s poetry, whatever the temporal and spatial reference; from the reminiscences of the atomic atrocities in *The Shadow of Hiroshima*, through contemporary Iraqi issues in *A Cold Coming*, to *Shrapnel*, in which Harrison blends his early-childhood war memories with the 2005 bombing of the London Underground and a bus in Shoreditch.

However, the concept of conflict is not limited to the simple dialectic of life and death as might be inferred from his war poems, for the notion in Harrison’s poetry is much broader. In her article, Maya Jaggi observes that Tony Harrison ‘fuels his poetry with politics’\(^10\), and the politics here pertain to a number of issues encompassing language, culture, class and the like, all expressed by embattled voices, remaining in continuous conflict.

As Sean O’Brien pinpoints, it is from ‘apparent contradictions’ that ‘Tony Harrison’s achievement springs’ (1998: 51). This also refers to Harrison’s own life, his upbringing, or, to be more precise, his formative years, as these contradictions reflect both his own social and political beliefs and outlooks, as well as the contradictions rife in modern day Britain. Much along Spencer’s remark, Tony Harrison himself admits the importance of the *versus* factor in his works:

> I think *versuses* are very important to creating the verse, I mean, this rather awful pun of course in that title, that I think I need that dialectic, I suppose, to create. It’s part of my way of looking at things\(^11\).

And Harrison feeds this dialectic with his own experience and perception, which reveals the extent to which he is aware of his own background, the importance of language as a social-status determiner, and the class issue. In his best-known work, *V*, Harrison focuses upon all these issues, using poetry as a means of addressing different layers of socio-cultural conflicts, though the question remains whether any of his ‘public poetry’ actually finds solutions to the conflicts Harrison decides to focus on.

We take *V* and the line ‘all the *versuses* of life’ as a point of departure to explore conflicts and controversies in Harrison’s poetry, both those that he focuses on and those that his poetry triggers. The focal point of interest, apart from the substantial cultural and social problems touched upon in Harrison’s poems, is the relationship between the poet and the reader, and to what an extent a poem

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can ‘go public’, stirring a debate that goes beyond just literary matters. In the first chapter, the early poetry preceding V is the main focus, and in particular the various methods by which Harrison makes his poetry both more embedded in the grain of the Yorkshire dialect, as well as its attempt to embrace more public forums for a mode of literature increasingly more exclusive and exclusionary. Harrison has consistently questioned the role of poetry in modern society, a question which becomes all the more interesting in an increasingly multicultural and media-saturated world. At the same time, he constantly attempts to transform traditional poetic forms and to diversify poetic language. How to fit Harrison’s poetry into today’s society is one critical avenue we would like to explore in this book.

The second chapter is the primary focus of this monograph, centreing as it does on the poem V and the various social and political issues that it comments on, as well as the debate instigated by the very public media frenzy that initially surrounded it. With the dust of this furore settled, the final chapter will depict a more reflective and ruminative Harrison, as age begins to leave its imprint on the poet and his personal life, examining how he uses his poetry to come to terms with such facts as aging and death. His long-standing battle with depression and its thematic treatment in his work is a further instance of how it is practically impossible to differentiate the poet from his biography. These issues in no way indicate an emotional mellowing on Harrison’s part, as the book will close with some further remarks on the pervasiveness of politics in all of the Leeds-born leftist’s work, regardless of the period in which it is written. Harrison’s burning anger is still present for all to see, whether readers silently reading him at home, or two academics who had the fortune to witness this passion at first hand.
Chapter One

Tony Harrison versus the metrics of the ‘King’s English’

Throughout his career, Harrison has been praised for his metrical virtuosity and flexibility; in particular, his ability to adapt the metre of the piece to its subject matter. Thus, he employs the quatrain of Khayyam’s *Rubaiyat* in a film concerned primarily with middle-eastern religious intolerance, whilst Thomas Gray’s elegiac quatrains are adapted to a different task and a different milieu in the long poem *V*. Whatever the verse form being used, there is one constant in Harrison’s poetry that, whilst drawn attention to by various critics, is not placed in the context of its tradition: the alliterative verse of Old and Middle English. This is an oversight considering that every critic is in agreement that Harrison’s employment of verse forms always carries a social and political import. This is no less true in his use of the alliterative tradition, which, thus far, has received no critical comment. There has been numerous discussion of his employment of the alliterative technique, and the various social and cultural strategies he is able to draw from it. For example, Desmond Graham, an acquaintance of the poet and a perceptive critic, notes how Harrison uses alliteration and assonance to forge a complex ‘aural patterning’ unique to the medium of poetry (Byrne 1997: 36). In the same volume, Peter Forbes focuses on a different, non-literary, aspect of Harrison’s fondness for alliteration by comparing Harrison’s affinity for the technique with its attraction in popular culture, citing the Yorkshire cricketer ‘Fiery’ Freddie Trueman as an example. Forbes’ argument is that alliteration is ‘an inherently demotic art even if the word itself is unknown to the less well-educated’ (194). Whilst the technique is given sufficient critical attention, the tradition in British poetics from which it stems is never touched on in Harrison criticism. Yet, Harrison’s knowledge of this tradition and his implementation of it in his work carries as much social and political weight as his assault on other ‘bourgeois establishment poetic forms’ that have been discussed by various critics (Spencer 1994: 16).

To prove this, it is helpful to turn to his fellow Yorkshire poet, Ted Hughes, and his essay *Myths, Metres, Rhythms*. Hughes argues that in Britain, historically, there have been two different ‘musical traditions in English verse’ (1995: 320). One is the ‘traditional’ verse that the majority of poets in contemporary Britain employ, and which is characterised as ‘metrically simple’. The other tradition is characterised as ‘unorthodox metre’, of which there are only a few

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12 Sandie Byrne refers to Harrison as being ‘as polymetric as he is polyglottal’ (1997: 58).
notable examples throughout British poetic history, namely: Thomas Wyatt, Christopher Smart, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Gerard Manley Hopkins. What makes these poets unorthodox is that they create a tension in their poetry between the laws of metre, such as conforming to the strictures of the iambic pentameter, and a hidden law of stresses. In the latter, the priority is given to the accent on syllables rather than on the metrical law which dictates the number of syllables in a line. Poetry that values stress and accent is viewed as ‘unorthodox’ due to historical circumstances. There is an historical tradition in British poetry that values stress over metre, referred to by Hughes as the ‘alliterative oaken bole’ of Anglo-Saxon poetry. This alliterative tradition derives mainly from the pre-Conquest Germanic and Scandinavian tribes that settled in Britain. With the Norman conquest, the French court set up the ‘strictly metrical, iambic, rhymed verse as the poetic tradition’ which has dominated ever since (367). The ‘native’ alliterative tradition was viewed as a tribal deviation from the norm of the ‘King’s English’ and was thus historically suppressed until its revitalization in late twentieth-century poetry. Hughes, therefore, sees a connection between this poetic suppression and that which occurred over different modes of speech, which is the key theme of Harrison’s School of Eloquence poetic sequence, if we replace the phrase ‘King’s English’ with its modern version of The Queen’s English, the title of one of Harrison’s poems.

The contention in Hughes’ essay is that one of the ways to counter this poetic hegemony of metrical form is to embrace the ‘hand-wrought, gnarled, burr-oak texture’ of the alliterative tradition (356). This phrase to describe Wyatt’s poetry could just as easily be applied to Harrison’s, and may indicate that the disguised quotation from Wyatt in Harrison’s The White Queen is as important to an understanding of the poem as Sandy Byrne claims it is (1997: 20). Whilst she draws attention to the thematic parallels between the two poems, the metrical and accentual aspects of the lines quoted by Harrison are also interesting: ‘not gentle, tame, or meek’ (2006: 22). This line can be read as a simple iambic metre with the second syllable of ‘gen-tle’ being the unstressed counterpart to the stressed monosyllable ‘tame’ but Hughes devotes considerable analysis to the illustration that Wyatt is not writing this line according to metrical principles, but was instead ‘listening keenly to stresses’ (354). Hughes argues that this tension between the metrical length of the line and its number of stresses is a constant in all English poetry, a point that Desmond Graham concurs with in his analysis of the same tension in Harrison’s poetry (Byrne 1997: 35). Harrison makes the reader aware of this tension in his poetry in his poem The Heartless Art. He self-consciously refers to his poetry as concerned ‘with rhyme and rhythm’ and performs extreme violence on syllabic principles in his lines: ‘like Baptists uttering Beelzebub / syllable by syllable, spat Meth- / a-done, and
there’s also the poetic rub!’ (206). By reducing meth- to one syllable it becomes impossible to read the line as iambic, as it ends, customarily for Harrison, with a spondee of two monosyllabic stresses. This is rendered even more dramatically effective by the cluster of polysyllabic words that precede and follow this line end.

Richard Eyre characterises Harrison’s poetry as ‘rhythmic, memorable, muscled, alliterative, dramatic and impenitently English’ (Byrne 1997: 94). Other critics question the Nationalist assumptions behind the last phrase, but it can be argued that Eyre is simply referring to an aspect of English metrics that has its roots in the English language itself, and which contrasts it with other countries. As Susan Stewart argues, the English language is based on the ‘principle of isochronism’; in other words, English utterances are intimately connected to the rhythms and pulses of breathing, and therefore tend to focus more on the relationships between stresses than on syllables (Bernstein 1998: 34). So, in English speech there will often be a stress followed by an unspecified number of unstressed syllables that is unique to the language, and subsequently has a knock-on effect on English metrics. Despite Harrison’s polyglottal acquisition of various languages, his stress-laden poetry is a testament to the English language, as well as to its poetry. Whilst he seems to be expressing the opposite argument at the end of Wordlists II the phrasing of the lines questions what they are stating: ‘not the tongue that once I used to know/but can’t bone up on now, and that’s mi mam’s’ (118). The cluster of monosyllabic words in the final line demands that almost every word in the line is given a stress, which is a unique feature of both the English language and the alliterative tradition.

Peter Forbes is, then, quite accurate in relating Harrison’s poetry to popular British culture, as his stress-laden poetry is a testament to the speech patterns of people throughout the island. This would also explain the historically established connection, in Britain, between alliterative poetry and the ‘vernacular movement’, as discussed by H. T. Kirby-Smith (1999: 69). He sees Gawain and the Green Knight as the consummation of this connection between literature and the vernacular speech of the British isles, as does Ted Hughes in the above-mentioned essay. Historically, after Gawain, the alliterative tradition was submerged by metric principles and the Gawain poem itself was critically ignored until the twentieth century.

Renewed interest in the poem in recent years coincides with a similar awakening of interest in the employment of vernacular speech in contemporary British poetry. This is one of the main themes addressed in Harrison’s School of Eloquence sequence. In Simon Armitage’s recent translation of the medieval alliterative poem he employs words from vernacular speech such as ‘laikin’ and ‘chunter’, unique to the Yorkshire region, as well as locutions such as ‘mizzy’
or ‘mire’, unique to the West Midlands area of England. For Armitage, this was one of the chief attractions of the poem: ‘there was something Pennine, or at least non-metropolitan, about its medieval language’13. Kirby-Smith makes the same point that ‘cosmopolitan’ Chaucer and his European metrical poetic principles were responsible for the waning of the alliterative tradition in the middle ages and its lack of vernacular language (69). Armitage is one poet among many seeking to redress the balance in his translation by including some of his own Yorkshire phrases, as in the line: ‘It’s not in my nature / to idle or allack about this evening’ (Armitage 2009: 16).

Armitage’s justification for using the word ‘laikin’ is that not only is it current Yorkshire slang, but it is also in the original poem. This is another aspect of Harrison’s use of dialect words in his own poetry that receives little discussion. He uses words such as ‘laikin’ or ‘thole’ which are both currently used, and have their roots in the Germanic languages that contributed to the alliterative tradition in England. Granted, this may not be entirely conscious on Harrison’s part, as this is just a feature of the English dialects of the North of England. Armitage uses the phrase ‘in fine fettle’ in his translation which is still currently used in Scotland, Ireland many of the northern parts of England, and the word ‘fettle’ has its origins possibly in the Anglo-Saxon Germanic word ‘fetel’ meaning ‘belt’ or the Norse word ‘fetill’ referring to the strap of a sword14. The dialect word ‘thole’ that Harrison uses in his poetry is also employed by Seamus Heaney in his translation of the Old English poem Beowulf. He argues in his introduction that the word probably does derive from a similar Anglo-Saxon lexeme in the poem, but that it is also used in the common Ulster speech of his family (Heaney 1999a: xxv). The survival of dialect words into modern speech is a testimony to the relationship between speech and literature in England, and it is not coincidental that the one characteristic that Beowulf, the Gawain poet, and Harrison’s poetry all have in common is their alliterative attributes.

The relationship between the alliterative tradition and speech is not simply one of vocabulary. It also has an effect on the way in which people speak and this may not be as ‘impenitently English’ as Eyre claims it is. It would appear to have more in common with certain regions within not only England but Scotland and Ireland also. If Heaney and Harrison are compared once more, in an early poem by the County Derry poet he consciously aligns himself with the tradition that this paper is arguing is a key aspect of Harrison’s poetry: ‘Our guttural muse was bulled long ago by the alliterative tradition’ (Heaney 1999b: 236). Leaving aside the colonial implications of the phrase ‘bulled’, by referring

14 Our thanks to our colleague, Dr Neubauer, for pointing these origins out to us.
to his muse as ‘guttural’ Heaney is drawing attention to the characteristics of Ulster speech, referred to by fellow Ulster poet Tom Paulin as ‘spiky and abrasive’\(^\text{15}\). The abrasion often stems from the guttural nature of Ulster speech which has more in common with Scottish vocal inflection. In his poem *Broagh* he talks of how the *gh* sound in the word is closer to Scottish pronunciation in words such as *loch*. He comments on this regional aspect of the word: ‘The English can’t altogether manage that last *gh* sound, that guttural slither’ (Heaney 1980: 69). Harrison, however, would have no problems with such a guttural slither, given his ability to render it frequently in his own poetry. The opening lines to *The Rhurbarbarians* serves as an illustrative example: ‘Those glottals glugged like poured pop, each/rebarbative syllable’ (113).

Such guttural speech has often been considered as of ‘the gutter’ by the more cosmopolitan centres of culture and civilization, hence Harrison’s reference to ‘barbarians’ in the title of the poem. Throughout English history the cradle of civilisation has always been seen to reside in the southern area of London and its environs, which would place the barbarians of both speech and poetry to the north. Chaucer’s famous dismissal of the alliterative tradition affirms Hughes’ point that in Britain the battle of the modes of poetry was often connected with the battle over metrical forms:

> But trusteth wel, I am a southren man-
> I kan nat geste Rum-Ram-Ruf, by letter;
> Ne, God wot, ryme holde I but litel bettre. (Chaucer 1996: 334)

By referring to Harrison as a ‘barbarian’ in his famous poem *Them and [uz]*, the Yorkshire poet’s school teacher is reinforcing the same cultural attitudes as Chaucer, over six hundred years later. Chaucer cannot come to terms with the alliterative tradition due to its heavy use of consonantal clusters of words, which contributes to the abrasive nature of both Northern speech and alliterative poetry. In Heaney’s poetry there is also much consonantal guttural ‘twang’ and in one poem he identifies one of its sources: ‘[a] scop’s twang’ with an ‘iron / flash of consonants / cleaving the line’ (Heaney 1999b: 104). This is as much a description of his ‘spiky’ Ulster speech as it is a reference to the Old English poetic tradition.

It is interesting that Heaney refers to himself as an Anglo-Saxon ‘ scop’, just as Harrison refers to himself as a ‘skald’ in V. Both poets are aligning themselves with versifiers from various Germanic and Scandinavian traditions that employ alliterative poetry. In both cases they are also referring to lyricists who

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were part of pre-literate, oral cultures, and so their poetry was of a similar vein. This may add a further explanation to both poets’ alliterative tendencies with the focus on stress rather than metre. Martyn Crucefix argues that the ‘conception of poetry as speech is a powerful constituent in Harrison’s work, and perhaps one not clearly understood’ (Byrne 1997: 166).

It is not clearly understood due to the tendency to read poetry by metrical and prosodic principles, but if we take the poetry to be an accurate representation of the voice of Harrison, as a poem to be heard aloud rather than analysed quietly, then the problem disappears. As Harrison said of V: ‘the ear must decide’ (O’Brien 1998: 46). This would have been the case with the skald’s and scop’s audience also. It is easier for the ear to decide if it is familiar with the tongue being used, but as Byrne points out, in Harrison’s poetry this is a problem as he is:

a poet whose work stops you short when you try to read him aloud in public and encounter head-on those ‘matter/water’ rhymes which work for him and Wordsworth, the direct speech of father and son, the Northern and specifically Leeds voices you are not sure whether to get something of your tongue round or ignore. (37)

To ignore the voices in Harrison’s poetry is to ignore an entire tradition of oral-based poetry in the British Isles. Ted Hughes referred to how one critic described some of his poetic lines as literally ‘unsayable’, but the following lines could as easily have come from Harrison as from Hughes: ‘Lightly he lifted the weapon, then let it down deftly/ With the barb of the bit by the bare neck’ (Hughes 2005: 1170). Compare this line with the opening of Harrison’s ‘Baked the day she suddenly dropped dead’ (Harrison 2007: 126). Both open with trochees and end with spondees and are packed with alliteration. Hughes would argue that these are lines that are only unsayable if the reader comes from a different background than the two Yorkshire poets. Being made aware of that origin, Crucefix’s problem in Harrison’s poetry dissolves. Whilst this would seem to limit the range and impact of their poetry, a knowledge of the extensiveness of the oral tradition in Britain and the various streams and tributaries from which it derives its origins, places their works in a wider perspective. The many parallels between Hughes, Harrison and Heaney then become clearer, as Hughes argues that in the North of England, historically, there had been an ‘enveloping, nurturing, Celtic matrix’ in which the oral tradition flourished (1995: 369). This would have been added to by the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian cultures that subsequently invaded the same areas. Despite other tribal differences, the one thing all these cultures shared was their orality, which in their poetry meant an alliterative tradition, as it affects the ear of the scop’s or skald’s
audience, as well as being a useful mnemonic device for poets who would have to know by heart thousands of lines of poetry. Julius Caesar praised the Celtic poets for their prodigious feats of memory, which would seem a strange comment to make, particularly when considering it is coming from the leader of the predominant literate culture of the world at that time.

Another parallel between Harrison’s poetry and these various pre-Christian cultures is difficult at first glance to notice. Kirby-Smith highlights that most of the poems from the alliterative tradition ‘grow out of times and circumstances when the prevailing ethic was fiercely martial’ (63). Harrison’s stint as war-poet contributor to *The Guardian* in such devastated regions as Serbia and Afghanistan would make it a far stretch to claim Harrison as a poet who celebrates martial values. Metaphorically, though, he does often express his poetic intentions in combative rhetoric. Thus, he describes in interview his subversion of the bourgeois forms of poetry, such as the sonnet and quatrain, as an ‘aggressive occupation’, which is the same rhetoric he adopts in the belligerent opening to the second section of *Them and [uz]*: ‘So right, yer buggers, then! We’ll *occupy/your lousy leasehold Poetry*’ (Harrison: 2006: 123). Bruce Woodcock characterises this aspect of Harrison’s poetry as ‘classical vandalism’, a feature of all Harrison’s work, and he makes a relevant connection between the angry satire of his longer poems, such as *V*, and the tradition under discussion here:

The verse too is much more vigorous. Gray’s classically illustrative iambic patterns have been invigorated with a strenuous resistance to the iambic norms, the trochee and dactyl of the opening line setting the stamp, along with Harrison’s penchant for a verbal density akin to the best Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse. (1990: 50-65)

A few examples from *V* easily illustrate Woodcock’s point: ‘sprayed by some peeved supporter who was pissed’, ‘made the tree shed showers of shrivelled may’, ‘the causes skinhead spraycans could espouse’ (Harrison 2006: 238-40).

It is not just the Anglo-Saxon alliterative tradition that both Harrison and Heaney identify with, however, as the former poet indicated to this author in a recent interview. In discussing the use of dialect words in both his own and Heaney’s poetry, he identifies a common source for their strategy: ‘[Heaney’s] just a version of Henryson, the Scottish makar, who was a great influence on me, if we think about Northerners’ (Butler and Klepuszewski 2009). He goes on to mention the other ‘Scottish Chaucerians’, William Dunbar and Gavin Doug-

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16 Christopher Butler is another critic who views Harrison’s Greek dramatic translations as a way for the poet to get ‘back past Christianity and the moral and social arrangements it has presupposed’ (Byrne 1997: 106).
las, and their similar influence on him. One critic who makes a similar connection between Harrison and the Scottish medieval poets is Christopher Butler when he refers to V as an example of a ‘flyting riposte’ (Byrne 1997: 97). The similarities between this unique medieval form and Harrison’s modern day equivalent are numerous. Firstly, there is the heavy use of alliteration in the form, which James VI declared its defining characteristic: ‘the maist part of your lyne sall rynne vpon a [one] letter’ (Bawcutt 1992: 373). An example from Dunbar’s The Flying of Dunbar and Kennedy epitomises the ‘density’ of alliteration that the poem contains:

Thy rigbane rattillis and thy ribbis on raw;  
Thy hanchis hirklis with hukebanis harth and haw,  
Thy laithly lymis ar lene as ony treis. (Baildon 1907: 89)

In this famous flyting poem we have the same “quasidramatic” situation as is set up in V between the poet and the skinhead. In the Scottish poem it is two poets who are having the verbal altercation, and the sense of their conflict is strikingly similar to that in Harrison’s poem, as Priscilla Bawcutt explains: ‘At one level Dunbar and Kennedy speak as representatives of social groups, voicing the antagonisms of Lowlander and Highlander’ (228). This antagonism is voiced using the same ‘bad language’ that was the source of controversy in the filmed version of V, and in Dunbar’s day a phrase such as ‘cry cok’ used in the poem would have been considered as offensive as ‘listen, cunt’ that raised such an outcry in Britain when heard on national television.

The main similarity between the two poets, and the two poetic traditions, is that alliteration is heavily employed as it was close to the grain of the living speech of the people from those regions. Bawcutt emphasises that Dunbar’s poetry is replete with both the angry ‘street talk’ of the warring poets, as well as ‘the strident voices of other people’ (229). A glossary of terms is essential for most people when reading poems in Scots, but even when there is a full grasp of what the individual words mean the spoken idiom of Scots can also be lost on many a reader. Hugh MacDiarmid implies that only a born Scot can vocally shape this idiom effectively: ‘And sall a Belgian pit it into words/ And sing a sang to’t syne, and no’ a Scot?/ Oors is a wilder thistle, and Ramaekers/ Cannae bear aff the gree – avaunt the thoacht!’ (MacDiarmid 1992: 37). MacDiarmid’s description of Scots speech as ‘wild’ echoes Paulin’s description of his favourite accents as ‘spiky and abrasive’. It is not coincidental that all these poets have ‘Northern’ backgrounds as indicated by Harrison in interview, as northern dialects tend to be much harsher than their southern counterparts. This, in turn, may be due to their common linguistic origins, as Norman MacCaig refers to the Anglo-Saxon roots of Scots speech:
Scots, it must be observed, is not English badly spelled; nor is it a dialect of English. To simplify, but not in a direction away from the truth: the Scots language was a development and by no means a degeneration of the Anglian branch of what is called Old English, and was originally spoken from the Forth to the Humber -- that's to say, on both sides of the Border. The Saxon branch to the South flourished and became what we call English. With the establishment of the Border, the Anglian branch developed as Scots. Scots and English, therefore, are common languages with a common ancestor, and it is as absurd to call Scots a dialect of English as it would be to call English a dialect of Scots. (MacDiarmid 1972: x)

Harrison’s choice to live in Newcastle, which is literally just south of the border between Scotland and England would have made him aware of the similar ancestry between the Northern English contained in his poetry and his speaking voice, and his Scottish poetic forebears. A telling example of the linguistic family resemblances concerns the word ‘flyting’ itself, which, as Bawcutt tells us, is ‘roughly synonymous with a scold (Scottish skald)’ (223). The ‘skald or skin’ of V would then have more in common with the oral Scottish tradition of poetic recital than the measured cadences of Gray’s elegy.

In Dunbar’s *Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy* the word ‘scald’ is also used to describe the author of the poem, but curiously enough it is used in a mocking pejorative sense, as Dunbar is referred to as a mere minstrel: ‘Tak the a fidill or a floyte, and geste’ (Baildon 1907: 69). The other attack levelled at him is that he is not a true Scottish poet, due to his having spent some time abroad, as Bawcutt notes: ‘For Kennedy Dunbar is an outsider of a different sort— a vagabond cleric, a rootless wanderer’ (228). The word employed to describe such a person is ‘baird’, which is another favourite nomenclature that Harrison uses in reference to himself. Kennedy employs it to emphasise Dunbar’s rootless wanderings on the continent of Europe, which are seen to have infected his poetry with its assumption of foreign models. Herein lies Dunbar’s most important influence on Harrison. Whilst he seeks to ‘occupy’ the bourgeois forms of poetry and subvert them for his own purposes, the contradiction is that he is able to wield the various metrical tools of those forms to his purpose. In doing so, his main influence would have been the Scottish poets he mentioned. The chief distinction between English and Scottish alliterative verse in Dunbar’s time was

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17 As his collection *Permanently Bard* indicates, and as he revealed in his interview: “I tend to see all my work as one work, and that drive towards being a bard informs it all. Everyone has always called me ‘bard’, it’s just my nickname” (Butler and Klepuszewski 2009).
that the Anglo-Saxon verse tended to be unrhymed, whilst the Scottish poets were in favour of stanzaic models in which rhyme featured prominently (Bawcutt 1992: 374). Both Harrison and Dunbar share a common talent: their ability to master different strains of stanza organization. In the case of Dunbar this could even mean the ability to make use of the unrhymed English version of alliterative verse. In both poets’ case, this metrical flexibility is employed to suit the thematic material under discussion. So, whether working within the constraints of a sonnet, or using quatrains in his longer poems and film poems, Harrison always employs alliteration as a constant in the same manner as Douglas. The closing lines of *Blasphemer’s Banquet*, a film poem of fierce polemic, illustrates this constancy: ‘instead of Paradise, prefers, / this life of passion, pain and passing shows’ (Harrison 2007: 152).

Very often the two poets apply alliteration to achieve the same effects. The anger of rhetoric and polemic is powerfully reinforced in alliterative verse, and is employed in that fashion by both Harrison and Dunbar. In the latter poets’ case alliteration is made to serve as a ‘powerful reinforcer’ of insults, and is often prominent in the many ‘catalogues of abuse’ that appear in his work (Bawcutt 1992: 374). His description of the court of King James IV furnishes an apt example:

fenȝeouris, fleichouris, and flatteraris,
Cryaris, craikaris, and clatteraris. (Baildon 1907: 137)

In Harrison’s poetry alliteration is often put to a similar use, as in the catalogue of invective hate that is present in *The Big H*: ‘Millions of bloody babes I’ll butcher and I’ll barbecue,/ Boil the buggers down to bones and bubbly barley sugar goo’ (Harrison 2007: 59). What both poets achieve in such torrents of abuse is ‘near-anarchy and above all ‘noyis’ and ‘gild’ (clamour)’ (Bawcutt 1992: 370). Sean O’Brien argues that Harrison’s consonantal and alliterative language is aiming for a similar effect, which he describes as ‘insistently physical a noise, and as bluntly concrete (as it were) a set of properties as could be mustered for the occasion’ (1998: 62). He is referring to the final lines of *V*, such as ‘shored slack, crushed shale, smashed prop’, but there are numerous examples throughout Harrison’s work, such as the ‘noisy’ murmurs of the crowd in ‘The Rhubarbarians’ or the comparison of his poetry to the physical noise of the insurrectionary Luddite movement in ‘On not Being Milton’:

The stutter of the scold out of the branks
Of condescension, class and counter-class
Thickens with glottals to a lumpen mass
Of Ludding morphemes closing up their ranks. (Harrison 2006: 112)
There is a subtle reference again to Harrison’s awareness of the etymology of the word ‘scold’ or ‘scald’, which also appears in Dunbar’s poetry, and in both cases refers, interestingly, not only to poets but also to ‘gossipy women’ (Burt 2011: 254).

The physicality of the noise in this poem is an aural reflection of what the poem is discussing. It is not only referring to the act of stuttering, but is sonically reproducing it as well. A similar poet to achieve such effects was Gerard Manley Hopkins, who exploited ‘clotted spondees’ to accomplish this task, according to Susan Stewart (Bernstein 1998: 44). This is an apposite description of many of Harrison’s lines as well, which often sound as if they are being spoken through a ‘gob full of pebbles outshouting seas’ (Harrison 2006: 122). In his famous poem *Heredity* Harrison equates his poetry with the familial inheritance passed on from two uncles: ‘one was a stammerer, the other dumb’ (111). This inheritance is fairly consistent throughout *The School of Eloquence* sequence, which enacts this condition as often as it refers to it:

His gaping jaws  
Once plugged into the power of his stammer  
Patterned the stuck plosive without pause  
Like a d-d-damascener’s hammer. (115)

Again, it is alliterative repetition or ‘patterning’, in this case the percussionary beating of the plosive p’s, that allows Harrison to audibly reproduce this stammering effect. Peter Quartermain argues that this is one of the defining characteristics of American twentieth-century poetry, citing Emily Dickinson as a prime example of a poet situated in ‘the age of the stammering poet, groping for words, stuttering in quest of articulation, refusing the preset certainties of pattern’ (Bernstein 1998: 227). He has, however, nothing to say on the role that social exclusion has to play in this phenomenon. Harrison’s uncles stammer and stutter due to their class background, which ousts them from the dominant forms of social discourse, a phenomenon that Dickinson, as a spinster, would also have been familiar with, and possibly influenced her own inarticulate-haunted poetry.

In Harrison’s case, the preoccupation with the speech impediment of his uncles illustrates the psychological trauma that often attends the acts of social exclusion, that affect not just modes of poetry but modes of speech also. To cite a similar example, the Irish poet John Montague also suffers from the same speech impediment, and he equates this with the suppression of the Irish language in favour of the socially, politically and culturally dominant language of English. He refers to English as a ‘grafted tongue’ and he depicts graphically
the trauma of one young child being forced to speak English rather than his native Irish tongue:

An Irish
child weeps at school
repeating its English….
To grow
a second tongue, as
harsh a humiliation
as twice to be born. (Montague 1972: 18)

Working class people from the North of England experience a similar humiliation when their mode of speech is viewed as just as inferior as the Irish language. Ned Thomas claims that what both Montague and Harrison possess, as do all regional writers, is an awareness of ‘the consciousness of suppression [which] has implicit in it the notion of liberation and emergence’ (1991: 121). Harrison’s poem Wordlists shows both aspects of this idea. On the one hand, the awareness of suppression is there in his statement that ‘society’s not like the OED’. And to counter this, he offers liberation through his re-appropriation of the speech and diction of people from the excluded region of the Scottish/English border:

His heart beat faster when a living mouth
(the jotting said a ‘fishwife’s’) used the old
and, for him forgotten in his flit down South,
border word yagach to describe the cold. (Harrison: 2006, 119)

The note of liberation and emergence resounds clearly in the final line of the poem: ‘Fling our doors wide! all, all, not one, but all!’

**Harrison versus print culture**

It was previously mentioned that both Harrison and Heaney personified themselves as scops and scalds, oral reciters of poetry. The implications of this affiliation run deep, and will be explored in this section. In Harrison’s case the identification with an oral class of poet is thematically connected with two important aspects of his poetry: his attempt to render the speech of his class as accurately as possible, and his interrogation of the bourgeois forms of poetry. To address the latter point first: the tension in Harrison’s poetry between the traditional laws of metre and the hidden law of stresses normally equates to a tension between adherence to metrical forms and the rhythm of the speaking voice. It is not often noticed in daily intercourse that speech does contain rhythm, but as Sandie Byrne argues: ‘Speech arrives in rhythmical form and our
experience of it cannot be separated from our knowledge of its rhythmical structure’ (33). This is something Harrison has been acutely aware of throughout his career. Despite his repeated assaults on the iambic metre, he is also aware that it is, in his words, ‘absolutely natural to English speech. Whether it’s imported as a metre is for me unimportant, it’s close to natural speech, and that’s what I like to play with, the mixture of regular metre and absolutely colloquial speech’ (Butler and Klepuzewski 2009). So, he will employ iambic metre if it fits to the regular patterns of speech, as it often does: ‘It won’t be long before Ah’m t’only white!’ (Harrison 2006: 129). The irony is that this scans as perfect iambic only through the use of the elisions of northern speech, indicating that the relation between the battle for poetic forms and that of modes of speech can yield some surprising and contradictory results.

In attempting to render the speech of his class as effectively as possible Harrison’s poetry comes up against the problems inherent in this endeavour. In particular, there is the problem of transcribing living speech into written form, as a poem such as Them and [uz] graphically illustrates. It plays with the phonetic forms of representation most clearly in the contrast between [uz] and [Ʌs] that punctuate the first section of the poem. There are limitations to the extent that written transcription can represent speech, as Susan Stewart mentions: ‘Most features of spoken intonation, pitch, stress, and intensity must be supplied by the reader.’ In poetry, this creates additional problems as Stewart goes on to explain:

In a poem the acoustical ‘space’ of the form, the context wherein the stress is reconstructed, becomes the work itself -- the consequent phrase or sentence or stanza or form from title or first line to closure -- and all the knowledge one brings to the poem. This process from sound production to inscription to reading to sound reception is pocked with anachronisms that in themselves are productive of historical meaning. Spelling, for example, always lags behind pronunciation; off-rhyming can be taken as exact rhyming and vice versa; poetry itself is often cited as an index to past pronunciation of the language. (Bernstein 1998: 32)

Harrison’s poetry deals with many of these precise anachronisms. The relationship between spelling and pronunciation is cleverly highlighted at the end of On Not Being Milton: ‘Sir, I Ham a very Bad Hand at Righting’ (2006: 112). The connection between pronunciation and rhyming is a main theme of Them and [uz] as when the poet reminds us that ‘Wordsworth’s matter/water are full rhymes’ (123). The knowledge that the reader brings to the poem is in full evidence in the opening line of the poem: ‘aɪɑɪ, ay, ay!....stutterer Demosthenes.’
Not only does the reader need to possess at least an awareness of ancient Greek, and the fact that Demosthenes was a Greek orator who had to overcome the same speech impediment as Harrison’s uncle. There is also a reference to the British music hall tradition with its standard oratorical opening, and without this knowledge the phrase ‘ay, ay!’ will make no sense to the reader.

The reader has a certain amount of work to do in order to fully appreciate the poem, but the performance of the poem by the poet can be an invaluable aid, and this is where Harrison can legitimately label himself a ‘scald’. In his readings of his own work he is able to inflect, stress and pace the lines in a way that makes them more accessible to the audience and answers the questions of sound production in a way that the printed page cannot. By mimicking the catchphrase of the music hall comedian in the opening of Them and [uz] Harrison is providing an aural clue to the reference that could be lost by merely sight reading from the page. The poet is also able to assist the reader in determining the meaning of the poem by stressing certain words over others, quickly sliding over the words that are not so important to the meaning of a certain poem. In some cases this adds a theatrical element to the poems, as the poet adopts different personae through a shift in tone of voice. The most famous example is his vocal performance of the skinhead in V, who has a more aggressive and colloquial tone of voice than the more ruminative persona of the author of the poem. In his reading of Them and [uz] he achieves something similar by adopting the tone of voice of the schoolmaster who is patronising the author as a youth. Throughout a textual reading of the poem there are numerous indicators that Harrison is attacking the superior attitude of his school teacher, often none too subtly as in the proclamation: ‘please believe [As] / your speech is in the hands of the Receivers’ (122). The capital letter in the final word reveals the position of dominance this group possesses, and in the reading of the poem this is further emphasised by the sneering, nasal tone of voice that Harrison adopts whenever he mimics the tutor’s persona. This high-pitched nasal tone is at odds with the guttural rumble of the lines in the second section of the poem when the poet goes on the offensive: ‘you can tell the Receivers where to go / (and not aspirate it).’ His ‘e-nun-ci-a-tion’ of phrases such as ‘glorious heritage’ is bitingly satirical and jars with such a guttural collection of glottals in a line such as ‘lumps to hawk up and spit out.’

This can all be lost on a silent reading of the poem, and it raises the question of how effective print is in evoking speech. Tom Paulin is another poet who wrestles with such a dilemma. He makes a contrast between the ‘the springy, irreverent, chanting, quartzy, often tender and intimate, vernacular voice’ with the ‘Parnassian official order…[language] of institutions, committees, public voices, print’ (Paulin 1990: x). It is difficult for print to capture the endless sub-
tleties and variations of vernacular speech, and so in The Wind Dog Paulin sets up an opposition between ‘print sound’ and ‘spokensound’, the latter term deliberately coined ad hoc, as speech very often is of a similar nature. It is possible to capture speech in print, as Paulin’s poem proves when he renders an old Belfast street song accurately: ‘– thhee black lumps / outa her wee shap / – can-
dy apples hard green pears / kanversation lazengers’ (Paulin 1999: 56). Even so, an actual listening to the speech of people from Belfast would be of immense benefit in truly being able to aurally appreciate these lines. In Harrison, the contrast between the worlds of speech and print is slightly more complicated due to his desire to have a ‘public voice’ but some of his most tender poems arise from a situation when he is aware of how the world of print has separated him from his family, in particular his father: ‘what’s still between’s / not the thirty or so years, but books, books, books’ (126). His dislike of institutions and committees is as immersive as Paulin’s: whether it is the GCE educational examinations, referred to sarcastically as ‘Grand Child Eliminator’, or the public institution of Poet Laureate referred to as ‘purest poison if paid poets lose / their freedom as PM’s or monarch’s hack’ (2000: 54).

Part of the power of the oral performance of poetry is that it allows the poet to maintain their political and social freedom to critique and criticise, another feature that the polemical Paulin and Harrison have in common. The anthropologist Victor Turner believed that ‘performance is often a critique, direct or veiled, of the social life it grows out of, an evaluation (with lively possibilities of rejection) of the way society handles history’ (Bernstein 1998: 263). Peter Middleton applies this concept to the re-emergence in popularity of the poetry reading, and whilst he does not mention Harrison, the Leeds poet’s performance of Vernon national television is certainly applicable to the idea of performance as social criticism (263). Middleton highlights the fact that many poets and poetic movements who express an interest in the oral and performative aspects of poetry often equate it with a belief in ‘poetry’s revolutionary cultural power’. Harrison certainly maintains a similar stance, and explains his attempts to reach as wide and diverse an audience as possible, whether through the medium of national television or the public forums of theatre and newspapers. His reasoning for refusing the prestigious public role of Poet Laureate is that it is a position that does not allow for a questioning of the political and social status quo, which is exactly the function he wants for his poetry:

free to scatter scorn on Number 10,
free to blast and bollock Blairite Britain,
{and alliterate outrageously like then !}
free to write exactly as I choose
and heed both Thomas Gray’s and Milton’s ghost. (2000: 55)
One of the ways in which ‘society handles history’ is to either ignore it or re-write it, and part of Harrison’s job as oral poet is to give a voice to those who have been suppressed throughout history, as he is aware that ‘the dumb go down in history and disappear / and not one gentleman has been brought to book’ (2006: 121). The pun on the final phrase illustrates that Harrison is as aware as Paulin of the association between the ‘official order’, in this case the order of the legal system, and the printed word. Harrison’s subversive social poetry is a means to bring to book those who have not been called to answer for social and political inequities.

By first printing Laureate’s Block in The Guardian newspaper Harrison is free not only to express his opinions without censorship, but also to reach a much more diverse audience than the coteries of literary studies in universities. The same was true of V which was published in full in The Independent newspaper, before being broadcast on national television. The controversy surrounding the broadcast of the poem took place after the event, with politicians using the same media as the poet to offer their inane opinions on a topic they refused to really engage with, aducing a tired round of clichéd responses to boost their public popularity ratings. The live, unedited, performance of Harrison’s poem was a pre-emptive strike at the inevitable responses that the film received, and is another way in which the poetry reading can offer a forum for radical political and social change. In the age of spin doctors and sound bites, the emotional intensity of both Harrison’s performance and the effect it had on the small audience in attendance is a welcome corrective.

This is the benefit that oral performance can have over words printed on a page as Peter Middleton claims: ‘We should not underestimate the power of live performance to establish authority even in a world where bureaucracies manage knowledge and foxy mass media exclude response from their reading spaces’ (Bernstein 1998: 270). Harrison sums up the modern-day world of bureaucracy and mass-media in one line: ‘[a]self-promoting sycophantic flock’ (2000: 55).

After the furore surrounding V, Bloodaxe reprinted the poem in an extended edition, including excerpts from the various newspapers replete with journalist’s opinions and the defence of the poem by fellow poets, and general readers who wrote editorial letters praising Harrison. The striking thing about this edition is that the poem itself is relatively small in size compared to the bulk of material succeeding it.

This, however, is only a dramatic example of a common phenomenon that the re-emergence of the poetry reading, and thus the oral performance of poetry, is bringing back into common awareness after decades of blinkered textual analysis of printed poems. A printed poem displays the illusion of being a fixed
and finished product, literally and metaphorically bound within the confines of the volume it occupies. Once a poet performs this poem in public, whether on television, on a sound recording, or in a live venue, then the fixity of the poem dissolves, and any subsequent re-reading of the poem will be affected by the memory of the previous performance. Peter Middleton describes this contemporary process:

Poetry readings are part of the long biography of poems, part of the distribution from poet to readers, and readers to readers, which takes place through silent reading, memory, active analysis, discussion, performance, publication, and all the many processes whereby thoughts, feelings and knowledges circulate. The poem (like all texts) is a multidimensional entity, not reducible to one act of reading, one set of marks on one page, nor one poetry reading. (Bernstein 1998: 293-4)

Harrison would seem to concur with the idea of the poem being a multidimensional entity when asked whether V still had relevance as a poem twenty years after the events it was describing. His response confirms Middleton’s point: ‘I think that V, it still has an effect on people when I read it to audiences, and teachers are showing it to their pupils. I think it still has the power to move people and engage them in debate’ (Butler and Klepuszewski 2009). This is as much due to the nature of language itself, as of poetry, as the title of the poem suggests. By working on the many different meanings of the one letter V in the title, Harrison is exploring the nature of the ‘polysemantic scope of language’ itself, of which poetry is then merely an extension of the principle (O’Brien: 60).

The idea that poems have biographies of their own raises a crucial issue which is discussed in both general literary criticism and the branch of criticism that explores the recent surge of popularity in the oral performance of poetry. On the one hand, during a live performance the presence, or authority, of the poet is unquestionable, as Harrison’s own performances attest to. It is almost impossible to confuse the voice and presence of, say, a Harrison and a Heaney, or even Ted Hughes, who is regionally closer to Harrison. They each possess a unique voice that is closely aligned, but not necessarily synonymous, with their poetic voices, so that once a reader has heard the poet perform, a silent reading of any of their poems will make the connection between the lines on the page and the voice of the author. The supposed ‘death of the author’ that is the basis of poststructuralist literary theory would therefore seem to be negated by the ‘live’ poetry reading. Barthes, who coined the phrase on the supposed demise of the authorial figure, opened his essay Authors and Writers with the
question: ‘Who speaks?’ (Sontag 1982: 32). In a poetry reading the answer to
that question should be relatively simple. So, as Sandie Byrne comments, when
reading Harrison’s poetry his name is everywhere for the reader or audience
member to see or hear: ‘Harrison’s name, as ‘Tony’, ‘our Tony’, ‘Tony Harri-
son’, or ‘my name’ appears frequently in his poetry’ (Byrne 1998: 178).

On the other hand, many poets and critics who are interested in the perform-
ance element of poetry stress the opposite viewpoint: that poetry is a perfo-
rformance, and the identity of the poet that comes across in these situations is also
of a performative nature. Thus, Barthes answers his own query: ‘who speaks is
not who writes, and who writes is not who is’ (Sontag 1982: 32). Harrison’s
recitation of V is a rigorous exploration of this idea. In keeping with the dra-
matic element of the poem Harrison performs the two separate roles of the poet
and the skinhead and each has their own specific tone of voice. Yet, as the poem
suggests, Harrison himself is able to perform both roles so effectively as they
are separate elements of his own personality. The skinhead is referred to as his
‘alter ego’, a point he attempts to convince his foul-mouthed persona of: ‘the
skin and poet united fucking Rimbaud/ but the autre that je est is fucking you’
(Harrison 2006: 242). The alter ego tacitly concedes the point when he
spraycans his name on one of the graves and it turns out to be that of the poet.
Thus, the poem, despite its public showing on national television, and the noto-
riety that its author received, actually stresses a different point of view entirely,
as Anthony Rowlands noted:

‘V’ emphasises this lack of a fixed identity. The narrator is split into
two selves: the Harrison within the text can never be the fleshy self
of the present poet… Epiphanies such as the skinhead’s ‘Tony’ in-
scription might provide clues, albeit flawed ones, the poem suggests,
to an authorial presence beyond signification. (2001: 281-3)

This may seem to be at odds with the markedly autobiographical poems in
The School of Eloquence sequence which seem to be closer in spirit to the ‘ten-
der and intimate’ poems of the vernacular voice that Paulin praises in his own
work. However, even in this sequence there is a constant questioning of the self
that is Tony Harrison. In the poem Self-justification the title is misleading as the
poet is not searching for his own voice but a ‘would-be mobile tongue’ not
‘tied’ to the fleshy self which can impede the spirit of the person, as it does with
the stammer of his uncle Joe. Ironically, it is the world of print that allows his
uncle to escape his speech impediment as he works as a printer, and is thus able
to ‘handset type much faster than he spoke’ (2006: 172). By referring to his
uncle, Harrison is implying that the performative aspect of identity is a common
trait that defines the human species. As he phrases it in Palladas: ‘Life’s a per-
formance. Either join in/ lightheartedly, or thole the pain’ (77).
Chapter One

The aural aspect of performance poetry itself contributes to the questioning of the identity of the author. Bruce Andrews argues that one of the effects that oral poetry can achieve is ‘sonic dissonance’, which would be akin to the physical noise that O’Brien perceives in Harrison’s poetry, and which can only be noticed if one reads the lines aloud. What such dissonance achieves, according to Andrews, is a disruption of the boundaries between sense and sound that has been a major plumb line of exploration in much modern poetry since Robert Frost. In poetry, Frost’s phrase the ‘sound of sense’, unites the two seemingly opposite terms. Paulin explains Frost’s term in his own poetry: ‘a sentence he said/ was a sound in itself / on which other sounds called words may be strung’ (Paulin 1999: 56). By focusing on sounds rather than sense in poetry, the poet as authorial figure can often be effaced, as Andrews states: ‘To take the full measure of sense in sound would celebrate nonidentity, perhaps even obliviousness of self, or at least disrupt the cozy traces of personalization’ (Bernstein 1998: 74). Such a surrendering of self to the sounds of sense could be the implied meaning of the end of Wordlists when Harrison comments that ‘no polysyllables could see me through, / come glossolalia, dulciloquy’ (2006: 117). The self-effacing manner of the final term comes about due to Harrison’s desire to start talking in tongues which would leave his audience as astonished as the participants during the Pentecost, to elucidate the Biblical reference.

Speaking in tongues is a common metaphor for divine inspiration, and despite Harrison’s atheistic stance on religious matters, the idea of inspiration, of lines being delivered through him, with his self as simply a vessel or a conduit for whatever the muse wants to express, is a popular image in not only his poetry but that of numerous performance poets also. Jed Rasula explores this idea in his essay Understanding the Sound of not Understanding:

the poet is an extraneous, parasitical supplement to the poem. It is to apprehend the poet as a byproduct of the occasion, or as a technician facilitating a broadcast (as in Jack Spicer’s poet-as-radio hypothesis). Of course, the legacy of the Muses is a traditional way of making the point that inspiration is self-effacement; and that poetry is either unreliable speech or an opportunistic realization of the duplicity of language. (Bernstein 1998: 254)

The duplicity of not only language but of the self is the fundamental theme of V. As a way to escape the treachery of language Harrison often uses the same image as Jack Spicer. Spicer derived his idea of the poet as a receiver of transmissions from an external source, from Cocteau’s movie Orphée, a role model that Harrison also regularly adopts. In the early poem Curtain Sonnets he self-consciously refers to himself as ‘Orpheus going down again’ and his depiction
of this poetic archetype, the ‘sort of poet I think I am’ is of a figure with no voice of its own: ‘Lips cropped off a poet’ (2006: 55). In his late film poem *Metamorphose*, the identification with the figure is a way for Harrison to declare what he believes is the function of poetry in society, and the necessity for inspiration: ‘The voice, that heals and seeks to mend / men’s broken souls that men’s deeds rend’ (2007: 397). Whilst V seems to accept division as the order of things, the very act of leaving himself open to the inspiration of poetry allows Harrison to entertain a possible solution to this fractured state.

How, though, is it possible for a poet such as Harrison to reconcile his, often militantly expressed, atheism with the concept of poetic inspiration? A coded reference to Yeats in one his poems may provide some attempt at an answer to this question. The final line of Study reads: ‘My mind moves upon silence and *Aeneid VI*’ (2006: 115). The Virgil reference has been discussed by many critics as it makes thematic sense that Harrison would evoke a scene in which the Roman poet converses with his dead father in the underworld given that the poem is ostensibly about the recent death of his own father. The Yeats reference seems to be generally ignored though, but it fits with the theme of this current chapter. In Yeats’ *Long-Legged Fly* the Irish poet provides three examples of various famous historical figures: namely Caesar, Helen of Troy and Michael Angelo. Only one of them is engaged in artistic expression as Michael Angelo is painting the famous picture of Adam reaching out to God in the Sistine chapel. Yet, all three are united in their access to an unconscious realm of thought, which in each case is expressed by Yeats in the refrain: ‘Like a long-legged fly upon the stream / His mind moves upon silence’ (Yeats 1990: 382). The importance of each of the figures implies that this silence is of crucial importance in mankind’s history, and so A. G. Stock, an astute critic of Yeats, remarks: ‘Their minds are on nothing, and within that nothing is the destiny of the world’ (1961: 231). In an attempt to explain what Yeats meant by the term ‘silence’, Stock inevitably draws on religious imagery, specifically Buddha’s concept of emptiness and the God of the Old Testament whose face moves upon the waters. Neither of these figures would fit comfortably in Harrison’s oeuvre given his regular disavowal of any religious belief, often in abusive rhetoric as in *Fruitility*: ‘Fuck philosophy that sees / life itself as some disease / we sicken with until release’ (Harrison 2000: 46). In the same volume he decries ‘anything that still pretends divinity shapes human ends’ (38).

However, the silence that both Yeats and Harrison use as a symbol of poetic inspiration does not need to have any religious overtones. Don Paterson, a contemporary Scottish poet, argues that silence and poetry are virtually synonymous:
Silence is the poet’s ground. It’s silence that delineates the formal borders of the poem, and the formal arrangement of silences that puts the language under the pressure of its form. Silence – both invoked and symbolised by the white page, and specifically directed by the gaps left by lineation, stanza and poem – underwrites the status of the poem as significant mark.

Harrison would concur with the opening sentence when he described his own writing routines: ‘I’ve cultivated the habits of silence’ (Butler and Klep­uszewski 2009). Here, it seems as if Paterson is focusing on the poem as print and Harrison has often made the reader of his poetry pay attention to the spaces on the printed page. His tribute to his printer uncle ends with the line: ‘by which all eloquence gets justified’ (2006: 172). The most extreme example of this typographical experimentation occurs in The Heart­less Art which instantiates of a poem that is written not to be read aloud but to pay attention to the visual element:

I’ve left some spaces ( )
benumbed by morphia and Methadone
until the ( ) of April, ( ) (2006: 208)

Footnotes at the bottom of the page fill in the blanks contained in the poem, making an oral performance of the poem impossible.

Yet, Paterson is not just discussing the role of silence on the printed page in this essay. As he goes on to explain: ‘This mark explicitly invites the reader to attend to the poem in such a way as permits it its full resonant potential, both acoustically and semantically, as a voice within an auditorium…. Silence is the acoustic space in which the poem makes its large echoes’. To return to the first example above, the reason Harrison includes the spaces is to render both graphically and acoustically the space needed for a stammer sufferer to vocally articulate a sentence. The silent reader does not have to pause at the spaces as the eye can quickly slide over them. When reading the poem aloud, however, the space sets up a resonance that depends on silence, as the audience is anticipating the word to follow but is forced to accept the silent interlude that occurs in the gap. Paterson’s argument is that this is what all poetry effects. By choosing to craft lines of certain length it is drawing attention to the vast white spaces that surround the words on the page, as well as to the slowing of pace that inevitably attends a vocal performance of the poem. In performance, this white space can also be the silence that the poet’s performance uses as punctuation, in a way not too dissimilar, ironically given Harrison’s views on religion, to the liturgy of

a mass. This is indeed how Melvyn Bragg chose to convey his impression of Harrison’s performance of V on television:

There is the atmosphere of a sect, underground, survivors. The scene is low lit, with an undoubted religious overtone as the young preacher stands and delivers the word to the silent transfixed congregation. Harrison conducts himself as he reads, generally with his right hand beating the pulse of the poem as he glances now and then at the book held in his left hand. The effect is of a performance rather than a reading, the performance of someone determined that no syllable will be lost and no punctuation unmarked, and the hand is a wand. (Byrne 1997: 52)
Chapter Two

Tony Harrison versus the public?

Tony Harrison’s V is a poem whose heterogeneity invites many different interpretations on various levels\(^{19}\). In 1987, the poem was turned into a film directed by Richard Eyre and produced by Channel Four. What preceded the airing of the film was a media debate which lasted a few weeks, and was channelled into a discussion concerning the coarse diction of the poem. Most of the debate almost entirely omitted that fact that V touches upon a lot of different issues, and that the foul language of the poem is not an end in itself, but a means of achieving a literary goal. Consequently, in October and November 1987, V was decried and stigmatised, though, admittedly, there were also voices of praise. Around the time of, and shortly after, the first broadcast of the film on the 4\(^{th}\) November 1987 the poem reached the apogee of its fame/infamy. Heated debates occupied front pages of tabloids and broadsheets for days, and the matter was even discussed in Parliament. Indeed, the media and public frenzy was quite an achievement for a poet who does not reject his working-class upbringing, both in terms of the language, as well as cultural background. All the conflicting opinions certainly mirrored the scale of the public response to the poem. Sadly, however, as has already been said, one of the main reasons for such polarised views were the use of expletives in the poem, whereas the vital message remained largely neglected. On the other hand, however, the public fury over the use of coarse language in the poem drew the attention of a large number of viewers, many of whom recognised the essential issues undertaken by Harrison, and ignored in the media debate.

When V was first published, Martin Booth called it ‘the most outstanding social poem of the last 25 years\(^ {20} \). His opinion, voiced in the year preceding the televising of V by Channel Four was not questioned or challenged, undoubtedly owing to the fact that V was merely a poem on paper, practically available to the very few who would actually purchase a book of poetry and genuinely cherish

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\(^{19}\) Some of the issues on which this chapter focuses have been discussed in the following articles:

it. Had the poem been left in this form or even anthologized in a collection, it would have been likely ignored except within more specialist or critical circles.

However, a poem in a collection is not quite the same as a poem made public by the media. This truth was in a way later expressed during the debate concerning V’s migration to the public-media sphere. One example from the debate, a letter to the editor by S. Butterworth, seems to confirm this stance:

The four-letter words are best left where they are, in the mind, the mouth, and the locations where editors, writers and publishers legitimately exercise their freedom to express themselves as they wish. ... Art does not need the mass media. Art is for art’s sake.  

Expressing a similar opinion, Sir Gilbert Longden tries to convince the reader that those who are willing to read the poem can simply purchase the book, so there is no rationale behind the attempt to televise it.  

The above-mentioned voices, regardless of their value, were undoubtedly representative of those with a rather conservative view on art and literature, but voices like these also fuelled the vehement reaction to the public reading of Harrison’s poem and its subsequent airing on television. Consequently, prior to the television broadcast, V suddenly became the focus of an intense debate that had not, in fact, been caused by the poem as such, but by people who felt outraged and indignant for reasons not intrinsically connected with the merit of the poem. Rather, it was the fact that Harrison dared to employ what, to many, seemed an unacceptable use of language coupled with subject matter deemed inappropriate to convey in the public space.

What was in fact most vexatious to some people was not the poem as such, its merits or message, not even the foul language, but the plan to televise it. There were attempts to reduce V to something strictly colloquial, not worth special attention, as expressed in the following commentary by Martin Harris:

It has a lot of dirty words in it, or rather, it has the three or four dirty words everyone knows, repeated many times.  

In a similar manner, Ronald Butt tried to ignore the value of the poem by stating that it was merely an attempt to dazzle the reader with what does not go beyond the ordinary, unnecessarily dressed in a poetic form:

If the purpose of poetry is to enhance understanding then the restraint of much of this versified reportage is not poetry. You can read

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23 ‘Odd man out – To show V or not to show V.’ Daily Telegraph, 16 October 1987.
it on walls all over the place. It tells you only what you know already\textsuperscript{24}.

Once again it turned out that the problem was not the foul language of the poem, as verbal dirt was certainly not alien to the readers, but the fact that it was used in poetry. This view was mirrored in the flood of criticism that came from different sources, though inspired by the downmarket press, a fact which Tony Harrison emphasises in an interview:

\begin{quote}
... the Daily Mail phoned around people who’ve never read the poem and don’t know me from Adam, and they shoot off their mouth, and they’re happy to be quoted, condemning something they know nothing about. That’s how it started\textsuperscript{25}.
\end{quote}

The criticism of \textit{V} was most offensive on the part of the gutter press, supported by the establishment and conservative politicians. Grant emphasises that when \textit{V} was about to be televised ‘...the tabloids frothed at the mouth, Tory MPs fulminated, and – the ultimate accolade – questions were asked in the House’ (1991: 113).

Tory MPs labelled Harrison a left-wing propagandist posing threat to the established order, an example of what Margaret Thatcher labelled as ‘the enemy within’\textsuperscript{26}. Gerald Haworth and Teddy Taylor, both Tory MPs were quoted in \textit{The Sun}\textsuperscript{27}; while \textit{The Star} cited Gerald Owart, also a Tory MP\textsuperscript{28}. Tory MPs actually went further and proposed a Motion in Parliament. As Hugh Herbert summed it up:

\begin{quote}
this week caused much heartburn among the kind of MP who sits up counting how many four-letter words appear in a programme scheduled to go out half an hour before midnight\textsuperscript{29}.
\end{quote}

The establishment and conservative politicians found an ally in Mary Whitehouse (President of the National Viewers’ and Listeners’ Association), who, obviously convinced that her reaction is a voice of the public, wrote a letter criticising \textit{The Independent} for printing the whole poem in the paper’s News section:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{24}‘Disdain Versus Manners.’ \textit{The Times}, 22 October 1987.
\textsuperscript{25}http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/johntusainterview/harrison_transcript.shtml; 1.08.2011.
\textsuperscript{26}http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/105563; 7.08.2011.
\textsuperscript{28}‘From bad to verse ... Fury over TV poem.’ \textit{The Star} 13 October 1987.
\textsuperscript{29}Hugh Herbert. 1987. ‘Vindications of mortality.’ \textit{The Guardian}, 17 October.
\end{quote}
The intrinsic message behind your publication of the poem is that the concepts of the increasingly outdated permissive humanism are more important to you than the enlightened courtesy which you owe to your readers.

In another letter of indignation she claimed that ‘The televising of this poem is bound to undermine public confidence in the standards and effectiveness of the IBA ...’. Her opinion did not remain singular and was supported by a number of officials, such as Viscount George Tonypandy who remarked in his letter that ‘Foul language is offensive on the television at any hour’.

As it was the language of the poem that became the focal point of interest, the tabloids employed suitable headlines. The ‘rude ode’, ‘a string of four-letter words’, ‘cascade of expletives’, and ‘torrent of four-letter filth’ are just a few examples of banners used in the heated media debate that followed the decision to broadcast the public reading of the poem. What perpetuated the outrage was a seemingly mathematical concern with the calculation of swearwords used in the poem. The Daily Mail, for example, informed its readers that the crudest word is used 17 times in the poem, whereas The Sun undertook a similar approach and hastened to communicate that V contains 90 swear words. As could have been expected, the uproar prompted by the tabloids was immediately supported by various members of the public, a good example being a letter from a reader who defined the poem as ‘unhealthy ... in the sense that it seems to emerge from a rather disturbed and unpleasant state of mind’.

However, as Byrne rightly observes, ‘the heterogeneity of Harrison’s work is matched by the diversity of the ways in which it has been interpreted’ (1998: 90). Consequently, much as the poem stirred controversy, on the other end of the continuum there were numerous positive remarks. These came not only from journalists, but also academics, and distinguished literary figures. Sean French, a journalist, admitted: ‘I never thought that any poet writing today could capture what was happening to Britain in so clear-eyed and unvengful a way’.

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31 ‘IBA members’ personal standards.’ The Times, 26 October 1987.
34 Daily Express, 12 October 1987.
37 Brenda Maddox. 1987 ‘Four and Against.’ Sunday Telegraph, 1 November.
Tom Philips, Associate of the Royal Academy, hailed the poem as an ‘eloquent, witty and passionate sermon’\textsuperscript{39}. Dr Edward Black of the London School of Economics called it ‘one of the most interesting and studious, thoughtful and craftsmanlike poems to be published in England since Philip Larkin’s \textit{Church Going}’\textsuperscript{40}.

As could have been expected, among those who stood firmly in support of Tony Harrison’s poem were men of letters, such as Peter Levi, professor of poetry at Oxford University, who praised the poem for its poetic value: ‘It plays off vernacular language against formality marvellously. As a work of complex thought and feeling it deserves to be studied’\textsuperscript{41}. In the same article Harold Pinter pointed out the absurdity of the media and public crusade against Harrison's poem, arguing that ‘The criticism against the poem has been offensive, juvenile and, of course, philistine.’ Bernard Levin, described by \textit{The Times} as ‘the most famous journalist of his day’\textsuperscript{42}, defined \textit{V} as ‘written in fire’ and fuelled by ‘monolithic integrity’\textsuperscript{43}.

The defenders of \textit{V}, predominantly voiced their opinions in quality papers. Auberon Waugh tried to pinpoint the fact that the coarse language was used as a literary tool, and therefore there is no sound reason to object to it:

People are making fools of themselves who object to the rude words, since they are essential to the scene he is describing and the dialogue which ensues\textsuperscript{44}.

Similarly, in a letter to the editor, George Thompson, Chairman of the Independent Broadcasting Authority, emphasised the logical connection between the language and the content of the poem:

The foul language, though frequent, is used neither to shock nor titillate. It is an integral part of the message of the poem. It is the very reverse of gratuitous\textsuperscript{45}.

Brenda Maddox in her article, while having doubts whether the C-word is not too offensive to be used on television even late at night, admits that ‘Neither

\textsuperscript{39} \textit{The Independent}, 3 November 1987.
\textsuperscript{40} \textit{The Independent}, 4 November 1987.
\textsuperscript{41} ‘Literati back TV poem attacked by MPs as “filth.”’ \textit{Sunday Times}, 18 October 1987.
\textsuperscript{42} \url{http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/obituaries/article467654.ece?token=null&offset=0&page=1}; 20.09.2011.
\textsuperscript{43} Bernard Levin. 1987. ‘The way we live now: An adult’s garden of verse.’ \textit{The Times}, 19 October.
\textsuperscript{44} ‘Auberon Waugh’s Column.’ \textit{Sunday Telegraph}, 18 October 1987.
\textsuperscript{45} \textit{The Times}, 29 October 1987.
television nor dramatists can be restricted to a fossilised language while everybody else is speaking in a different way.’ And she adds, in a word of explanation, that words ‘are the currency of our lives. It is wrong to pretend that they do not exist out of context. They do. Like coins, they have recognised value. Like ammunition, they explode, regardless of where they are”.

As can be inferred from the above-quoted opinions, much as the public reading of V caused widespread opposition among those readers who felt appalled by the ample use of expletives, the filming met with appreciation from many viewers and readers. Paradoxically, as it turned out, a great number of those who expressed their outrage had not actually acquainted themselves with the poem. As Butler puts it:

the confrontations brought about by V exemplify the actual modes of diffusion of ideas within our society. They offer us an unusual opportunity to see how a poem was interpreted in the public forum, and with the additional irony that its ideas began to circulate in the parodic summary of its detractors, most of whom had not read it.

(1997: 110)

This fact was confirmed by the director of the film, who emphasised that in general people who voiced their outrage had not familiarised themselves with the poem, let alone the public reading which at that stage was still to be broadcast by Channel Four. To Eyre, this was particularly shocking because, as he states, not even the production crew had seen the film before the broadcast (1991: 365). Amazingly, it turned out that a great number of people articulated their opinion on the basis of something they had only heard about from coverage in the gutter press. More than twenty years later, British comedian, Andy Parsons, in one of his acts, rightly pinpointed that after the film was shown ‘over the course of the next two weeks they got forty-two thousand complaints from people who hadn’t heard the original broadcast, but had heard that they might get offended, so they decided to tune in after the event to see if they were offended and were duly offended”.

Paradoxically, this comment is not merely amusing but is, in fact, an apt diagnosis of what happened in the debate concerning V.

Regardless of what triggered, or who really engineered, the sudden interest in Harrison’s poem, what remains is the fact that the debate undoubtedly showed conflicting attitudes towards the work, expressed on the one hand mainly by tabloids, and on the other by quality papers. The broadsheets attempted to

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46 Brenda Maddox. 1987. ‘Four and Against.’ Sunday Telegraph, 1 November.
47 Andy Parsons, Live at the Apollo, BBC series 4, episode 5, 28 November 2009.
be more toned down and considerate in their coverage, whereas the tabloids remained offensive and critical, capitalising upon the furore surrounding the coarse language of the poem.

However, all attempts to debunk the value of the poem, and, above all, the ‘protests by clean-up campaigners’\textsuperscript{48} to dissuade Channel Four from televising \textit{V}, failed completely. After the broadcast, the whole media interest in the poem waned, and all that remained was limited to a few articles which attempted to belittle the poem with comments of the ‘\textit{V} are not amused’\textsuperscript{49} variety, which were a far cry from the pre-broadcast fury. This was clearly mirrored in the IBA’s analysis of the event published the following year, which concluded the following:

The level of public response to the transmission of \textit{V} was relatively low. The flood of public protest expected was not realised. In contrast to the pre-transmission of post bag (34 letters), 6 letters were received after the programme was transmitted; 4 were from complainants (including 2 MPs) and 2 were congratulatory. Most comment was received by telephone calls, mainly direct to Channel 4 on the night of transmission or on the day immediately following. The majority of these were in favour of its transmission\textsuperscript{50}.

The opinions expressed by the viewers who phoned the Channel Four duty officers on the 4\textsuperscript{th} and 5\textsuperscript{th} of November were predominantly positive, if not enthusiastic, much contrary to the media opinion voiced prior to the broadcast. More importantly, the public response after the broadcast confirmed that media debate did not reflect the genuine voice of the public.

In 1988, \textit{V}, as a headline returned for a while owing to the fact that a number of teachers intended to introduce the poem into the reading list for A-level examinations. This was, as it were, foretold by Brian Tyler, the headmaster of Kingswood, Corby, Northants, whose opinion on \textit{V} was quoted by \textit{The Sunday Times} a year earlier:

There has been a knee-jerk reaction to the bad language. The poem would make an interesting A-level text. TV quiz shows and advertisements with their values of greed and selfishness are far more dangerous than the bad language in \textit{V}\textsuperscript{51}.

\textsuperscript{48} ‘Battle to ban shock TV poem.’ \textit{The Sun}, 12 October 1987.
\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Sunday Telegraph}, 8 November 1987.
\textsuperscript{50} ‘Why did we broadcast \textit{V}? A case study on how the IBA made its decision, and how the public responded.’ \textit{Independent Broadcasting Authority}, 1988.
\textsuperscript{51} \textit{Sunday Times}, 18 October 1987.
The teachers’ campaign to make \textit{V} part of the school reading list met with fierce reaction from David Sumber, Tory MP, who, encouraged by a complaint from two parents, forwarded it to the Education Secretary\textsuperscript{52}. In return, the teachers defended the idea, claiming that \textit{V} was most relevant, and the crude words were there solely for poetic purposes. Moreover, the teachers maintained that the pupils identified with the text, particularly perceiving Harrison as ‘someone from their working class environment who struggled with his academic potential’\textsuperscript{53}. It seems that once again the poem which had caused public conflict between the Establishment and various different elements of British society, now did the same with regard to teachers and parents. In this context, it seems ironic that almost two decades later Tony Harrison’s reflection upon the fact is as follows:

It’s interesting that despite all the terrible fuss raised over the poem then: the language, the headlines in the \textit{Daily Mail}, and so on, that now it is part of the general school curriculum. It is now deemed acceptable for teenagers to read it. Whether that means it’s become tamer, because it’s lost its abrasiveness, I’m not sure. (Butler and Klepuszewski 2009)

Indeed, one cannot fail to notice that the poem still retains much of its social imperative, and remains a poetic challenge that is relevant and potent. Obviously, much of \textit{V}’s power comes from the fact that it was made public, giving it a dimension it would not have had if it had remained a poem printed in a limited circulation\textsuperscript{54}.

Although \textit{V} is undoubtedly a milestone in Harrison’s literary career – not only because of the reception it received, but more so because Harrison managed to use poetry as an effective tool in a debate concerning important social issues – it is not his only poem that has been turned into a film. In fact, he has written a number of poems intended for filming, which can be found in a collection of his film poems\textsuperscript{55}. The difference between \textit{V} and the poems in the collection is

\begin{itemize}
\item In fact, as Kennedy observes, the publicity surrounding \textit{V} around the time of its televising, at least in terms of subsequent literary criticism, partly turned \textit{V} into a media phenomenon that overshadowed the poem as such:
\begin{quote}
Critics of \textit{v.} have tended to elide the poem with the historical and political circumstances surrounding the moment of its writing, first publication and subsequent controversial television version broadcast by Channel 4 on 4 November 1987. It is almost as if \textit{v.} exists more as its reception than as a poem. (2009: 162)
\end{quote}
\item Harrison, Tony. 2007. \textit{Collected Film Poetry}. London: Faber and Faber.
\end{itemize}
that the latter were written with the clear purpose to move poetry into the public domain by filming it, whereas V was initially only to be published in print and it was the public reading of it, filmed and televised, that turned it into what may be regarded as a film poem.

As to the other film poems, none of them, in fact, managed to stir so much controversy as V did, though all reached larger audiences than they would have done, had they simply been printed on the page. Even The Blasphemers Banquet (1989), whose broadcast was opposed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, could not be a match for the media crusade against V in 1987. In 1989, Robert Runcie, the then Archbishop of Canterbury, opposed the showing of The Blasphemers Banquet on religious grounds, but this time even the press seemed reluctant to support such dissenting voices:

Archbishop Runcie had been pressing the corporation to postpone the showing. Straight after the transmission went out, he was condemning the programme for the hurt it would have caused Moslems in this country.⁵⁶

The Blasphemers Banquet is undoubtedly a poem that exists within a social context, but it certainly does not match V in the category of public poetry, which the latter superbly exemplifies, as it is engaged in social and political warfare, and well-anchored in the reality of its time. More to the point, V’s public dimension is clearly mirrored in the reception it received, though admittedly, most of it was triggered by the film of the poem, directed by Richard Eyre and produced by Channel Four.

Of all the film poems, at least within the context of V, it seems worth mentioning Loving Memory (1987), which actually preceded V and in some fragments contains similar references, most conspicuously because the poem is set in a graveyard, but also because it discusses the role and function of a poet in society. As a result, one cannot escape the feeling that certain lines in V, to quote two lines from the opening of the poem:

… butcher, publican, and Baker, now me, bard
Adding poetry to their beef, beer and bread. (Harrison 2000: 7)

echo Harrison’s ruminations voiced earlier in Loving Memory:

Craftsmen, wheelwright, blacksmith, undertaker,
Who also turned a skilled hand to the plough
Gathered in harvest grateful to their Maker
Are in decline, as Gray’s own craft is, now. (Harrison 2007: 76-77)

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Structured on Auden’s *Night Mail*, another of Harrison’s film poems, *Crossings* (2002), addresses social problems afflicting people in the here and now. Harrison retains Auden’s rhythm and mood, but touches upon issues that are again relevant within the context of the 1980s:

In come the letters load after load
panic … pain … pleasure for every postcode:
a letter for someone homeless, alone,
sent back to his mother ‘addressee unknown’.
final demands that prove the last straw
for desperate men who can’t take any more,
great news for a pupil with good exam grades,
the result of a blood test for HIV AIDS.
For all the electronic and mobile phone boom
sealed letters are still the top heralds of doom. (Harrison: 2007: 403)

The setting of *V* is Holbeck cemetery in Leeds, located in a typical northern suburbia, where Tony Harrison’s family grave is located, and where he is making one of his rare visits – ‘flying visits once or twice a year’ (Harrison 2000: 12), only to find his family grave desecrated by vandals with obscene graffiti, most of which contain a selection of vulgarisms, as well as references to the local football club, Leeds United:

The language of this graveyard ranges from
a bit of Latin for a former Mayor
...
to CUNT, PISS, SHIT and (mostly) FUCK!
Or, more expansively, there’s LEEDS v.
the opponent of last week, this week, or next,
and a repertoire of blunt four-letter curses. (Harrison 2000: 10)

Harrison’s choice of the setting has its inspiration in Thomas Gray’s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*. Should this lead to the conclusion that *V* has an elegiac tinge is one thing, but the intertextuality in this case is particularly pertinent, the more so because in Harrison’s poem Gray’s rustic background acquires a more corrupt urban dimension. Gray’s conclusive ‘The paths of glory lead but to the grave’⁵⁷, a line that closes his ponderings on the churchyard’s residents, to use a euphemism, is confronted with Harrison’s harsh imagery of desecrated graves and the graffiti whose aim is ‘to shock the living, not arouse the dead from their deep peace’ (2000: 16).

Chapter Two

The graffitied graves, including the stone slab on Harrison’s family grave become the point of departure for ponderings on language and class, interspersed with various cultural references like, for example, the mention of the Great War – ‘those who laid their lives down at the Somme’ (10), or the National Front – ‘a swastika with NF’ (11). All of them have their place and significance in the poem. However, the most important issues Harrison challenges in V follow the ‘all the versuses of life’ (1989: 11) pattern, that consists of various juxtapositions around which Harrison’s poem is structured. These versuses are of various kinds, which, as Spencer points out, dissect the ‘complex and urgent social issues of the day’ (1994: 90), predominantly pertaining to class, language, culture, as well as social and political agendas, and matters concerning the role of the poet and poetry in society. The insistent ‘v’ in the poem becomes symbolic of numerous issues which Harrison addresses.

In most part the diction of V is based on a double-voiced discourse, which is a tool to present a number of antagonisms through conflicting voices. There are, however, predominant themes in the poem, one of which, ‘the impassioned political kernel’ as Nicholson puts it, pivots around issues concerning class and social divisions. Harrison addresses and analyses them within the specific political context of 1984-85 miners’ strike. The choice seems particularly relevant, as the closing of mines was in fact the epitome of Thatcher’s politics in the 1980s. Harrison articulates it quite overtly in the poem:

Class v. class as bitter as before,  
the unending violence of US and THEM  
personified in 1984  
by Coal Board MacGregor and the NUM (11)

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58 As Harrison puts it in an interview:
Well, there are all kinds of things behind the poem. One is, you would go to any city area like the one I grew up in, and look at the graveyard, and once it was a fairly settled community with people who were butchers, and then their son was a butcher, and so on and so on. You can see this in the graves; the graves are quite high, and they leave space for other people to come on. My own family grave is like that. And of course everybody goes away. People leave, because economically they go somewhere else to find work, and so on. So the families who belong to the dead who were there, have moved away. I've moved away. I go to the grave, as I say in the poem, you know, for an odd ten minutes when I’m changing trains or something. That’s a social difference and the people who live round there don’t have the settled continuity of jobs as they're represented on the graves. They go through... it’s a shortcut to Leeds United, and as they go through, they spray ‘United’, which has all kinds of also other associations. It’s also a thing, an expression you find chiselled on graves when a wife joins a husband, or children join their mother and father in death. See http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/johntusainterview/harrison_transcript.shtml

In this case, the ‘versus’ is inescapably an allusion to the way the then government’s attitudes, which Margaret Thatcher liked to refer to in terms of her politics of no surrender, shaped the British reality of the 1980s. In Harrison’s poem this reality is embedded in the landscape of the north of England, particularly those areas affected by the miners’ conflict and the subsequent closing of many mines. All this is perfectly pronounced in the poem:

As the coal with reddish dust cools in the grate
on the late-night national news we see
police v. pickets at a coke-plant grate,
old violence and old disunity. (15-16)

The extent to which Harrison challenges Thatcherite politics certainly places him among those whom Margaret Thatcher defined as ‘the enemy within’, when she drew a parallel between the Falklands War and the miners’ strike during a meeting with Conservative MPs at Westminster in 1984. From the present perspective, particularly ‘the unending violence of US and THEM’, the issue of class seems a point worth considering, as only ten years after the televising of *V* John Prescott declared, before the 1997 election, that ‘We are all middle class now’ (the phrase was later adopted by Tony Blair). For Harrison, it is an absurd slogan, completely detached from reality. When asked to reflect upon *V* from the perspective of 2009 UK politics, Tony Harrison makes an interesting comment on the problem of class divisions in the UK, and whether *V* in this respect can still be relevant:

They do still exist, and they’re returning, in a strange way. The have and have-nots are becoming quite marked again and the idea of New Labour as being class-free is a fantasy. The old divisions are still there, just not expressed in the same way.

Harrison’s remark about the class divisions being redressed is certainly not his idiosyncratic view. As Ferguson observes:

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64 And this is certainly not Harrison’s idiosyncratic view. As Ferguson observes:

There’s no doubt that the days of visibly desperate aspiration are gone; we just laugh at those who believe that language and table-manners can raise them up the social scale ... The point is that we haven’t moved on that far, certainly not nearly as far as the useful myth would have it ... All we have witnessed is the Balkanisation of class. Instead of
There’s no doubt that the days of visibly desperate aspiration are gone; we just laugh at those who believe that language and table-manners can raise them up the social scale ... The point is that we haven’t moved on that far, certainly not nearly as far as the useful myth would have it ... All we have witnessed is the Balkanisation of class. Instead of there being three main snobberies – upper looking down on middle looking down on working – we have a slew of finer gradations. We have the very rich, and the very poor, and in between them not one vast homogeneous middle class but six or seven. The differences might not be so obvious, but they’re certainly there.

Harrison’s view is also concurrent with the opinion expressed by Andrew Neil in The Great British Class Survey, conducted by the BBC, in which he talks about a new social group ‘that is people who ceased to be even working class, they became an underclass’.

Despite attempts by various politicians, surprisingly representing both the right and the left wing, the problem of stark class divisions within British society still exists and it is an issue which has been problematic for a long time. As Kennedy rightly observes:

In a specifically British context, class has become an increasing source of embarrassment to successive post-war governments. … the apparent classlessness of modern Britain, Harrison implies, is not the result of resolving the old antagonisms and resentments but of pretending they no longer exist. The image of Beeston Hill cemetery being over a worked out pit becomes a metonym for the old system being pushed out of sight, literally underground. (Kennedy 2009: 180)

There are more such metonyms in the poem. In the context of class and politics, you have such examples as the almost clichéd images of the police and protesting miners that fittingly render the atmosphere of the Thatcherite times, as well as detailing her policies that led to the deepening divide between the rich and the poor, and there is also the coverage of rising unemployment, particularly in the north of England in the aftermath of the closing of mines. Harrison diagnoses the socio-political divisions and at the same time he challenges the

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65 Ferguson, Euan. ‘We’re All Snobs Now.’ The Observer, 30 September 2001.

66 http://www.youtube.com/view_play_list?p=7CC9219365D319FD
existing order by giving voice to the impoverished and disregarded. When the skinhead in the poem says ‘Me, I’ll croak doing the same nowt ah do now as a kid’ and ‘ah’ve been on t’dole all mi life in fucking Leeds!’ (18), they become acknowledgements of his predicament and he underscores the bitter disappointment and discontent which stem from his bleak prospects. These lines certainly exemplify Harrison’s ‘uncompromising intervention in the politics of the mid 1980s’ (Spencer 1994: 91). It comes as no surprise that such a poetic voice was not welcomed by the Thatcherite establishment. As Ian Murray points out ‘...objections to ‘obscenity’ are being used by our rulers to prevent recognition of the devastation over which they are presiding’67. And this devastation is apparent in many lines of the poem, encompassing various social contexts. Harrison’s view of the so-called establishment is generally disparaging, and his working-class background seems to fortify his distrust of all those whom he labels as ‘the British ruling class’:

Letters of transparent tubes and gas
in Düsseldorf are blue and flash out KRUPP.
Arms are hoisted for the British ruling class
and clandestine, genteel aggro keeps them up. (16)

Harrison obliquely defines the symbolic THEM in his poem. One may find here allusions to Thatcherite foreign policy, the retrospective background being the Falklands War of 1982, or allegations against Thatcher’s son, Mark, and his involvement in arms deals with Saudi Arabia68. However, Harrison does not propose yet another conspiracy theory, but rather offers a more sinister reminder that behind all power there is often corruption, and disregard for the common people.

Harrison’s resentment towards the establishment does not spare the Royal Family, the reference being as terse as it is implicit:

Some, where kids use aerosols, use giant signs
to let the people know who’s forged their fetters
Like PRICE O WALES above West Yorkshire mines
(no prizes for who nicked the missing letters!) (Harrison 2000: 15)

The bracketed line remains an ironic allusion to Prince Charles, known to be a patron of a number of yearly awards given in the field of education and employment. Obviously, the young people armed with cans of spray that Harrison has in mind in the stanza are highly unlikely award winners. The stanza perfect-

68 See, for example, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/mps-want-thatcher-arms-deal-inquiry-1441981.html, or http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2003/aug/08/saudiarabia.usa
ly epitomises Harrison’s attitude towards the establishment, which is generally one of bitterness and disappointment, mostly implied but always censorious and condemnatory.

It comes as no surprise that the public, televised reading of V met with such fierce opposition from those who became a target in the poem. As David Isaacs comments: ‘If anyone was left with a lingering doubt that the Arts are today under siege by an increasingly Right-wing Establishment, those doubts will have been removed by yesterday’s ignorant assault on Tony Harrison’. In this context, the crude language of V, so much reviled, was obviously a red herring used to cover issues of a profound social importance.

The class issue in V, apart from its political frame, has a broader meaning, and is also more personal for Tony Harrison, for whom it is expressive of an inner conflict between the part of him that clearly identifies itself with the working-class as a poet, but on the other hand whose education and present social status are in complete contrast to his humble origins. The idiolect discourse Harrison adopts exposes the discrepancy between his background and his present status, a gap, as we later learn, he tries to bridge. The confrontation of attitudes is expressed here predominantly by means of the diction in the poem:

What is it that these crude words are revealing?
What is it that this aggro act implies?
Giving the dead their xenophobic feeling
or just a cri-de-cœur because man dies?

So what’s a cri-de-coeur, cunt? Can’t you speak
the language that yer mam spoke. Think of ‘er!
Can yer only get yer tongue round fucking Greek?
Go and fuck yourself with cri-de-coeur! (Harrison 1989: 17)

What seems to be a ‘mishandling of linguistic registers’ (Späth 2002: 57) is a deliberate clash of the eloquent with the inarticulate. After all, what Harrison does in his poem is more than just a breach of good manners – it is a purposeful public violation of the language decorum, not for the sake of an artistic whim, but to shed light on social divisions and conflict. Harrison mingles what is formal and, at least in the eyes of the offended readers, plebeian, if not sacrilegious; the classical form of the poem remains in sharp conflict with the demotic language used by the skinhead. Harrison contaminates the language in V not only with the vernacular, but, more importantly, with the vulgar, though the latter has a meaningful purpose: it shows the power of language, particularly in the context of the backlash against the televisual assault against the televisual appearance of V. His is also a social com-

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mentator, who employs conflicting voices, not in a simple poem which should be quietly read and contemplated, but in a complex challenge to the burning issues of the time.

For Harrison his poetic gift is a blessing, but also something that disinherits him from his background. As a working-class boy with a Grammar School education, Harrison took part, as it were, in a class migration, however involuntary it was. Späth sees this social upgrade, as it were, as ‘a one-way ticket’ in what he calls ‘social mobility’ (2002: 58). This sense of disengagement from the past clearly occurs as these lines, spoken by the skinhead, indicate:

Don’t talk to me of fucking representing
the class yer were born into any more. (Harrison 1989: 22)

For the skinhead there seems to be no option but to vent one’s frustration by spraying the graves with crude, offensive words, an act as desperate as it is ineffectual. Broom rightly observes that in V Harrison ‘recognises the way in which obscene language becomes the only possible language for the linguistically impoverished and angry’ (2006: 19). Unemployed, his aggravation fortified with cheap lager, the skinhead can offer nothing but ‘all these Vs.’ (18). He functions in the poem as a ‘generically representative voice of disaffection’ (Woodcock 1990: 61), though this disaffection does not reach far beyond a bitter acceptance of his life as it is. Moreover, the skinhead rejects Harrison’s idea of using poetic means to instigate a positive social change can be introduced:

the reason why I want this in a book
's to give ungrateful cunts like you a hearing!'
A book, yer stupid cunt, 's not worth a fuck!
'The only reason why I write this poem at all
on yobs like you who do the dirt on death
's to give some higher meaning to your scrawl.'

70 The title of the study by Frances Stevens, The New Inheritors, perfectly defines this creation of a new social group, alienated from their class background. See Stevens, Frances. 1970. The New Inheritors. London: Hutchinson Educational. A good example of such alienation can also be found in a study by Jackson and Marsden, in which they show a 65-73 percent shift from Labour to Conservative in the case of the working-class boys who were given a chance to attend grammar schools. See Brian Jackson & Dennis Marsden. 1962. Education and the Working Class. Some general themes raised by a study of 88 working-class children in northern industrial city. London: Routledge, 1962, p. 194.
Don’t fucking bother, cunt! Don’t waste your breath! (Harrison 1989: 19)

Harrison’s ponderings about class are deeply embedded in the language context, language which in V is also a social identity marker. The skinhead’s linguistic repertoire, his ‘ownership of language’ (Sheehan 2008: 4), manifests a sense of belonging to working-class Leeds, but even more so to Leeds United supporters, as well as those who have reasons to be most disappointed with the social and political reality.

Part of the skinhead’s identification is his social status what vexes him in particular are the inscriptions on the graves listed at the beginning of the poem, which show names such as Wordsworth, or Byron, all representing solid crafts: the first one built church organs, the other was a tanner. The skinhead resents the fact that he is unemployed, while ‘this lot worked at one job all life through’. As a result, he reasons that part of his aggravation is ‘reading on their graves the jobs they did’, only to conclude that:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{When dole-wallahs fuck off to the void } \\
&\text{What'll t'mason carve up for their jobs? } \\
&\text{The cunts who lieth 'ere wor unemployed?} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(Harrison 2000: 18)

However, as far as V is concerned, Woodcock questions the outcome of this dialectic and concludes that Harrison the poet is ‘as impotent as the angry bover boys he berates’ (Woodcock 1990: 60). Whereas it may seem so on the surface, in point of fact, the dialogic tangle in V brings the reader closer to what Harrison’s poetic dialectic leads to. What Harrison successfully does in the poem is to give voice to ‘the linguistically impoverished and angry’ (Broom 2006: 19), even more so when he reads the poem in the film – which for Harrison, by the way, was ‘a long slow-burning revenge’ executed on the teacher who mocked his accent and did not allow him to recite poetry aloud. It thus comes as no surprise that for Harrison his literary work is also a means of defending the language with which local communities identify themselves, or, in more general terms, is a ‘never-ending fight-back against standardisation and class prejudice’. Much of it, most obviously, stems from his background, in which he feels rooted despite the education he received, but also from a genuine belief that language represents the people who use it:

\[71\] Although this pun is deliberate, these names do appear on the graves of Holbeck cemetery.
\[73\] Glover, Michael. 2007. ‘Tony Harrison: Not to be read quietly.’ The Independent, 1 April.
... my upbringing among so-called ‘inarticulate’ people has given me a passion for language that communicates directly and immediately. I prefer the idea of men speaking to men to a man speaking to a god, or even worse to Oxford’s anointed. (1991: 9)

One of the imperatives in Harrison’s poem that still retains much of its social validity which, more than twenty years after the filming, makes V still potent in its form and content is the cultural layer of the poem. Similar to the other issues in the poem, the cultural dimension remains partly in defiance of existing notions. Predominantly, it challenges the stereotypical image of Britain as the Land of Hope and Glory, whitewashed thatched Home Counties cottages, or the ‘pleasant pastures’ of Blake’s Jerusalem, all of which are often used as the epitome of Englishness in terms of cultural heritage. These images are somewhat misleading labels which do not really depict contemporary Britain as such, but, mostly, serve the purpose of, as Andrew Marr calls it, the ‘heritage industry’.

This industry, for obvious reasons, is by and large centred around a myth, probably long-gone in terms of modern Britain, which offers a selective image of the British Isles and their culture, one that is based on a number of false assumptions, and a general Establishment nostalgia for drawing from the past, while ignoring the present. Harrison deflates this myth in much the same way as he debunks cultural stereotypes, offering the readers a challenge which is still relevant and potent. In V the cultural myth is dispelled and turned into a long-gone image, substituted with the peripheral England and its vernacular, class divisions, and social and political disturbances, all framed within the Britain of the early 1980s. If one considers the true weight of this challenge, it comes as no surprise that during the media debate the landscape depicted by Harrison was ignored by reducing the poem to a problem of verbal impropriety impinging on public moral standards. As Spencer explains:

All the tabloid vapourings about obscenity were, of course, quite unable to discredit the poem. What they did succeed in doing, however, was to deflect attention away from the relevance of the poem’s ideas and on to one dimension only of the competing social voices through which those ideas are expressed. (1994: 91)

The poem offers invaluable study material not only because of the language class and political issues it addresses, but also because it amalgamates a variety of cultural issues which go beyond the 1980s juncture. An important, though often neglected, area of conflicts and antagonism in Harrison’s poem embraces

cultural issues. The cultural references, even if interlinked with matters concerning class and language, can be considered on their own, and they are decidedly worth the reader’s attention. As Butler observes:

The work of Tony Harrison confronts a number of problems concerning culture, and it finds a distinctive way of opening up a debate about it. Harrison treats culture in all his writing as something that people can know a good deal more or less about, and even think they possess, and which can make real and imaginary worlds which interact, and which we can inhabit, more or less separately, as Harrison and his father and mother did. His work also brings the ‘high culture’ as an educational ideal (or at least as the result of a grammar school education) into a confrontation with the ‘way of life’ culture of those whom it seems to exclude. (1997: 93)

In terms of literary criticism V has been discussed in numerous publications, but mainly within the context of language and class, though to anyone familiar with its contents it must be obvious that the poem is not limited to these two issues. Harrison himself admits that V contains issues that go beyond language and class matters:

are becoming clearer now that the shock value that the poem gave to the system is no longer there, which is one of the reasons that the poem still works. The kids looking today can see the other things, the wider tensions beyond simply those of class and language. It’s interesting that people who have no interest in poetry send me letters saying that it was V that made people realise that poetry was for them. I’d like to think it’s because they find something else besides the shocking language, whatever that something else is. I dramatised the area in which I grew up, and the time in which it took place. (Butler and Klepuszewski 2009)

It is indeed impressive that in just one poem Harrison manages to ‘congregate under one-letter sign’ (O’Brien 1998: 60) a number of problems which relate both to the British reality of the 1980s and Harrison’s own experience. This invaluable source of cultural knowledge allows the reader to view some aspects of British culture that are then seen through the prism of conflicting realities. A most transparent example here is the reference to the Troubles in Northern Ireland:

The map that’s colour-coded Ulster/Eire’s flashed on again as almost every night.
Behind a tiny coffin with two bearers
men in masks with arms show off their might. (30)

Another area of cultural focus in V, similarly interesting and relevant in the context of the poem is football, which on the whole seems inseparable from the cultural landscape of modern Britain, even more so at the time when Harrison wrote his poem, if only because of the loutish behaviour of football supporters. The problem became a particularly burning issue in the Eighties, and reached its peak with the Heysel Stadium disaster of 1985, where the English fans attacked Juventus supporters, all resulting in the death of thirty-nine fans and hundreds of others being injured. As Blake Morrison reflects ‘a reasonable assumption in cultural controversies is that the true source of dispute differs from the stated one’75. This statement reflects how in Harrison’s poem the football culture serves a different purpose, namely to create the background for the socio-economic problems mentioned earlier in this article. Spencer rightly observes, V ‘acknowledges the vital connection between unemployment, soccer fan subculture and racism.’ (1994: 95). For the football supporters their team is something that unites them (an obvious pun on Leeds United), but also, owing to the team’s regular failures, reminds them of their disillusionment with reality:

The ground where Leeds United play
But disappoint their fans week after week (Harrison 2000: 9)

As Butler notices, ‘when you are against, your need is to unite with others’ (1997: 95), and this is exactly what the fans do in their collective championing of local identity. For them their football team symbolises their being against, even though this ‘against’ is vaguely defined; in fact, it exists as an inexplicable, yet indispensable enemy one needs to have in order to account for one’s failure. It is of no importance who the opponent is, as long as there is a clear-cut division which allows fans to unify against the other side. All this fortified by lager, which often offers the best consolation for another lost game, makes the disappointed supporters assert themselves in any possible manner, and they always find an identifiable target to hold responsible for their own share of failure:

Jobless though they are how can these kids,
Even though their team’s lost one more game,
Believe that the ‘Pakis’, ‘Niggers’, even ‘Yids’
Sprayed on the tombstones here should bear the blame? (16)

The racial/ethnic reference in V is further developed not so much within the context of racial prejudice, but more so in terms of cultural changes, as experienced by Harrison’s father. As Spencer puts it, Harrison reveals ‘the impact of immigration on a working-class neighbourhood and the problems of adjustment this created for Harrison’s father’ (1994: 96). Harrison uses a retrospective in which he recalls the time of his childhood and how his father’s difficulty in accepting the social changes of the time, partly correlated with the growing number of immigrants.

House after house FOR SALE where we’d played cricket with white roses cut from flour-sacks on our caps, with stumps chalked on the coal-grate for our wicket, and every one bought now by ‘coloured chaps’…

squeezed by the unfamiliar, and fear of foreign food and faces, when he smelt curry in the shop where he’d bought beer. (26-27)

However, the retrospection is relevant beyond the issue of immigration as such, and functions as a background for mental and social changes. This is particularly transparent in the stanza depicting his father’s vulnerability against the changing reality, one which rapidly supplanted the ‘habitat’ of Harrison’s father and his generation:

The supermarket made him feel embarrassed. Where people bought whole lambs for family freezers he bought baked beans from check-out girls too harassed to smile or swap a joke with sad old geezers. (27)

In V Harrison skilfully embeds his reflections within cultural changes, which contextualise the experience which he relates in the poem. This experience includes memories of his father and how he found it difficult to accept his own

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76 As Harrison puts it:

The theme about my father describes just the beginnings of that area being taken over by immigrants. ... People think the poem depicts my father as a racist, which he wasn’t, he had to adapt to new things and he was alone, and he was simply trying to understand it, in his own limited way.

In the same interview, himself advanced in years, Harrison reveals that what he finds particularly difficult to accept is ‘the constant presence of phones’ which he finds ‘intrusive’, only to conclude that:

Change is always more difficult to accept as you get older, whether it be mobile phones, or the fact that the postman doesn’t come anymore, but you have to learn a new habit. It’s everybody’s ageing problems. (Butler and Klepuszewski 2009)
versus of life, which for him was the clash between the world he was used to and the changing reality, more and more alien to him. In fact, this is yet another juxtaposition in Harrison’s poem, one which is pertinent to his own case. Like his father he is ‘squeezed by the unfamiliar’ when faced with the desecration of the cemetery, and all the ‘against! against! against!’(..) that seems to be the only argument of the desecrators. Harrison depicts his father’s aversion to cultural changes, but at the same time shows that he himself is part of these changes. The ways of his father and his generation are long gone, but the derelict graveyard, is not only vandalized, but also neglected:

My dad who came each week to bring fresh flowers came home with clay stains on his trouser knees.
Since my parents’ deaths I’ve spent 2 hours made up of odd 10 minutes such as these. (12)

In this particularly intimate reference, Harrison reflects upon the changing attitudes and reality. The memory of his father’s weekly visits at the graveyard epitomizes the discrepancy between then and now, which adds to all the other ‘versuses’ in the poem. At the same time, the quoted lines reveal the extent to which V challenges vital cultural issues within a very broad scope, ranging from matters concerning the society at large to those which concern individuals.

The latter dimension in Harrison’s poem is clearly visible in the incapacity which stems from his background and his education. This is fully revealed in the final part of the dialogue between Harrison and the skinhead who represents the graveyard desecrators armed with graffiti sprays. When the skinhead is asked to put his name under the graffiti on Harrison’s family grave it turns out to be Harrison’s: ‘He aerosolled his name. And it was mine’ (2000: 22). This line reveals that the dialogue in the poem does not involve two different characters, but, as Harrison also discloses in an interview, the skinhead voice that is inside him. What transpires from the lines is that Harrison’s poem is not only a subversive confrontation with the established order, but the antagonisms he uses in the poem, particularly in the discourse with the skinhead, reveal his divided self:

Half versus half, the enemies within the heart that can’t be whole till they unite. (Harrison 2000: 23)

At the same time, among all the versuses, the symbolic V may in this context be interpreted as a search for integrity where all seems to divide. He is of his

Brown, Andrew. 1993. ‘Harrison forward: Andrew Brown meets Tony Harrison, whose poetry goes straight to the heart and to the mind.’ The Independent & The Independent on Sunday, 23 January.
class though he can express it in a classical form, a fact which annoyed many of the readers in the Eighties. Despite his own doubts, expressed in the poem, as well as in a number of interviews, V, as an internal discourse, turns out to be conclusive. The public reading of V stirred controversy which went beyond what Harrison expected and beyond the merits of his poem. What most of the readers and the general public failed to notice was the fact that Harrison used his diction as a means not as an end in itself. So, the debate at the time of televising blurred the fact that in V Harrison uses conflicting voices in order to ‘plead for incorporation and unity, despite the antagonistic thrust of much of its language and energy’ (O’Brien 1998: 60). Throughout the poem, Harrison juggles with various versuses, but also embeds an occasional ‘united’, which, for example, is sprayed on his parents’ grave, or functions, paradoxically, in the context of the local football team. In the closing fragments of the poem, the UNITED and ‘v’ return, not to divide, but, in a more subdued manner, to integrate:

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. (Harrison 2000: 32)

This small ‘v’, as Harrison reveals in the subsequent lines, no longer belongs in his imbroglio, but suggests that all the versuses in the poem, may, as a result of this poetic dialectic, lead to simple integrative ‘Victory?’. It seems Harrison’s victory lies in finding an equilibrium or, as Broom puts it, ‘alternative unity’ (2006: 18), built on oppositions and conflicts.

And in the case of V it is not just a matter of reflecting, to follow Lucas’s remark, ‘tensions that exist irreconcilable in English society (1991: 351), but also a question of what poetry should offer the public in terms of its form and message. V exemplifies Harrison’s need to incorporate a poetic dialectic in a quest for integrity. As Harrison states himself, conflicts and opposites are fundamental to his poetry and, as transpires from the discourse in V almost inseparable from his own experience:

I think the versuses are very important to creating the verse ... I think I need that dialectic, I suppose, to create. It’s part of my way of looking at things."78

For Harrison, presenting conflicting voices seems to be the very essence of his poetry, and an indispensable part of what he calls being ‘a public poet’, an application of which is nowhere more transparent than in V:

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I was determined to make V more public, which is part of the bard’s poetic status. The television transmission of the poem was a part of that. (Butler and Klepuszewski 2009)

At the same time, Harrison is acutely aware of the limitations of his public mission, much as W. H. Auden in his poem ‘In Memory of W. B. Yeats’, who writes:

For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making ...

In on of his numerous interviews Harrison echoes Auden’s words by saying that ‘poetry is not a popular art; it doesn’t change anything’. This conviction, in turn, is directly mirrored in V, when the skinhead concludes – ‘it’s not poetry we need in this class war’ (Harrison 2000: 22). Harrison often reflects on his recurrent doubts in interviews:

There’s always a skinhead, who is a persistent voice in my own head, saying ‘This is all a pile of shit.’ (Butler and Klepuszewski 2009)

In V this reflection is contained within a Shakespearean allusion in the line ‘This pen’s all I have of a magic wand’ (15). Yet, much as Harrison remains dubious about the real impact his poetry can have on addressing social problems, his ‘magic wand’ proves that in showing conflicts he simultaneously strives for integrity. It is so, because Harrison, as Garofalakis suggests, ‘does not simply reveal the dichotomies … Harrison questions the paradoxical unions of the dualities wherever they may occur’ (1991: 203). Much as there is room for division, there is room for unification, though this is forged in conflict – ‘the skin and poet united … but the autre that je est is fucking you’ (19).

This skin/poet conflict expresses Harrison’s doubts about his mission as a poet, for in V Harrison seems to insist that being a poet is much the same as being a craftsman who simply does his job (he emphasises this at the beginning and closing lines of the poem):

Writing poetry is no more or less important than baking bread, pulling a pint. … In this way he asserts a type of belonging with non-poets, simple men of their trade. (Mills 2000: 132)

If we accept Kennedy’s stance that ‘the cemetery in v. is a place of dead working men who represent the same lineage in which Harrison must locate

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himself’ (2009: 171) then the opening stanza of the poem is clearly a token of how much \( V \) is also a poem about the function of a poet and poetry in society:

\[
\begin{array}{l}
\text{butcher, publican, and baker, now me, bard} \\
\text{adding poetry to their beef, beer and bread. (7)}
\end{array}
\]

The argument concerning the role of poetry in the social dimension, constitutes much of what \( V \) targets. What inevitably ensues from this logic is the question of public poetry, or poetry in the public domain, and the implications, both for the poets and for the readers. In one of his articles, Kingsley Amis once wrote that ‘Contemporary poetry is written to impress other poets or would-be poets, not to please the ordinary readers’ (1990: 366). As we know, Amis was predominantly a novelist, and only marginally a poet, but this view is not simply Amis’s idiosyncrasy, as such an icon of poetry as Robert Graves makes a related comment in the foreword to his *Poems 1938-45*:

\[
\text{I write poems for poets […]. For people in general I write prose, and am content that they should be unaware that I do anything else. To write poems for other than poets is wasteful. (1946: vii)}
\]

With Tony Harrison the case seems to be quite the opposite, for two reasons. First of all, ‘It is a distinctive feature of \( v. \)’, as Späth observes, ‘that its social context is outlined more clearly than is usual in poetry ( 2002: 56). More to the point, Harrison himself sees his own poetic work as a public mission in which one of the main goals is to make poetry public in order to reach a wide, non-specialist audience. As he explains:

\[
\text{I think that the move for me towards public poetry came from some of the dilemmas I had when having left a working-class background and started learning Latin and Greek at grammar school, I wanted to write a poetry which did some kind of honour to what I was learning, but also would reach people like my parents, and use what I think of as a common language.}^{81}
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Harrison’s interest in public poetry goes back to his early days:

\[
\text{When I was growing up in the 1950s, poets seemed too concerned to explore their own consciousness. The range of dramatic poetry has always been far greater than that of the short lyric, which was a kind of norm when I was just beginning.}^{82}
\]

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Harrison makes it clear that the idea of writing poetry with a public message has always been intrinsic to his literary work:

> Everyone has always called me ‘bard’, it’s just my nickname. I was determined to make v more public, which is part of the bard’s poetic status. The television transmission of the poem was a part of that (Butler and Klepuszewski 2009).

This, inevitably, brings about the question of what is public poetry, as Harrison calls it in the quotation cited earlier, and in what way it is different from poetry as such. In his article on the notion of public poetry David Orr observes:

> All poetry is public, in the sense that every poem implies an audience. But some publics are more public than others. Most contemporary poets, for example, address a public that consists of close friends, professional acquaintances, and a few handy abstractions like the Ideal Reader and Posterity.

This is, by and large, a fitting definition, at least in the case of most poetry, or poets. However, occasionally, the very nature of a given poem, the context in which it appears, or the way it is presented automatically enlarges the public, far beyond the scope mentioned by Orr. One good example could be Adrian Mitchell’s poem *To Whom it May Concern*, which, had it not been for the Vietnam War context, and the fact that the reading of the poem was filmed in London’s Royal Albert Hall in 1965, would most probably have never stirred the imagination and endured.

Another possible issue, that introduces a poem into a more public sphere is the theme or the language, as is the case with Philip Larkin’s *Sunny Prestatyn*. Larkin uses vulgar language in his poem, and also what is not really a sexual innuendo but a brutal straightforward depiction, all in a vandalism-ridden mood, resembling, to an extent, Harrison’s *V*:

> Huge tits and a fissured crotch  
> Were scored well in, and the space  
> Between her legs held scrawls  
> That set her fairly astride  
> A tuberous cock and balls. (Thwaite 1988: 149)

Martin Harris compares *Sunny Prestatyn* with *V* concluding that ‘Philip Larkin’s poem … uses the same image of graffiti as its theme, makes essentially the same point about the desecration of an innocent past, and even uses a few

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dirty words – but does it with grace, wit, and in 24 lines\textsuperscript{84}. Apart from the obvious difference in the number of lines, which seems an irrelevant comment as such, and the emphasis on the similarity in terms of social context, it is hard to agree that it is the ‘grace and wit’, which may have defended Larkin’s poem against the kind of public fury that surrounded \textit{V}. Obviously, \textit{Sunny Prestatyn} remained accessible to those who wished to buy a printed volume, meaning of course a very limited audience. \textit{V} was not only televised, but it was also printed in the News Section of \textit{The Independent}, enlarging the scope of potential readers of the poem.

Harrison’s poem, and to a lesser degree Larkin’s too, runs against the fundamental concept, still commonly held, that poetry should be, as Hoggart puts it, ‘synonymous with poems about nature’ (Hoggart 1991: 41). The implication then is at it is not the language, or the certain inconvenience of the theme, but the fact that it somehow debunks yet another idyllic myth of a poetry moulded into pleasant, easy to read, Georgian-like verse and tailored for the average reader:

Despite seventy-five years in which acclimatization could have taken place, the wider public, even, say, the serious novel-reading or theatre-going public, have never really accepted \textit{difficulty} in poetry. To be difficult has been to guarantee a small audience. (Forbes 1997: 195)

In this context, \textit{V} with its coarse language, tensions, and polarisation was non-canonical, and not part of the cultural heritage that many expect poetry to adhere to, making it far cry from the traditional concept of the poetic voice. More to the point, it’s just the fact that Harrison uses taboo words, but that he contaminates, as it were, literary grandeur with the vernacular. As Harrison observes himself:

I think what a lot of people were irritated by, those who looked at the poem, was that all these tensions and this debate which uses the language of the street, is in the quatrains, the rhymed quatrains, of Gray’s Elegy in a Country Churchyard. I mean, deliberately. This is a rage in an urban churchyard, but I’m using the metre of Gray’s Elegy; and some people like certain things uncorrupted, unpolluted, kept sacrosanct\textsuperscript{85}.

\textsuperscript{84} ‘Odd man out – To show V or not to show V’ \textit{Daily Telegraph}, 16 October 1987.
\textsuperscript{85} http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/johntusainterview/harrison_transcript.shtml; 20.08.2011.
What many of the critics omitted was the fact that the coarse language in V is essential to the diction of dialogue and is not an end in itself. This is best described by Tony Harrison who, asked for opinion during the media fury, said that ‘If we want to debate some of the obscenities in our culture ... we must represent them’86. What this means in the case of poetry is that if it is to go deeper into the public domain, it needs to move beyond the limits of what many expect poetry to be. As O’Brien observes, in V Harrison ‘attempted to carry poetry into the awareness of a wide, non-specialist public’ (1998: 59) and he managed to convey his message by means of poetry that confronts the public, rather than an individual poetry admirer.

The problem behind the debate stirred by V is not of a linguistic or even thematic nature, but the fact that Harrison went public and took poetry beyond its traditional limits. As Sue Hubbard points out ‘Poetry is essentially a private act’87, which remains very much in line with Larkin’s observation that ‘novels are about other people and poems are about yourself’ (Larkin 1984: 49). In point of fact, novels are turned into films, drama is performed in the theatre, biographies are discussed in the media, but poetry remains somewhat on the margin of public interest. Harrison ‘the public poet’ proved that poetry can be an effective instrument in a debate that encompasses vital social issues.

What Harrison achieved in his going public cannot be underestimated. First and foremost, he reached a huge public, something he would have never achieved had it not been for Channel Four and The Independent. As he himself observes:

> V has reached quite interesting groups of people. It has been done by amateur theatre groups. I don't have illusions about how many people you can reach, but I do go on trying. There are many forms of discouragement of poetry but it is uniquely placed to go directly into the heart and into the mind88.

As a result, Harrison made V accessible to the common reader and managed to reach those who do not necessarily read poetry. The more so, because the televising of V boosted the sales of the printed version of the poem, the reason being exactly what Sue Hubbard notices in her article:

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88 Brown, Andrew. 1993. ‘Harrison forward: Andrew Brown meets Tony Harrison, whose poetry goes straight to the heart and to the mind.’ The Independent & The Independent on Sunday, 23 January.
What both artists and observers are beginning to realise is that public art (and this is particularly true of poetry as public art) can touch that clandestine, hidden, even sacred part of ourselves, whilst appealing and referencing the outer social being in the wider fabric of society. The poem in the public space allows for a convergence of the sacred and the profane, the covert and the overt, the inside and the outside.  

Hubbard’s comment is particularly relevant to Harrison, who, most evidently in V, managed to give poetry more social validity, somehow contrary to what is traditionally expected from poetry. In his own way, he repudiated the belief, by and large predominant among the British public, that poetry belongs in the realm of the idyllic and pleasant, should be easy to read, and must be tailored for the average reader. Harrison simultaneously proves that poetry can efficiently render and address various social issues. What helped him to achieve this end was undoubtedly, as the media debate has shown, the language Harrison dared to employ in his poem, but even more so the fact that the poem was released from the limits of the printed word (excluding the fact that The Independent, prior to the airing of the film, decided to print the whole poem in its News section) and made generally accessible on television. In Harrison’s case the answer to the question whether there is ‘an artistic cost in going public’ (O’Brien 1998: 51) is fairly straightforward, for despite all the censorious ‘tabloidization’, the factual negotiations of the poem’s value prevailed and it remains an excellent example of merging the poetic with the public.

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Harrison’s Eros versus Thanatos

It is difficult to avoid discussing issues of class and language in Harrison’s poetry given that they are such a dominant theme in the majority of his work. This is especially the case with a confrontational social poem such as V, and as a consequence criticism of the poem can often neglect other areas upon which it focuses. Melvyn Bragg is an exception to this as he draws attention to the main inspiration behind its composition, as well as its predominant emotional tone: ‘brooding over the final days and death of his dad...[and his own] journey towards death’ (Byrne 1997: 50). Death is described as one of the poet’s ‘eternal themes’ by Bragg, but there is a difference between how Harrison treats this theme in his earlier poetry compared to his later poems from V onwards. Terry Eagleton believes that in his later poetry Harrison leaves his class-engaged political anger behind and becomes a ‘bruised metaphysician’ (Byrne 1997: 94). In other words, the theme of death has become as much a philosophical problem for the poet to contend with, as a purely emotional one in reaction to the death of his parents. The introduction into Harrison’s poetry of metaphysical terms and speculations could be argued to begin with V, and the implications of its title that the poet directs the reader toward: ‘These Vs are all the versuses of life...man v. wife,/ Communist v. Fascist, Left v. Right...soul/body, heart v. mind’ (238). These are philosophical abstractions, as the capitalising of the words indicates, and which come to dominate the later volumes of Harrison’s poetry.

One metaphysical idea that comes to preoccupy Harrison intensely is the idea of death as a drive possessed by all living creatures, an idea first proposed by Freud. The Viennese doctor was the first to indicate that children will always have an aggressive disposition towards their parents which will, in turn, manifest itself in a grief-stricken conscience. His theory of the Oedipus complex has long since been challenged and refuted, but even Freud knew the issue was more complicated than the complex suggests: ‘It is not really a decisive matter whether one has killed one’s father or abstained from the deed; one must feel guilty in either case, for guilt is the expression of the conflict of ambivalence, the eternal struggle between Eros and the destructive or death instinct’ (Brown 1985: 120).

This eternal struggle between Eros and Thanatos, or the desire for love and life versus the wish for annihilation, death and destruction is one of Freud’s more speculative ‘metaphysical’ ideas, but one that seems to have sustained
itself more than the Oedipus complex in many academic disciplines. The relationship between the two terms is referred to by Freud as an ‘eternal struggle’ or ‘a dialectic of life and death’ to use Hans Osterwalder’s term, which he argues is a ‘persistent theme in Tony Harrison’s poetry’\(^{90}\). This is confirmed by a direct reference to the Freudian theory in *Dancewatch Danceathon*:

> “Eros/Thanatos a pair
> Like Ginger Rodgers/Fred Astaire
> One figure fleshless, and one full
> The dancing duo, cheek to skull. (Harrison 2000: 9)

Osterwalder is correct to discern in the poetry of this period the persistent idea of a dialectic between two seemingly oppositional terms. Often these terms are obviously metaphysical, as in this example from *A Kumquat for John Keats*: ‘he’s granted days and kumquats to express/ Man’s Being ripened by his Nothingness’ (2006: 193). By capitalising Being, Harrison is drawing attention to the existential theme of the poem, as this is the common translation of the existential term *Dasein* coined by Martin Heidegger. In equating Being with Nothingness he may even be providing an intertextual reference to Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* in which these oppositional terms are discussed at length:

In *Being and Nothingness*, the individual is a *pour-soi* (Nothingness) confronting the *en-soi* (Being), and the pour-soi is seen as disturbed and terrified as well as stimulated by the presence of the en-soi. The individual is seen, in other words, as a lack of being and as tormented by this lack. Being is seen as replete in itself. (Abel 1987: 136)

In *A Kumquat for Keats* Harrison seems to be suggesting, as is Sartre, that the oppositional terms of Being and Nothingness may actually be complementary rather than confrontational. The metaphor he employs to highlight this point is the kumquat, a fruit that contains contradictory qualities that actually complement each other when being eaten: ‘sweet pulp and sour skin….both sweet and bitter’ (2006: 192-5). This leads to Harrison making analogies with other qualities that may be complementary rather than antagonistic: ‘life has a skin of death that keeps its zest’ just as Being is ‘ripened’ by Nothingness. Poetic utterance and its oppositional term, silence, also display a similar relationship in this existential dilemma: ‘A language near extinction best preserves/ the deepest grammar of our nothingness’ (2006: 189).

The use of overt existential and metaphysical terminology in his poetry distinguishes Harrison’s later from his earlier poetry, but this is not to say that

there is a lack of continuity between the two periods in the poet’s work and personal interests. Before the publication of his first volume of poetry Harrison had been experimenting with various poetic and dramatic forms for a specific purpose, as he explains:

The forms I taught myself, through use and an enormous amount of translation, none of which I kept, are now enactments of unresolved existential problems, of personal energies in ambiguous conflict with the stereotype, sexual, racial, political, national. Their themes, like Zarate’s History of Peru, are about discovery and conquest; celebration and defeat. (Astley 1991: 33-4. Our italics)

Christopher Butler interprets this passage as an indication that Harrison’s poetry deals with ‘perennial problems’ that are not necessarily ‘philosophical’ issues, or, at least, don’t take a philosophical form in his poetry (Byrne 1997: 94). This is questionable, given that in the above passage Harrison identifies the school of philosophical thought he is interested in: namely existentialism. It is debatable, however, if existentialism is exclusively a school of philosophy given its influence on schools of literary theory as well as sociology, psychology and psychiatry. The latter discipline has a connection with Harrison who has suffered from depression for many years, with intermittent recourse to therapy as a way to cope with his illness. His poetry is a means to alleviate his dark thoughts, as he confided to Richard Hoggart that the rhythmical aspect of his poetry has a corrective function: ‘it’s associated with the heartbeat, with the sexual instinct, with all those physical rhythms which go on despite the moments when you feel suicidal’ (Astley 1991: 236).

Suicide is a common thought for people who have ‘unresolved existential problems.’ The main problem is that existence itself is seen to be meaningless and without purpose and therefore the individual is no longer able to engage with reality, and commits suicide. The ‘futility of life’ that is the common view in people with this affliction is, as Butler describes it, a ‘perennial problem’ as the existential therapist Harry Guntrip harrowingly confirms:

Psychoanalysis has, now I believe, uncovered the deepest and most awe-inspiring problem from which human beings can suffer; the secret core of total schizoid isolation. A recent suicide was reported to have left a tape-recorded message, ‘There comes a time when you feel there is no meaning in life, and there is no point in going on with it.’ Far more people than we know have this feeling deep within them, although not all to the same degree of intensity. (1971: 195)
In Harrison’s poetry the idea of life as meaningless surfaces time and again throughout all periods of his output. In the early poem *The White Queen* boredom affects the eponymous narrator of the poem who seeks endless distraction due to his self-conscious awareness that ‘my mind / Shut out all meaning like a blackout blind’ (Harrison 2006: 24). Towards the end of the poem the meaninglessness of existence is phrased differently:

> It’s not diseases, but the void that kills,
> The space, the gaps, the darkness, that same void
> He hears vibrating in clogged adenoid
> And vocal cords. (2006: 26)

The philosophical precedent for musings on the void of existence is provided in the poem: it is the *l’abîme ouvert* of Blaise Pascal. The French philosopher’s abject terror when facing the endless meaningless void of existence is echoed in the fears of the poetic narrator and questions Butler’s contention that Harrison’s poetry does not concern itself with philosophical themes. It is also a further link to Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, described by Lionel Abel as containing a ‘Pascalian pathos’ (136).

The ‘metaphysical’ aspect to Harrison’s later poetry is a continuation of his earlier existential musings rather than a new topic for exploration as characterised by Eagleton. He uses the same existential terminology in both phases of his career, as an earlier example will highlight. In *The White Queen* the eponymous narrator muses incessantly on Pascal’s view of the void of existence, and he perceives this nullity everywhere he looks, be it the murmurings of the ‘churning sea’ or in his own biology: ‘It is this Nothingness and nothing else / Throbs in the blood’ (26). This is the same Nothingness that is equated with Being in the later poetry, the difference being that the emotional terror of the early poem is somewhat tempered by the metaphysical musings of the later poem. Possibly, Harrison has adopted Sartre’s strategy of how to deal with unresolved existential problems: namely, that the individual is more in accord with Being than Nothingness if he is able to provide a unity to the various events of his life, or as Abel phrases it: ‘the manner in which a particular individual tries to render his own experience into a ‘whole’’(126). This raises a key debate that often takes place in criticism of Harrison’s work concerning whether or not his poetry is seeking some kind of unity, or resolution of its contradictions, as discussed at the end of the previous chapter of this book. Sean O’Brien criticizes what he refers to as the ‘unified field approaches’ to Harrison’s poetry which confidently proclaim that the poetry ‘transcends’ the problems it discusses, citing such critics as Stephen Spender, Blake Morrison and Carol Rutter (1998: 54). He argues in opposition that the poetry both enacts, and contains images of, contra-
dictions that cannot be so easily unified. Yet, at the end of the same essay he acknowledges that in V Harrison, through incorporating the voice of the skinhead into his own (or possibly vice versa), is able to transform ‘duality into unity’ (52).

As was previously mentioned, the Leeds author often seeks for images of division being united, and in his later metaphysical poems this is a persistent leitmotif as the sour/sweet description of the kumquat illustrates. The most common image employed though is the same one that occurs in V: love. The tentative solution to all the divisions, the ‘versuses of life’ that plague both the individual man and contemporary Britain, listed in the poem is the ‘working marriage’ the poet has with his wife. O’Brien is astute enough to call attention to the tentativeness of this proclamation in the poem, focusing on the hedging, cautionary language of ‘seem’ and ‘sometimes’ in the line ‘where opposites seem sometimes unified’ (246). The further lack of confidence in this solution is the fact that one of the divisions listed in the poem is ‘man v. wife’, ironising the final image of Harrison going home to a wife that may no longer actually be there. Despite this ironic undermining of its own argument in V, the sheer wealth of references to love as an image of unification in Harrison’s poetry may well indicate that it is a transfiguring healing power that can consolidate Harrison’s divided nature: ‘plantlife, a yellow house, a pair of lovers,/ uniting in their love deep opposites’ (226).

As Rollo May explains, the idea of the dialectic, as coined by Hegel as a scheme for the unfolding of history, was a way to explain the ‘fundamental polarity of all reality’ of which the separation into male and female is an illustrative example (112). The act of sexual intercourse is a dramatic re-enactment of this fundamental polarity, according to May, and he quotes fellow existential thinker Paul Tillich for support: ‘it is well known to the students of Hegel that he started, in his early fragments, as a philosopher of love, and it can be said without exaggeration that Hegel’s dialectical scheme is an abstraction from his concrete intuition into the nature of love as separation and reunion’ (113). Harrison implies something similar in his poem Deathwatch Danceathon as it is the rhythm of sex that is associated with the Eros/Thanatos pair:

Six centuries of insect sex
Make hallowed rafters hollow wrecks,
The high and holy upheld by
Oak-beams gnawed to casks of ply,
And their Totentanz tattoos
Percussive in half-empty pews
Are sex sex sex, the tapping crown
Of cruising bug brings churches down (2000: 5)
The line ‘percussive in half-empty pews’ rhythmically enacts the sexual pulse it is describing, thus implying that Harrison equates the rhythm of metre with the rhythm of intercourse, which he explicitly confirmed in his interview with Richard Hoggart, comparing his metre with the ‘sexual instinct’ as well as other ‘physical rhythms’. He is not a pioneer in making such a comparison. Carl Jung, for one, devoted a great deal of attention to tracing the etymological roots of the mythical figure of Prometheus, in order to confirm the ‘sexual symbolism...of fire production”. He describes a religious ceremony celebrating this connection, which leads him to conclude: ‘We see here also the rhythm, the metre in its original place as sexual rhythm, rising above the mating call into music [my italics]’ (1916: 165). It would be interesting to ascertain if Harrison had read Jung, as his own introductory essay to his film-poem Prometheus makes the same correlation between ‘poetry and fire’ as Jung makes in his early study of the unconscious (Harrison 2007: pp. 257-84).

There is a reductionist danger in Freud’s theory of Eros which is hinted at in Harrison’s description also. The poet compares his metrical rhythm to the ‘sexual instinct’ which is how Freud viewed both the sex drive and the death wish: they are instinctual drives that may be beyond the individual’s conscious control. When Harrison compares his poetic composition to a ‘heartbeat’ or a ‘life support system’ he is making a similar implication – it is an impulse over which he has no volition. The existentialist theory of Eros is a corrective to this biologically reductive model. Rollo May contrasts the existential concept of Eros with the biological sex drive:

it can be agreed that the aim of the sex act in its zoological and physiological sense is indeed the orgasm. But the aim of Eros is not: Eros seeks union with the other person in delight and passion, and the procreating of new dimensions of experience which broaden and deepen the being of both persons. (74)

Such a union brings feelings of warmth, intimacy and meaning to people’s lives, whilst sex is simply a blind drive seeking instant gratification. In his poem “Following Pine” Harrison questions the analogy of his poetic rhythm with the blind insect copulation from “Dancewatch Danceathon”. In the earlier poem the “lovebugs” are so intent on their procreative coupling that they are oblivious to the dangers of their surrounding environment, which in this case is the speeding motor vehicle containing the poet and his lover: ‘They’d sooner fuck their brains out than survive.’ This leads to a lack of proper perspective in their existence: ‘When they copulate in swarms you can’t see far.’ This is a literal danger to the couple, as well as the distracted insects, which leads to a poetic meditation on Harrison’s part: ‘Is it just the crushed canoodling gnat/ that needs for its
Nirvana nothingness?’ (2006: 222). The implication is that possibly human relationships strive not for Nothingness, but for Being, which is May’s basic existential argument concerning love.

May goes on to subvert a long-standing humorous anecdote about sex and how it differs from Eros. After sex, the urge is to fall asleep in a blissful state of self-satisfaction and forgetfulness or, given the contemporary disintegration of long-term relationships, it is more common for people to return to their own homes first, and then rest. May believes that Eros is the opposite of such a process, and that the ‘urge for union with the partner […] is the occasion for human tenderness’ (74). The same opportunity for tenderness defines many of Harrison’s depictions of the need for union with a partner. At the end of V the poet desires to return to his loved one and makes a clear distinction between ‘turning to love, and sleep’s oblivion.’ It is not oblivion that the poet is seeking in his loved one, as he proceeds to explain: ‘The ones we choose to love become our anchor / when the hawser of the blood-tie’s hacked, or frays’ (2006: 248). The ‘blood-tie’ would presumably refer to his family relationships, the attitude which Freud described as one of ‘ambivalence’, which is the perfect description of the mood of Harrison’s family sonnets in The School of Eloquence. One of the purposes of love in a young individual’s life is that it enables one to break out of the restrictions of family life and achieve a measure of independence. Not to do so, according to Jung, is to fall victim to neurosis, which is the failure to attempt the goal ‘of the conquest of an independent life’ (338-9). The price for such independence is guilt at forsaking the family hearth, and this guilt is a dominant emotion throughout Harrison’s sequence. His only solution is to attempt through his poetry to re-establish a link long since severed by their deaths, as in the final stanza of ‘Long Distance’:

I believe life ends with death, and that is all.  
You haven’t both gone shopping; just the same,  
in my new black leather phone book there’s your name  
and the disconnected number I still call. (2006: 134)

It is death that has ‘hacked’ the thread connecting the poet to his parents and in Harrison’s poetry there is an express awareness that death and love are as inseparable as is implied in Freud’s theory of the mutual relationship of Eros and Thanatos. To view the theory from another angle, it is death, specifically the mortality of loved ones, that invests love with the existential meaning it possesses. May believes that the two are mutually dependent on each other: ‘Love is not only enriched by our sense of mortality but constituted by it’ (May 1969: 102). This is another means by which May contrasts Eros with sex. The latter is often indulged in, often pathologically and obsessively so, as a means
for people to avoid thinking of the pain and terror of death. May believes that contemporary mankind is terrified of death, and is in ‘flight from despair’ through ‘endless distractions’ to repeat Kuhn’s argument. Harrison voiced a similar sentiment in a recent interview: ‘I understand why people like a constant bombardment of noise, it’s a fear of mortality; but I find that intrusive, and have to learn to live with it’ (Butler and Klepuszewski 2009). Harrison does not exempt himself from this fear, as his poem *Laureate’s Block* depicts his own intimations of mortality on the occasion of the death of fellow Leeds poet, Ted Hughes. As he muses in the poem, ‘A poet's death fills other poets with dread’ (2000: 13). His way of managing this feeling of dread is exactly that promoted by May in his existential analysis of the relationship between love and death – he seeks his lover’s bed for warmth and companionship:

A poet’s death fills other poets with dread,
a king's death kings, but under my duvet.
is Queen Elizabeth, and off our bed
slide these quatrains and all of Thomas Gray. (13)

Victor Frankl, a survivor of the holocaust, believed that the most enabling way for people to accept the inevitability of death is to possess a purpose in life. Having experienced the proximity of his own death in the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Dachau, and through long years of treating people suffering from thoughts of depression, he concluded that there was a direct correlation between people’s fear of their imminent death and their sense of whether their lives had possessed a purpose. Subsequent research has promoted Frankl’s theory: ‘Results thus supported Frankl’s notions that Ss [subjects] who reported a high purpose and meaning in their life tended to fear death less and to have a more accepting attitude toward it’ (Frankl 1997: 125). Such research has been clear in its statement that a belief in the meaningfulness of life does not have to be synonymous with religious belief, so that even a devout atheist such as Harrison can embrace such a premise.

To return to Harrison’s line ‘the deepest grammar of our nothingness’ may offer an intimation that the poet does see meaning and purpose even when confronting the void. To pronounce that nothingness has a grammar is to suggest that it has structure and form in order to serve a purpose, just as the structures of grammar in language are a means to achieve communication.91 The sequence of poems from which this line comes has a common theme stated in the title, *Art*

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91 This idea is complicated in Harrison, however, as he intimates in *Palladas* that grammar does not endorse a life of meaning, but a long sequence of brutal deaths: “It’s whole content’s/ one long string of accidents” (83). Even this line is ambiguous, though, as he is not describing random accidents, but various wrathful acts of the Greek gods.
The basic thesis of this sequence is that people, and species in general, take on more importance, more meaningfulness, the closer they are to death or extinction, or as Harrison phrases it: ‘the species the World’s lost/ or will be losing in a little while,/ which, as they near extinction, grow in worth’ (2006: 187).

The emotional tone of these poems is not one of despair at the imminence of death or extinction, but of joyful remembrance, through the act of poetry, of their existence here and now. This has been a consistent emotional expression in Harrison’s poetry from the early poems in the *Palladas* sequence (‘life’s too brief to be a bore/ and you’ll never pass this way again’) through *Art and Extinction* to the celebration of ‘this fleeting life’ in the film poem *Prometheus*. Poetry itself, as a medium, is testimony not only to the meaningfulness of life, but of human interaction as well. It is the embodiment of the existential inflection of Eros or love as May explains: ‘[it is] the drive to give meaning and pattern to our variegation, form to our otherwise impoverishing formlessness, integration to counter our disintegrative trends’ (78). This is what poetry, and especially Harrison’s poetry, provides: form and pattern which coalesce together in meaningful constellations. It is a binding, or as May phrases it an attractive, force that brings people together in meaningful relationships, which is how Harrison has always viewed his poetic endeavor:

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Loving the rituals that keep men close,
Nature created means for friends apart:

pen, paper, ink, the alphabet,
signs for the distant and disconsolate heart. (2006: 80)
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Poetry is thus able to fill the void of the dreaded ‘existential vacuum’ that looms large in all of Harrison’s poetry. The despair that seeks to reduce people to ‘utter nothings, sustained by nothingness’ and that is constantly ‘brooding about death’ in the same sequence is countered throughout the same sequence, and it is Eros that the poems are constantly endorsing: ‘Learn to love tranquility…drink and love and leave the rest to Fate’ (2006: 78-9).

This is the positive view of the poetic process, but there is an alternative view that Harrison’s poetry also explores, and is connected with another of his unresolved existential crises. On the one hand, poetry is considered as ‘one of the rituals that keep men close.’ On the other hand, his poetry regularly intimates that poetry provides the opposite function: it is a means of driving a wedge between people, of separating them. This is the dramatic scene established in *Book Ends* in which there is a division between the ‘“scholar’ me” of the poet and his working class father ‘worn out on poor pay’ (2006: 126). The quotation marks surrounding the term ‘scholar’ are a reference to Richard Hog-
gart’s seminal study of the relationship between class and literature, *The Uses of Literacy*, and his coining of the term ‘scholarship boy’ to refer to those who were educated out of their class by the educational system. The poem is a dramatic enactment of this class division as the final lines indicate: ‘what’s still between’/ not the thirty or so years, but books, books, books’ (126). To view the poem from an existential perspective sheds further light on the poem and how its divisions run deeper than merely those of class. In existential thought, one of the means of ‘flight from despair’ that can create a life of ‘sham existence’ is that of intellectual pursuits, of which a literary life is one example. Rather than being a process in which people emotionally and meaningfully connect with each other, poetry may be a defense mechanism that keeps people at a distance. This is a common strategy in the late twentieth century, according to Rollo May: ‘This plays into the hands of modern man’s central defense, namely intellectualization—using words as substitutes for feelings and experience’ (174). Many of Harrison’s poems explore this idea that their over-concern with formal models and stylistic strategies are basically a postponement of any real emotional expression. In the second poem of *Book Ends* the dramatic tension between the poet and his father concerns the composition of the inscription of his recently deceased mother’s tombstone. His father mocks the poet for being unable to find the words to express his grief, given his professed profession ‘You’re the bright boy at description/ and you can’t tell them what the fuck to put!’ (2006: 127). The further irony is that it is the father’s words, free of poetic sophistication and intellectual interference, that are able to provide a proper emotional response to the tragic event:

I’ve got the envelope that he’d been scrawling,
mis-spelt, mawkish, stylistically appalling
but I can’t squeeze more love into their stone. (127)

Harrison’s questioning of the function of poetry is not too dissimilar to the violently aggressive dismissal of the role of poetry by the skinhead in *V*. As is always the case, this is a complicated and ambiguous rejection on the youth’s part: ‘Who needs / yer fucking poufy words. Ah write mi own’ (2006: 244). On the one hand, the skinhead is rejecting Harrison’s attempt through poetry to make sense of the juvenile delinquent’s aggressive acts. On the other hand, he does make a comparison between his graffiti and the poets own linguistic lineations. Despite the youth’s aggressiveness, and his rejection of the poet’s solution of love as a resolution to internal conflicts, Harrison sees the skinhead’s graffiti as his own attempt at meaningful communication with someone else, thus establishing the parallel between the poet and his alter ego: ‘He aerosolled his name. And it was mine’ (2006: 244). The reason for the adolescent’s artistic
form of expression is also established as a similar quest for a meaningful union with someone else: ‘his aerosol vocab would baulk at love,/ the skin’s UNITED underwrites the poet’ (2006: 248). It is doubtful, however, if the youth is experiencing the same existential crisis as the older poet, as death seems to hold no fear for the former. Yet, their crisis is not that dissimilar, nor is their response. It is interesting that, statistically, young people suffer just as frequently from an ‘existential vacuum’ as their elder equivalents, and that very often it is expressed through forms of ‘mindless agro’ as depicted by Harrison in his poem: ‘criminality and purpose in life are inversely related…. In the light of such facts it is understandable that Louis S. Barber holds that logotherapy is “particularly applicable to the treatment of juvenile delinquents”’ (Frankl 1997: 104). This is because young people suffer as much from existential despair as anyone else, due mainly to the unique social situation they find themselves in in contemporary times which is depicted so concisely in Harrison’s poem. As May explains:

This anonymous man’s never being known, this aloneness, is transformed into loneliness, which may then become daimonic possession…. it is not surprising that the young men in the streets, who are only anonymous digits in their society, should gang together in violent attacks to make sure their assertion is felt. (162)

The skinhead in Harrison’s poem spray paints in order to assert his identity, thus ensuring a respite from the meaninglessness of anonymity: ‘Ah’ve got mi work on show all over Leeds’ (2006: 244).

So, Harrison and his alter ego have a further connection through a shared existential problem. They also share a similar response to this state of affairs as Frankl has noted over years of research that ‘people are most likely to become aggressive when they are caught in this feeling of emptiness and meaninglessness’ (104). This provides a further avenue of exploration into Harrison’s ‘aggressive occupation’ of literary forms and modes. This is not just being done for political reasons connected with class or as an assertion of masculinity as Byrne claims (1997: 64). It also has a more personal, existential meaning for Harrison, as he responds emotionally to the possibility of a lack of meaning in his life or his relationships. The poetic drive itself may be fuelled by this aggressive anger as Gordon Allport suggests that this is the primary motivation behind the creative urge: ‘Aggression is not a primary tendency to hurt or destroy, but an intensified form of self-assertion and self-expression . . . a secondary result of thwarting and interference’ (1949: 65). In the poet’s case, the class issues are the main sources of interference in the early poems, and it is precisely a ‘form of self-assertion’ that is the response in Them and [uz]: ‘I’m Tony Harrison no longer you!’ (2006: 123). This, though, is a response with its own attendant
problems, as Harry Guntrip explains: ‘The more complex societies become, the more fears and insecurities create vicious circles of suspicion, defensiveness, defense by attack, and counterattack. An aggressive society becomes self-perpetuating, a nearly insoluble problem’ (120). This notion of endless self-perpetuation haunts the margins of Harrison’s poetry, whether in the ‘dark and circular... turn of the labyrinth’ mentioned in Newcastle is Peru, or the more metaphysically inclined lines in The Lords of Life: ‘eternity’s encirclement,/ curled in a circle, sucking its own tail...emblem of continuous rebirth’ (2006: 213).

The form of self-assertion in the poet’s work is another element of the notion of identity previously discussed. The ‘identity problem’ is seen by many existential psychiatrists as the fundamental issue in contemporary society (Guntrip 1971: 119). One of the main aspects connected with this problem is gender, and the current argument being put forward is that each individual needs to accept that there are both male and female elements to their personality if they are to fully realise their sense of identity. This is an idea that goes back to Jung and his theory of the anima and animus, and is firmly established in modern existential psychiatry, as the title of a paper from one of its leading advocates illustrates: The Female and Male Elements in Human Bisexuality. In this paper Donald Winnicott argues that both elements exist to varying degrees in an individual, regardless of their sex. Analogously, Harrison in interview expressed an identical premise when discussing one aspect of his earlier unresolved problems: ‘coming to terms with one’s own female qualities seems to be a very necessary struggle’ (Astley 1991: 36-45). This struggle may have found a solution in a poem such as ‘Lords of Life’ as the above quotation continues with the idea of a ‘formed continuum of female/male’ (213). David Kennedy argues that such poems are a means for Harrison to question conventional notions of masculinity in modern Britain as they imply ‘a recognition that the male/female binary needs to be redefined’ (2000: 122). Theoretically, this is a sound analysis of a persistent theme in Harrison’s later poetry, but it fails to account for a fairly pronounced strain of misogyny that runs through the earlier poetry in particular. Psychologically, this suggests that Harrison, despite his pronouncements to the contrary, endorses a binary gender distinction as Guntrip explains:

we can assess the neurotic distortions of masculinity and femininity encountered not only in patients but in popular opinion; the identification of female with weak, making some women despise their own sex and produce Adler’s ‘masculine protest’; and of ‘male’ with strength, which then usually means aggressiveness. (119)
Both Byrne and Kennedy highlight how the association of masculinity with aggression is not just an element of the poet’s personality, but of the social circumstances in post-war Britain. There is then a social context for such questionable lines in the poetry: ‘The theft of fire. Man’s worst bargain yet./ Zeus created Woman, He was that upset!’ (2006: 89).

Due to his persistent misogyny, however, Harrison is not able to resolve his own identity problem, and so the image of self-division is a resolute one in much of his work, despite the awareness of love as a solution to this problem. Self-division is a key idea in existential psychology and numerous theories have been put forward as to why this personal crisis occurs. A key concept coined by Sartre in Being and Nothingness is ‘bad faith’, which Rollo May, a proponent of the school of existential psychiatry, and the first to offer love as a solution to some of the problems in his field, explores in more detail than his French predecessor:

Sartre’s concept of ‘bad faith’ and ‘good faith’ is also an illustration—the dilemma of honesty with one’s self lying in the fact that there is always some element of self-distortion in our acts and beliefs. The man who thinks he is in ‘good faith’ is at that point in ‘bad faith’, and the only way to be in ‘good faith’ is to know that you are in bad faith, i.e., to know that there is some element of distortion and illusion in your perception. The moral problem is not simply a matter of believing in one’s convictions and acting on them, for people’s convictions can be as dominating and destructive, if not more so, than mere pragmatic positions. The moral problem is the relentless endeavor to find one’s own convictions and at the same time to admit that there will always be in them an element of self-aggrandizement and distortion. (1969: 157-8)

Despite Harrison’s striving to re-create an accurate representation of the voice of working class Leeds, his endeavor is doomed to failure due to the impossible nature of the task: it is an act of ‘bad faith’. Yet, due to his awareness of the illusory aspect of his poetic convictions, there is the moral equivalent of an act of ‘good faith’ in his poetry as well. In his poem The Queen’s English Harrison makes it clear, both to himself and the reader, that his poetry is not the same as the collection of Poems from the Yorkshire Dales that his father buys for him. There are similarities between his poetry and the ‘broken lines [that] go through me’, but Harrison is honest enough to admit that even when he mimics his father’s voice in his poems they are not entirely genuine lines, and so there is an irony in the final line: ‘wi’skill they putten wuds reet i’ his mouth’ (2006: 136). This is what Harrison does with his father, or the skinhead in V, he puts
his own words in their mouths, thus rendering the whole poetic dialogue suspect. Hence O’Brien, for one, warns the reader not to award the poetry a ‘higher authenticity which they cannot in fact possess’ (53).

This lack of authenticity may well be another contributor to Harrison’s bouts of depression, as the two are often twinned together in existentialist thought as Helmut Kuhn clarifies:

Viewed in the light of authenticity, life under the dispensation of incipient despair (and that means, the whole of human life this side of the healing crisis) is sham existence (Uneigentlichkeit, mauvaise foi). The individual is on the flight from despair, taking shelter behind empty pleasures, aimless activities, hollow traditions and reassuring myths. But the masquerade is of no avail. Despair, tracking down its quarry, will force him to turn round and to stand at bay. (1949: 110)

It would seem rather presumptuous to label Harrison’s poetry as an ‘aimless activity’ but he admitted in interview that this is a thought that often haunts him in his personal moments of despair: ‘I always ask myself, with regard to the idea of being a public poet, ‘What the f**k is the use of this?’ ‘ (Butler and Klepuszewski 2009). This is precisely the function that the skinhead in V performs; he is there to make the poet aware of his self-aggrandizement in his use of ‘poufy words’ and the futility of his poetic endeavours: ‘Don’t talk to me of fucking representing/ the class yer were born into any more’ (2006: 244). His poem Confessional Poetry is another example of how the poet makes himself aware of his own self-delusions and then re-enacts them himself in his work, as in the ruthless self-examination of his use of his father’s speech in his poems: ‘His words when they came would scarcely scan. / Mi dad’s did scan, like yours do, many times!’ (2006: 128). Rollo May believes that the concept of ‘bad faith’ is connected with ‘the profound difficulty of ‘knowing thyself’’ (157) and this is ostensibly what Harrison’s poem is about, as the title, Confessional Poetry suggests. There is a play on this term for the poetic genre, though, as the poem suggests a parallel with the church confessional in which forgiveness for sins is the main function: ‘I’m guilty, and the way I make it up’s / in poetry and that much I confess’ (2006: 128).

**Harrison’s Eros versus cold trade**

So, in Harrison’s case, we can add ‘gender isolation’ as well as ‘class isolation’ to the situation of ‘total schizoid isolation’ that the existential psychiatrists view as the plight of contemporary humanity (Guntrip 1971: 158). The existen-
tialists were not promoting an original idea when they advocated modern man’s ‘alienated consciousness’ as this was the main description of capitalist society put forward by Marx. The difference between the former and the latter is that Marx believed that this sense of alienation derived from class issues and the nature of modern capitalist economy, whilst the existentialists sought more psychoanalytical reasons for society’s current state. Yet, the two have certain arguments in common, as Norman Brown theorises that the psychoanalytic critique of rationality has certain parallels with early Marxist thought:

his conception of the radical viciousness of the civilized mind, labeled the ‘alienated consciousness.’ The alienated consciousness is correlative with a money economy. Its root is the compulsion to work. This compulsion to work subordinates man to things, producing at the same time confusion in the valuation of things (…) and devaluation of the human body. It reduces the drives of the human being to greed and competition (aggression and possessiveness, as in the anal character). The desire for money takes the place of all genuinely human needs. (1985: 235-6)

The only accurate comment that one of the journalists made during the V controversy was to label Harrison a ‘bolshie poet’, as his affinities with Marxist thought are clear to be seen. Brown’s passage indicates a number of points that have parallels in Harrison’s poetry, some of which are openly acknowledged by the poet, some of which are hidden under the surface. Brown’s final point, that economic desire has been substituted for genuine human emotion, is one made repeatedly in Harrison’s work. His description of the ‘sick, / sick body politic’ is consistent and it is often the money economy that is seen to be the fault: ‘the world’s bold cannonade / of loveless warfare and cold trade’ (2006: 66). This cold economic trade is contrasted to the warmth of his lover’s bed where tenderness and compassion are the ballast to the ‘mess’ of the outside world.

Despite Harrison’s critique of the current economic situation, there is an aspect of his work and life that is a reflection of that same position as identified by Brown: the compulsion to work. Kennedy discusses the association in post-war Britain between the comparison of writing with ‘effeminacy’ in contrast to the masculinity of physical work, and he notes the conflict of this in Harrison’s own ‘work’ which often seeks to describe itself in those terms as an assertion of the author’s own masculinity (2000: 120-2). Byrne goes even further, drawing

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92 His poem The Red Lights of Plenty, for example, was written ‘for the centenary of the death of Karl Marx’ (203).
a comparison between this idea of work and modern economic principles: ‘Har-
Rison seems to want to be simultaneously ‘Maker’ rather than money-maker (with a concomitant involvement in commerce) and labourer earning a living through his sweat’ (1997: 71). It is the case that the poet often equates his writing with other forms of manual labour, such as in these typically alliterative lines in V: ‘butcher, publican, and baker, now me, bard / adding poetry to their beef, beer and bread’ (2006: 236). Brown highlights the irony underpinning this when he shows the equation between a money economy and the compulsion to work. This irony is exposed in the phrase Harrison used in interview when decanting on the connection between his poetry and manual labour. He related a meeting that took place en route to a poetry reading in Galway, in which a fellow passenger responded to his disclosure that he was a poet by profession by exclaiming: ‘That’s a grand trade to be in’ (Butler and Klepuszewski 2009). The poet would probably want to make a distinction between his work and the ‘cold trade’ described in Newcastle is Peru.

Marxist critics of literature have often stressed the connection between the modern idea of the individual author and a capitalist market economy. Literature is a market in which authors sell their products, it is a form of trade. The very term ‘author’ in its modern use is inextricably connected with the modern literature market, as Raymond Williams describes: ‘In the modern period there is an observable relation between the idea of an author and the idea of ‘literary property’: notably in the organization of authors to protect their work, by copyright and similar means, within a bourgeois market’ (1977: 192). As a publishing writer, Harrison engages with this bourgeois market just as he employs ‘bourgeois modes’ of poetry. However, he is also a rare exception to this case as well, given that he writes poems for newspapers such as The Guardian, and allowed the full publication of V in a national newspaper. He relinquished his property rights, and therefore his profit margin, for a specific purpose: ‘I was determined to make it more public’ (Butler and Klepuszewski 2009). He is aware that poetry publication is a specific niche in the modern bourgeois economy, and seeks to transcend this social and economic restriction by whatever means possible. This niche often has a class element to it, as poetry, especially modern poetry, is essentially a middle-class literary form, as is the study of the ‘classics’ that Harrison underwent as a student. The class element of his chosen medium of expression is one of the central themes of The School of Eloquence and is a main source of tension between the poet and his father, as A Good Read demonstrates: ‘That summer it was Ibsen, Marx and Gide./ I got one of his you-stuck-up-bugger looks’ (2006: 141). The quotation marks that enclose the phrase ‘the Arts’ as well as its capitalisation embody the role that social class, not to mention economic principles, plays in defining literature as a category.
This category, however, is not fixed, but is always at the mercy of social, historical and political forces, according to Marxist theory. Technological advances and their effect on means of production can assist in expanding social and cultural relationships, according to Williams (1997: 53-4). The importance of print, for example, is now being superseded by advances in recording technology that allows for both audio and visual reproduction that simply cannot be reduplicated in print. Harrison is a poet keenly aware of this shifting aspect of literary categorisation as his later film poetry proves. He argues in the introduction to Prometheus that this new genre is simply an extension of his previous work, as he believes that ‘film and poetry have a great deal in common’ (2007: 277). He provides substantiating examples, such as comparing the rhythm of poetry to the ‘rhythmicity of a shot’ or the editing techniques of film to ‘clusters of poetic imagery’ (277). He further adopts the Russian film maker Andrei Tarkovsky’s term ‘cinema of poetry’ to bolster his argument. Tarkovsky also believed that cinema and poetry have a relationship, and he constructed his own films on the basis of ‘poetic logic’ rather than the normal situation of narrative causality that is the hallmark of the majority of films (1989: 44-56). Yet, the Russian film maker also draws a distinction between the two modes of expression:

Beyond it lie irreconcilable differences: stemming from the essential disparity between word and screened image; for the basic difference is that literature uses words to describe the world, whereas films do not have to use words: it manifests itself to us directly. (60)

The publication of Harrison’s film poems is a prime example of Tarkovsky’s point, as half the volume is taken up with shot directions and descriptions, most of which have to be seen in order to convey their intention. Additionally, a film image can be open to multiple interpretations, often reduced when rendered on the page, as an example from the opening of Prometheus illustrates: ‘The logo is a combination of notices forbidding activities, like NO SMOKING, but also in its black, white and red rather reminiscent of Nazi insignia (our italics)’ (2007: 287).

Part of the reason that Harrison turned to films is that it is currently a more popular medium than poetry, thus ensuring a greater audience. A comparison of the media of poetry and cinema, and their root expressive drive, indicates why this is of importance not only for Harrison but for any creative individual. Tarkovsky was a highly existential film maker, who believed that films should be made in order to fill what he called a ‘spiritual vacuum’ that sees no sense of meaning in life. As already stated, this existential crisis of meaning often involves an ‘identity problem’ and Tarkovsky supports this by perceiving film as
a medium concerned with a ‘true affirmation of self’ (40). This self, however, is not to be confused with an assertion of individuality, which is not the function of artistic expression. Rather, the self-expressive function of art is ineluctably connected with the necessity of an audience. As Tarkovsky phrases it: ‘Self-expression is meaningless unless it meets with a response’ (40). In other words, art is an inherently social process, a point that Marxist criticism often argues. Williams, for example, believes that artistic expression and reception is a means to replace the ‘alienated consciousness’ of modern man with a ‘practical consciousness’ which is a product of social and historical forces at constant work in individuals and societies. There are no self-contained ‘texts’ just as there are no self-determined individuals, as all are bound up in a web of social and political networks, referred to by Williams as ‘active history’ (210). All literature is therefore inherently political and social in nature, whatever the conscious beliefs of the individual author. There is also no real qualitative difference between literature and the ‘direct practice of everyday communication’ as communication with another person is the basic drive of all art (211). Harrison’s poem A Good Read is an illustrative example of how Harrison seeks to ground his poetry in the bedrock of normal social discourse when he compares his reading of ‘Ibsen, Marx, and Gide’ to his father’s own reading practices: ‘Your programme at United! The labels on your whisky or your beer!’ (2006: 141).

This can be the positive aspect to Harrison’s equation of poetry with manual labour, as his poetry is as much a material, social product as beer or bread. Williams distinguishes his ‘practical consciousness’ in similar terms:

These modes of consciousness are material. Every element of form has an active material basis. It is easy to see this in the ‘materials’ of forms: words, sounds, and notations, as in speech and writing; other physically produced elements in other arts. But it is always more difficult to see certain essential properties of form - properties of relation, in a wide sense - in material ways. It is especially difficult when ‘matter’ and ‘consciousness’ are disjoined, as in idealism or in mechanical materialism. (210)

The disjunction of matter and consciousness is another of the ‘versuses’ that Harrison seeks to overcome in his work. It is connected with two ideas already discussed: the modern economic principle which, as Brown argues, involves a ‘devaluation of the human body’ and the aurality of Harrison’s poetry that comes through when the poetry is read aloud. The inflections of English phraseology reflect the bodily materiality of artistic production. Williams talks of the ‘embodiment’ of artistic performance just as the ‘body of work’ of an artist can be discussed. Harrison, as repeatedly mentioned, often equates his work
with bodily production, comparing his poetic composition to ‘physical rhythms.’ His response to ‘loveless warfare and cold trade’ in the poem *Newcastle is Peru* is to celebrate the physical body of his lover: ‘these slopes of flesh my fingers ski/ with circular dexterity’ (2006: 67). Williams sees language itself as a material process, and this association of language with physicality is provocatively espoused, and orally echoed in its alliteration, by Harrison in his poem *Doodlebugs*: ‘the slow discovery, of cunt as coastline, then as continent’ (2006: 20).

This line is both socially and politically radical for two reasons. For one, it is expressing ‘tabooed and repressed dimensions of reality’ to use Herbert Marcuse’s phrase (1978: 19). The word ‘cunt’ is itself a taboo lexical unit, as proven by the outcry over its use in *V*. To openly advocate sexual exploration is to subvert the sexually repressive society of modern times. To promote economic desire at the expense of other bodily desires can only be repressive in nature, which is why Brown describes modern society as one of ‘asceticism’ (237). A poem such as *Doodlebugs* or any of the other poems in *Loiners* that the poet’s mother labelled as ‘mucky’ in *Bringing Up* are an attempt at liberation from a repressive society that could not even provide the young poet with the meaning of the word ‘harlot’, as dramatised in *Wordlists*. The other radical nature of this type of poem is that it celebrates the very principle that is being repressed, as Marcuse further explains employing the terminology beloved of the existentialists:

> The affirmative character of art has yet another source: it is in the commitment of art to Eros, the deep affirmation of the Life Instincts in their fight against instinctual and social oppression. The permanence of art, its historical immortality throughout the millenia of destruction, bears witness to this commitment. (10-1)

Rather than celebrate the mutual relationship of Eros and Thanatos, Harrison depicts a society that has chosen to repress the one and elevate the other to a station ill befitting it, as the line from *Newcastle is Peru* suggests in the phrase ‘loveless warfare’ in which there is the death instinct but not the other one mentioned by Marcuse. Furthermore, Norman Brown sees a parallel between existentialist and Marxist thought in their joint attack on the ‘rationality’ of the modern capitalist economic state, in which rational thought has superseded any notion of emotional exuberance, and Harrison also describes this element of social oppression:

> 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. (2006: 92)

The relationship between the supremacy of logical thought and the destructive tendencies of modern civilization is brilliantly expressed in this conceit of the frying pan.

Both Marcuse and Williams argue that an awareness of social oppression often occurs when an individual personally experiences political censorship or observes it occurring to other people or social groups. This is the event dramatised in Harrison’s *Them and [uz]*. The appropriate response for a politically engaged poet is a contentious issue, to which Marcuse offers one strategy:

> The catharsis itself is grounded in the power of aesthetic form to call fate by its name, to demystify its force, to give the word to the victims—the power of recognition which gives the individual a modicum of freedom and fulfillment in the realm of unfreedom. (10)

It is not just Harrison who is the victim in *Them and [uz]* it is also the class he was born into, and so he resolves to give them an authentic voice in the poem: ‘used my name and own voice: [uz] [uz] [uz], / ended sentences with by, with, from, / and spoke the language that I spoke at home’ (2006: 123). This strategy of giving voice to those denied their means of expression recurs throughout Harrison’s career. It is explicitly stated as such in *National Trust* where the poet includes a line of Cornish, a language that is practically extinct due to oppression from a dominant English government. Williams’ ‘active history’ is often one of social and political oppression as the poem expresses: ‘the dumb go down in history and disappear…the tongueless man gets his land took’ (2006: 121). Williams labels such a strategy as occurs in the poetry as ‘counter-hegemony’ which is ‘historical: the recovery of discarded areas, or the redress of selective and reductive interpretations’ (116). The former tactic takes place in a poem such as *National Trust*, the latter in a poem such as *The Song of the PWD man* which redefines the colonial myth as a process of brutal exploitation:

> So it’s not all that surprising that some lecherous apes
> Take rather rough advantage, mostly blacks and Lebanese,
> Though I’ve heard it tell as well that it were one of these
> That white Police Inspector fancied and forced down
> At the back of the barracks in the sleazy part of town. (2006: 41)

Marcuse’s use of the word ‘fate’ is intentionally general, as he firmly believes that Marxist theories of literature and aesthetics too often rely on an overly deterministic and reductive scheme to describe how politics and society affect an individual. Marxist theory, Marcuse argues, can overvalue the im-
 importantes of ‘historical materialism’ which has two negative related consequenc-es: a ‘devaluation of the entire realm of subjectivity’ which, in turn, reduces the unconscious realm of the individual to the product of ‘class consciousness’ (3). Harrison’s poetry is open to a similar charge of reducing important political and social issues, not to mention his own family relationships, to issues of class alone. In a poem that is ostensibly about his father’s death one wonders if the final lines have anything to do with what preceded it in the poem, and the poet’s depiction of himself as a beggar is essentially melodramatic and unconvincing: ‘I’m opening my trap / to busk the class that broke him for the pence / that splash like brackish tears into our cap’ (2006: 149). Despite such lapses, it would be an injustice to the poet to see his work as falling into the dangers of ideological reduction that Marcuse detects in Marxist theory. Byrne argues that Harrison is not a mere ‘club-wielding materialist’ and that his poetry also contains ‘intangible ideals, aspirations, and imagination’, exactly the criteria that Marcuse believes art possesses that raises it above simple ideology (Byrne 1997: 60). Interestingly, Harrison makes use of the same ‘intangible’ terminology as Marcuse when discussing issues such as poverty in a way that transcends class issues:

Yes, I’m poor. What’s wrong with that?
What is it I’ve done to earn your hate?

It’s not my character you’re sneering at,
Only the usual senselessness of Fate. (2006: 81)

Marcuse employs the Eros/Thanatos dialectical struggle as a model of history precisely because it transcends class issues to connect art with something more universal: ‘History is also grounded in nature’ (Marcuse 1978: 16). The aesthetic mode that is most appropriate in conveying this awareness of history, according to the French philosopher, is tragedy, which is able to convey the ‘metasocial dimension’ of the Eros/Thanatos schema by focusing on the ‘personal fate’ of the protagonists in a way that elevates them above any form of ‘class struggle’. Harrison’s long career as a writer in the theatre regularly involves adaptations of the Greek tragedies where he often adapts ancient works for contemporary purposes, not to reduce the meaning of the play to a topical issue but to show that literature deals with universal issues. The following lines from Labourers highlight the all-inclusive nature of tragedy:

Phrynichos, who gave the theatre a start
in redeeming destruction through the power of art,
and, witnessing male warfare, gave the task
of mourning and redemption to the female mask. (Harrison 1996: 143)

According to Marcuse, tragedy expresses a ‘guiltless guilt’, a wonderfully paradoxical phrase. The implication is that guilt is not a personal affair, as is the case in Harrison’s guilt-ridden poems about his parents discussed in the previous section. Rather, it is something universal, all-pervasive, woven into the fabric of existence itself, a fact that tragedy pitilessly illustrates, as Roberto Calasso describes its tragic victims: ‘eventually he is crushed by it perhaps, perhaps abandoned, perhaps freed, while the guilt rolls on to threaten others, to create new stories, new victims’ (Calasso 1994: 95). The possible consolation is that in such a belief the individual is never directly responsible for their actions, as personal agency is called into question. It is divine forces that shape the course of the life of the individual who is unable to affect its outcome in any way. The only recourse in such a situation is passive acceptance, as is expressed in *Palladas*: ‘ride it; and admit defeat. / There’s no point in resisting; it’s too strong - / willy-nilly, you’ll get swept along’ (2006: 79).

The danger of this idea is that it can be viewed as similar to the reductive determinism of Marxist theory. In this theory ‘Fate’ or ‘Fortune’ or ‘Guilt’ is reclassified as the ‘iron laws’ or the ‘objective conditions’ of the ‘economy’, which dictates all social interactions (Williams 1977: 85). To dismiss personal agency is to banish any notion of a subjective life for individuals who are merely caught up in impersonal market forces so large-scale that they are seen as an external process the individual is unable to control, and so is ‘swept along.’ In social terms, this involves the subordination of all human activities, including the writing of poetry, to capitalist institutions. Williams quotes Engels in a possible riposte to this inescapable situation: ‘We make our history ourselves, but, in the first place, under very definite assumptions and conditions’ (85). Harrison would probably see his own work as falling under the second category, as he constantly attacks the capitalist institutions of contemporary society. In the film *Prometheus* this is dramatised in the conflict between the protagonist of the film, reincarnated in an unemployed and acculturated miner, who refuses to submit to the dictates of Hermes, the deity who possesses most of the dialogue in the film, and who is the representative of those institutions that Harrison is criticising:

Each dollar buys a missile hurled
at the champion of the world
by these jobless carbon-worker snoes
who take his side against us gods.
Or *did* with due devotion till
they deified the dollar bill.
Zeus entrusts these jobs to me,
free-trade Hermes/Mercury!
When jobs collapse they know their pal
is D-mark-toting Capital! (2007: 357)

In this passage the implications of the economic view of reality as outlined by Brown are plain to see. People are reduced to the status of things, ‘carbon-worker sods’, whilst any human solidarity is relinquished in the face of personal greed. Yet, in the film, and all of Harrison’s work, be it in the theatre, on the printed page, or in film, it is not the forces, personified here in Hermes, that have the last word, but the oppositional voice that is the voice of the poet himself, and defines what Harrison believes is the redeeming, as well as subversive, nature of poetry:

Fire and poetry, two great powers
that mek the so-called gods’ world OURS! (2007: 372)
CONCLUSIONS

One of the main reasons for journeying to Newcastle to interview Tony Harrison was to ascertain from the poet himself whether he believed that *V* was still a relevant social and political document in contemporary Britain, or whether its depiction of a class-divided British society is now merely a historical curiosity. He agreed that it is a poem that still holds up well to historical analysis of the political situation during the Thatcher era, but he also contended that those issues had far from receded from the current British political landscape. Indeed, he believes that the issues explored in *V* ‘do still exist, and they’re returning, in a strange way. The have and have-nots are becoming quite marked again and the idea of New Labour as being class-free is a fantasy. The old divisions are still there, just not expressed in the same way’ (Butler and Klepuszewski 2009). This comment was voiced in September of 2010, and was dramatically confirmed the following summer with the outbreak of rioting in London and many other key British cities. The catalyst for these eruptions of social discontent was the wrongful killing of a black youth by an overzealous British police force, but this singular incident was soon forgotten in a tidal wave of violent anti-social behaviour. It was no historical accident that the rioting began in the capital city of London, described by one journalist as ‘the most unequal city in the developed world, where the wealth of the richest 10% has risen to 273 times that of the poorest, drawing in young people who have had their educational maintenance allowance axed just as official youth unemployment has reached a record high and university places are being cut back under the weight of a tripling of tuition fees’93. This description of a ‘divided Britain’ would suggest that Harrison’s poem still has the ability to address an increasingly disenfranchised and disillusioned portion of the British population.

Many of the social and political ‘verses’ dealt with in Harrison’s poetic oeuvre, and documented throughout this study, manifested themselves in violent fashion during the ‘summer of discontent’ of 2011. The violent events were predictably condemned by politicians as the ‘mindless thuggery’ of a criminal ‘underclass’, reinforcing Harrison’s contention that the old class divisions are still prevalent in contemporary Britain. This is unsurprising, given that the class issue has for centuries stirred a debate in the United Kingdom whose weight can never be overstated. The opening epigraph to Harrison’s *School of Eloquence* sequence places the class issue in a much wider temporal frame by referring

93 Milne, Seumas. 2011. ‘These riots reflect a society run on greed and looting.’ The Guardian, 10 August.
back to events from the eighteenth century in Britain, and this is then further widened by references, throughout the series, to events as historically distant as those in imperial Rome. Part of the difficulty of the class issue in Britain is that its divisive agenda incubates a mistrust of communication on all sides. Part of the reason for the anonymity of the violent behaviour last summer was to reflect how people felt they were being treated in such a divisive society. As Victoria Beale commented regarding the problem of journalists trying to make sense of the events: ‘Who do you speak to in an “underclass” defined by its invisibility and isolation, and currently even more suspicious than usual of press intrusion?’94 This is the same suspicion voiced by the skinhead in Harrison’s poem, and the quotation surfaced a few times throughout this study as it remains an unresolved issue in contemporary social discourse: ‘Don’t talk to me of representing / the class yer were born into any more’ (Harrison 2006: 244).

The riots illustrated the prevalence of other divisions still at large in British society, and which Harrison cogently identified in his poem V. Whilst the violent behaviour was indulged in by people of varying age groups, the age division was one voiced often by those interviewed regarding their actions. As one looter put it: ‘They [employers and the older generation] look at us, yeah and they say ‘fuck it, youths mate’ that’s all they think.’95 Again, this is not too different to the sentiments voiced by the skinhead in V who is wary of ‘old farts’ who ‘get folks like me arrested’ (243). Resentment at such treatment is often expressed through racial prejudice towards others, as the graffiti on the tombstones in Beeston Hill attests to: ‘NIGGER…PAKI GIT’ (240). As mentioned, it was a racial incident that was the motivation for the chain of events of last summer, merely confirming an unfortunate facet of contemporary Britain: ‘Black people are 26 times more likely than white people to be stopped and searched by police in England and Wales, the most glaring example of “racial profiling” researchers have seen, according to an international report’.96 The parallel rise of the British National Party through its obnoxious representative Nick Griffith is also foreshadowed in Harrison’s poem with its allusions to the National Front.

All of which is confirmation that Harrison’s poetry deals with pertinent social issues faced by people in contemporary Britain. His work is an attempt to observe the human dilemmas that affect people in their everyday lives, and to

94 Beale, Victoria. 2011 ‘Who are the London Rioters – and why can’t the media find out?’ The New Republic, 11 August.
95 Shiv, Malik. 2011. “Uk Riots: ‘We don’t want no trouble. We just want a job.’” The Guardian, 12 August.
96 Townsend, Mark. 2011. ‘Black People are 26 times more likely than whites to face stop and search.’ The Observer, 17 October.
predict possible future outcomes. As he himself put it: ‘In so much as there is a confidence now it’s to do with finding a more prophetic voice.’\textsuperscript{97} Looking back from a current perspective, it is not difficult to identify the prophetic elements in his poetic output. The relationship between class and language has been a dominant theme in all his work, as Terry Eagleton remarked: ‘No modern English poet has shown more finely how the sign is a terrain of struggle where opposing accents intersect, how in a class-divided society language is cultural warfare and every nuance a political valuation’ (Eagleton 1991: 349). Harrison’s embracing of his own regional accent thus has always had a political element to it, and thanks to his example other poets and public figures have been able to follow suit, thus decentralising the tyranny of RP and the King’s English. The BBC has long been considered the bastion of such cultural linguistic values, yet they are now the ones promoting projects such as \textit{Voices}, aiming at recording the wide diversity of accents throughout the British Isles.\textsuperscript{98} This project also involves the promotion of regional variations of vocabulary, thus illustrating a key element of Harrison’s own poetry, and further identifying how vibrant and relevant the language of his roots is, as Verdonk explains:

> Good poetry is always rooted in ordinary daily speech from which, of course, it is at the same time different through its intensified meaning potential. If the language of poetry is to retain its vitality, it has to tap the sources of contemporaneous, everyday speech. In this way the language of poetry will create a place to accommodate the reader, who will thus be tempted to unravel the myriad of meanings concealed in a language s/he is familiar with. (Verdonk 1993: 3)

The final prophetic element of Harrison’s work is its continuous, strenuous, attempt to remain a public medium, despite the oft-sounded notion that due to the ubiquitous nature of mass media, poetry is becoming as marginalized as any of those people ignored due to social status:

> Strange how poetry most people think a bore,  
> Poetry that people of our period despise  
> Or if they don’t despise it just ignore,  
> Seems to surface fast when someone dies. (76)

It is hard not to agree with Späth that ‘In the twentieth century the poet, generally speaking, ceased to be a figure whom the public takes notice of’ (2002: 43).

\textsuperscript{97} Brown, Andrew. 1993. ‘Harrison forward: Andrew Brown meets Tony Harrison, whose poetry goes straight to the heart and to the mind.’ \textit{The Independent & The Independent on Sunday}, 23 January.

\textsuperscript{98} This project is an online one: \url{http://www.bbc.co.uk/voices/}
However, one has to admit that Harrison managed to achieve the seemingly impossible by introducing into this dying genre issues pertinent to the contemporary socio-economic and political landscape in such an explicit manner that its thematic weight drew a significant public response, from politicians and lay folk alike. His work in the medium of film poetry is a further attempt at garnering a wider public response, and has prompted others such as Simon Armitage to follow in his footsteps. The wealth of documentaries and documentary films concerning poetry, even ancient poems such as Beowulf, financed by large corporations such as the BBC, serves as a cautionary note to those who argue that poetry is ignored by the general public.

Harrison has time and again remarked on the various ways in which he has attempted to make his poetry available to a wider public audience. Public forums such as amateur theatre groups, the re-emergence of the poetry reading as a cultural event, the publication of war poems on the pages of The Guardian newspaper, or the uploading of V onto YouTube, one of the most popular social networking sites, may all be evidence that poetry does still engage the public, and that Harrison’s poetry is not simply a poetic engagement, but a social and political, and ultimately a human one. It was with great fondness that he related to us the positive responses he has received to his status as ‘bard’ down the years. ‘God has given you the greatest gift’ he heard on his way to a festival in Ireland where he was to give a reading, from a woman who, as he describes her ‘looked very superior, scrubbed and cleaned’. In Greece, where he spends much of his time working, a taxi driver comments upon his being a poet by saying ‘Bravo!’ (Butler and Klepuszewski 2009). All we can do is repeat the sentiment.

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All the Vs of Life: Conflicts and Controversies in Tony Harrison’s Poetry


