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V. – Tony Harrison’s Poetic Dialectic

Tony Harrison’s long poem *v.* published in 1985, and televised by Channel Four in 1987 was a milestone in his literary career, not only because of the reception it received, but also because Harrison managed to use poetry as an effective tool for a debate concerning important social issues.

Soon after it was published, Martin Booth called *v.* ‘the most outstanding social poem of the last 25 years’¹, though it was not until a year later, when a reading of the poem by Tony Harrison, directed by Richard Eyre, was aired that the public could really face its true value and impact. The filming, appreciated by some, caused widespread opposition on the part of those readers who felt appalled by its diction, namely the overt and ample use of expletives. As it turned out, however, a great number of those who expressed their outrage had not actually acquainted themselves with the poem. As Tony Harrison notes in an interview:

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...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.²

¹ Booth, Martin. 1986. ‘The Personal as Universal’. *Tribune*, 21 February, p.10.

² http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/johntusainterview/harrison_transcript.shtml; 1.08.2011

Years after, the fact was humorously recalled by Andy Parsons during one of his stand-up acts, when he rightly pinpointed that after the film was shown, ‘over the course of the next 2 weeks they got 42 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.’³

Regardless of what or who really triggered the sudden interest in *v.*, the fact is that the regional and national papers, tabloids and broadsheets were flooded with articles and letters pertaining to the event, and the broadcasting authorities had to deal with complaints from the viewers. ‘A torrent of four-letter filth’⁴ is an example of many epithets that were used in the British press in a time span of about a month to label, classify, and, above all, to tar the televising of Tony Harrison’s poem on Channel Four. While quality papers tended to be more toned down in the matter, tabloids were offensive and critical, capitalising on the fact that a poem containing coarse language was actually presented on television. Most tabloids based their news on calculating the number of different swearwords used in the poem. The Sun, for example, found it of importance to inform its readers that the poem contained 90 swear words.⁵

Apart from the short-lived media frenzy, *v.* caused an enormous indignation on the part of the so-called Establishment, right-wing politicians in particular. It comes as no surprise that Carol Rutter views this public crusade as an unquestionable literary achievement of Tony Harrison: ‘Poetry hit the front page of the newspapers. Poetry even had questions asked about it in Parliament. Not bad for a bard!’ (1995: 29). What the public outcry reflected was that *v.* exposed vital intersections where issues concerning predominantly language and class collide and remain in conflict. This article focuses on how Harrison incorporates a poetic dialectic in *v.* in his quest to find integrity.

The setting of *v.* is Holbeck cemetery in Leeds, 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’). It is both the setting of the poem, as well as its mood that *v.* is often labelled a graveyard poem or an elegy. In this context, an obvious intertextual inspiration can be traced in Thomas Gray’s ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard’, though Harrison replaces Gray’s rural milieu with urban, or in fact a suburban one. Whereas the voice in Gray’s

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³ Andy Parsons, Live at the Apollo, 28 Nov. 2009, series 4, episode 5, BBC.

⁴ Deans John and Lenkins, Garry. 1987. ‘Four-letter TV poem fury.’ *Daily Mail*, 12 October.

⁵ ‘Battle to ban shock TV poem.’ *The Sun*, 12 October 1987.

poem contemplates the place where ‘The rude Forefathers of the hamlet sleep’ only to conclude that ‘The paths of glory lead but to the grave,’⁶ all within the frame of rural imagery, Harrison confronts the living and the dead, with imagery that is crude and often shocking (‘They’re there to shock the living, not arouse the dead from their deep peace’).

The key issues in *v.* concern language and class, both of which have been of particular interest to Harrison ever since, after the introduction of the *Eleven Plus* examination by Butler Education Act in 1944, he won a scholarship at Leeds Grammar School, a fact which was to influence his work, and is particularly well-mirrored in his poetry. As a boy of working-class origin, Harrison became part of ‘a hidden pool of ability’⁷, from which education authorities fished out the clever ones, ‘a parvenu elite picked for their brains’ (1974: 79) as Gamble calls them. Worpole emphasises that the selection of working-class boys to attend grammar schools often estranged them both from their families, as well as their class background (1991: 61). As he further observes, the eleven-plus exam ‘swept thousands of homes each year like an icy wind, and ... in many places destroyed the cementing ties of family and each other, sometimes for ever. (1991: 62).⁸

The time spent in Leeds Grammar School gave Harrison the kind of education without which he would most probably not have become what he is now, but also made him realise how much class and language depend on each other. As he himself came from not a particularly articulate and eloquent background, the language he was exposed to during his school years remained in sharp contrast with the one he had been brought up with. He was one of many boys victimised by some teachers who found pleasure in scorning working-class pupils for their accents,⁹ a fact which he often relates to in interviews:

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 because I had a thick urban Leeds accent. I’d say ‘Me ‘eart aches in a drowsy numbness’ ‘Please, stop.’¹⁰

⁶ <http://www.blupete.com/Literature/Poetry/Elegy.htm>; 25.08.2011.

⁷ Central Advisory Council for Education (England): Ministry of Education 15018 (HMSO), 1959.

⁸ 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.

⁹ See Stevens, Frances. 1960. *The Living Tradition*. London: Hutchinson.

¹⁰ http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/johntusainterview/harrison_transcript.shtml; 1.08.2011

This exasperating experience was later referred to in ‘Them & [uz]’, which is probably Harrison’s most often cited poem, particularly the line containing a retort to being lectured on the superiority of Received Pronunciation (‘We say [uS] not [uz]’):

‘So right, yer buggers, then!

We’ll occupy your lousy leasehold Poetry: (Harrison 1982: no pagination)

In fact, much of Harrison’s work is marked as a quest to legitimise the vernacular. However, far from being an obsession of someone who feels obliged to pay tribute to the class of his origin, it is a genuine belief that language is the people who use it. As he puts it in an introduction to Astley’s anthology:

...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)

This passion is most brilliantly displayed in *v.* which is also a prominent example of his ‘never-ending fight-back against standardisation and class prejudice.’¹¹ It seems that, following the logic of Mills’s remark who defines dialect as a ‘club which lets everyone in’ (Mills 2000: 128), Harrison deeply believes that dialect, paradoxically, equals inclusion, rather than the opposite. Harrison’s stance here is hardly surprising not only because of his background, but also because RP speakers in Britain constitute just a few per cent of the population, which decidedly makes it a minority variant. It comes as no surprise that when Harrison was to adapt medieval plays for the National Theatre, he demanded that God, Jesus and all the cast should have Yorkshire accents. Harrison’s logic was simple: ‘God in my version speaks the same language as the people he is talking to.’¹²

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Looking from the present perspective at the question of regional dialect one can find it hard to comprehend that only 30 years ago a guide for BBC presenters contained the following recommendation:

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

¹¹ Glover, Michael. 2007. ‘Tony Harrison: Not to be read quietly’. *The Independent*, 1 April.

¹² 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.

established southern universities, and not yet so set in his ways that all linguistic change is regarded as unacceptable.¹³

Although in the case of the BBC things have changed enormously, the quotation is a superb indicator of the atmosphere attached to language at the time *v.* reached its public. It thus comes as no surprise that right after its publication and, more so, its televising, *v.* stirred such an uproar. After all, what Harrison had done was more than just a breach of good manners – it was a purposeful public violation of the language *decorum*, not for the sake of an artistic whim, but to shed light on social divisions and conflicts.

The springboard for reflections on language and class in the poem is the fact that Harrison's family grave, among many others, has been 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 1989: 10)

This small 'v' becomes the common denominator in the poem ('These Vs are all the versuses of life') and carries a great polysemic weight: behind each of these v's lie problems pivoting around various political, cultural and social issues. However, the central part of *v.* is dominated by a double-voiced discourse, largely based on an interrogative tone. The discourse Harrison adopts exposes the discrepancy between his background and his present status, a gap, as we later learn, he tries to bridge. The clash 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-coeur* 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)

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¹³ Burchfield, Robert. 1981. *The Spoken Word: A BBC Guide*. London, p. 9.

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. For Harrison his poetic gift is a blessing, but also something that disinherits him from his background. As a working-class boy with Grammar School education, Harrison took part, as it were, in a class migration, however involuntarily it was.¹⁴ This alienation clearly transpires from the lines spoken by the skinhead:

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

In the context of class representation, language in *v.* is first and foremost a social identity marker, and the skinhead's linguistic repertoire in this respect manifests a sense of belonging to working-class Leeds, Leeds United supporters and, as we learn later on, to those who have reasons to be most disappointed with the social and political reality. As Butler notices, 'when you are against, your need is to unite with others.' (1997: 95) and in this respect the skinhead's differentiation is clear-cut. Part of the skinhead's identification is his social status ('*ah've been on t'dole all mi life in fucking Leeds!*'), and 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 Byron¹⁵, 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:

When dole-wallahs fuck off to the void
What'll t'mason carve up for their jobs?
The cunts who lieth 'ere wor unemployed? (Harrison 1989: 18)

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¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ Although this pun is deliberate, these names do appear on the graves of Holbeck cemetery.

skinhead can offer nothing but 'all these Vs: against! against! against!' 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 ('*Me, I'll croak doing t'same nowt ah do now as a kid*'). Moreover, the skinhead rejects Harrison's idea of using poetic means by which a positive 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.'
Don't fucking bother, cunt! Don't waste your breath! (Harrison 1989: 19)

But the true extent of this incapacity is not fully clarified until the final part of the dialogue between Harrison and the skinhead, representing the graveyard desecrators armed with graffiti sprays. What becomes transparent is that the whole conversation is just an internal dialogue. This is revealed when Harrison asks the skinhead to sign his name under the UNITED sprayed on Harrison's parents' grave: 'He aerosolled his name. And it was mine.' (Harrison 1989: 22) As Harrison admits, the skinhead in *v.* is inside him,¹⁶ though of course this confession does not pertain only to *v.*, but has to be read in a broader context of how his poetry is based on juxtaposing conflicting voices. As Harrison states himself, conflicts and opposites are fundamental for his poetry and, as transpires from the discourse in *v.*, almost inseparable from his own experience:

I think the verses 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.¹⁷

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

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¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/johntusainterview/harrison_transcript.shtml; 1.08.2011.

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'¹⁸ executed on the teacher who mocked his accent and did not allow him to recite poetry aloud. It was particularly the public reading of *v.* that seems to have vexed a great number of the readers: the fact that Harrison made public what is generally believed to belong to the margin and is expected to continue its existence there. As expressed by one reader in a letter to the editor:

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.¹⁹

And this is exactly what Harrison achieves: he *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 televising of *v.*

Harrison is also a social commentator, who employs conflicting voices, not in a simple poem to read and contemplate, but in a complex challenge to the burning issues of the time.

Intertwined with the language is the issue of class divisions, which is omnipresent in the poem, particularly emphasised in the line spoken by the skinhead, or Harrison's alter ego:

it's not poetry we need in this class war. (Harrison 1989: 22)

One should not forget that Harrison wrote his poem in a particularly polarised period, namely the miners' strike of 1984-85. He couldn't have chosen the timing better, as the period was marked by closing of many mines and a significant weakening, if not factual destruction of the union trades in Britain. All this is perfectly pronounced in the poem:

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Class v. class as bitter as before,
the unending violence of US and THEM
personified in 1984
by Coal Board MacGregor and the NUM (Harrison 1989: 11)

Harrison challenges the class issues in *v.* and frames them within a period of social and political turbulence in the UK. His poem is an uncompromising critique of class divisions, and in many lines it is concurrent with political climate of the day:

¹⁸ Garner, Brent. 1986. 'Tony Harrison: Scholarship Boy.' *Transactions of the Yorkshire Dialect Society*, p. 23.

¹⁹ 'Letters to the Editor' *The Times* 24 October 1987 'S. Butterworth

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. (Harrison 1989: 16)

The extent to which Harrison intervenes in 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 1984.²⁰ From the present perspective, particularly ‘the unending violence of US and THEM’ in regard to 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’²¹ (the phrase was later adopted by Tony Blair). For Harrison, it is just an absurd slogan, completely detached from reality. When asked to reflect upon *v.* from a 2009 perspective, 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.²²

Harrison’s remark about the class divisions being *redressed*²³ reflects his own misgivings about his poetic work, and being, as he calls it, ‘a public poet’, a concept which he often refers to in interviews, and which seems particularly relevant in the case of *v.*:

²⁰ <http://www.margareththatcher.org/document/105563>; 7.08.2011.

²¹ Sylvester, Rachel. 2010. ‘Class war is so last week for new Gordon Brown.’ *The Times*, 19 January.

²² Butler, Stephen and Klepuszewski, Wojciech. 2009. ‘It’s a grand trade to be in – interview with Tony Harrison.’ (unpublished).

²³ 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 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. See Ferguson, Euan. 2001. ‘We’re All Snobs Now.’ *The Observer*, 30 September.

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.²⁴

Despite the stated determination, he remains sceptical whether his public mission as a bard can have any practical implications. Harrison confirms his doubts by saying that 'poetry is not a popular art; it doesn't change anything.'²⁵ This is almost a direct borrowing from 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats' by W.H. Auden:

For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making...²⁶

This doubt is also reflected in his conversation with the skinhead and echoes the latter's conviction that it is simply a waste of time:

There's always a skinhead, who is a persistent voice in my own head, saying "This is all a pile of shit."²⁷

Yet, within Harrison's dialectic the skinhead's voice always has a counterpart in the voice of the poet. Harrison in yet another intertextual manner relates to Shakespeare's Prospero by saying: 'This pen's all I have of a magic wand' (Harrison 1989: 15). However, if one interprets the line as a doubt that poetry can effectively face social problems, one cannot escape the feeling that in Harrison's hands this magic wand unites and integrates. 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.').

Harrison, almost subversive in his confrontation with the established order (Thatcher's *enemy within*) uses antagonisms in the poem, particularly in the discourse with the skinhead, to reveal his own enemy, one which divides the self:

Half versus half, the enemies within
the heart that can't be whole till they unite. (Harrison 1989: 23)

What finally transpires from *v.* is that he, as has been suggested, finds (or tries to do so) integrity where all seems to divide. Even if he expresses

²⁴ Butler, Stephen and Klepuszewski, Wojciech. 2009.

²⁵ Jaggi, Maya. 2007. 'Beats of the heart'. The Guardian, 31 March.

²⁶ <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15544>; 12.08.2011.

²⁷ Butler, Stephen and Klepuszewski, Wojciech. 2009.

doubts about his mission as a poet, he confirms this imperative in the poem:

Next millennium you'll have to search quite hard
to find my slab behind the family dead,
butcher, publican, and baker, now me, bard
adding poetry to their beef, beer and bread. (Harrison 1989: 7)

Harrison the poet is a bard, but not one that speaks to us from a pedestal. He is not disconnected from his background, for his job is as tangible as that of any of those craftsmen he mentions in his 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)

He is of his class though he can express it in a classical form, 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 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 verses, 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 1989: 32)

This small 'v', as Harrison reveals in the subsequent lines, no longer belongs in his imbroglia, but suggests that all the verses in the poem, may, as a result of this poetic dialectic, lead to simple integrative 'Victory?'. And Harrison's victory lies in finding an equilibrium built on oppositions and conflicts.

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