

**UNIVERSITY OF
FORWARD
THINKING
WESTMINSTER** 

WestminsterResearch

<http://www.westminster.ac.uk/westminsterresearch>

**From Baghdad to Sarajevo to Beeston: The War Poetry of Tony
Harrison
Copley, H.**

This is an accepted manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in English Studies, 99 (1), pp. 19-33.

The final definitive version is available online:

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2017.1405319>

© 2018 Taylor & Francis

The WestminsterResearch online digital archive at the University of Westminster aims to make the research output of the University available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the authors and/or copyright owners.

Whilst further distribution of specific materials from within this archive is forbidden, you may freely distribute the URL of WestminsterResearch: (<http://westminsterresearch.wmin.ac.uk/>).

In case of abuse or copyright appearing without permission e-mail repository@westminster.ac.uk

From Baghdad to Sarajevo to Beeston: The War Poetry of Tony Harrison

Abstract

Much has been written about Tony Harrison's representation of the various social and political 'versus' or class 'wars' that have shaped British society. However, this critical depiction ignores his occupation of other war zones. In his role as a correspondent for *The Guardian* and *The Observer* during the Gulf and Bosnian Wars for instance, Harrison produced poems that directly responded to international events, even travelling to sites of conflict to produce poetic dispatches from the front line. A new reading of these poems, combined with a consideration of the poet's archived notebooks, prompts a critical re-examination of the poet's position as an international war writer. By examining Harrison's poetry and archived documentation a new image of the poet emerges – one that confirms his place as a war poet for the twentieth century and which sheds new light on the moral, formal and aesthetic considerations that characterised his front line poetics.

Keywords: Tony Harrison, war poetry, Bosnia, Iraq, international humanism

Article

i.

In his 1971 essay 'The Inkwell of Dr Agrippa', first published as the introduction to *Corgi Modern Poets in Focus 4*, Tony Harrison surprises his readers. Rather than provide the expected narrative of cause and effect overtly related to the relationship between class and poetic 'eloquence', the poet instead attributes his artistic vocation to war. Recounting Pablo Neruda's story of the childhood encounter that brought him to poetry, and paraphrasing the Italian poet's idea of those memories and images that "widen out the boundaries of our being and unite all living things!", Harrison reflects that for him these 'images are all to do with the War', going on to list V.J. day, his

childhood discovery of Belsen concentration camp, and his belated awareness of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as the defining moments that clouded his imagination and ‘drove’ him into poetry.¹

That it is international and not class conflict that ‘widen[ed] out the boundaries’ of Harrison’s being and propelled him into poetry provides a more nuanced version of the Leeds poet than is often portrayed in critical appraisals of his work. Although by no means a case of one preoccupation ‘versus’ another, the excerpt offers up the picture of a writer as concerned with the demolition of historical and geographical boundaries as social ones. Frequently labelled – and rightly celebrated – as a ‘working class poet’,² both Harrison’s subject matter and style are often attributed to his upbringing and ‘self-consciously proletarian concern’ with reclaiming poetry on behalf of the ‘labouring class’ and those who would otherwise ‘go down in history and disappear’.³ Many of the sonnets in Harrison *The School of Eloquence* collection, as well as his best known poem, ‘V’, demonstrate the poet’s ongoing and unresolved preoccupation with the social, and largely national ‘versuses of life’, be that ‘LEEDS v. DERBY’, ‘Black/White’, ‘man v. wife’, ‘Communist v. Fascist’, ‘Left v. Right’, or ‘class v. class’.⁴ Yet alongside these personal and social conflicts, Harrison also exhibits his concern with historical and political events that extend within and beyond the borders of Leeds, Britain and Europe and that transcend the class conflicts of post-War England.

Even in his first full collection, *The Loiners*, a book whose title initially suggests a subject matter contained to the citizens of Leeds, Harrison ‘widens out the boundaries’ of his hometown to the extent that a Beeston abattoir becomes indistinguishable from Buchenwald concentration camp, the streets of Nigeria merge with those of ancient Greece and post-War Leeds, and ‘Newcastle is Peru’.⁵ United by the fact that they all ‘bear their loins through the terrors of life’, the protagonists of the collection – the poet included – demonstrate how Harrison’s poetry is so often

¹ Tony Harrison, ‘The Inkwell of Dr Agrippa,’ in *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies 1: Tony Harrison*, ed. Neil Astley (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991), 32.

² Blake Morrison, ‘Labouring: Continuous’, in *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies 1*, 216.

³ Luke Spencer, *The Poetry of Tony Harrison* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 16; Morrison, ‘Labouring: Continuous’, 219; Tony Harrison, ‘National Trust’, *Collected Poems*, (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 131.

⁴ Harrison, ‘V’, 266.

⁵ Harrison, ‘Allotments’, ‘The White Queen’, ‘The Songs of the PWD Man’, ‘Newcastle is Peru’, 20-21, 23-40, 44,46, 64-69.

situated in the space between local specificity and international influence.⁶ He may ‘occupy’ poetry both on behalf of his fellow ‘Loiners’ and the labouring ‘dumb’ who ‘go down in history and disappear’, but his gaze is not parochial.⁷ It is fixed outward – international and historical in its ambition and influence. The ‘dumb’ who Harrison gives a voice to range across the globe, across historical periods, across social spheres, and across moral territories, and by moving between these registers, often within the same poem or sequence, Harrison exhibits his resolutely international gaze.

Returning to ‘The Inkwell of Dr Agrippa’, it is particularly in Harrison’s poetic engagement with war and conflict, firstly in his representation of his childhood witness of the Second World War and its aftermath, and then in his representation of on-going and anticipated violence, that the borderless nature of his poetic imagination can be seen most clearly. Growing up in the shadow of the Second World War and the Holocaust, Harrison belonged to the generation ‘whose awakening to the atrocity of adult life was an awakening to this unparalleled atrocity’, and across his poetry and in his interviews we find a reflection of this symbiosis between selfhood, imagination, and historical witness.⁸ In ‘First Aid in English’, for example, one of the poems belonging to the ‘Sonnets for August 1945’ sequence (published in *Continuous* 1981), the poet recalls how even his school grammar books began to reflect the profound changes brought about by the war. Learning about collective nouns, the schoolboys ‘chanted gaggle, bevy, coven, herd / between the Nazi and the Japanese defeat’, using ‘bird or beast’ as their examples.⁹ Yet in a sudden shift the poem reflects how ‘Ghetto and gulag weren’t quite current then’. With new atrocities arrived the need for a new language to describe them, and with that ‘The fauna of our infancies decreased / As new nouns grew collectivising men’. Although rather casually communicated, the poem begins to convey the profound effect of past conflict and atrocity in shaping both the tools available to the post-War poet, and the ways that the finished poem might respond to the threat of collectivization and annihilation. Yet Harrison’s sense of the pressure that war places upon poetry and the imagination is as anticipatory as it is reflective. In the poem ‘Durham’ for example, published in *The Loiners*, the poet

⁶ Harrison, ‘The Inkwell of Dr Agrippa’, 34.

⁷ Harrison, ‘Them and Uz’, ‘National Trust’, 134, 131.

⁸ Christopher Ricks, *Geoffrey Hill and “The Tongue’s Atrocities”*: *The W.D. Thomas Memorial Lecture Delivered at the College on February 15th 1978* (Swansea: University College of Swansea, 1978), 5.

⁹ Harrison, ‘Sonnets for August 1945: 6 First Aid in English’, 202.

reflects how 'Threat/ smokes off our lives like steam'.¹⁰ In a Nuclear Age, the possibility that within the poet's lifetime man might leave the 'planet a pitted lunar chart' creates an urgency in Harrison's work which leads to a poetic style formed around retrospective and anticipatory pressure.¹¹ It also shapes a form of poetic humanism that is at once hopeful at bleak in its outlook. The poet may want to 'believe those words of Luther ... about planting an apple tree the very eve of the Apocalypse; or the Holocaust', yet this hopefulness is tempered with a bitter realism about man's seemingly unquenchable capacity for violence.¹²

With his language, memory, and sense of self in flux, Harrison chooses to write from a position comparable to the Greek fourth century Alexandrian poet, Palladas, whose work Harrison translated in 1975, and whose 'bitter force' he attributed to the fact that the poet's last years 'should have coincided with the virtual destruction of the system of the beliefs to which he owed his always precarious living'.¹³ In the preface to his translation of the 'gloomy epigrammist', Harrison addressed the importance of ignobility as a meaningful, historically-minded response to war and atrocity.¹⁴ For Harrison, 'What is unique and even invigorating about Palladas is that there is no sense at all of "gracious" surrender either to the inevitability of death or to historical change'.¹⁵ His poems, which frequently draw attention to the abject hopelessness of his predicament – 'Born naked. Buried naked. So why fuss? / All life leads to that first nakedness' – hold in their brash pessimism an ironic defiance of the power of history to silence and subdue.¹⁶ For Harrison, born in 1937, the circumstances that shape Palladas's final poetic output are reversed but no less apt. This time it is the poet's coming-of-age – linguistically, personally, and poetically – that coincides with the 'virtual destruction' of a set of beliefs that could not be reconciled with Auschwitz or Hiroshima, or indeed with any of the world events that he continues to encounter in the decades after 1945.¹⁷ Separated by seventeen centuries, the collision between history and poetry rings equally true, as

¹⁰ Harrison, 'Durham', 70.

¹¹ Harrison, 'Following Pine', 255

¹² Ibid, 253.

¹³ Harrison, 'Preface to *Palladas*', *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies 1*, 133.

¹⁴ Harrison, 'Preface to *Palladas*', 135.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Harrison, 'P:P 4', 79

¹⁷ Harrison, 'Preface to *Palladas*', 133.

Harrison's vision of the tradition that he inherits and the future that he intends to write for are clouded by these moments of destruction and realization.

In the work of each the capacity of man for acts of atrocity press down on the poets' consciousness and imagination, demanding a poetic style that can capture and respond to this irrevocable shift. And in the work of both there is a refusal of stoicism or politeness. In his representation of past, present, and future conflict Harrison offers up poetry as a 'momentary defeat of pessimism', but does this through combining moments of poignancy with inappropriate humour, sexual lewdness, and awkward rhyme.¹⁸ Like Palladas he makes both the figure of the poet and his chosen subjects 'embarrassing but heroic figures who are not dignified in despair', and who refuse 'to be noble on the gallows or to make peace with their maker'.¹⁹ Yet rather than take this to signify a turning away from the hope that leads the poet to wish to plant an apple tree 'on the eve of the apocalypse', Harrison's insistent, and sometimes difficult or even aggressive poetic voice instead contains the poet's fragile yet enduring humanism. It is his act of bitter defiance in the face of what might otherwise seem to be overwhelmingly dark subject matter.

This desire to find an appropriate poetic that might account for and respond to war and violence also shapes the form of Harrison's verse. While the metrical precision of his poetry does, as Luke Spencer argues, in part signify a determination to 'fashion truly oppositional meanings out of fundamentally bourgeois establishment poetic forms', it also contains and communicates the profound impact of historical violence on the poet's imagination.²⁰ In his study of Harrison's 'Holocaust Poetry' Antony Rowland attributes what he calls the poet's 'awkward' and insistent formal style to the conflict between history and heart.²¹ For Rowland, Harrison's 'awkward poetics arise out of the friction between the poet's humanist desire to celebrate the "spirit", and the difficulties of representing twentieth-century atrocities'.²² The poet's 'formal endeavour'²³ expresses the particular pressure that war and violence place upon the poetic imagination, but also attempts to hold it back, creating a form of

¹⁸ John Haffenden, Tony Harrison, 'Interview with Tony Harrison', in *Bloodaxe Critical Anthology*, 227

¹⁹ Harrison, 'Preface to *Palladas*', 135.

²⁰ Spencer, 16.

²¹ Antony Rowland, *Holocaust Poetry: awkward poetics in the work of Sylvia Plath, Geoffrey Hill, Tony Harrison and Ted Hughes* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005).

²² Rowland, 102.

²³ Harrison, 'Preface to *Palladas*', 133

metrical 'life-support system' in the face of subject matter that might otherwise threaten to overwhelm and stifle the human spirit.²⁴

The nature of this metrical 'life support' is self-reflexively articulated in the poem 'Jumper', one of the poet's *School of Eloquence* sonnets. Here, Harrison articulates the particular role that form plays in the face of dark and sometimes disturbing subject matter:

When I want some sort of human metronome
to beat calm celebration out of fear
like that when German bombs fell round our home
it's my mother's needles, knitting, that I hear,
the click of needles steady though the walls shake.
The stitches, plain or purl, were never dropped.²⁵

The power of the 'metronome', be it human or metrical, to 'beat calm celebration out of fear' articulates the tension between content and form that drives the energy within Harrison's highly formal, yet also irreverent poetry. 'Jumper' provides an alternative, constructive cause behind the poet's continual adherence to strict rhyme and meter. Just as his mother's 'stitches were never dropped', so the insistence on rhyme maintains the fine, surviving threads of human spirit, even when all else has been blown apart. It sends a defiant message about the power of poetry to 'beat calm celebration out of fear', enacting an indirect form of call and response between history and the poet's creative, and ultimately hopeful, act of self-fashioning. Similarly to the defiant, insistent tone of the poetic voice, the form of the poem articulates Harrison's sense of the role of poetry as a necessary means of both documenting and resisting violence.

The form and voice of Harrison's verse together mark a new type of war writing for the twentieth century. They create what might be called a civilian front line poetics; a style that combines the immediacy of journalism, the irreverent and sometimes shocking bawdiness of the music hall, the formal precision of his earlier sonnets, with a form of tortured humanism that simultaneously despairs of poetry in the face of atrocity and celebrates its enduring role. It is this style that allows him to approach conflicts and geographies beyond the borders of Leeds and Britain. Actively seeking out war, Harrison self-consciously and successfully carves out a place for

²⁴ Haffenden, Harrison, 236.

²⁵ Harrison, 'Jumper', 177.

himself as a civilian War Poet for the contemporary age, even going as far as to travel to the front line to produce his poetic dispatches.

One example of this is the poem 'On the Spot', which sees Harrison move away from the aftermath of the Second World War and announce his position as a poet for the Nuclear Age. Forming part of a sequence called 'Sentences', 'On the Spot', was published in *US Martial* in 1981. Itself an updated, Americanisation of the satiric verse of the Roman poet Marcus Valerius Martialis, the pamphlet – like the poet's earlier translations of Palladas – brings together the contemporary with the classical, as in his updated translation Harrison contextualizes the Cold War and the Cuban Missile Crisis within a far larger tradition of poetry under pressure. Dated 'Havana, August 1969' and written 'for Miroslav Holub', the epigraph of the poem announces the historical and political nature of the piece.²⁶ The dedication reaches out to a community of free-thinking, dissenting, committed writers, regardless of their nation of residence.

Discussing those poets and writers who have influenced his own writing in the wake of being awarded the 2009 PEN/Pinter prize, Harrison mentions Holub as a contemporary poet and 'friend' whose work, alongside that of Wole Soyinka, continues to influence both his sense of history, and the role that poetry must play in relation to political and historical oppression.²⁷ 'On The Spot' negotiates Harrison's equal sense of defeat and defiance in the face of contemporary history. In a reflection of this, the poem mixes its similes, moving between the gun and the rumba as two very different, but nonetheless equally relevant metaphors for the poetic act. In the first image there is the heavy weight of the 'sentence' levelled upon the contemporary poet by historical witness. In the second, there is the way that poetry might nevertheless improvise and adapt in order to remain unrestricted by these external and imagined pressures.

In the opening lines of the poem Harrison leaves no doubt as to his role as a historical witness, nor to the sort of pressures and events that contemporary poetry must face in its attempt to address and respond to the world around it. Sitting 'Watching the Soviet subs surface / at the side of flagged battleships / between

²⁶ Harrison, 'On the Spot', 109.

²⁷ Harrison, 'The Poetic Gaze', *The Guardian*, 24 October 2009, accessed December 1 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/oct/24/tony-harrison-speech-pen-pinter>.

Havana harbour and the USA', Harrison is located 'on the spot' of the Cold War.²⁸ He is ideally situated to consider both his place as a European writer – and that of Czechoslovakian Holub's – in relation to a conflict that continually threatens to 'surface' and break the relative calm of his surroundings. In acknowledgement of this pressure, the first link that the poem establishes – comparing the writer's pen and ink to the gun or else the sword of the soldier – draws attention to the potential redundancy of the poet when faced with the very different weapons of the atomic age. Whereas 'the sword / has developed immensely' so that now 'only nomads in deserts still lop heads off with it':

... the pen is still only
a point, a free ink-flow
and the witness it has to keep bearing.

The poem's opening reference to beheading reminds the reader of Harrison's tendency to respond to historical violence in kind; with a poetic that refuses to shy away from the realities of conflict, instead demeaning the gravitas of the situation with the casual use of 'lop'. Yet the apparent archaism of the pen in relation to an as yet only alluded to industrialised violence casts the poet in the role of Luddite, outdated and redundant. The pen does not sit in his hand 'snug as a gun', representative of the alternative force of the written word.²⁹ Instead it belongs to an era no longer relevant to the world around it. 'On The Spot' begins then, on a note of despair, and with an urgent call for formal and linguistic innovation in the face of modern warfare. Whilst the submarine and the atomic bomb stand as proof of the quick advancement of military technology, the pen and ink remain almost unchanged, seemingly ineffectual for 'the witness [that] it has to keep bearing'. Yet this last line, the mention of the 'free ink-flow', and the tension between continuity and disruption in Harrison's description of the poet's role, all work together to subtly temper the apparent pessimism of these opening lines.

The idea that the pen 'has to keep bearing' and bearing up to history, despite seeming poorly equipped for the role, leads to the second, more positive metaphor that Harrison makes in his definition of the role of the contemporary poet. Drawing on the ability of poets such as Miroslav Holub to write in the face of 'surveillance and censorship', the 'free ink-flow' of the pen offers Harrison a new, distinctly modern

²⁸ Harrison, 'On the Spot', 109

²⁹ Seamus Heaney, 'Digging', *Opened Ground: Poems, 1966-1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 3.

model of poetic response.³⁰ Having begun on a note of pessimism and apparent immobility in the face of history, 'On the Spot' goes on to subvert the single, unaltered 'point' of the pen, playing on its apparent stillness – across the ages - in order to celebrate its secret strength. Identifying the unseen power of the poet to improvise and adjust, the poem evokes the metaphor of the rumba to express the mode through which the contemporary, cosmopolitan writer can and must continue to write in the face of silence. Poetry is 'the art of dancing on the spot / without ever being seen to be moving, / not a foot or a hand out of place'.³¹

The choice of the rumba as an appropriate metaphor for the poet's relationship to war is revealing. The emphasis on improvisation, on the power of form, and of the sensual and sexual as a weapon against pessimism and creative inertia captures the values that underpin Harrison's poetic. In both the dance and the act of writing, 'formal endeavour' is what stands between the artist and 'choking silence, sheer cosmic exasperation and what [Samuel] Beckett's *Lucky* calls "divine aphasia"³². Alongside this, the poem finds its defence in the dialogue between past and present, and home and abroad, transferred via the same single 'point' of the pen.

'On The Spot' is an important poem in Harrison's oeuvre. It sets out a definition of poetry as a public act of continuing and effective defiance against on-going violence and oppression, rather than merely a way to express the continuing force of recent history. Bringing together the memory of past conflict and the anticipation of continuing violence, the poem concerns itself with the question of how poetry might occupy the front-line of history and politics. The fact that the poem is dedicated to a living poet, and one whose work addresses the 'Before and After' of Soviet occupation and oppression in Czechoslovakia, places Harrison into an alternative, cosmopolitan, and on-going tradition of war poetry.³³ Shaped by the writing of Milton and Keats, and often worked out upon the streets of Beeston and Leeds, Harrison's poetic persona is nevertheless distinctly and deliberately international in character. It actively searches out the spaces and moments of conflict that define the public sphere. Located in 'Havana', the poem demonstrates Harrison's

³⁰ Harrison, 'The Poetic Gaze'.

³¹ Harrison, 'On the Spot', 110.

³² Harrison, 'Preface to *Palladas*', 135.

³³ Miroslav Holub, *Poems Before and After: Collected English Translations* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books; 2nd ed., 2006).

belief in the need for contemporary poetry to ‘occupy’ not only an existing tradition of verse, but a space on the front-line of politics and international conflict.

This move towards the front line becomes more pronounced in Harrison’s work on the Gulf and Bosnian War. First as a documenter of the atrocities taking place in Iraq, and then as the official poetic correspondent for *The Guardian* during the 1992-1995 Bosnian war, Harrison tests the limits of the pen to bear up to history. He also attempts to close the imaginative, cultural, and geographical gap that might otherwise allow his readership to remain at a safe distance from both conflicts. These self-reflexive poems interrogate the ability of poetry to bear witness and question the role of the pen and ink in a world of guns, nuclear weapons, and remote missiles. Yet despite this they still celebrate the power of the pen as means both of ‘dancing on the spot’, and as a way to open up histories, stories, and experiences otherwise closed off through geographical distance. Once again displaying his credentials as an international writer, in both sets of poems Harrison traces the common frailties, faults, conflicts and needs that connect Iraq and Bosnia with Leeds, Britain and the rest of the world, and offers a version of connective history that is as hopeful as it is bleak.

ii.

Interviewed in *The Independent* in 2002, Harrison first uttered a phrase that he has since repeated countless times at readings and in interviews. Talking about the public role of the poem, he asserted his belief that ‘poems belong as much in the news pages as the literary pages’.³⁴ His reasoning behind this at first appears to be a pragmatic, self-deprecatory one – ‘A lot of people throw aside the literary pages! Whereas everybody looks at the news section’. Yet alongside the part-joking, part-serious desire for relevance and notoriety, the statement conveys Harrison’s belief in his role as a civilian war-poet, his conviction of the public role of poetry, and his sense of his place on the front line of history.

This sense can also be found in Harrison’s archived notebooks and photo albums from the time of his writing on Bosnia and Iraq, which together form a scrap

³⁴ Harrison, in Suzi Feay, ‘Poetry Belongs on the Front Pages’, *The Independent*, 14 October 2012, accessed 1 December 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/tony-harrison-poetry-belongs-on-the-front-pages-8210241.html>.

book or collage dedicated to the conflicts and to Harrison's place in amongst the action. As well as serving as a visual prompt for Harrison, the collected newspaper cuttings, photographs, beer bottle wrappers, plane tickets, letters, drafts and snippets of conversations suggest there to be a further role for the notebooks. Carefully crafted, they suggest an act of self-fashioning; a composition and creation of the role of the contemporary civilian war poet. These pages, which are often added to and amended years later after the completion and publication of the eventual collection to which they relate, point to Harrison's consideration of his own posterity and archival reception.

A key example of this can be found on the inside front cover of a *The Gaze Of The Gorgon* notebook. Stuck in across the entirety of the page is a picture that has been retrospectively added after the publication of the collection.³⁵ Presumably taken by an accompanying photographer in Bosnia, it shows Harrison dressed in a blue bullet-proof vest and helmet, apparently caught unaware, his appearance indistinguishable from that of a front-line journalist reporting back to the studio at the BBC or else a humanitarian worker based at the scene. That Harrison has chosen to hold on to this picture is unsurprising. What is more noticeable is the way that he has chosen to keep and display it. The fact that it has been retrospectively added to the front of a finished notebook invests the photograph with the feeling of an un-official front cover to *The Gaze of The Gorgon*, or at least to the creative process behind the finished collection. Written in black ink next to the picture is 'Bosnia. Est '95'. Around this writing however Harrison has kept drawing, circling his outline, first in black ink then in red, before adding in three large, block exclamation marks to complete his hand drawn frame. These extra hand-sketched additions around the photo give the impression of a continued surprise and excitement from Harrison at the authority and position that the picture has given him (and through him, poetry itself). Clearly pleased with the image and what it presents, Harrison has chosen to display it as a pictorial representation of the figure of the humanitarian war-poet that he wished, in his writing, to fashion.

Alongside this obvious pride in his position as a poet on the front-line of history, there is however, still an ongoing sense of self-doubt, and even self-defeat in these notebooks, which works to undermine the otherwise confident celebration of

³⁵ Tony Harrison, BC MS 20c Harrison/02, Small Notebook [Gaze of the Gorgon]. Tony Harrison Archive, Leeds, Brotherton Library, 'Leeds Poetry 1950-1980' collection.

poetry in the face of conflict. Throughout his drafts, any grandiose or formal statement of intent is cut through in an often comical, sometimes aggressive way. In the opening pages to his first notebook for *The Loiners*, Harrison begins by laying out the purpose of the book. He writes that ‘In order to impose discipline on my poetic activity and to attempt to complete my scattered store of almost worthless fragments, I begin to use this book’, before going on to include an excerpt from Baudelaire’s letters on the precise relationship between inspiration and daily work in the life of a successful writer.³⁶ Yet immediately underneath this rather earnest declaration of intent, written in red ink and underlined, is the phrase:

this book is full of shit

This dichotomy, played out in draft form, perfectly captures both the self-consciousness of Harrison’s verse, and the tension between celebration and self-defeat, and graveness and ignobility that equally shapes the poet’s output as a war writer.

This is nowhere more apparent than in his Gulf War poems, which are at once bleak, thoughtful, and even mischievous in the face of atrocity. In ‘A Cold Coming’, which Harrison produced in 1991 on commission for *The Guardian* newspaper,³⁷ the poet responds to the shocking image of a Iraqi soldier whose body has been charred into a grotesque position as he tried to escape a bombed convoy vehicle. Facing the camera, the blackened, distorted body presented a very different image of the Gulf War from that of tanks rolling through the desert and the remote lights of air strikes – two recurring tropes that had dominated the documentation of the conflict. The photograph, taken by Ken Jarecke, was deemed so shocking that it remained largely unpublished by the US and UK media, with only *The Observer* breaking this embargo.³⁸ And as Harrison wrote his poetic response, the image of the soldier – cut out and pasted onto a double page of his notebook, bearing down on his imagination³⁹ – demanded a poetic response that could match and face up to this subversive and vivid new picture of modern warfare.

³⁶ Harrison, BC MS 20c Harrison/03/Loi/01, *The Loiners* 1.

³⁷ Harrison, ‘A Cold Coming’, *The Guardian*, Friday 14 February 2014, accessed December 1 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2003/feb/14/features11.g2>.

³⁸ Roger Tooth, ‘Graphic content: when photographs of carnage are too upsetting to publish’, *The Guardian*, Wednesday 23 July, 2014, accessed December 1 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/23/graphic-content-photographs-too-upsetting-to-publish-gaza-mh17-ukraine>.

³⁹ Harrison, BC MS 20c Harrison/02, *Small Notebook* [Gaze of the Gorgon].

The result is a poem that brings together sex, death, humour, and disgust, with the voice of the dead soldier speaking through the tightly rhymed couplets of the poem. Rather than gloss over the appearance of the dead man, Harrison instead finds numerous inventive ways to describe his skin and body. He is ‘charred’, leaning ‘like someone made of Plasticine’. He is ‘a skull half roast, half bone’; his ‘flayed off’ face a ‘gaping rictus’, blackened like ‘baked dog turds’.⁴⁰ Clearly, this is no reverent and awed memorial to the glorious dead, but rather a shocking, truthful report on the real human cost of war. Similar to Harrison’s earlier poems on Hiroshima and the Holocaust, the poem marks a violent reaction to the dehumanising effects of remote warfare. The grotesque detail in which the poem focuses on the human features of the soldier draws attention to the juxtaposition between the ruined ground and the unharmed ‘screen-gazing crop-haired boy / from Iowa or Illinois’, able to press a button and create ‘the face you see today’. Imaginative and geographical distance is, for Harrison, no excuse, either for those who give the orders to fire, or for the reader.

As well as the macabre focus on the appearance of the soldier, the poem challenges the sensibilities of its readers through its choice of subject matter. The title – ‘A Cold Coming’ – taken from T.S. Eliot’s 1927 poem ‘Journey of the Magi’, not only makes reference to a Holy Land now despoiled by war, but alludes to the surprising sexual content of the poem. Playing out a scenario where he is simply there to hold up a microphone, press ‘RECORD’, and note down the verbatim testimony of the charred dead body – “Don’t be afraid I’ve picked on you / for this exclusive interview. // Isn’t it your sort of poet’s task / to find words for this frightening mask?” – Harrison ventriloquizes the already shocking persona of the Iraqi soldier to subvert the elegiac expectations of the poem even further.

Playing on the story of the magi, the protagonist begins ‘I read the news of three wise men / who left their sperm in nitrogen’, before going on to discuss the difference between the US soldiers who ‘seemed the masters of their fate / with wisely stored ejaculate’ and those, like him, with no means on ‘Sadam’s pay’ to ‘go and get our semen stored’. Harrison’s focus on the decidedly unpoetic subject of masturbation and sperm banks, coupled with the unsightly nature of his chosen protagonist, creates a poem that is at once ignoble and strangely celebratory of the unsavoury richness of human existence. Yet while the couplet form of the piece

⁴⁰ Harrison, ‘A Cold Coming’, 313-320.

seems to only add to the bitter yet strangely upbeat tone of 'A Cold Coming', the poem also manages to strike a poignant note, as Harrison uses the sexuality and human urges of the soldier to remind the reader of the human behind the image – the lover, husband, and deprived father who has become nothing more than a defeated and disfigured foe. The poet – via the voice of the protagonist – implores the reader to 'stretch your imagination (and not retch)' and picture 'the image of me beside my wife, / closely clasped creating life ...'. The intimacy of this wish, and the longing of the dead man to 'have engendered there / a child untouched by war's despair' offers that fragile yet enduring humanism that characterises the poet's representation of atrocity. While the 'metronome' regularity of the couplet form and the sardonic irreverence hold back the overwhelming darkness of the scene, the poignant reminder of the man's humanity refuses to allow the reader to forget the shared characteristics that connect them.

In keeping with Harrison's other war poetry and notebooks, it is not just the reader who is left vulnerable to interrogation from the protagonist. The poet too faces the judgement and scorn of his subject. Immediately after reminding the reader of the soldier's humanity, Harrison draws attention to his own tendency to focus on the poignant by interrogating the capability of the poem to tell the truth. The Iraqi sardonically asks the poet to 'pretend' a more poetic ending to this piece:

Lie and say you saw me and I smiled
to see the soldier hug his child.

This alternative image acknowledges both the poet's own weakness for these moments of human connection, and plays into the potential failure of the humanist poem. The need to capture the imagination and sympathy of the reader, and to still retain any hope of human goodness in the face of atrocity leads to the inevitable temptation to fabricate and even censor the grim reality of the Iraqi's fate. Equally, the formal and aesthetic demands of the poem create a medium so constricted by its 'metronome' that the poem becomes willing to sacrifice the truth in return for its rhyme.⁴¹⁴² Yet by performing these risks within the poem itself, Harrison not only avoids the very traps that he lays out for himself, he argues for a form of war reporting that interrogates those behind the camera as much as those in front of it.

⁴¹ This tension between formal endeavor and faithfulness to the subject is explored by Harrison most explicitly in the poem 'The Heartless Art' (*Collected Poems*, 234-236).

Confrontational, bawdy, and at times shockingly funny, 'A Cold Coming' is a poem defined by its sets of 'versus'. Antony Rowland has argued that the conflicted, even 'barbaric' style seen clearly in poems such as this one ensues partly from the 'embarrassment' of engaging with 'historical referents so plainly resistant to artistic representation'.⁴³ Based on an image deemed too shocking to publish by most media outlets, 'A Cold Coming' certainly articulates the 'awkwardness' of tackling a subject matter that 'resists' both poetry and any humanistic resolution. However, the 'barbaric' nature of the poem also represents the poet's very deliberate dance 'on the spot' around this historical pressure. Walking a fine line between despair versus hope, between the grotesque versus the poignant, and between documentation versus introspection, the poem captures the conflicting yet productive dualities that lie at the heart of Harrison's front line poetics. It is these 'V's that define Harrison's defiant and public speech act, and which enable him to connect the fate of the Iraqi soldier to figures such as his own angry, ugly, and silenced double in the poem 'V'.

Harrison even makes this 'V' connection between Iraq and Leeds in his other poem on the Gulf War. In 'Initial Illumination', the poet uses the enduring image of the 'V' sign to remind the British reader, in no uncertain terms, of the arbitrary chance of their existence and continuing safety. From the peaceful 'farne cormorants' connected to the doomed 'Baghdad cock' who was 'betrayed / by bombs into believing day was dawning', to the 'word of God' lit up first by the pen of 'Eadfrith and Billfrith' and now 'illuminated' in the Baghdad 'midnight sky' due to the trigger finger of George Bush, the poem is full of doubles and 'v's'.⁴⁴ Bringing together the classical with the contemporary the poem asks whether the 'insular initial' of the 'victory V' is 'opened armed at all', or rather a sign of our decline into a new 'Dark Age'. 'Initial Illumination' ends with the bleak entreaty to remember the double-edged sword of military victory:

Now with the noonday headlights in Kuwait
and the burial of the blackened in Baghdad
let them remember, all those who celebrate,
that their good news is someone else's bad.

The alternative, for Harrison, is unthinkable. Without poetry there to offer some small 'illumination' within the darkness, 'the light will never dawn on poor Mankind'. This

⁴³ Antony Rowland, *Tony Harrison and the Holocaust*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001), 10.

⁴⁴ Harrison, 'Initial Illumination', 311, 312.

apocalyptic prognosis places a great deal of pressure on the war poem and the ‘free flow ink’ of the poet. Despite the poet’s acknowledgement of his own weakness in the face of atrocity, the pen remains for Harrison an urgent and necessary means of holding back the darkness.

The dualities and sometimes unresolved ‘v’'s that characterise Harrison’s Gulf War poems become even more apparent in his representation of the 1992-1995 Bosnian Conflict. Whereas ‘A Cold Coming’ and ‘Initial Illumination’ saw the poet respond from the distance of Britain, in ‘Three Poems from Bosnia’ Harrison actually writes from the physical front line, travelling with news crews to the heart of the conflict to produce a set of dispatches for *The Guardian*. Yet despite the differing circumstances that produced the sequence – Harrison wrote and sent off each poem on the same day, working to a similar deadline as his fellow reporters – the themes that run through the pieces echo the poet’s earlier work on the Gulf War in their shared insistence on the need for a humane and nuanced vision of war.

In the first poem of the sequence, entitled ‘The Cycles of Donji Vakuf’, Harrison recounts, in couplet rhyme, his convoy’s arrival in the hours immediately after a ‘cleanse’ of Donji Vakuf.⁴⁵ Watching the ‘victors’ loot and burn the fallen town, the poet focuses on the half-amusing, half-barbaric image of grown soldiers awkwardly cycling away on stolen children’s bikes. Zoning in on one man ‘whose knees keep bumping on his chin’, the poet allows the ridiculous sight to undermine the idea that there might be any nobility or grace in victory. Instead the carnivalesque scene, which features men riding around like clowns and a cow ‘who’s no idea she’s a Muslim’s now’ spraying ‘a triumphal arch of piss across the path of her happy Bosnian boss’ serves only to highlight both the petty human frailties of the soldiers, and the ridiculous, unglamorous realities of war. Like the sardonic, charred soldier in ‘A Cold Coming’, or the mistaken rooster in ‘Initial illumination’, the figures within ‘The Cycles of Donji Vakuf’ again confirm Harrison’s insistence on creating a decidedly uncomfortable, ignoble war poem to match the circumstances he finds himself within.

Yet in order to provide the element of poignancy needed to ‘illuminate’ the imagination and sympathy of his readers, Harrison once again turns to the same ‘versus’ between celebration and despair that characterised both of the poet’s Gulf

⁴⁵ Harrison, ‘Three Poems from Bosnia: The Cycles of Donji Vakuf’, 336

War poems. Drawing upon the circularity of a child's bicycle, the poem ends with a poignant reflection on the dialectical nature of any conflict:

And tonight some small boy will be glad
he's got the present of a bike from soldier dad,
who braved the Serb artillery and fire
to bring back a scuffed red bike with one flat tyre.
And among the thousands fleeing north, another
with all his gladness gutted, with his mother,
knowing the nightmare they are cycling in,
will miss the music of his mandolin.⁴⁶

These final lines, remarkably similar to those in 'Initial Illumination', once again confirm Harrison's belief in his obligation to articulate his humanist vision within his war poetry. They again show the poet attempt to draw out the two sides of the 'v' sign, even if this time both the victors and the defeated belong within the same national border. An integral part of Harrison's front-line poetic is this starkly laid out reminder of the human face of victory and defeat, and it appears regardless of whether it means falling into the very trap of sentimentality articulated by the poet's charred Iraqi soldier.

This move towards the sentimental continues in the second poem of the sequence, entitled 'The Bright Lights of Sarajevo'. Again arriving at the aftermath of battle, the poet focuses on a pair of young lovers who go strolling through the unlit and shell scarred streets of the city. Moving even further away from the bitter voice of 'A Cold Coming', the poet bears witness to the remaining traces of humanity in the warzone. Documenting private love in the public spaces of conflict, he spies on the pair as the boy takes her hand and leads her away 'from where they stand / on two shell splash scars, where in '92 / Serb mortars massacred a breadshop queue / and blood dunked crusts of shredded bread / lay on the pavement with the broken dead.'⁴⁷ This romantic meeting, located atop the 'scars' of earlier conflict, provides a moment of humanity in amongst the physical reminders of its scarcity.

The proximity between normality and joy and utter horror – evocatively described by the poet – are both a poignant and a disturbing reminder both of the strangeness of war and of the simple strangeness of being human. Yet without the almost aggressively deployed bitterness and humour that permeates through

⁴⁶ Harrison, *Ibid*, 338.

⁴⁷ Harrison, 'Three poems for Bosnia: The Bright Lights of Sarajevo', 339.

Harrison's other war poems, the piece threatens to lose the sharp edge that makes Harrison's other pieces so successful in facing up to violence. What saves the poem however, is its proximity to the final piece in the sequence, 'Essentials', a piece also dated to 'Sarajevo, 20 September 1995', the same day and location as the former.⁴⁸ Juxtaposed to this continuity, the final, two quatrain poem in the sequence offers a dramatic change of scene from the 'star-filled evening sky' and equally star-crossed lovers of 'The Bright Lights of Sarajevo'. Instead, the poem relates a 'Conversation with a Croat' regarding the best books to burn for cooking fuel. Unable to part with his Shakespeares or Sartres, the Croat eventually decides to use "'*Das Kapital* to cook my AID canned beans!'"'. By ending the poem with the quoted words of another, without any further consideration of the appropriateness (or irony) of cooking with Marx's seminal work, 'Essentials' holds back from the poignant, dualistic reflection that characterised the previous two Bosnian poems. This resistance of closure, coupled with the decision to end on the question of how 'essential' literature is in times of war, demonstrates the same self-consciousness and anxiety that runs through 'A Cold Coming', 'On the Spot', and the poet's own notebooks.

It is this 'essential' self-awareness, which at times manifests itself in a bitter, aggressive exposure of man's capacity for ugliness and violence, combined with the poet's more hopeful, idealistic desire to find and celebrate the enduring power of the human spirit, that makes Harrison's front-line poetic so successful in relation to an increasingly faceless form of warfare. What the pieces convey is the same 'strong pessimism' that defined both Palladas's writing and the description of the Dionysian tradition put forward by Friedrich Nietzsche – the philosopher quoted by Harrison in the epigraph to *The Gaze of the Gorgon*, the collection that contains 'A Cold Coming'.⁴⁹ Those writers, Nietzsche suggested, forced the reader 'to peer into the terrors of individual existence – without turning to stone', and in Harrison's often uncomfortable representation of flawed human behaviour – the cruelty, the pettiness, the anxiety, the joy, the lust, and the hope that transcend circumstance and geographical borders – we find a remarkably similar approach.⁵⁰ Poetry, for Harrison remains the 'one medium which could concentrate our attention on our worst

⁴⁸ Harrison, 'Three poems for Bosnia: Essentials', 341.

⁴⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, translated by Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3.

⁵⁰ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 91.

experiences without leaving us with the feeling, as other media can, that life in this century has had its affirmative spirit burnt out'.⁵¹ This statement captures how he defines his unique occupation of a poetic tradition of twentieth century war writing. Belonging on the news pages, yet ultimately even more 'essential' due to its power to overcome geographical, imaginative, and historical boundaries, the poem remains for Harrison a necessary weapon against dehumanisation, insularity, and hatred.

References

Feay, Suzi, Harrison, Tony, in 'Poetry Belongs on the Front Pages', *The Independent*, 14 October 2012, accessed December 1 2016. <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/tony-harrison-poetry-belongs-on-the-front-pages-8210241.html>.

Haffenden, John, Harrison, Tony, 'Interview with Tony Harrison', in *Bloodaxe Critical Anthology: 1 Tony Harrison*, ed. Neil Astley, 227-246. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books Ltd., 1991.

Harrison, Tony, *Collected Poems*. London: Penguin Books, 2007.

— — —. 'A Cold Coming', *The Guardian*, Friday 14 February 2014, accessed December 1 2016.

<https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2003/feb/14/features11.g2>.

— — —. BC MS 20c Harrison/02, Small Notebook [Gaze of the Gorgon]. Tony Harrison Archive, Leeds, Brotherton Library, 'Leeds Poetry 1950-1980' collection.

— — —. Harrison, BC MS 20c Harrison/03/Loi/01, The Loiners 1. Tony Harrison Archive, Leeds, Brotherton Library, 'Leeds Poetry 1950-1980' collection.

— — —. 'Preface to *Palladas*', *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies 1: Tony Harrison*, ed. Neil Astley, 133-135. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991.

— — —. 'Prologue', *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies 1: Tony Harrison*, ed. Neil Astley, 133. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991.

— — —. 'The Inkwell of Dr Agrippa,' in *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies 1: Tony Harrison*, ed. Neil Astley, 32-35. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991.

— — —. 'The Poetic Gaze', *The Guardian*, 24 October 2009, accessed December 1 2016. <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/oct/24/tony-harrison-speech-pen-pinter>

Heaney, Seamus, *Opened Ground: Poems, 1966-1996*. London: Faber and Faber, 1998.

Holub, Miroslav, *Poems Before and After: Collected English Translations*. Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books; 2nd ed., 2006.

Morrison, Blake 'Labouring: Continuous', in *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies 1: Tony Harrison*, ed. Neil Astley, 216-219. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991.

⁵¹ Harrison, 'Prologue', *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies*, 133.

Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Birth of Tragedy*, translated by Douglas Smith. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Ricks, Christopher, *Geoffrey Hill and "The Tongue's Atrocities": The W.D. Thomas Memorial Lecture Delivered at the College on February 15th 1978*. Swansea: University College of Swansea, 1978.

Rowland, Antony, *Holocaust Poetry: awkward poetics in the work of Sylvia Plath, Geoffrey Hill, Tony Harrison and Ted Hughes*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005.

— — —. *Tony Harrison and the Holocaust*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001.

Spencer, Luke, *The Poetry of Tony Harrison*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994.

Tooth, Roger, 'Graphic content: when photographs of carnage are too upsetting to publish', *The Guardian*, Wednesday 23 July, 2014, accessed December 1 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/23/graphic-content-photographs-too-upsetting-to-publish-gaza-mh17-ukraine>.