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Prometheus to Revelation: Fire in the Work of Tony Harrison

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by

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## Abbreviations to Tony Harrison's Work

CC.....*The Common Chorus*

CFP.....*Collected Film Poetry*

CP..... *Collected Poems*

F.....*Fram*

GG.....*The Gaze of the Gorgon*

M.....*The Mysteries*

P..... *Prometheus*

P3 .....*Plays 3 : Poetry or Bust; The Kaisers of Carnuntum; The  
Labourers of Herakles*

T.....*Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*

TW.....*Theatre Works : 1973-1985*

Note :

For convenience and coherence, I have chosen to abbreviate only Harrison's major works.

References to Special Collections and to anthologised prose materials are given in full.

## Introduction

Luke Spencer's contention (1994, p.xi) that the lack of sustained critical attention to Tony Harrison's work has been occasioned by the poet's frightening diversity and 'upfront political concerns', does not amount to a comprehensive explanation. Peter Forbes's observation of Harrison's steadfast refusal to review poems, and his negativity about the poetry scene generally, suggest a state of mind which would tend to distance critical reception of his own material (Forbes, 1997, p.191). Within that limited critical canon, a similar elision appears to have occurred respecting the centrality of the idea of 'fire' to Harrison's oeuvre. Where it is not marginalized or ignored, it is often generalized to the point of bland acknowledgement and with little further elaboration, as though fire's purpose was a *donnée* and thereafter given comprehensive definition. Sandie Byrne's summation of the poet's existential fears – 'Harrison's terrible muse is the high-tech fire which could consume poetry and life alike' (Byrne, 1998, p.237), and Peter Forbes in similar vein - 'Fire is a recurring thread [...] and the big fire, the nuclear holocaust is the biggest of all' (Forbes, 1991, p.492), are characteristic here. Both make a persuasive point but what remains problematic is the omission of supporting evidence. A generalisation of, or unwillingness to engage at greater depth with, Harrison's preoccupation is characteristic of those critics who venture any more than a desultory opinion. Sean O'Brien, by contrast, reverses the critical telescope by describing Harrison's vigorous, obsessional pursuit of his established themes in incandescent metaphors of the sort the poet himself might employ - 'The painful dramatization of linguistic and class prejudices which light Tony Harrison's poems like a naval flare' (O'Brien, 1998, p.244). The one major exception to such critical footnoting is Antony Rowland's long study, *Tony Harrison and the Holocaust*, where the very nature of the themes – nuclear annihilation being chief amongst these – renders a detailed engagement with fire inevitable. I am therefore

obliged to Professor Rowland's work for some useful pointers regarding those aspects of fire whose attribution is specifically destructive. But fire infects almost all areas of Harrison's poetic development, including those whose meaning does not reside exclusively in the negative and the annihilative. Not merely a useful and multivalent poetic device, fire may be a conduit to general definition which reveals at least as much about the poet's inner thinking and motivation as about his thematic interests.

Critical attention has focused on several such thematic registers, principal among which are language and silence, elegy and remembrance, class division, and, most recently, and forcefully, annihilation and the possibility of meaningful poetic discourse in the shadow of Auschwitz.<sup>1</sup> The fashioning, in Luke Spencer's words, of 'truly oppositional meanings' (Spencer, 1994, p.16), or binaries, in the crucible of intense commitment is perhaps Harrison's most significant achievement. That critics have drawn any conclusions as to this ongoing dialectic, with only scant attention to the fire trope which informs it, is unaccountable. Fire is a highly amenable tool for the development of binaries since its very nature compounds the contradictory and the diametrically opposed. Harrison has many times reframed Gaston Bachelard's neat aphorism, 'It is cookery and it is apocalypse' (Bachelard, 1964, p.7), not least in the oblique reference to his general purpose in the preface to the film/poem *Prometheus*: 'The flames that created reverie create nightmares' (P, p.xx). There is a constant striving for clarity in Harrison's work; an attempt to make sense of a modern universe which, to paraphrase Jonathan Dollimore's existential reading, has replaced the earlier Western Humanist traditions of unity, fullness and freedom with psychological disunity, crisis and fragmentation (Dollimore, 2001, p.91). Fire streamlines the poet's thinking as it shapes meaning through invigoration and transmogrification, but it also yields a paradoxical uncertainty. It defines an increasing complexity of oppositions, or oppositions which become more complex as they are rendered mutable by the phenomenon, and it reduces these referents to one, ultimately simple opposition: that of creation and destruction.

In his Presidential Address to the Classical Association of 12 April, 1988 - 'Facing Up to the Muses' – Harrison notes the presence of two pictures on the wall of his home. One is

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<sup>1</sup> Antony Rowland's long study, *Tony Harrison and the Holocaust* (2001) finds poetic viability in Harrison's own 'barbaric' discourse in answer to Adorno's seminal dictum, 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'. This issue is discussed at length towards the end of my final chapter.

of the Muses dancing on Mount Helicon, the other a photo of the Greenham women dancing at a US airbase containing a nuclear silo wherein, in the poet's words, the possibility of 'our extinction is stored' (Harrison, 1991 (1), p.448). Harrison is declaring, through the symbolism of the dancing figures, the propinquity of death and celebration, and rehearsing one interpretation of his unperformed play *The Common Chorus* which spliced and recontextualized two Greek tragedies – *Hecuba* and *Trojan Women*. The poet found, in the context of Greenham Common, an eloquent means of underlining the relevance of the ancient, to the potential for modern tragedy. The Greenham women here become an 'indissoluble chorus' (p.448) 'dancing in the face of the ultimate darkness of Helicon' (p.449) so that past and present are blended in a single figurative fire which now bears the patina of extinction. And the need to express, to describe, sometimes to overburden his audience with explanation, is existential for Harrison.

His vision, then, is fundamentally uncertain, and the fire which is ubiquitously harnessed to clarify that vision acts rather in the manner of Phidias's chisel in classical Athens. The sculptor attempted to give a perfect representation of the imperfect human form, and to fix the otherwise evanescent in the permanence of stone. Harrison's own attempt to re-inscribe for posterity, and to posthumously re-energise his father's inarticulate working-class tongue in the poem 'Marked with D', is an act of imaginative idealization. But the concluding lines are crematory; the father's remains are '[...] smoke, enough to sting one person's eyes and ash (not unlike flour) for one small loaf' and the narrator/son is overwhelmed by the sense of loss and finitude against which the lineaments of teleology are powerless (CP, p.168). Fire, or fittingly, fire's detritus, is the signifier of another form of certainty which, for Harrison, is without consolation. But for the poet it acts to make confluent the kinds of oppositional position which Terry Eagleton identifies as unified in tragic Art: 'The Commonplace and the Catastrophic, as in Auden's poem "Musée de Beaux Arts", are the recto and the verso of a single process' (Eagleton, 2003, p.92). In the Breughel picture on which Auden's poem is based, the figure of Icarus in flames plunges into the sea as boats sail unwittingly past. Life goes on as catastrophic symbolisms unfold nearby. The same may be said of the binary development of Harrison's poem, 'Bookends I' (CP p.137), where the impedimenta of the domestic commonplace such as the ever-lit fire with its supply of municipally-mained and regulated gas is an



omnipresent focal presence, whilst the fact of his father's overwhelming grief at the loss of his wife is the unspoken elephant in the room. The 'catastrophe' is entirely personal and the drained emotional landscape is present in the thin and naked blue spikes of the flames. It is ironic that Harrison, in the play *Fram*, should use the falling Icarus as a simile for two stowaway Nigerian boys frozen to death in the wheelbay of a jet bound for Europe, and then discovered 30,000 feet below, wrapped in a final embrace for warmth - 'reluctant cuddlers' (F, p.94). The fact of their death renders a conspicuous indictment of colonialism, abuse and poverty in a breath, whilst the rich West rolls on in uninterested, humdrum silence.

On the other hand, and as Rowland notes, humanity's new-found potential for self-destruction creates a sense of fragility in the process of memorialisation in the sense that annihilation would mean the end of memory itself (Rowland, 2001, p.199). And this fragility seems now to be overwhelming in Harrison's work: the clarifying power of fire has given way to the ice of resignation and silence, as though George Steiner's future-time had already arrived - '[...] the time of the long eclipse of humane hopes and the dislocation of the future tense' (Steiner, 2001, p.22). Talking of Geoffrey Hill's poem 'September Song', Antony Rowland notes that 'harmless fires', since the holocaust, have been 'infected with the knowledge of the Nazi mass burnings' (Rowland, 2001, p.25). This is true of Harrison's poetry, and would seem to corroborate Adorno's view of the ongoing pervasiveness of this defining historical event. The poet's work cannot be examined except through this prism.

As it concerns Harrison's very earliest memories and the ideas of poetic regression, retreat and fire-reverie, my first chapter would seem a clear starting point for a thesis lineation which moves, metaphorically and very roughly, from 'birth' (nascence, the beginnings of language etc.) to 'death' (annihilation, universal silence, the end of language and memory). In this opening section I lean heavily on the work of Gaston Bachelard who provides a useful and oddly lyrical psychoanalytic framework for an investigation of fire reverie and the idea of memory. Harrison, particularly in the *School of Eloquence* sequence of poems but frequently elsewhere, seems compelled to return to the narcotic

simplicity of the domestic hearth of his childhood, almost as a willed retreat from the binary-conflicted present. The hearth, as in the Latin expression *focus*, is clearly focal for Harrison, a conduit through which memory, and negotiated memory, are enacted. That he derives scant consolation from his compulsion is characteristic of a temperament which is relentless in the making of 'connections', and which is sometimes blind to its own limitations. Harrison is drawn to look into the darkest recesses of the fire's vortex – as he does quite literally in the poem 'Newcastle is Peru' – and inevitably finds, amongst a kaleidoscope of memorial images from different temporal and geographical locations, a figurative 'funeral pyre'. For Bachelard, whose expression this is, the compulsion is Empedoclean: the process of abandonment to the reverie embraces the 'instinct for living and the instinct for dying' in the same instant (Bachelard, 1964, P.16). That Harrison is recreating the reverie in hindsight and thereby adding a further layer of complexity to interpretation does not diminish the sincerity of his belief in the power of fire to shape the imagination.

Harrison's self-proclaimed atheism cannot disguise a fascination with religious imageries which colour, and to some extent, define his poetic attitude. The infiltration of such resonances seems to have been early and intuitive. An examination of some of the oldest of Harrison's notebooks now held in the Special Collections department at the University of Leeds suggests an imagination awash with ideas of redemption and guilt, especially in the biblical sense. The manifestation of such ideas in imageries of fire is a potent characteristic of the Christian faith, and my second chapter will give a comprehensive reading of Harrison's tendency to apply fire's religious symbolism across his spectrum of themes. The juxtaposition of Harrison's polemical secularism with his clear 'grounding' in, and knowledge of, Christianity creates something of a paradox in his poetics, whereby the concrete materialism of his linguistic anger resembles the kind of 'tub-thumping' associated with Victorian non-conformism. A variation of Harrison's continuing demand for parity of class and language, his appropriation of religious registers of presentation attempts to undermine the excesses of fundamentalism and the psychological tyranny of metaphysical threats in the one-dimensional lexis of directed rage. Occasionally, and particularly in the *School of Eloquence* sequence of sonnets, the depth of Harrison's engagement produces a sense of metaphysical detachment,

abandonment even, which creates the intriguing further paradox of spirituality co-existing with the declared, and declaimed, material. At such moments, the poet seems to burnish his usual preoccupations of family, remembrance and language as he cleaves towards a figurative light of 'redemption' and yields to a probably unconscious supra-textual intention amongst the imagined crematory flames.<sup>2</sup> Harrison, again, attempts to subvert the tyrannies of past and present by exploiting the territory on which they all too visibly thrive. Whether circumscribed didactically or from deep within the narrative, Harrison is present at a conflagration which chastens as it observes a process of unjust chastening. But Harrison's compulsion seems also to be intuitive, so that refining fire produces epiphany for the tongueless dead and transformations which resonate throughout his poetry, such as the burnished ring of the poem 'Timer' (CP, p.179) and the totemic 'O' of continuity and oblivion, a paradox comprehensively explored by Sandie Byrne.<sup>3</sup>

Harrison's extensive knowledge of the Christian faith and its history relies, it seems to me, at least as much on prior experience as on research. Until relatively recently, religious resonances continued to shape post-war West Yorkshire lives, to varying degrees of engagement and absorption, and I quote widely from local history volumes and from E.P. Thompson and Richard Hoggart to support the view that Harrison's poetry, in particular the fascination with fire, owes something to his immanent understanding of the fires of damnation. The blurring of borderlines between the ideas of corporeal and metaphysical punishment, the hastening of the second by virtue of the first, produces the kinds of oppositional confusion which are grist to Harrison's mill, but are necessarily beyond his power to resolve. Since the idea of fire was as compelling a symbol to West Yorkshire non-conformists as it was to Dante's rendering of the Catholic Church, and implicit references to both appear in Harrison's work, my chapter will engage with each, particularly insofar as the poet sometimes enacts imitative forms of redemption using the fire trope.

Chapter Three shifts the focus of Harrison's religious engagement to incorporate the antagonistic atheism which has an equal claim to evaluation in the realm of the poet's anti-extremist polemics. Here, I investigate the ideas of censorship, fundamentalism, and

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<sup>2</sup> I use the poems 'Marked with D' (CP, p.168) and 'Fire-Eater' (p.182) pivotally, here.

<sup>3</sup> See Byrne (1998) Chapter 7, pp.191-228.

life-affirmation against the backdrop of the film/poem *The Blasphemers' Banquet* and several other poems, particularly as they distil their major concerns through the filter of fire. Beginning with the documenting of some historical examples of library conflagrations, including the Morden Tower library fire at Newcastle University in 1973, whose ramifications occupy many pages of Harrison's personal notebooks, I attempt here to establish a context for the poet's preoccupation. Harrison's use of fire in this arc of his work is characteristically both literal and metaphorical: as they threaten the 'sanctity', survival even, of the written word, and of the freedom to create Art, the flames of destruction are incendiary in both senses of the term. They feed and inflame mood as they are reflective of the dynamic of anger; the process of conflagration and destruction is circular and self-fulfilling.

A long discussion of *The Blasphemers' Banquet* establishes Harrison's own 'incendiary' anger as he seeks to defend the right of free speech against the depredations of Islamic fundamentalist proscription, using the Bradford burnings of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* as a conduit. Calling forth an assemblage of persecuted 'voices' of the past including Voltaire, whose own books were burned on a pyre of Catholic intolerance, Harrison excoriates the idea of blind adherence to censorship by establishing a humanist sensibility in opposition to it. The narrator/Harrison's use of such historical figures enables a trans-temporal and trans-cultural parity which in turn is intended to give contemporary events a greater universal relevance. The connection between the local and the universal is made clear in Harrison's long poem 'The Mother of the Muses', which was conceived not long before the Rushdie *fatwa*, and engages, to some degree, with the notion of the destruction of Art and the creative voice. Viewed through the prism of memory, the poet's mind's eye takes a backward glance through the documented history of newsreels and individual testimony in order to give historical context to the mental lives of the dementia sufferers in a Canadian nursing home. The poetic 'journey' over second world war Germany, recalling in visceral detail the effects of the allied 'thousand bomber' raids, finds a parallel with the ravages of Alzheimer's in the mass destruction of civilian populations, alongside the storehouses of Art: the museums and libraries, theatres and operas. Harrison's point seems ultimately to be that all paths of proscription and censorship, whether enacted as manifestations of fundamentalist myopia or yielded as

collateral damage in incendiary firestorms, lead eventually to existential silence if not contained. Harrison himself is not free of that same impulse, and I close the chapter with a brief look at his distinctly ambivalent attitude to the outpourings of 'popular' culture.

Continuing with the theme of religious influences and in particular the highly serviceable image of apostolic 'tongues of fire', Chapter Four will look beyond the Christian faith to give a reading of the beginnings of the idea of 'Word' and the relationship between *logos* and fire, in the Heraclitean sense. Language, for Harrison, inaugurates, enfranchises, and defines human continuity, and if language and fire seem indivisible in the poet's imagination, if not quite literally as they were for Heraclitus, it is because fire is an amenably versatile symbol. The multiplicity of fire's binary attributions in Harrison's work is mirrored by the cacophony of competing voices and linguistic registers which render the poet, for Terry Eagleton, a 'natural Bakhtinian' (Eagleton, 1991, p.349).

Beginning with a lengthy and introductory Part One, which will set out to define the influence of Greek thinking on Harrison's imagination, this early section will examine the poet's idea of shared spaces for celebrant and sufferer. A reflection of the shared dramatic spaces of Athenian tragic performance, Harrison's sense of his own expression best describes its inherent tension through a fire trope whose own powers are protean and metaphorically negotiable. Heraclitus provides a useful starting point for Part Two, which will explore the relationship between fire and language. For Heraclitus, this relationship was symbiotic, and I will try to demonstrate some degree of indivisibility of the two notions in Harrison's poetry, with particular reference to the poet's occasional tendency to occlude boundaries between the two, and to animate fire's rapacity through a process of poetic anthropomorphism. Part Three explores the ramifications of the Prometheus myth against the backdrop of Harrison's film/poem of the same name. When it was made in 1998, the film appeared to define many of Harrison's existing preoccupations. The double-edged Promethean 'gift' of fire, its uses and abuses, its inherent dualistic properties of construction and destruction, is described from the perspective of a European post-industrial landscape. Within this landscape, Harrison develops his themes of class, language/silence, memory and annihilation in terms of how they are defined by fire, and the technology of knowledge which it engenders.

Using several poems as touchstones, including particularly 'The White Queen', 'The Nuptial Torches', and the play *Phaedra Britannica*, Chapter Five will examine the contiguity of Freud's notion of *Eros* and *Thanatos*, or the imperatives of Sex/Life and Death, as they shape, and are represented in, some of Harrison's early poetry. The relationship between the two seems especially susceptible to metaphorical treatment by fire here, as elsewhere in Harrison's exploration of themes and connections. The chapter will investigate those poetic examples which best demonstrate this shaping process. After the protracted introduction of Part One, which will give a synopsis of the central ideas and critical underpinnings, I move on to examine each theme under a separate heading. Centrally, my thesis here rests on the idea that Harrison's African poetry, and play set in India, envisage a 'swamp' of sexual extremity where the acculturation of an abusive colonial mentality, and the unrelenting 'fire' of the sun are indivisible catalysts for systems of 'excusable' abuse. Paradoxically, however, the process seems inexorable, as, for example, the priapic figure of the otherwise intellectual White Queen is unable to successfully rationalise his own urges. The surrounding geographies of fecund organic growth and equally rapid decay make manifest the inescapability of the heat, as they mirror and are mirrored by the sense of unleashed human sexual impulses being exercised in close conjunction with them. The presence of sexuality and death, the extremities of perversity in such landscapes, seem, for Harrison, to be a useful vehicle for enacting a Freudian discourse, and Freud *is* a guiding-hand here. To some degree Marcuse's philosophies of liberationism, which were current at more or less the same period as the poems, are an invisible presence in the narratives. The White Queen's behaviour in particular embodies the worst excesses of the unrestrained *Id*, although giving vent to such impulses does not provide an emollient to his 'foul conditioning', beyond the compulsive scratching of an omnipresent itch.

Harrison's use of fire and its associations in the context of this chapter fit broadly into two categories: firstly, the universal shaping characteristics of the sun and of tropical heat as we see in both 'The White Queen' and *Phaedra Britannica*. In the play, a version of Racine's *Phaedra* which shifts the context to India under the Raj, the central character's perverse sexual inclinations for her stepson are an act of extreme hubris as in the original tragedy. The sun, which the Memsahib, or Phaedra, takes great pains to avoid in the play,

embodies a Eumenidean warning of retributive justice. The heat is a measure of her own flaming, deviant passion, and her actions in turn come to figure for India itself, which was perceived by colonial moralists as a swamp of barbarism and iniquity. Secondly, the workings of fire in the microscopic and particularist senses. Here, my argument will focus on semen as a repository of both life and death. Semen is a common image in Harrison's poetry. It allows the poet to explore his own proclivity for connection-making, and to some extent manifests a determined phallocentrism. But crucially, semen contains the possibility of life and death. It is a container for sexually transmitted diseases, which feature as a warning in 'The White Queen'. Gonorrhoea provides a form of limitless punishment in the poem, a reminder of the protagonist's perversity, and invariably described in metaphors of fire and searing pain which add to the horrors of the climate. Fire, in this context, is punisher rather than cleanser. The sun burns, and flames are turned inward to 'burn' the sufferers of sexually transmitted diseases with the mark of their transgression. And the process of metaphorical attribution is no less effective than it was when plague afflicted the human landscape in, for example, Virgil's *Georgics*. Making allowance for the translation here, fire appears to have become the embodiment of the affliction: '[...] and he had not long to wait before the plague was shooting its flames through his joints' (Virgil, 1982, p.78). In 'The Pomegranates of Patmos', Harrison finds a grand metaphor for life-affirmation in semen, yet still riven by the paradox of annihilation glowing in the spermatic globules, like the vermilion of pomegranate seeds. The poem 'The Nuptial Torches' continues the sex/death paradox, and is, to some degree, pivotal to my thesis. Set in sixteenth century Spain, against the backdrop of a public burning, and describing the lighting to the royal nuptial couch of human 'torches', the poem explores the intimacy of *Eros* and *Thanatos* through the prism of immolating fire. The suggestion that the central protagonist, King Philip, is aroused by his own act of barbarism is redoubled as Harrison once more offers the king's hot semen as a metaphor for both eroticism and retribution. I make use of a full range of direct critical materials for the purposes of this chapter, and endeavour to reinforce my application of Freud and Marcuse with some additional selections from the work of Lacan, Bataille and Foucault.

It is intended that my final chapter should provide a logical conclusion to the thesis, bearing heavily, as it does, on notions of annihilation, universal silence and the end of

memory. Beginning with an introduction outlining the general direction, I have broken the chapter into two further sections entitled, respectively, 'Katabasis – Plumbing the Faecal Furnace' and 'Ice and Silence'. I hope to demonstrate, through chronological illustration, a change in tone in Harrison's poetic approach, from one informed by a sense of consistently counterpointed binary engagement, to fatalism, negativity and retreat in recent years. The, albeit thin, tissue of hope for human survival and continuity which remained evident until relatively recently appears to have disappeared from view, and the negative transition is embodied in the gradual abandonment of the fire symbol in favour of ice. Part Two continues with an investigation of the poem 'A Cold Coming' and the film/poem *The Shadow of Hiroshima* which both usefully illuminate Rachel Falconer's central theme in her study *Hell in Contemporary Literature*, that many writers continue to explore existential themes through explicit or implicit katabatic narratives. Several of Harrison's poems could be described as 'descent' narratives, particularly where a 'journey' is undertaken with an apostrophised guide. The prospect of nuclear annihilation has hung over much of the poet's work since the middle nineteen eighties like a blackout curtain, and this prospect is described in, and accompanied by, imageries of fire. This general area of Harrison's work has received much critical attention, particularly in Sandie Byrne and Antony Rowland, and the latter's lengthy investigation, *Tony Harrison and the Holocaust*, is much utilised in my own thesis.

Over the past twenty five years Harrison's reflections on the implication of universal silence have come, more frequently, to utilize imageries of ice, almost as though the scourging fires of Revelation had been extinguished by the frozen and barren reality of a 'secular' apocalypse. Harrison will be fully aware of the idea of *ordo poenarum*, or the fitting of divine punishment to suit earthly transgression, and of the irony of the final circle of Hell in Dante's *Divine Comedy* being utterly ice-bound. In a sense, the poet's candid exploration of annihilating dementia in both 'The Mother of the Muses' and the film/poem *Black Daisies for the Bride* may be seen as a microcosmic metaphor for a nuclear apocalypse which potentially destroys language and induces silence on a universal scale. Sean O'Brien notes that love and alienation, understanding and distance, find metaphorical outlets in Harrison in dominant imageries of fire and cold (O'Brien, 1998, p.58), and whilst this is unarguable, the poet's most recent years have come to extend the



dark end of the metaphor to mean alienation also from 'self' in the sense of both dementia, the deprivation of meaning, and the silence of death. Significantly, both poems I mention are loaded with images of ice and snowstorms, and the visual occlusions which accompany them. Harrison continues his thematic hammering relentlessly but his most recent play *Fram* is set against the frozen backdrop of the Arctic, and Part Three of this chapter describes an increasing sense of resignation amongst the depressing, and possibly valedictory philosophical speculations of the play. The frozen landscape in which the central protagonist Nansen is ice-bound mirrors his own scientific prognosis as to the earth's appearance when the sun is finally extinguished. The more immediately pressing image, in respect of the hastening of the end of humanity with nuclear weapons, is an interchangeable concern in a dialogue of anxiety whose ramifications, I feel, draw Harrison closer than ever before to an intuitive simulacrum with his narrator. The possibility of termination gives, in George Steiner's words, '[...] to despair a new warrant' (Steiner, 2001, p.4). Nansen is a focus for the poet's own fears, and those fears, whether borne out of advancing age or increasing fatalism, are increasingly enacted in metaphors of ice. He is 'Facing North', to appropriate the metaphor in the title of his own poem, and finding scant consolation there. The fire symbol, which played a defining role in the most significant part of Harrison's poetical career, has now largely been extinguished.

## Notes on Approach

Harrison appears to be materially anchored throughout his oeuvre, or anchored to a sense of purpose in a universe he perceives to be 'real'. As the critic Antony Rowland somewhat tortuously notes, the poet describes historical events as though authentically experienced - 'Harrison is neither a post-structuralist nor a new historicist : he retains notions of true representations of events, and refuses to relativize the past within sets of equally valid narratives' (Rowland, 2001 p.207). Except, perhaps, that in essence new historicism identifies a reciprocal relationship between literary texts and the historical context in which they were produced, and evidence of such a mutual shaping process is clear, to some degree, across Harrison's body of work. There seems little doubt, for example, that the poet's tonal engagement with the theme of nuclear annihilation was influenced by the fatalisms of the Cold War, or that his use of fire symbols in defining manmade Armageddon carries the ontological shadow of a religion to which he doesn't subscribe, but whose imagery he has clearly absorbed. Harrison's is a poetics of projection as well as of the backward glance, and his imaginings are modelled on the eviscerations of the past. Of these, the visual record – the post-war newsreels of Belsen and of Hiroshima – are the indelible stimuli which underwrite the poet's sincerity to purpose. In an interview with Romana Huk of 1988, Jon Silkin, referring to the early Stand group of poets amongst whose number was Harrison, comments: 'People at Leeds were more concerned with what was real, and not with pursuing some reconciliation with or some easy understanding of what is difficult' (Huk, 1996, p.194). Silkin here locates the origin of Harrison's own motivation, and Huk corroborates the generic nature of his concerns: 'what he shares with Silkin is a commitment to readdressing the absence in history from his own personal, once-marginalized standpoint, and to speaking for the inarticulate' (p.199). Harrison is communing with the silenced dead, in part at least, as a prophylactic measure against the prospect of human finitude. And the past is 'real' to him. He uses

fire as a clarifying tool, as a means of illuminating that past as much as the language which provides its best and only expression. Fire fills the gap where, to paraphrase Huk, statement is not possible; it is a symbolic shaping process which may be inferred where otherwise inconspicuous, and it sometimes drives Harrison's narrative hand as compulsively as the ideas of rhythm and repetition (p.206).

That Rowland justifies his astonishingly wide-ranging inter-textual and inter-contextual readings of the poet's work on the basis that that work discloses a discourse beyond authorial intention, may be too fluid and tangential a view (Rowland, 2001, p.101). Rowland's approach makes unsustainable assumptions about Harrison's own sense of place and purpose, and gives lengthy analytical credence to extraneous material whose relevance seems to be marginal in spite of the claim to evaluative parity. Harrison's poetry seems to me *not* to concede Roland Barthes's proposal, approved by Rowland regarding Harrison, of 'the rupture of a mimetic relationship between language and reality' (in Rowland, 2001, p.100). Any sense of disengagement with perceived reality is vouchsafed only transiently, and then only when Harrison approaches a counter-intuitive 'transcendent' plane, and through the arc of imagined crematory flames.<sup>4</sup> Mostly, the poet hammers the underlying rhythm of language as though it was a precise mirror to reality, almost as if the world would implode if language stopped describing 'real' events; implode, in fact, into the existential silence which embodies his worst fears. An identification of poet with narrator seems to be a side-effect of the unusual linguistic clarity of Harrison's approach. As Neil Roberts notes of the *School of Eloquence* sequence of sonnets, 'Harrison's poetry is unashamedly humanist [...] A major corollary of this is that it demands a reading which is not afraid of identifying the 'speaker' with the poet, and the biographical individual' (Roberts, 1990, p.156). This confluence, for Roberts, renders the poems almost impervious to post-structuralist analysis, and a similar inference may be made about Harrison's engagement with the apocalypse. Apocalyptic thinking threatens to disclose absolute existential truths about annihilation, whereas the post-modernist approach denies the existence of absolute truth or, in William Franke's somewhat vapid expression, of a 'totalizing structure' (Franke, 2009, p.28). Harrison, like Franke, sees poetry as the best means of articulating expression in relation to the paradox of

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<sup>4</sup> See Part Two of Chapter Two for a full examination of this phenomenon.

finitude/renewal, and he is not afraid to render Armageddon in a symbolism which blends images of the secular and the religious (Franke, 2009, p.40).

Rowland is entitled to use modern theory in order to bolster assumptions about a universe of suggestion extraneous to Harrison's text, but the fact of the poet's own perception and stamp remain paramount, and it seems prudent, respecting critical approaches to his use of fire, to remain cognizant of endogenous considerations. I think particularly here of the psychoanalytical elements of the poet's compulsions, and the work of Gaston Bachelard, of whom Harrison is aware and to whom I shall refer at length throughout this thesis, provides a general framework for analysis with his seminal work *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*. Focusing on the primal elements of man's relationship with fire, Bachelard's study examines the phenomenon of reverie as a prism for reflection and mental narcosis. Reverie, for Bachelard, is the earliest and most fundamental mechanism upon which the accretion, over time, of layers of diffuse meanings and metaphors hang, adding complexity to complexity even as the material properties of fire appear to yield union in flame. The possibility of oppositions, of contradictions, inhere to fire and, in Harrison's work fire helps to define and shape his own existential anxieties. Fire's potential for creation and destruction finds mirrors in Harrison's thematic preoccupations: the energy and continuity of language, for example, set against the prospect of post-holocaust silence. Harrison's adoption of 'voice' in his work underwrites the energy of his poetry respecting the preservation of language and the historically 'silenced', particularly where he uses fire to illuminate differences of interpretation. This phenomenon helps the rhythm and sonority of demotic to break through the barricade of stasis and inertia. Harrison makes a lot of often contradictory noises and I am indebted to the work of the linguist M. M. Bakhtin, of whom Harrison is also unsurprisingly aware, for providing a useful schema for the examination of the interactive components of the poet's methods. In one of the poet's notebooks in the Special Collections archive of Leeds University, I discovered the following quotation from an unidentified commentator - '[...] linguistic theory must be grateful to Bakhtin for articulating the powerful force of the silenced in language use' (Poetry Notebooks P.11, p.111). Underlining the poet's own agenda so clearly, the several pages of the notebook given over to Bakhtin are covered in exclamation marks suggesting a 'eureka' moment of recognition. Harrison appears to be

seeking certainty in the form of approval, and here and elsewhere his use of fire is a useful metaphor for both outrage at linguistic injustice and for the expression of language. He is, as Michael Schmidt has noted, his own 'pentecost' in the sense of 'speaking in tongues to give voice to the many dictions and idioms which a dominant culture (in his view) has deliberately ignored or suppressed' (Schmidt, 1989, p.25).

The poet's failure to resolve the kinds of binary duality which became a central plank of the structuralist debate, is evidence of their limitation in giving adequate latitude to meaning. As Terry Eagleton notes in *Literary Theory*, often '[...] one term of an antithesis secretly inheres within the other' (Eagleton, 1983, p.133). Heraclitean logic, with which I will engage at length in Chapter Four, corroborates this process of entanglement with respect to fire: the often symbiotic relationship, for example, between different uses of fire symbolism. And, as this thesis will hope to show, the fires of destruction and creation cannot merely be defined as though entirely separate entities. They are, as Eagleton implies, often indivisible.

I hope that liberal use of Harrison's archive at Leeds will reinforce my argument in terms of the changing context of the poet's life. If evidence from the multiplicity of notebooks does not necessarily clarify the poetry, it certainly corroborates long-held intuitions, hints at the origin of ideas, and provides much tantalizing food for thought respecting the developing psychology of a poetics. The interior life which the archive exposes is naked and very frank in places, never more so than when the poet examines his preoccupations either in the figurative shadow of fire, or in a language which directly or indirectly mirrors the force and vigour of fire's material power. The archive as a whole encourages forensic interior examination, and I trust that its very extent as one framework of definition for Harrison's sizeable body of work, justifies my own approach to this thesis.

I have consciously restricted my use of Harrison's translations to those which fall more generally under the category of adaptations so as to avoid any crossover of attribution. But where 'adaptations' yield a significant departure from the original; where Harrison's stamp seems singularly his own, or his version of a play constitutes a radical reworking of context and use of language, an investigation may reasonably be justified. The author's

'mark' in this most committedly poetic of playwrights is, as Rowland notes, almost as visible in the plays as in the poems, and that linguistic uniqueness sometimes increases the degree of departure (Rowland, 2001, p.40). Harrison's comment in the introduction to *The Common Chorus* gives a justification for modern adaptations in terms of ongoing relevance: 'If I am a serious witness of mutability and the ruins of time I have to confess that I believe that versions of ancient plays have to be redone for each new production' (CC, p.xii). The play is a comprehensive abridgement of two Greek originals – a tragedy and a comedy. That *The Common Chorus* didn't reach the stage attests to that same mutability: the topicality of the Greenham Common protests had already lost its urgency whilst the production plans floundered.

*Phaedra Britannica* is another contextual departure. Based on Racine's *Phaedra*, the action is removed to the Indian *Raj* of the nineteenth century. Whilst the substance of the verbal exchanges remains broadly in keeping with the French version, many images are manifestly different from Racine, and many are couched in metaphors of fire in order to yield an embellished but authentic rendition of contextual geography. One example will demonstrate this distinction and underline my justification in examining some of Harrison's plays for the purpose of my perspective. The character of Aricia in Racine, describing the deaths of her six brothers, has 'The sword swept all away and drenched the earth' (Racine, 1963, p.167). Harrison by contrast, in order to convey summary British military justice along with Racine's sense of finality, has the character of Lilamani's siblings 'blown from a cannon into nothingness. / Smoking smithereens !' (TW, p.87). It is characteristic of Harrison's impulse for connection-making that the absolute destruction here may also figure as a metonym for more modern considerations of nuclear war and universal annihilation. Harrison finds myth indispensable; a precondition, almost, of survival. His view is corroborated by Bernard O'Donoghue, who suggests that myth is a broad church and will accommodate diverse adaptation, to suit all contextual possibility. For Harrison, all historical events are bound in one ontological continuum: 'Like Steiner in *Antigones*, Harrison sees the concerns and conflicts of modern society as inextricably linked to the history of its myths and its language(s), and he finds the same conflicts at issue in the very various works that he has chosen as his tradition' (O'Donoghue, 1991 (1),

p.261). The compulsion to re-rehearse myth in such a way frequently demands a flexible approach to linguistic and contextual presentation.

## Chapter One : Childhood's End - Reverie and the Narcotic Gaze

*'Ibant Obscuri – The hearth and the holocaust; two poles of fire in my life'.<sup>5</sup>*

### Part One - Awakenings

Tony Harrison's self-conscious appropriation of fire as a tool for the development and illustration of ideas begins its process of germination as a personal intuition:

I have always associated staring into flames with the freedom of poetic meditation. (P, p.vii).

Tracing its origins as far back as the domestic hearth of wartime Beeston and the warm narcosis of idle reverie, Harrison's reflection in the preface to *Prometheus* presupposes the importance of his own major poetic theme of memory. The suggestion is more than tangential: bound up with the possibly overworked compulsions of remembrance and the varied processes of mourning is an elegy for the lost simplicity of early childhood's fireside certainties, before the obtrusion of experience and of fire's own semiotic complexities. 'Intuition' is an apposite term in this regard, for before maturity confers a deeper understanding of fire's binary and metonymic potential, Harrison recognises almost unconsciously something of what his classicism will later yield in translation: 'I later learned that the Latin for hearth is *focus*' (P, p.vii). Fire is a focus for reverie and for reflection, and both responses are amenable to the unconditional receptiveness of the poet's still one-dimensional, juvenile imagination.

The process of 'awakening' which is one of the characteristics of the poem 'The Morning After' sharpens the vivid sense of collective happiness attending the VJ day

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<sup>5</sup> A barely legible, handwritten sentence found in Book Two (p.197) of Harrison's Poetry Notebooks, this epithet clearly holds the key to the poet's preoccupation with fire.



bonfire celebration in wartime Leeds. Here is an outward display of festive emotion which serves as a material manifestation of Harrison's inner reverie:

Though people weep, their tears dry from the heat.  
Faces flush with flame, beer, sheer relief  
and such a sense of celebration in our street  
for me it still means joy though banked with grief.

And that, now clouded, sense of public joy  
with war-worn adults wild in their loud fling  
has never come again since as a boy  
I saw Leeds people dance and heard them sing.  
(from 'The Morning After' Part I, CP, p.196).

The poem moves from a retrospective present tense which authenticates the immediacy of the moment, to a reflectively 'post-coital' backward glance where binary considerations emerge to fatally compromise it. I refer, here, specifically to that symbiosis of bonfire and relief which, for Harrison, remains inviolably inscribed in that part of his imagination lit by early memory. These verses echo, though no doubt unconsciously, Siegfried Sassoon's seizing of a single, orgasmic moment of 'public joy' in the poem 'Everyone Sang'. I quote it in full for its sustained, overall effect:

Everyone suddenly burst out singing;  
And I was filled with such delight  
As prisoned birds must find in freedom,  
Winging wildly across the white  
Orchards and dark-green fields; on – on – and out of sight.

Everyone's voice was suddenly lifted;  
And beauty came like the setting sun:  
My heart was shaken with tears; and horror  
Drifted away...O, but Everyone  
Was a bird; and the song was wordless; the singing will never be done.  
(Gardner, 1972, p.862).

Both poems claim celebration in extreme relief. For Sassoon, the horrors of the First World War momentarily melt into a utopian ideal, though they remain a palpable, if invisible, presence. Harrison's use of alliteration in the second stanza shown above sharpens the poignancy of the general happiness on the whetstone of wartime attrition and a sense of national entropy. Alliterative use of the letter 'W' is, in fact, common to both poems and with not dissimilar intentions. Prisoned birds 'winging wildly across the

white / Orchards' disclose a sense of unfettered freedom which makes an excellent template for 'war-worn adults wild in their loud fling' of liberation from the privations of war. Although Harrison's poem is the more likely to be guilty of the distortion associated with lengthy hindsight,<sup>6</sup> both declare an emotional charge whose effectiveness is predicated upon a sincerity which partially occludes poetic artifice; that is to say that the reader is momentarily blinded by the force of the lines.

A full reading of the 'Morning After' is, of course, not possible without reference to inherent oppositional shades, and if an interview with the *Guardian* is sincere, the appearance of characteristic, and undermining, binary registers towards the end of Harrison's poem are not merely the products of hindsight and experience. The poet revealed that he was aware of the presence of the darker manifestations of the fire trope even whilst present at the bonfire celebration.<sup>7</sup> Oppositional scenarios such as the aftermath of the Hiroshima attack co-existed with the tears of relief, creating a template and a prism for subsequent reflection, even in the extremity of youth. If these memories are authentic, Harrison was a surprisingly insightful eight-year-old on VJ day. Intimations of a potentially destabilising 'otherness' in part I of the poem are precisely that, suggestions: the 'grief' tarnished joy banked like an overburdened fireplace, gives way to other more sinister premonitions - 'There's still that dark, scorched circle on the road' (CP, p.196). The disharmonic hints melt seamlessly into a visceral and knowing part II like the transition from youth to experience, and any sense of contemplative fire-reverie is supplanted by an outward, noun-cluttered tableau culminating in the 'endgame' of Harrison's discourse: annihilative silence, an unthinkable 'Archerless zilch'. In a sense, the scorched circle in the road is totemic, drawing the narrator compulsively to both the possibility of extinction and to a place of memory, indelibly inscribed by the flames of the bonfire. The reader is given to believe that a cautionary note of warning and prophecy co-exists with the instinct for celebration, even in the juvenile imagination. It is clear from Harrison's personal notebooks that such binary suggestions continued to preoccupy him

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<sup>6</sup> Sassoon's poem was written very soon after the Armistice, and still in the full glow of collective relief.

<sup>7</sup> In *Guardian Culture*, 31 Mar, 2007.

when he conceived the following lines from an early unpublished fragment entitled 'The Convalescent', whose tenor clearly foreshadows 'The Morning After':

This dance of death's a conga like we did on Victory Night.  
The bonfires all around us giving off a deep red light.  
(from the *Loiners* Notebooks, Book 3).

The fire, and in the final line from 'The Morning After Part II', the fire's detritus, combine to create a focus as universal as that distant fire which draws the sea-borne Argive sailors in Homer's *Iliad* to memories of hearth and home, *and* to visions of an uncertain future:

And as when from across water a light shines to mariners  
From a blazing fire, when the fire is burning high in the mountains  
In a desolate steading, as the mariners are carried unwilling  
By storm wind over the fish-swarming sea, far away from their loved ones.  
(Lattimore, 1961, p.370)

And the connection does not overstate Harrison's perception of his bonfire's significance. The prismatic power of the flames carries, for him, the symbolic weight of the Argive torches; their importance, as Eva Parisinou notes of Aeschylean tragedy, consists in '[...] the strong metaphorical connotation of this long chain of fires, as reflections of the equally long chain of crime and retribution throughout the *Oresteia*' (Parisinou, 2000, p.110). Whilst underlining the fire trope as Harrison's favoured means of expression, Marianne MacDonald is right to characterise such a seemingly paradoxical conjunction of opposing intentions as a dialectic between 'celebration and mourning' (MacDonald, 1991, p.481). If it is inappropriate to labour the darker ramifications of Harrison's thought processes at this stage, it might be useful to confirm a more generalised intertextual awareness of the psychological contiguity of both sides of an opposition, which, to some degree, justify celebration. Finding, as David Kennedy notes, an echo in ancient festivals such as the Greek *Dionysia*, Harrison's instinctively allusive expression of disinhibition is entangled, to some extent, with his classical preoccupation (Kennedy, 1996, p.41). The idea of the Greek 'orchestra', or, by Harrison's own definition, a 'circular dancing place' (TO,p.vii), is necessarily grafted on to the originating memory with lengthy hindsight and the apparently limitless compulsion to establish connections of real substance. But an awareness of the intensity of conflicting meanings is clearly visible at the 'brooding ground' of the bonfire celebration (TO,p.vii). The underpinning schema of Athenian tragedy, of light and dark, of hubris and nemesis, are played out subtextually in the

scorched 'O' of the fire's residue, a place where infinite darkness and the memory of the celebrants are spliced.

To some degree, bonfire revels are a means of staving off darker intrusions. Thomas Hardy's philosophical vignette in *Return of the Native* discloses evidence of the inevitable presence of a converse picture:

Moreover to light a fire is the instinctive and resistant act of man, when, at the winter ingress, the curfew is sounded throughout nature. It indicates a spontaneous Promethean rebelliousness against the fiat that this recurrent season shall bring foul times, cold darkness, misery and death. Black chaos comes and the fettered gods of the earth say, 'Let there be Light.' (Hardy, 1999, p.23).

Means (fire) and motivation (rebellion) are bound in one Promethean gesture, and to the extent that Hardy's description acknowledges the co-existence of the 'winter ingress', it provides a useful intertextual template for Harrison's own sense of inherent oppositions. The 'Sonnets for August 1945' collection of poems finds an ingress of very real Hiroshimas and, through an association conferred by much later hindsight, of nuclear winters. Narrator as child is drawn narcotically into his own circle of fire-charged reverie which yet falls shy of utter abandonment to 'misrule', at least in the sense conveyed by Philip Gross in his rabidly vigorous poem, 'Frost Fair':

fires on the ice  
tonight's the night  
for fighting cock and baited bull and dancing bear  
men swallowing swords  
and tugs of war  
and everyone who's anyone is there. (Gross, 1991,p.23).

Where Gross's exoticism allows the suggestion of only one elemental contrast in the first line of the poem, Harrison's enthusiasm is tempered by the presence of a calculated oppositional counterpoint which is bound to transcend his own vague youthful knowledge of the unique symbolic properties of the bonfire and the hearth. If children are quick to intuit the resonance of fundamental binaries, the mature poet encodes his representation in complex metonyms :

The Rising Sun was blackened on those flames.  
The jabbering tongues of fire consumed its rays.  
Hiroshima, Nagasaki were mere names  
for us small boys who gloried in our blaze.

(The Morning After II, CP, p.197).

To some degree, the final two lines of the quatrain are characteristic examples of superfluity, where the poet's tendency to 'show his hand' threatens to prosaically unpack an otherwise effectively condensed imagery. Where Harrison's use of personification deliberately invites darker intrusions here, T.S. Eliot reiterates Hardy's winter/bonfire dualism with an invocation of personified fiery rapacity acting like an antibiotic in infected blood :

Fires Devouring the winter season,  
Eating up the darkness, with wit and wine and wisdom!  
(from *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot, 1937, p.24).

Amongst several other possible interpretations, the apostolic 'jabbering tongues' of destructive fire of Harrison's poem 'devour' life and landscape, whilst figuratively silencing the communal singing of poem I and the jingoistic *Rule Britannias* of Poem II; the first two lines of 'The Morning After' resemble a proscriptive litany which temporarily stalls the joint narratives of I and II, and imposes an hiatus of contemplation between them.

Oppositional registers in the two sonnets serve to underline, rather than to mitigate, the authenticity of a profound childhood experience of bonfire reverie. The image of faces unanimously 'flushed with flame, beer, sheer relief' represent the capturing of the essence of an historical moment, an act of appropriation which is enhanced by the presence of a terrible symbolic darkness and the usage of the present tense to validate the memory. Significantly, fire is present at the inaugurating moment as a filter for reverie, at a major associative moment, and also as an omnipresent tool for defining such moments in poetry. Detailed investigation of the idea of fire reverie and the thought processes which may, in primitive times, have engendered the very earliest forms of language, is as ultimately speculative as literary criticism itself. However, the ubiquitous presence of the focal point of the hearth in Harrison's oeuvre also demands a flexible critical approach because it helps to define the poet's own speculations about language and about silence.<sup>8</sup> For the philosopher Gaston Bachelard, there is a sense in which the

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<sup>8</sup> The significance of the domestic hearth is pre-historic in origin, particularly as the rarity of fire placed a premium on the notion of the ever-burning fireplace. The early Romans clearly recognised the value and necessity of the hearth, by entrusting the family focus to the protection of the goddess *Vesta*. (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* – See bibliography).

'dreamer' conjures his reveries in concentrated spaces, the better to 'guard' his or her thoughts for reformulation into language and speculation. Since the fireplace is just such a concentrated space, the implication of Bachelard's thinking here is that if it did not exist, the mind would have to will it into being. By this reading, flames become a focus for the 'concentrated power' of expression (Bachelard, 1964, pp.49-50).

Harrison's reference to Bachelard's seminal study *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* in his preface to *Prometheus* (P, p. *xix*) amounts to more than a fleeting acknowledgement. In an almost too convenient sense, it would be possible to give a reading of the importance of fire in Harrison's poetry through Bachelard's own general metonymic schema, summarized around the cardinal points of creation, redemption and apocalypse (Bachelard, 1964: *viii*).<sup>9</sup> Convenient, because Harrison no doubt recognises the close critical alignment between his own work and Bachelard's analysis, and because that alignment may render the poetry reiterative and predictable. But the scale of Harrison's use of the fire trope, at least until relatively recently, has been overwhelming. An inventory of fire references and associated signifiers confirms, aside from the precise period of its most fertile application, the presence of a compulsive tic. The question arises here: does the resulting, relentless gravitas help the work to endure, or does the reiteration of imageries of apocalypse make an endurance course for Harrison's audience? Acknowledging its origins in the primitive human mind, Bachelard recognises that the significance of fire is so close to the surface of modern consciousness that connection-making is inevitable and often specious, as though critical awareness were 'blinded' by the potency of its own prehistory. Referring to two examples from the Enlightenment of the 'scientific' relationship between fire and the reproductive system, Bachelard is unequivocal about the power of fire, whilst remaining fully cognisant of its limitations and overuses: 'By bringing together so many of these ridiculous statements, we have tried to illustrate a state of mind which fully *realizes* the most insignificant metaphors' (Bachelard, 1964, p. 48). I am not suggesting that Harrison would make any literal connection between, for example, the 'seminal vesicles' and the fires of life-vitality as did Jean-Pierre

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<sup>9</sup> In the Preface to Bachelard's book (1964), by Northrop Frye.

David in 1771, but that the prevalence of his application of fire metaphors may yield as much about psychological process as it contributes to poetic evaluation. Harrison would, in fact, have been a model case study for Bachelard.

The early part of Bachelard's analysis takes a particular interest in fire-reverie, and for the purposes of this early section of my own chapter, it would seem reasonable to explore Harrison's proclivity for seeking a return to the hearth and womb of memory. His poetry represents a heavy engagement with some of the pressing issues of the moment punctuated by regular retreats to the spurious safety of his remote, pre binary-conflicted consciousness. The notion of the 'return' has been noted by Neil Corcoran as a major source of both anxiety and poetic stimulation in Harrison's work (Corcoran, 1993,p.153), and corollary to the heightened emotion which is necessarily occasioned by anxiety, is a possibly misleading certitude. Peter Middleton and Tim Woods's instructive volume on the subject of literatures of memory suggests that the modern approach to historiography is characterised by the transcription of immediate or locally-shared experience:

Contemporary writers rely increasingly on scenes of recollection, witness and anamnesis to represent historicism in action – memory is assumed to be the making of history. (Middleton and Woods, 2000, pp.4-5).

One sub-text of this position allows for the poststructuralist possibility that history is negotiated by the writer, whose assumptions are then refracted and articulated as historical certainty. That this is probably true of Harrison, for whom memory of personal testimony is augmented by what Middleton and Woods refer to as 'pre-articulate forms of material – performance, imagery, sound and effects' – does not appear to disturb the substance of the grieving process, or the focus of fire through which that grief is commonly described (Middleton and Woods, 2000, p.3). V J day bonfires and subsequent cinematic representations of concentration camps serve to define, if not confuse, Harrison's formulation of a history which is as much a rehearsal of a compulsive nostalgia as an accurate representation of the material and emotional architectures of the past. The seductive fire trope, I believe, helps Harrison to negotiate a passage between reminiscence, historical representation and an uncertain future, but the whole is informed by a sense of the prescience of history which is unusually pronounced in this poet. Harrison's insistent recourse to memories of the early nineteen forties is to some degree

explained by the critic Lyndsey Stonebridge, who, in a compelling study of the reactions of British children to the second world war as retold through the literatures of the period, describes the presence of a psychically-charged anxiety in certain children which allows them to 'find a way of being in history without being subsumed by it' (Stonebridge, 2007 p.54). Anxiousness about the abstract presence of war is, for such personalities, more compelling than the actuality of air-raids. Stonebridge's analysis is persuasive and serviceable: Harrison himself appears to pick his way through the landscape of history with the help of a figurative torch of fire in order to illuminate childhood images which have remained at the forefront of his consciousness throughout.

The poet's commitment to the kinds of memory which pre-date his own social 'awakening' resembles a self-conscious abandonment to a period of unspoilt innocence, and perhaps reflects a failure of poetic will, or articulacy, or both.<sup>10</sup> The 'return' is a psychological retreat to the 'focus' alluded to earlier, whose origins, for Wolfgang Schivelbusch, unify and fulfil the most primitive compulsions of man :

The unity of the primeval fire is the source of the magic that fire possesses for archaic culture and mythology.  
(Schivelbusch, 1988 ,p.4).

Schivelbusch's analysis describes a period when fire represented an imaginative unity of utilities, before the 'civilising' phenomena of reason and causation separated and commodified those utilities into identifiable functions, such as heating, lighting and food production. Bachelard corroborates this compulsion at a psychoanalytical level :

In his happy solitude, the dreaming child experiences cosmic reverie, that reverie which unites us with the world. (Bachelard, 1987,p.96).

The warm narcosis of such an experience naturally acknowledges the possibility of negative inferences: particularly that the memorialized past may become a 'safe haven' from the dyspepsia-inducing pain of the present. The anxiety is conceded, again with an oblique reference to fire, by Harrison in the poem 'Pain-Killers:

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<sup>10</sup> Another form of 'return', to the love and sexual embrace of a spouse or partner, is prolifically used in Harrison's work, and the conceit has met with much criticism. Luke Spencer, Sandie Byrne and others have inferred a sexist objectification of the female in Harrison's approach, and possibly more significant, a facile abandoning of the critical faculties at crucial points of engagement. This phenomenon will be discussed further in Chapter Five.



[...] I curse,  
but silently, secreting pain, at this delay,  
the acid in my gut caused by dad's ghost -  
(CP, p.183).

The psychologist Otto Rank further underlines the importance of civilization's comforts such as the hearth, as 'durable substitutes' with which to 'replace' the intra-uterine safety of the womb. For Rank, such comforts provide a 'protective shell' against the trauma of existence in an act of subconscious mimesis of the early stage of life (Rank, 1929, p.99). The contiguous relationship, in Freud's terms, between the Life (*Eros*) and Death (*Thanatos*) instincts becomes evident here, for the regressive state is not far from a state of total abnegation masquerading as a craving for security. Harrison's poetry does sometimes indicate a tone of abandonment, to a place resembling that which he otherwise seeks ardently to avoid : oblivion and silence. That ice and fire have remained in close conjunction throughout his work excepting where, in recent times, the former appears to have overwhelmed the latter, is one measure of the paradox of attempted resolution. Freud's identification of the death instinct's regressive mechanism defines the desire for 'return' in terms which are as cold as stone, and far removed from the warmth of the womb: 'Most universal endeavours of all living substance (are)[...] to return to the quiescence of the inorganic world' (Freud, 1950, p.86).<sup>11</sup> His analysis makes an assumption that instincts are inevitably drawn into an orbit of death, though as Beverley Clack argues, the acceptance of mortality, even to the point of overshadowing life, 'provides a boundary for our experience, (making) our decisions meaningful' (Clack, 2002, p.130). The death instinct, from this perspective, and to paraphrase Marcuse, paradoxically strives to eliminate rather than to embrace destruction.<sup>12</sup> By this reading, the sense of death's immanence within, and imminence to, Harrison's imagination encourages a desperate need to avoid its natural conclusion, and sharpens his poetic focus in terms of a compulsion to broadcast his universal concerns about injustice, annihilation and silence. Aside from being a place of abandonment, the fireplace is a forge of ideas, and to this extent, life is embodied amongst the flames.

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<sup>11</sup> I will explore the relationship between the Life and Death instincts at much greater length in chapter five.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Marcuse (1998 , p.271) for a fuller analysis.

The 'hearth' of memory is womblike also in the sense of defining a secure repository for imaginative freedom, and whilst not intending to over-read psychological regression into his poetry, parallels clearly obtain between the poet's ongoing narcosis and the earliest forms of fire reverie. Confluent with the psychological elements of regression and reverie are the repetitious compulsions which mimic the beat of the pulse. For Harrison, the idea of poetic rhythm is intuitively predicated upon the heartbeat;<sup>13</sup> his work is visceral and appears to embody a connection with the guttural elements of reception. Northrop Frye, referring to William Blake, finds a metaphorical relationship between the idea of regeneration through fire and the physiology, and conceives it in an appropriate lexis:

On the level of an unconscious will to live, the hammer is the heart beat, the bellows the lungs and the furnace the whole metabolism of a warm-blooded animal.  
(Frye, 1962, p.253).

Frye's appropriation of these Hephaestean similes underlines an intuitive connection between fire, the coursing of the blood, and organic vitality. An early draft of Harrison's poem 'On Not Being Milton', undated but probably from 1971, extends a metaphor for the industrial manufacturing of regional demotic into a realm of fire and class resentment, by establishing a sense of origin and purpose:

the bad blood hammers in the heart  
blood fly (sic) like hot sparks from a forge.  
(from Book 26, *School of Eloquence* Notebooks, page not numbered).

If the poet's borrowed use of the expression '*cahier d'un retour au pays natal*' in the published version of the poem to some extent defines the *School* sequence, then the repository of memory may not be limited to region and class. The words form the title of a poem by Martinique poet Aimé Césaire which wrested ground away from earlier, formally euro-centric approaches to Caribbean poetry by establishing a sense of 'negritude', in the form of a 'return' to, and occupation of, the linguistic landscape of poetry by an indigenous and metonymic voice. Although parallels between Césaire's appropriation of language and Harrison's own sense of linguistic purpose must have

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<sup>13</sup> His mother's in particular. I say confluent because the awareness of his mother's closeness through her heartbeat is bound up with the fireplace, and the psychological security provided by both in wartime Beeston.

seemed irresistible at the time of the latter's engagement with the themes of the *School* poems, the Caribbean poet's words do not set limits on interpretation. I take Harrison's 'backward glance' to include a return to the realm of early childhood where the direction of language is formed, and the corollary associations of womb and heartbeat encourage it. The domestic hearth, particularly of childhood, appears to complement and nourish that same sense of vitality which is therefore delimited by Hallie Rebecca Marshall's otherwise unarguable assessment of Harrison's sense of rhythm: '[...] it is the metrical pulse that propels it forward and keeps it alive' (Marshall, 2009, p.43). Referring to the poet's own assumptions about the heartbeat and metre, Marshall overlooks the possibility of the presence of the extraneous element of reverie working a silent, and profound, ministry on the early imagination. The key to the importance of sustaining early memories of the family hearth, of the maternal heartbeat and of nursery rhymes, is continuity. In an interview with Richard Hoggart, Harrison underlines the centrality of life-affirming rhythm to his poetry and incidentally offers a fillip to Marshall's point:

The metre itself is like the pulse. That's what it's about. I don't have the heart to confront some experience unless I know I have this rhythm to carry me to the other side. It's an existential need, the metrical form, for me. (Hoggart, 1991, p.43).

For such an imagination, physiological repetition prefigures regularity of metre, constant re-visitation of theme, and delineation of those themes in metaphors, for example, of fire. In a persuasive analysis of the subject Bruce Kavin finds a potent affirmation of existence, a reinforcement of vitality and intensity, in the language of repetition, which, in turn, expresses 'its fundamental sympathy with the rhythm of our desires' (Kavin, 1972, p.94). Repetition for Harrison, like the banging of hammers in a furnace on the verge of decline, is a declaration of a desire for survival against the odds, or an assertion, to paraphrase Kavin again, of identity (p.185).

Harrison's sonorous moment of reflection in the final verse of 'Timer', a poem which, on a material level, recalls details of the poet's mother's cremation, underwrites, in the present tense for immediacy, a connection between the intimacy of the womb, memory, and the fragility of time as they 'sift' through the poet's fingers like incinerated ash. The metrically languid repetition of nouns reinforces the synchronicity of language's presentation with needful emotion, and therefore underlines Kavin's thesis:

It's on my warm palm now, your burnished ring !

I feel your ashes, head, arms, breasts, womb, legs,  
sift through its circle slowly, like that thing  
you used to let me watch to time the eggs.  
(CP, p.179).

The fragmenting of Harrison's mother's remains signals the end of a unified 'wholeness'. The metre's pulse slows to a near standstill at line two above as though in imitation of a death curfew or intimation of prescient departure. As much as the ring is a token of continuity, one psychological link, whose process of dissolution began in psychoanalytical terms with the tearing of the baby from the mother's womb, is irretrievably broken. For Anthony O'Hear, this rupture precipitates a crisis of separation which, for the sensitive, may only be mollified by a proclivity for abandonment:

In this emergence into a separate individuality the child begins to form a conception of a world of objects [...] as separate from itself, and threatening or benign, as the case may be. But the original rupture and its painful effects remain [...] For some people a subsidence into an oceanic sense of oneness with the world is the only way to compensate for the pain of the original rupture. (O'Hear, 1988, p.140).

Without intending to labour what would, in any case, be a highly speculative psychoanalytical reading of 'Timer', it seems likely that the final verse shown above is attempting to render a sense of 'oneness with the world', whilst somehow remaining outside of the realm of dissolution and finality on which the narrator reflects. The punctuated inventory of body parts effectively slows the pace of the poet's inner reverie as he enacts a ritual of cathexis<sup>14</sup> which is obliged, paradoxically, to accept the impossibility of any return or reconciliation. The survival of the ring in the crematory flames is therefore more than a metaphor for legacy and continuity of memory: it reminds Harrison of his own mortality.<sup>15</sup> The metaphor may, in fact, fail in terms of material verisimilitude. Although it is a most apposite figure for the ending of the fires of life, of ultimate dissolution, human crematory ash does not share the uniform properties of egg-

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<sup>14</sup> Cathexis' is a psychoanalytical term which describes the concentrated investment of emotional energy into a person or idea. That Harrison focuses very closely on these experiences corroborates the utility of the expression in the context of this chapter.

<sup>15</sup> Luke Spencer notes the significance of the idea of the ring as permanent parental legacy in 'Timer' and of grandparental legacy in 'Continuous'. (Spencer, 1994, p.83).

timer sand; it is largely coarse, contains many bone fragments, and would not readily sift through the fingers. To some extent, Harrison's intimate disclosure of what women of his mother's generation and class would refer to, generically, as the 'unmentionables', is foreshadowed by a lightly satirical and insightful fragment entitled 'Bodily Functions' which seems not to have gotten beyond notebook stage. The following verse precisely echoes the affectionate parodies of the characters of Cissy and Ada, as performed by comedians Les Dawson and Roy Barraclough, and brings the cremated inventory of 'Timer' into a sharp contrast of gathering finality :

'sanitary towel', 'cancer', 'circumcise'.  
'They removed' (sound up, sound down) 'her womb',  
functions too intimate for any word  
even when no child like me in the room  
pretending not to listen, overheard.  
(Poetry Notebooks, Book 5, p.105).

The means by which the poet draws closer to the memory of his mother in 'Timer' is construed, by one commentator - Antony Rowland - as tasteless:

Is this 'feeling' not indecent ? Pain is registered by the full beats on the ashes, head, arms and so on, but by focusing on parts of the mother, does he engage.....in the process of fetishising a corpse ? Since 'ring' now refers colloquially to the rim of one's anus, does the narrator imagine a scene in which he places his sticky paws on her burnt bottom ?  
(Rowland, 2001, p.179).

The pain to which Rowland refers *justifies*, for me, the imaginative exploration of Harrison's mother's body, and I can detect no hint of indecency except, perhaps, within the suggestive nature of this critic's prose. To some extent, Harrison's exposure of his mother's privacy reverses her own tendency to inhibition, much as the poems 'Marked with D' and 'Fire-Eater' give tongue to his father's inarticulacy. Both difficulties tend toward creating shrouds of silence, generating the kind of domestic disharmony suggested by Harrison's own early notebook scribbling : 'The atmosphere of my childhood was of the inarticulate and the unmentionable' (in Box 1, Journals and Commonplace Books, Book 3 – Undated, but c.1966).

For Bachelard, a sense of repose was anterior to the process of fire reverie for early mankind (Bachelard, 1964, p.14). The containment of fire within a domestic hearth encouraged a corollary sense of safe introspection, in turn providing a temporary, and

necessary, respite from fears both material and imagined. The 'slightly hypnotized condition' (p.3) which is characteristic of repose whilst gazing into a fire embodies one of Bachelard's central theses: that the scientific objectification of fire in terms of its chemical and physical properties offers only a limited interpretation of a much more meaningful set of relations. In a sense, fire remains impervious to scientific analysis. Its value, for Bachelard, consists in its relation to psychological experience, its power to elicit subjective emotional responses, and to embody generically identifiable attributes which strike a pre-existent chord within the individual and the collective psyche. Fire is figuratively fluid; it encapsulates recognisable aspects of experience such as the transformative and the vital, and is therefore highly amenable to mythopoeic, symbolic and metaphorical attribution. The title of Bachelard's book, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, gives the work an ontological patina, which is paradoxically undercut by its own poetic and impressionistic literary style. He was clearly aware of this inconsistency: the protean nature of fire lends itself to poetic exploration, and the philosopher gave preliminary notice of the likely outcome of his approach :

When our reader has finished reading this book he will in no way have increased his knowledge. This will not be entirely our fault, perhaps, but rather will be the price that must be paid for the method we have selected.  
(Bachelard, 1964, p.5).

A loss of repose is one of the prices that Harrison pays for an unblinking poetic engagement with the cruelty of domestic pain,<sup>16</sup> and the moments of near abandonment which sometimes disturb his longer disclosures embody a reaction to this disquiet. The drama of the poem 'Ghosts: Some Words Before Breakfast' (CP, p.73) flits in and out of engagement with the narrator's daughter's struggles with an unspecified accident injury, so as to cathect the pain of the memory of a hospital visit. The narrative is an impressionistic, present-tense stream of consciousness, which, were it not conceived within the oddly-selected formal structure of predominantly tetrametric couplets, would yield unlikely Modernist echoes. Moving from direct personal address to the suddenly

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<sup>16</sup> Harrison's compulsion to commemorate through poetry is presupposed by a binary awareness which was evident fifty years ago:

'How cruel it is that blight, like charity, is beginning at home'.

(from *Journals and Commonplace Books* c. 1956 – 1986. Box 1. Entry dated 29 Aug, 1959).

imagistic to the cripplingly concrete, Harrison's poem conveys a sense of movement around the corridors of Newcastle's Royal Victoria Hospital, and beyond to the darkened city. The highly subjective and personal tone which blends generations of females within the poet's emotional view, from matriarchal disquiet at conception outside wedlock, to the 'punishment' of stillbirth, to the broken body of the daughter, does not disguise an effective sense of foreboding.<sup>17</sup> Harrison's abandonment of locational and material registers in the central part of the poem exacerbates the feeling of mental isolation as the narrator loses his bearings in the waking-nightmare of his claustrophobic journey through the hospital:

Air ! Air ! There's not enough  
air in this small world. I'll suf-  
focate. Air ! Air ! – In each black  
  
PVC disposal sack,  
I see two of my dimensions gone  
into a flat oblivion.  
Weightless, like a stranger  
caught loosely flapping on my mother's grate,  
down corridors, a shadow man,  
I almost sleepwalk.  
(CP, p.75).

Harrison's reflexive consonantal vigour may grate against a subtlety of intention here, but I am more interested in how that same instinctual need once more calls on images of fire, or fire's detritus, to describe his memory of anaesthetic detachment. 'Strangers' are diaphanous tissues of ash that float above fireplaces, and with this image Harrison splices the memory of a simple childhood reverie with an amniotic psychological weightlessness which temporarily cocoons him against the brutal truth of his child's injuries. They are, as Neil Hairsine notes, a conduit to an embryonic state of mind, precisely as Coleridge intended in his poem 'Frost at Midnight' (Hairsine, 1997, p.169).<sup>18</sup> Where Coleridge's reverie is a mirror to his present reposed state perceived through the accretion of fireside memories, Harrison is describing his 'present' somnambulist state as a simulacrum of a childhood fireside fixation; in other words he is a 'stranger' to himself, if only briefly.

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<sup>17</sup> Noted at length by Sandie Byrne. (1998, p.13).

<sup>18</sup> S.T. Coleridge. *Coleridge – Poems*. 1963. Ed. John Beer. London : J.M. Dent & Son. p.138.

Genuine repose is compromised, however, by the binary knowledge that the narrator's insulation, like the elusive 'stranger', is wafer-thin.<sup>19</sup> I cannot, however, agree with Rosemary Burton that 'Ghosts' proclaims 'a remarkable visual quality' (Burton, 1991, p.29). Implicit in her view is a too-easy association between relentless inventories of locative nouns and efflorescence, as though the conjunction was bound to extrude words into view almost by an act of poetic will. The foregrounding of language and sonority in Harrison's poetry forces colour into the background despite the best efforts of the poet to throw advertisements and lengthy observational sequences into the mix. Sometimes, but rarely, reiterative linguistic aggression compels a morbid gaze at the 'sight' of the sound:

*our first (the one we married for)  
red splashes on a LADIES floor...  
inter urinam et faeces nasc-  
imur...issues of blood. You ask,  
as brought to bed you blench and bleed,  
then scream, insisting that I read,  
as blood comes out in spurts like piss,  
a bit of Pride & Prejudice. (CP, p.73).*

Repetition and reinforcing alliteration declaim some colour contrast here in much the same way that endemic use of fire references elsewhere in the poet's oeuvre attempts, and often fails, to create a visual field in opposition to the darkness of binary possibility.<sup>20</sup> The lack of linguistic delicacy alienates form from intention still further. Harrison's predilection for Augustan poetic structures is applied without a thought for the lightness of touch which might enhance the memory of a significantly prescient moment of contemplative fire-reverie:

Weightless, like a stranger caught

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<sup>19</sup> 'Ghosts' appears to have undergone several transformations prior to the final published draft. Harrison's daughter Jane's hospital recovery from a life-threatening accident precipitates an 'abandoned' reverie which is documented very movingly in the poet's handwritten diary, entitled 'Vigil Notebooks'. The emotional heart of the 'vigil' provides the poem's underpinning theme, though many other preoccupations from the poet's very early notebooks make a reappearance, particularly guilt and the strained relationship with his mother. A kaleidoscope of foreboding images precipitates, and also exacerbates, the narrator's sense of abandonment in the poem, a mood which is clearly presupposed by Harrison's tortured notebook entry: 'Numbness prevents me crying out aloud'. (in Journals and Commonplace Books c.1956-1986, Box 2, Book 15, undated but probably c.1966).

<sup>20</sup> '*inter urinam et faeces nascimur*' – (Latin). Translates literally as 'we are born between urine and faeces'. Harrison's use of St Augustine's phrase makes an irony of the struggle for birth, since the accompanying lines refer to his stillborn child.



loosely flapping on my mother's grate,  
(CP, p.75).

Effectiveness is spared, in part, by the assonantal 'caught / grate' which contravenes a characteristic rigidity of full rhyme, but the reader is attuned to hearing this kind of inflexible couplet form used in the service of satire. In the following example from 'The Rape of the Lock', Alexander Pope captures the essence of an imagined sylph whose physical presence is as flimsy as Harrison's flap of ash :

Transparent forms, too fine for mortal sight,  
Their fluid bodies half dissolv'd in light.  
Loose to the wind their airy garments flew,  
Thin glitt'ring texture of the filmy dew,  
Dipt in the richest tincture of the skies,  
Where light disports in ever-mingling dyes,  
(Pope, 1978, p.94).

In a sense, identification of contrasts between such syntactical delicacy and Harrison's industrial sensibilities is futile since he is probably incapable of expressing any form of fragility other than emotional, which he does, in any case, achieve to persuasive effect in the *School of Eloquence* sequence. The key to the success of the sequence, if success it is, appears to reside in sincerity of emotion which, in turn, becomes a shorthand figure for eloquence itself. That he is describing the lineaments of effective oratory need not render the Roman Quintilian's observation any less relevant in the context of modern poetry: 'Everything that is spoken honestly is spoken eloquently' (in Russell and Winterbottom, 1972, p.421). In 'Ghosts', Harrison is as honest to his own anguish as it is possible to be. The single image of a floating flap of ash dislocates time for him: a moment of remembered fireside reverie draws the past into the present, enabling abandonment to the defence mechanism of psychic 'weightlessness'. That the flimsy 'stranger' is, by easy metaphorical inference, as fragile as his daughter's broken body, is a paradox which strengthens, rather than otherwise, the power of these lines, and underwrites both the psychological necessity of the 'return', and the protean serviceability of fire imageries to best express it.

## Part Two - Elegy, Embrocation and the Empty Meter

The following lines from 'Book Ends I' straddle the ultimately subjective borderline between pathos and bathos, and return us to a further echo of the hearth and the failure of memory and reverie :

The 'scholar' me, you, worn out on poor pay,  
only our silence made us seem a pair.

Not as good for staring in, blue gas,  
too regular each bud, each yellow spike.

A night you need my company to pass  
and she not here to tell us we're alike ! (CP, p.137).

Just as the gas fire is a pale imitation of its coal prototype, the mutual silence between father and son gives a false impression of a unity which cannot obtain because of the cultural wall, reiterated metaphorically in 'books, books, books', dividing them (CP, p.137). The metrical evenness of the second couplet above, and indeed the lineation generally, embellishes the regularity of the gas flame's 'bud', though the poem is disturbed by the temporal shifts and calculated pauses which appear to betoken a numbing grief. Gazing into the fire in contemplation, as Harrison's narrator often does, is thwarted as an act of reverie by the crushing knowledge of domestic division, in spite of the raddled thread of love which, elsewhere, provokes irrational compulsions:

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.  
(from 'Long Distance II', CP, p.145).

Apropos of my earlier examination of 'the Morning After' poems, the process of memory cathexis may, in any case, be negotiated. Daniel Schacter gives a *de facto* cautionary view:

Extensively rehearsed and elaborated memories come to form the core of our life stories – narratives of self that help us to define and understand our identities and our place in the world.  
(in Middleton and Woods, 2000, p.299)

Schacter's resonant use of the words 'rehearsed and elaborated' hint at a negotiation which demonstrates the mind's infinite capacity for selection and readjustment. Harrison's constant reassertion of memorial identity may sometimes subordinate historical accuracy to the demands of effective mental exegesis. This sentimentalised attempt at making a 'connection' may reflect such a mental negotiation, with the express intention of binding the struggling poet within one of the many metonymic manifestations of the totemic letter 'O' - the family circle.<sup>21</sup> In an article about the poem 'v.' for *English Journal*, David Kennedy appears to corroborate the importance of a poetic contingency which derives its signification and significance rather from the demands of the moment of mental 'fixing' than from considerations of logical and linear presentation (Kennedy, 2009, p.163). Negotiated memory, then, may perform a disservice to historical authenticity which is necessarily subordinate to the signifying moment. In a sense, the *faux*-presence of the gas fire in 'Book Ends I' is a material manifestation of a process of ergonomic compromise and negotiation; its failure to provide psychological or literal warmth hints at a poor facsimile, and rehearses a break with the past which may itself be negotiated. But the moment of contemplation is of over-riding importance here: the psychological rupture of son from parent precipitates an *ennui* which *is* authentic, and the gas fire in which the narrator fails to 'lose' himself is the material measure of a severed link with the past.

More persuasive still, perhaps because they describe the unconditional love of a grieving widower, are these lines from 'Long Distance II':

Though my mother was already two years dead  
Dad kept her slippers warming by the gas,  
put hot-water bottles her side of the bed  
and still went to renew her transport pass. (CP, p.145).

The act of devotion is irrational, though plausibly so; its utility serves only the process of memory-work. Neither act can provide that connection which Harrison Senior and Junior both desire, rather as gas fires cannot replace the warmth of the memory of the inclusive family hearth, and the psychological abstraction which clearly accompanied it. In Harrison's film/poem *Prometheus* any fireplace focus is utterly lost, beyond that which draws the audience to the image of the permanently extinguished coal fire hidden behind

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<sup>21</sup> Sandie Byrne's long study, *H, v. & O* (1998) identifies several possible interpretations of the letter 'O' in Harrison's oeuvre, ranging from opposition, to the inclusive family circle, to the black circle of annihilation. My own work will engage with the binary implications of 'O' as they become germane to my concerns.

its 'one-bar electric' replacement (P, p.5). Here, the new post-industrial landscape is foregrounded in the form of the closure of the final Yorkshire 'pit', making a poignant symbol of the empty grate, which now resonates with the severing of universal, in addition to domestic, 'connections'. The gas fire of 'Book Ends I' is a similarly prohibitive utility to the inadequate electric alternative; its latticed regularity is a disincentive to 'dreaming', and a useful metaphor for Harrison's failure to connect with that period of innocence before his cultural 'awakening'. Where the simple exchange of the gas for the coal fire in a sense figures for Harrison's constrained imaginative liberty, the catalyst for domestic division is borne out of the poet's education.

In Ken Smith's poem, 'Family Group', psychological disruption is occasioned by the cataclysmic effect of a sudden change of socio-cultural surroundings. The narrator's father, who early in the poem enjoys a Wordsworthian symbiosis with his agrarian work landscape -

Horse and man in motion together, deliberate  
(in Silkin, J. ed., 1973, p.114).

- finds moments of reflective silence which are characteristic of the domestic hearth:

He was my father who brought in wood and lit  
the hissing lamp. And he would sit, quiet  
as moor, before the fire. (p.114).

The fireplace, like Harrison's of early memory, is a focus as much for describing the bond of family contentment as for presupposing an imminent poetic crux, which, in its turn, will result in a disfiguring of the narrative. The reader infers the effects of a slow-thawing narcosis as a natural consolation, reward even, for the bitterest end of winter farming :

Work angled him.  
Fingers were crooked with frost, stiffened. (p.114).

The narrator's clear inclusion in the bond of contentment – 'my father' is proudly proprietorial – reinforces the pathos of the closing lines where his parents' own emotional security is compromised by their new economic status of shopkeepers:

Nothing is made any more  
but money, that cannot be made. Nothing  
means happiness. (p.115).

The father in particular no longer possesses the intuitional antennae to recognise anything 'natural' beyond the ephemera of the cash nexus. His wife is at pains to draw language

out of him through the fireplace focus which is now lost to them, and, where they formerly found ironic contentment in silence...

She cannot ease him into speech, or be content  
before the broody fire. (p.115).

The unequivocal positioning of Smith's narrator respecting this 'negative' transition echoes Harrison's own grief and bewilderment at the erosion of his father's psychological security through age and bereavement. In both narratives it is clear that the formerly unifying energy of the hearth is now lost, though for entirely different reasons. Smith's parents experience a traditional process of deracination by the exchange of a simple agrarian culture for an urban, labour-saving strangeness which Craig Raine's Martian might recognise, where 'the light comes down wires, / water through tubes' (p.115). Harrison's father's grief is compounded by his sense of cultural dislocation; the anchoring locators of a former existence appear to have been transformed and undermined by, amongst other perceived disruptions, ethnic integration.

The enervating effect of gas fires appears to exclude the possibility of effective reverie, in the same way that the pace of twentieth-century social change provokes conservative reactions in those, particularly elderly people, who can trace such changes in measurable temporal fractures. Placing such a process of deracination in a sociological context, Wolfgang Schivelbusch describes the historical impact of the transition from a hearth-centred social universe to the gas-orientated municipal standardisations of Victorian Europe, and consequences which mirror Harrison's own sense of mental dislocation :

Removing the production of light and heat from the house gave this process a new quality. When the household lost its hearth fire, it lost what since time immemorial had been the focus of its life. Although refined and civilised over the centuries in the form of stoves, oil lamps and candles, fire had always remained clearly and physically recognisable as not merely a product but also the soul of the house [...] People gazing at a gaslight no longer lost themselves in dreams of the primeval fire. (Schivelbusch,1988, pp.28-29).

That the comforting aspects of the hearth have, to some degree, been replaced by the omnipresent domestic focus of the television, and in more recent times, by the solitary pursuit of internet browsing, seems an unarguable point, if one unaccountably overlooked by Schivelbusch. But the fireplace bears singular properties of contemplation-induction

which allow for the silent engendering of ideas often in terms of metaphor and oppositional contrast. It is instructive to consider that coal fires, or more particularly the kinds of gas fire which render the difference in appearance between the two negligible, have surged in popularity in recent years, almost as if popular culture was attempting to restore a lost locus, along with other nostalgias for an earlier incarnation. Harrison's isolated reflection in 'Book Ends I' finds, in the regular yellow spike, a measure of his own failure to restore the past in the present. For Istvan Racz, the reflection almost amounts to a more general compulsion - 'Harrison asks the question over and over again: what meaning can the culture of his childhood acquire in the present?' (Racz, 2005, p.121). Or to put it another way: is poetry, for Harrison, the final and only means of mitigating the pain of irreconcilable divisions separating present and past? It is significant that the mood of the following unpublished notebook fragment is a reaction to isolation, an emotion shaped by the municipal facsimiles of light and heat:

but when a person sits indoors, alone,  
in a room lit by one bulb and a gas fire  
the lonely heart can quickly turn to stone  
before the horrors of the Oresteia.  
(in Poetry Notebooks, Book 5, p.17).

The depressing sparseness of the room appears to encourage general reflection, within which is bound a cornucopia of particular failures and unrepaired domestic divisions. The thin gas flame and naked bulb are also conduits of a sort.

When Gaston Bachelard wrote that electrical illumination 'will never allow us to dream the dreams that the light of the living oil-lamps conjured up. We live in the age of administered light' (in Schivelbusch, 1988, p.178), he was referring to the violation of natural capacities of reflection. The sparse, isolated couplets of 'Book Ends I' are a mirror of the thin gas flame they describe, a shadow of the freeform dynamism rendered by the gift of fire in Harrison's reading of the Promethean myth. The gift also engendered action's obverse which is reflection, or in the poet's own words, '[...] the inwardness and poetry that came from its (fire's) contemplation' (Harrison, in *The Guardian* online, 24 Oct, 2009). Harrison's frequent 'regressions' would, measured against Bachelard's analysis, amount to a characteristic creative identity integrated around the idea of fire and its many analogous associations. For Bachelard, such associations are early, complex and intuitive,

the psychological foundation of what later may find poetic expression in simile and metaphor (Bachelard, 1964, p.vi).

Bachelard gives two specific instances of psychological integration which appear to associate the memory of childhood fire reverie with extraneous, but material, forms of comfort, where the comforting medium thereby takes on the manner of the inclusive, glowing hearth. One example will suffice to clarify his observation that ‘fire is the most insinuating of medicaments’ (Bachelard, 1964, p.8) in that it induces a near-synaesthetic integration of the senses, or disintegration of boundaries between those senses:

It would be a winter’s morning in our poor home. The fire would be shining in the hearth. They would give me syrup of Tolu. I can remember how I would lick the spoon. Where are they, those days filled with the warm smell of balsam and the hot aromas of the medicines ?  
(Bachelard, 1964, p.8).

Allowing for the fact that the writer’s own memory is subject to the same elegiac longings as his readers, and that memory perception may reinvent the past to satisfy the emotional demands of the present,<sup>22</sup> recurrence of the phenomenon across literature would suggest a commonly held experience. The following extract from Marcel Proust, is, in one sense, a metonymic shorthand for his central preoccupation in the compendious *À La Recherche du Temps Perdu*, an attempt to re-inscribe memory.

Where in icy weather the pleasure you enjoy is the feeling that you are separated from the outdoors [...] and where, since the fire is kept burning all night in the fireplace, you sleep in a great cloak of warmth, smoky air, pierced by the glimmers from the logs breaking into flame again, a sort of immaterial alcove, a warm cave hollowed in the heart of the room itself, a zone of heat with moving thermal contours.  
(Proust, 2002, p.11).

Proust’s titanic sentences and characteristic accretions of subordinate clauses create a ‘womb’ for the warmth of regressive return where actual and negotiated memories compete in an act of oblation before the fire. Such an act cannot evade the central focal point of the flames, and concedes the potency of them for engendering a kaleidoscope of abstraction. Harrison acknowledges Proust in the poem ‘Currants’ where one of his

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<sup>22</sup> The possibility seems to be admitted in Bachelard’s closing line, which echoes the elegiac tone of Wordsworth’s famous elegy for the ‘fires’ of youth: ‘Whither is fled the visionary gleam ?/ Where is it now, the glory and the dream ?’ (from ‘Ode : Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood’ – William Wordsworth, *The Poems –Volume One*. 1997. Ed. John O. Hayden. Harmondsworth : Penguin Books).

father's Eccles cakes takes on the properties of the hearth and becomes a focus for memory, much as the novelist's *petite madeleine*, which the poet refers to directly, is a shorthand figure for 'things past' (CP, p.164).

Excepting where the narratives collapse into culminating and characteristic binaries of loss and departure, Harrison's thematically 'twinned' poems 'The Beast with Two Backs' (CP, p.160) and 'Grog' (p.161), appropriate images of 'fire-infused' remedies as symbols of unity and partial domestic harmony. The fireplace is not visible in either poem but figures as a conspicuous presence in metaphors of 'warming' and 'healing', so that the process of blending is conveniently subordinated to Harrison's claim for familial integration :

Their sulks and marital misunderstanding  
were often healed by hot lumbago balm.  
I'd see one or the other cross the landing  
to wash the pungent fire off a palm.  
(From 'The Beast with Two Backs' CP, p.160).

Closed against the ongoing extraneous reminder of winter like Proust's narrative, the poem simulates the generation of psychological warmth in metaphors as much as Proust's retails it in literal terms. The essential spirit of the memory shares clear associations with the hearth because it serves the same unifying purpose: the balm eases and conjoins through the agency of heat. In psychoanalytical terms, such warmth occupies a space of remembered contentment emerging somewhere in the dream imagination, and resembling, in an appositely protean description, the interior of the womb:

The dream interior is warm, never burning. Dream warmth is always gentle, constant, regular. Through warmth, everything is deep. Warmth is the sign of a depth, the sense of a depth. (Bachelard, 1987, p.54).

The dignified ritual of 'grog-making' in the poem 'Grog' imbues the alchemy of the process of concoction and mutual warming with a mock-solemnity even as it unconsciously upholds stereotypical gender roles :

The whisky was Dad's solemn stewardship.  
She added honey, cloves and lemon. Steam  
perfumed with cinnamon rose as they'd sip  
from the spoon they'd stir together with, a team.  
(CP, p.161).

But the axis of meaning rests on the reiteration of terms of inclusion and togetherness which are balm to Harrison's childhood sense of place and purpose. A brief inventory of



expressions of unity – ‘healed’, ‘coupled’, ‘silently together’, ‘truly share’, ‘father, mother’, ‘mingle’, ‘stir together’, ‘a team’ – underlines the value of warming foci to these poems and to Part Two of the *School* sequence generally. In a comment about the significance of memory in Proust’s *magnum opus*, Herbert Marcuse places such an instinct for regression firmly in a Freudian framework : ‘Remembrance retrieves the *temps perdu*, which was the time of gratification and fulfilment’ (Marcuse, 1998, p.233). Aside from reinforcing the knot of the family ‘ties that bind’, Harrison’s repetition of terms of ‘togetherness’ attempts to restore a time of simple ‘gratification’ into the present as a barrier against the sense of death and oblivion with which, again by a Freudian reading, the poem’s own life force is contiguous. The warming vision of the past evoked in ‘Grog’ is therefore as ‘worth being fluey for’ (CP, p.161) as the medicament itself: an image of unity which describes the fixing of an historical moment outside of the realm of time and time’s inevitable atrophying tendencies. For Marcuse, Eros, or the life instinct, would here appear to position itself in a remembrance illusion temporarily suspended beyond the reach of death (Marcuse, 1998, p.233). Harrison’s use of images of warming medicaments succours such an illusion, at least until disharmonising inferences emerge in the form of marital schism :

Barring my begetting their flu grog-making  
was one act that I’d say they’d truly share.  
(CP, p.161).

The above is the voice of hindsight and supposition, and is one measure of a series of contra-distinctive registers which infect Harrison’s work.<sup>23</sup> Another is the unfortunate and slightly farcical ‘voice’ which threatens to undermine the elegiac tone of ‘The Beast with Two Backs’. Put simply, the *double entendre* of the title pun, and the comic intrusion of the cad-like Dr Sloane with his ‘waxed mustachios’, wrests the poem into the realm of Music Hall and the smutty postcard, and almost subverts its capacity for representing loss and separation. The clear sexual innuendo of a term like ‘coupled’, and the silent ministry of the doctor –

In the rheumatic North in icy weather  
dapper Dr Sloane with waxed mustachios

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<sup>23</sup> Harrison’s work is highly amenable to a linguistic analysis predicated upon M.M. Bakhtin’s theory of dialogic discourse. His work will be referred to throughout my thesis. See bibliography.

could keep my parents silently together  
touching the parts they'd sooner not expose.  
(CP, p.160).

- strain the elegy to near breaking-point through an insidious form of voyeurism in which narrator as child is evidently complicit: 'I'd see one or the other cross the landing' (p.160). The suggestion that Harrison's parents' relationship was, in any case, physically detached, is confirmed in both poems,<sup>24</sup> but the lack of intimacy doubly affirms the value of ritual in healing a division given metaphorical expression in the icy winds of the pun 'rheumatic North' (p.160). To reiterate: the strength of both pieces, but particularly 'Grog', consists in the poet's commitment to commemorating a union which is rehearsed through simple rituals of survival, in spite of the leakage of evidence of 'marital misunderstanding'. The balm, the warming drink, and the hearth which remains a palpable presence even *in absentia*, are the media through and around which such rituals are enacted. The final, binary representation of isolation in 'Grog' brings the narrative into the retrospective present and, for Sandie Byrne, attempts to replace the loss of the invisible other, presumably an absent partner, with a projection of self:<sup>25</sup>

My thermos flask of grog's one way I try,  
flu-racked and forsaken, to forget,  
when waking drenched and half-delirious, why  
the shape beside me's mine roughed out in sweat.  
(CP, p.161).

If the alliteration in line two above reinforces the narrator's sense of loss, it also serves to ironise his motive for drinking the grog; an act of commemoration is temporarily usurped by the desire, instead, to forget. This, and the weak attempt at a culminating binary in 'The Beast with Two Backs' need not represent the failure of Harrison's narratives to balance meaning, for both assert the predominance of the value of ritual in making a space for acts of assimilation, 'where both their loves could mingle' (CP, p.161).

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<sup>24</sup> 'What may have kept them coupled through such days' ('The Beast with Two Backs', p.160), 'Barring my begetting, their flu grog-making / was one act that I'd say they'd truly share' ('Grog', p.161).

<sup>25</sup> Byrne's text mistakenly attributes these lines to 'The Beast with Two Backs' (Byrne,1988, p.174).

The Memsahib's suicide in Harrison's adaptation of Racine's *Phaedra* subverts the notional signification of warming balm, in another, this time unambiguous, attempt at willed amnesia :

I chose another, slower way to go –  
there's poison in my veins, and beat by beat  
the heart that once was blazing loses heat.  
(from *Phaedra Britannica* in TW, pp.123-124).

Somewhat removed from Racine's version<sup>26</sup> of these culminating moments, Harrison's remodelling process subtly restores precedence to a paradoxical sense of continuity in the expression 'beat by beat', which also gives a coincidental nod to the rhythm and pulse of early memory, and the narcotic attraction of the, in this instance, ebbing heartbeat. The presence, in Harrison's imagination, of a contiguous association between the pulse, rhythm and various metaphorical attributions of heat and fire, appears to remain constant even where the requirements of seventeenth-century drama impose their own demands for authenticity. Elsewhere, the integration of Harrison's poetic consciousness with the memory of the domestic hearth allows the intrusion of a more profound existential 'darkness' which emerges most commonly in the form of dualities of life and death.<sup>27</sup>

Bachelard's decision to categorise his study under several convenient, and inter-related headings, is corroborated by the highly apposite nature of his choices. In chapter two<sup>28</sup> of *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, he appropriates one of the central definitions of Hölderlin's poem 'Empedocles' in order to describe the psychological duality which allows the integration of 'the instinct for living and the instinct for dying' (Bachelard, 1964, p.16). Beginning with the premise that even very early fireside reverie may engender oppositional mental signifiers - an idea neatly aphorised in the expression '(from) the hearth to the volcano' (p.16) - Bachelard goes on to suggest that the process of integrated reflection embodies its own form of resolution, thereby mirroring Empedocles's act of corporeal abandonment and certainty of spiritual regeneration. Empedocles's sense of

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<sup>26</sup> At least in John Cairncross's translation. See *Phaedra and Other Plays*. 1963. ed. E.V. Rieu. Trans. John Cairncross. Harmondsworth : Penguin Books.

<sup>27</sup> Sigmund Freud's associated notions of *Eros* and *Thanatos*, particularly in terms of the sexual imperative, will be investigated in Chapter Five.

<sup>28</sup> 'Fire and Reverie : The Empedocles Complex.' (Bachelard, 1964, p.13).

the symbolic primacy of fire to the idea of consciousness is difficult to define in modern, material terms. The philosopher Raymond Adolph Prier presumably does not overstate the importance of fire, and to a secondary degree, light, as ‘common symbolic denominators’ when he asserts that Empedocles, like the majority of pre-Socratic poets and thinkers, ‘conceived his universe in terms of this seminal experience’ (Prier, 1976, p.133). If Empedocles did hurl himself into Etna, his action would serve to authenticate the sincerity of his perception about the unifying power of fire. Drawn towards the cauldron, he envisages a resolution to the ultimate binary, and presumes to find life in death :

You look for life, you look and from deeps of earth  
A fire, divinely gleaming wells up for you  
And quick, aquiver with desire, you  
Hurl yourself down into Etna’s furnace.  
(Hölderlin, 1994, p.35).

The ascendancy of fire in Harrison’s poetry is heavily indebted to the symbolisms of mythology and of Christianity, and is particularly striking in one so clearly steeped in traditions of materialist humanism. The shaping of the poet’s work by these overwhelmingly significant influences adds further interpretational complexity to the simple act of fireside reverie. In a sense, his *modus operandi*, his frequent attachment to muscular demotic, stands in contradistinction to his attempt at metaphysical, Empedoclean resolution, creating a fundamental opposition within the work itself.

Such an attachment is established in the poem ‘Fireguard’ (CP, p.181) whose remembered fireplace is the focus for vivid and detailed memories and whose flames deliberately mirror the process of cremation. The poem’s one-dimensional slightness, perhaps even literalness, may account for the lack of critical interest, but it is sufficiently robust to withstand an examination. The simplicity of the central conceit, the memory of a ritual fire-lighting procedure, may have contributed to any negative perception. The use of vernacular in ‘You had to look sharpish with the fireguard’, and the onomatopoeic ‘clarted’,<sup>29</sup> nicely position the narrative in the post war West Riding, but do not, in

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<sup>29</sup> ‘Clarted’ : A West Yorkshire term which precisely describes, for me anyway, a thick coating of fatty substances. Harrison shares the expression with Sean O’Brien who puts it to effective onomatopoeic use in the cloacal ‘Acheron, Phlegethon, Styx’ (in *Cousin Coat – Selected Poems 1976-2001*. 2001. Basingstoke : Picador. p.155).

isolation, lift the evocation out of the realm of the prosaic ordinary. As an indication of Harrison's tendency to 'reach out' to the past through the medium of fire, the description embodies an ongoing attempt at an emotional resolution. Mother, father and son are drawn into a life-affirming, self-perpetuating, possibly self-sufficient, circle of continuity. The tenure of remembered happiness is temporary, however, a fact indicated by a sudden change of register after an enforced pause at the end of the second stanza. I quote the final four lines in full to give a flavour of the sharp transition which seems to waken the narrator from a dream of childhood certainty :

Why can't my memory home in on just that ?  
Through the griefguard round the glow we all sat near  
burst sputterings of polished pine and fat,  
then smoke I crane my neck at to watch clear.  
(CP, p.181).

The intrusion of imagined crematory details underlines the sudden failure of memory to provide consolation. The 'whiplash crack' of line three and the 'burst sputterings' of line fifteen amount to the same substantive, material image, but 'polished pine and fat' in the context of the final verse allow only one interpretation: the varnished wood of a coffin and the adipose tissue of a corpse in the process of reduction. The alliterative compound expression 'griefguard' echoes Harrison's interest in hybrid early English terminology, a lexis which is reconstituted widely in his translation of the *Oresteia* and in the poem 'The Ballad of the Geldshark' (CP, p.114). Here, the term conveniently divides the narrative of memory from an intrusively morbid imagining of finitude which gives no pause for psychological closure. The 'griefguard' is a paradoxical fireguard which offers no protection against the worst imaginings. The 'glow' the family shares in the second line shown is seamlessly devoured in the following one by the usurping flames of immolation. The petulance and literalness of the final verse's opening question shown above undermines Harrison's efforts to prepare the ground for the blending of images of celebration and of death. The final line of the poem signals a sudden and characteristic temporal shift into the retrospective present. In an image which compounds fireplace and crematory smoke, the narrator waits for the wraiths to disappear in order that the initial memory may be restored. The narrator's 'escape' into the material present is confirmed

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by a skyward visual elevation, the poet's neck craned upwards to see smoke emerging from the crematorium's chimney.

'Fireguard' is clearly not as devoid of value as the lack of critical attention would suggest. And if exposure of poetic intention is achieved too cheaply, the poem yet intimates the potency of memory and reverie as 'forcing-houses' for the creation of oppositions. Fire, and more pertinently fire's domestic associations, align the focus of Harrison's self-confessed need: 'this fire I learned to lay's what I most miss' (CP, p.181). But here, the hearth is less a prism for refracting memory than an insubstantial opacity, obscuring and redefining memory through disparate, not entirely successful, images of occlusion: hands 'clarted' with lard, grubby bread, and crematory smoke. If elsewhere in the *School of Eloquence* sequence Harrison is able to achieve the meagre consolation which, for Antony Rowland, is this poet's only alternative to nihilism, it is conclusively absent from the hopeless conclusion to 'Fireguard' (Rowland, 2001, p.211). Unless the act of remembrance itself may be seen as consolatory, Harrison here fails to achieve the 'balancing and ordering (of) the terrors through art and artifice,' which has been his sustaining mandate throughout (O'Hear, 1988, p.158). The culminating images of 'Fireguard' describe a process of transmogrification within the poem which is a characteristic device for the figuring of oppositions. Harrison transmutes a focus for unity and inclusiveness into a morbid image of loss and alienation. The metaphorical warmth of-

The best wood to make chips with for our fire  
was from bakehouse boxes Dad brought smeared with lard.  
It had a whiplash crack. Its sparks leaped higher.  
(CP, p.181).

-is soon supplanted by onomatopoeias of crematory consumption. The loss is described in terms both horrific and final, and the reader is left to question the efficacy of Harrison's representation. This technique is repeated in the subtler poem 'Continuous' (CP, p.154) where an image of a cinema organist dropping through the floor is juxtaposed with that of Harrison's father's coffin 'lowered' out of sight in the crematorium. 'Continuous' demonstrates a kind of sleight of hand which ultimately restores a sense of balance and continuity to the poet's process of cathexis. If the 'burst sputterings of pine and fat' of 'Fireguard' may conceivably embody an attempt to underscore Harrison's failure to maintain a reverie focus beyond the idea of purposeless finality, then the morbid nature

of the imagery concentrates attention away from his intention. 'Sleight of hand' is, in any case, a deliberate choice of term for describing Harrison's means of conjoining binary meanings. The poet's ongoing preoccupation with Music Hall and the macabre, and with popular working class culture of the post war period, finds expression in imageries of death and annihilation throughout his *oeuvre*.

If the hearth in 'Fireguard' acts as a pivot for the exploration of a relatively simple opposition, the fireplace in the poem 'Newcastle is Peru' (CP, p.64) is a centrifuge for the diffusion of several often conflicting memories and reflections. For Bachelard, the relationship between the act of contemplation and the hearth is very nearly symbiotic :

[...] it is the pensive man whom I wish to study here, the pensive man sitting by his hearth, in solitude, when the fire is as bright as if it were the consciousness of his solitude.  
(Bachelard, 1987, p.4).

The seemingly trivial incident of fire lighting becomes, for Harrison's narrator, no less than the central metaphysical focus for reverie, and for the externalisation of memories and associations bound within that inner solitude. The act of 'staring into the flames of the Shilbottle cobbles', as the poet notes in his essay *Shango the Shaky Fairy*, occasions the urge to brood (Harrison, 1991 (5), p.103). Or, to reach much further back, in Bachelard's psychoanalytical terms, the reverie may provide a portal through which the very earliest primal latencies may be realised. Towards the close of the poem, the fire 'flickers and struts' in a personification of organic vitality, as though it alone holds the key to the diffuse outpouring of images which litter an unusually complex narrative.<sup>30</sup> Sandie Byrne finds a logical coherence of memory and of poetic impression in the poem which would justify the miasma of actual memories, historico-geographical references, and apparently arbitrary temporal shifts (Byrne, 1997, p.66). Drawn by the fire and by increasing inebriation, the narrator is an Orlando figure in a vertiginous landscape of spatio-temporal dislocations which accrete to bind the particular and the universal, the geographically known and the unknown. For N. S. Thompson, the process of sudden associative recognition in the lines - 'and Newcastle is Newcastle is New-/castle is Peru! (CP, p.66) is

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<sup>30</sup> To the extent that the fireplace figures as a 'living' conduit for reverie and reflection, I am unmoved by Luke Spencer's preoccupation with Harrison's 'strutting' sexual arrogance and 'complacent masculinity' in relation to this image. (Spencer, 1994, p.37).

no less than epiphanic (Thompson, 1997,p.124); an affirmation which draws Peru and known geographical memories of Prague and Nigeria into an inclusive, boundary-less circle:

I look out over life and praise  
from my unsteady, sea-view plinth  
each dark turn of the labyrinth  
that might like a river suddenly  
wind its widening banks into the sea  
and Newcastle is Newcastle is New-  
castle *is* Peru !  
(CP, p.66).

The 'circle', to which I will return, elsewhere defines a binary 'Scaleless zodiac'<sup>31</sup> of emptiness, a terrible image of purposelessness once more associated with fire and its residua, this time in the form of the scorch-mark left by a bonfire. In 'Newcastle', the narrator falters on the brink of derangement, alcohol and flames producing both manic energy and paralysing enervation:

I lay down, dizzy, drunk, alone,  
life circling life like the Eddystone  
dark sea, but lighting nothing; sense  
nor centre, nor circumference.  
(CP, p.65).

Writing in an early review for *Stand* magazine, Anne Cluysenaar makes an affirmation out of the paradoxical 'life-light' which co-exists, textually, with the near-nihilism of the poet's reflection. The poem, for Cluysenaar, 'creates a living place and consciousness against a groundswell of nothingness' (Cluysenaar, 1971, p.74). The fireplace of 'Newcastle is Peru' is the catalyst for an explosion of images which describe this chiaroscuro interchange of affirmation, depression and morbidity through an inventory of historical and contemporary references.<sup>32</sup> And the shifting imagery reveals a simulacrum of geographies contained within a single reverie. Socio-cultural, economic and colonially-exploitative determinants render commonality through both universal consanguinity and guilt complicity.

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<sup>31</sup> From the concluding line of 'The Morning After II'. (CP, p.197).

<sup>32</sup> Cf Sandie Byrne's detailed account of this inventory in *Tony Harrison – Loiner*. (2007, p.59).



It seems clear from his early personal notebooks that Harrison's persistent awareness of such existential dualities is grounded if not in 'lived' experience then as vicarious witness, confirming Neil Roberts's suggestion that narrator and poet are generally one and the same (Roberts, 1990, p.156). A diary entry of 21 Jan, 1959, for example, describes an experience of reverie which conjures a very early incarnation of Harrison's tendency to infer universal, and subsequently inescapable, oppositional preoccupations, amongst the flames. With the benefit of hindsight, the reader may now 'locate' poetic explorations of the following description of universal pain in 'Newcastle is Peru', amongst very many other poems, of which 'The Morning After' alluded to earlier, and 'The Birds of Japan', are striking examples.<sup>33</sup>

I put the (banana) skin on the red coals of the fire and put fresh coal above it. It is screaming there like faraway souls in torment or a flock of birds on fire. I have put a stop to their agonies.

(Journals and Commonplace Books, Notebook 1958 – 1966, page not numbered).

Where the wanton hint of messianic control in the final sentence suddenly curtails the inevitability of abandoned reflection in this albeit brief prose extract, 'Newcastle is Peru' exhausts any sense of restraint in a deliberate act of fire-induced self-indulgence. Echoes of Robert Lowell's poem, 'Waking Early Sunday Morning' make a deeper connection, here, than the critic Luke Spencer is prepared to elaborate.<sup>34</sup> Lowell's attempt at breaking loose from existential anxiety finds mental respite in the instinctual purpose of the natural world :

O to break loose, like the chinook  
salmon jumping and falling back,  
nosing up to the impossible  
stone and bone-crushing waterfall-  
(Lowell, 1967, p.13).

But the willed reverie of the early part of the poem is consistently grounded by the 'stain' of reality which can be ameliorated neither by the 'self-deception' of organised religion,

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<sup>33</sup> Commemorations of the dead of Hiroshima, and birds 'cremated on the wing' (CP, p.203) over the same city, make up more recent manifestations of Harrison's earlier fireside reflection. The 'ghosts in the machine' of the poem 'Illuminations I' (CP, p.157) are, in one sense, a generic rendition of the dead of all holocausts refracted, with hindsight, through the viewfinder of a seaside slot-machine.

<sup>34</sup> Spencer notes the formal and thematic influence of Lowell's poem, particularly in its adoption of Andrew Marvell's eight line stanza with rhymed couplets. (Spencer, 1994, p.139).

nor, ultimately, by the fleeting pleasures of love and eroticism.<sup>35</sup> Lowell's internal dialectic is one with which readers of Harrison will be familiar. Harrison's compulsion to be similarly 'cut loose' is precipitated and fed by the flames, but the imageries created in reverie fail to provide the amniotic security of the childhood hearth. Where he is not enervated to the point of stasis, Harrison is drawn, through the fire, to the annihilative darkness which is one half of *the* predominant, not to say potentially over-subscribed, binary of his entire *oeuvre*. If Harrison is more secure in his belief in the anaesthetic power of eroticism than Lowell,<sup>36</sup> then their attitudes appear to converge in an acute mutual sense of cosmic infinitude. Both poets offer up images of joyless finality, and both find meagre scraps of consolation against the dark background of the unknowing, turning cosmos. Lowell, first, asserts a valedictory aestheticism which stands in counterpoint to the oblivious universe:

Pity the planet, all joy gone  
from this sweet volcanic cone;  
peace to our children when they fall  
in small war on the heels of small  
war – until the end of time  
to police the earth, a ghost  
orbiting forever lost  
in our monotonous sublime.  
(Lowell, 1967, p.16).

Harrison conveys annihilation through a characteristic, if not entirely consistent, use of the fire trope, where the 'end' is conceived in terms of the final dying of the fire's light. His affirmation of the human imperative is direct, and less subtle, than Lowell's:

At rest ! That last red flash  
as life's last ember turns to ash  
and riddled dusts drop through the grate  
around the heart. O celebrate,  
as panic screws up each charged nerve  
to cornering the next sharp swerve,  
Earth, people, planets as they move  
with all the gravity of love. (CP, p.67).

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<sup>35</sup> 'All life's grandeur/ is something with a girl in summer' (Lowell, 1967, p.16).

<sup>36</sup> Harrison's ingenuous expression of insecurity in 'I need / your shoulder with a desperate need' (CP, p.64), mirrors the failure of experience to replace the loss of childhood certainty. His obsessive reassertion of love and sex as antidotes to metaphorical darkness, and critical suspicion of his proprietorial attitude to women, will be examined in Chapter Five.

The process of fire-lighting, which occurs towards the beginning of the narrative, prepares the drunken 'acolyte' for an act of commemoration as much as of celebration. Clearly influenced by Harrison's youthful experience of 'picture-going', the urgency of the newspaper's fireplace consummation echoes the early cinematic convention of indicating the passage of time by showing daily newspapers, dates prominent, fading or falling out of view at speed. Here though, the idea of temporal continuity is appropriated for purposes of topical signification as much as for kaleidoscoping personal memory and speculative reflection. The newspaper's actual photograph of '.....mortar bombs/ smashing down Onitsha homes' (CP, p.65) burns literally, but also 'burns' into the imagination, foregrounding the absolute imperative of remembering the unheard dead who silently shadow the foreign news pages.<sup>37</sup>

A good draught and the fire roars  
like muted Disney dinosaurs,  
and last week's Sunday paper glows  
yellowish, its urgent prose,  
like flies across a carcass, spreads  
and fattens on the voiceless dead. (CP, p.64).

The final metaphor above is complex, and is conceived in characteristically brutal images which simultaneously describe the rapacity of fire, the 'urgency' of journalistic prose grown fat on its own hyperbole, and most crucially, the organic destruction of those whose voices have, by the time of publication, already become historical footnotes. But there might also be an obscure suggestion of re-birth amongst the carnage. As fire engenders life and the act of creation as much as destruction, organic corruption is accompanied by the simultaneous possibility of growth.<sup>38</sup> Harrison's 'flies across a carcass'

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<sup>37</sup> For Joe Kelleher, the urgent transmutation of newspaper into prose-embossed ashes and the transformation of topical imageries by metaphor, are symptomatic of the 'shifting fictive geography' which is a major characteristic of the poem. (Kelleher, 1996, p.14).

<sup>38</sup> Harrison repeats the idea in the play *Fram*. In a characteristically macabre description seen through the eyes of the character Johansen, two African stowaways are discovered, post-mortem and flyblown, in the wheelbay of a jet :

'Garbed not in furs but flies  
Each one garbed and breaked and hooded by a black  
Flocking, buzzing, feasting, heaving anorak'. (F, p.93).

The black 'cloak' of flies make an irony of the notion of body heat in the context of death, particularly as the bluebottles themselves are thriving amongst the 'putrescence'. The image of the boys, found huddled together 'against the gnawing cold', sounds a faint, very faint, echo of affirmation.

are closely reminiscent of Virgil's agrarian image in *Georgics III* where dead oxen were popularly supposed to have been 'hosts' for embryonic bees.<sup>39</sup> Harrison is likely to be aware of the significance of Virgil's interpretation, and indeed, makes reference to the work in a different context in 'Cypress & Cedar' (CP, p.260). The cosmic circularity to which I alluded earlier is anchored in classical notions of continuity, and excepting where the circle is obliterated by the omen of complete darkness, Harrison's work consistently hints at the unlikely possibility of growth. It is a characteristic of the poet's longer poems, if not of his entire body of work, that great binary symbols attempt an ethical synthesis which is as practically unachievable as the utopian social model deriving from Marx's theory of dialectical materialism. But the unlikelihood of a resolution does not inhibit Harrison's compulsion to fashion connections by the application of opposing signifiers such as fire and ice, and light and shade. Each clamours in audible but monochrome competition, leaving the reader deaf and baffled at the failure of such a relentless strategy to put colour on the canvas.

That this thesis is attempting to explain and define the origins and effectiveness of the fire trope to Harrison's poetics does not abrogate critical responsibility, despite its clear agenda to engage with the preoccupation rather than to assess the general value of his work in the contemporary canon. I hope, indeed, that I have amply described the limitations of such an obsession throughout the foregoing chapter. I also hope to have demonstrated the significance of the mental 'return' to Harrison's poetic *raison d'être*, as it is characterised and defined by prominent use of imageries of fire. Using Bachelard's model of fire-reverie as a psychological touchstone, I have attempted to measure the depth of Harrison's compulsion to celebrate and restore historical memory through the focus of the particular, in the form of reverie and the domestic hearth, and the universal in the shape of the communal bonfire. To a degree, Harrison's work establishes its own

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<sup>39</sup> The close proximity of famine and death to the Roman farming community is likely to have sharpened the significance of the simultaneity of birth and corruption, or of birth engendered in corruption, to the general imagination. The following lines from *The Georgics* combine agricultural advice with poetry, and illustrate the notion of death and re-birth in death, as the razed field prepares the ground for new life :

'It is often helpful to fire the empty fields.

The tall stubble goes up in a splutter of flames'. (in Virgil, 1982 , p.31).

framework of linearity. As observers, it is possible to infer in the Blakean sense, a transition from innocence to experience, with the darkness of annihilative silence stalking the margins of an ongoing negotiation between the two. Reverie imageries, for which the domestic fireplace is the central catalyst in the poem 'Newcastle is Peru', collectively embody an elaboration of this negotiation. Fire, as the classicist Raymond Prier notes of the ancient Greeks, gives that negotiation room to breathe and expand and fill a space in the imagination, as flames '[...] when mixed with spices allow a man to name anything according to his pleasure' (Prier, 1976, p.65). It is both instructive and ironic to note, therefore, that Harrison's recent failure to engage positively with either critic or public has been achieved with an almost total abnegation of interest in the fire trope.<sup>40</sup> The connection with the hearth of memory seems finally to have been severed in age, and it is tempting to view this development as the nether end of an inevitable poetic progression.

It is also significant, I think, that Harrison's last major attempt to encompass all of his preoccupations in one work, the film/poem *Prometheus*, should tackle each preoccupation through the focus of fire. *Prometheus*, which I will examine at length in chapter four, foregrounds particular and universal concerns through the agency of a protracted gaze, in Peter Robinson's words, 'into the nightmare fires of the twentieth century in order to forge an art that can withstand and face up to contemporary ills' (Robinson, 1999, page not numbered ). Whether it fulfils this somewhat grand claim is questionable. But in the context of the tenor of this chapter, reverie, as it is experienced by three of the central human characters in the film, sums the essential range of fire's narcotic powers as they are described in Harrison's earlier work, and as they have been examined here: the young boy fascinated by a match's flame (P, p.7) evokes an awakening awareness of a world beyond the immediate; the 'Mam/lo' figure persecuted by the spectres of Force and Violence finds brief repose in the animated flames as 'she sleeps with firelight dancing on her face' (P, p.59); and finally, the 'Old Man' is reduced from class-defiance to the tears of fifty years of hindsight in the reflective duration of a

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<sup>40</sup> I refer here to Harrison's poetry since *Laureate's Block*, which turned out to be a more prescient title than was perhaps intended. His relatively recent play, *Fram*, applies the fire trope liberally, but, like the themes it describes, the narrative exudes an air of valedictory summation which renders its usage facile, at best.

cigarette's smoke (P, p.48). It barely need be added that the autobiographical Harrison is fully conspicuous behind all three.

## Chapter Two

### The Shadow of Christianity

'The strongest mental swimmer drowns in God;  
I find my depths in lesser things like love.'<sup>41</sup>

#### Part One - The Infernal Gulph : Injustice and the Wolves of Memory

The tendency of critics is to seek a materialist context for Harrison's vigorously vocal outpourings, since his central aims are perceived to be inscribed within the parameters of class and the expression of class injustice through language. Sandie Byrne is only one exemplar of a convention which gives pre-eminent credence to the characteristic material registers of a working-class Leeds now viewed from an insecure temporal and cultural distance by the poet.<sup>42</sup> Byrne appropriates Yeats's expression 'foul rag and bone shop of the heart' (Byrne, 1998, p.39) to encapsulate the detritus of emotions and object-images fused in memory, but fails other than superficially to ascribe significance to the vestigial workings of the Christian tradition on Harrison's imagination. Anthony O'Hear finds no contradiction in the demands of a generally 'irreligious intelligentsia' for spiritual consolation, in part because religious rituals are inherent within that same cultural

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<sup>41</sup> Tony Harrison, from a fragment of a poem called 'The Mysteries' in *Juvenilia*, page not numbered. (See bibliography)

<sup>42</sup> The index to Richard Hoggart's seminal work, *The Uses of Literacy*, reads like an inventory of Harrison's own local signifiers, and tends to confirm the authenticity of his diagnostic, yet affectionate sociological portrait of post-war Leeds. I will refer to Hoggart's study throughout the thesis. (See bibliography).

heritage: 'For our artistic tradition is a tradition formed and informed by religious and Christian spirituality' (O'Hear, 1988, p.127). The rudiments of church or chapel, which have only become detached in recent generations, were fundamentally rooted in working-class cultural traditions of the West Riding throughout the nineteenth century and up until the post-war period of the twentieth, even amongst a predominantly non-churchgoing public. That scant evidence of Harrison's childhood participation in religious ceremony exists does not preclude the likelihood of the poet's indirect and early exposure to the heavy and simplistic symbolisms of Christian doctrine. The many references to the notions of sin and guilt in the early notebooks of his personal archive at Leeds bear this exposure out. One particularly striking example from an undated but early entry indicates a more than passing, and old-fashioned, emotional involvement – 'Christ's blood cleanseth us all from sin' (Juvenilia, Book 15, page not numbered). The point I am attempting to make here is that an intuitive knowledge of the ideas of punishment and redemption, together with the indispensable corollary association of fire as a biblical metaphor for both, would be present in Harrison's imagination long before he acquired the power to respond to them in serious poetical terms. Rick Rylance, whilst reiterating the established perception of Harrison's driving impulses, acknowledges the presence of embedded associations:

The religious register of Harrison's work is widely evident. His atheism is partly political, and concerns the relationship between the clergy and the legitimation of the status quo [...] but Harrison also [...] associates Christianity with guilt and psychological repression. (Rylance, 1991, p.62).

Rylance's final comment here is ambiguous. Does he mean the kind of crushing guilt inflicted by a repressive church, or is he referring to Harrison's own submission to it? As experienced by the poet himself, the working through of guilt is an unarguable underpinning mechanism for a large part of the *School* sequence, particularly that which is occasioned by the poetry *he* creates. It is ironic that Harrison's poetic lexis failed to connect with his parents in spite of the concessions to mawkishness and simplistic over-exposure which are a linguistic consequence of his desire for atonement. In any case, the poet's direct engagement with his own history risks making a sentimental casualty of the language he appropriates for the specific purposes of connection. Judgement here, as outlined earlier in my thesis, is inevitably subjective as is Rylance's contention elsewhere



that Harrison's solipsism tends to render one-dimensional the community he obsessively describes (Rylance, 1997, p.139).

Harrison's own unambiguous motivation, which concludes the poem 'Confessional Poetry', externalises a psychological compulsion:

I'm guilty, and the way I make it up's  
in poetry, and that much I confess.  
(CP, p.139).

Assuming that the poet is not 'making it up' in the sense of telling lies, his declaration will fail, at least as much as the mimetic and illusory language of religious atonement in which it is conceived, to re-establish the broken socio-cultural connection with his family and his displaced Leeds origins. The determination to write is compendiously manifested in Harrison's early personal notebooks, and it appears clear from the following example, unless the final religious injunction is intended ironically, that guilt, particularly at inertia and/or the sexual urge is a vital component of the twenty-one-year-old's artistic commitment :

I tried an experiment today. Whenever my mind dwelt upon trivia, or when I felt the stimulations of lust or wilfulness, I repeated within myself :  
'Almighty Lord, have mercy on this sinner's soul.'  
(Journals and Commonplace Books, notebook entry of 10 Jan, 1959).

Similar attempts at expiation are enacted throughout the early notebooks, and it is clear from several such textual entries that where perceived inaction, laziness, sexual incontinence or a sense of personal fraudulence threaten to destabilise Harrison's artistic coherence, both God and the Protestant work ethic are invoked in order to restore the will to redemption through hard graft. Harrison's renowned capacity for self-reliance and hard work especially through the media of note-taking, endless drafting and re-drafting, are cultural echoes of an earlier period of Presbyterian mental economy where a sense of guilt at indolence yielded at least one motivation for industriousness.

Where, in Harrison's poems, we infer guilt which is not explicitly admitted, the reader may or may not be emotionally persuaded by the narrator's enactment of redemption through domestic fireside meditation:

I stare into the fire. Your skinned skull shines.  
I close my eyes. That makes a dark like mines.  
(from 'Working', CP, p.135).

The characteristic use of fire as a catalyst for reflection and atonement, and the mantra-like juxtaposition of foreshortened clauses underline a genuine empathy, particularly for overlooked historical footnotes such as teenage Victorian 'coal-getter' and drudge Patience Kershaw, who was hitherto excluded by the bourgeois world of words with which the poet is necessarily complicit. To the degree that an unknown existence has at last been acknowledged by an albeit small modern poetry-reading audience, Harrison's deliberate use of a complex, Anglo-Saxon lexis of compound nonce-words in the second verse of the sonnet both does and does not adduce the relative usefulness of words to make a difference, particularly as his assumption is disingenuous:

Patience Kershaw, bald hurrier, fourteen,  
this wordshift and inwit's a load of crap  
for dumping on a slagheap, I mean  
*th'art nobbut summat as wants raking up.*  
(CP, p.135).

'Raking up', a term once more expressive of the deep infiltration of the fire trope in the poet's imagination, combines a suggestion of the ashes of human detritus with a binary claim for reiterative, phoenix-like commemoration. A 'raking up' draws the iniquity of the past into the present, and is intended to reinforce the continuing efficacy of expressions of collective guilt.

When, in *The Uses of Literacy*, Richard Hoggart made a very broad assumption about the reception of Christianity by the working class in nineteen fifties Leeds, he identified a kind of adumbrated understanding which harnessed the general ethical schema of religion whilst paying lip-service to its metaphysical possibilities. Put simply, 'Christianity', for those who sought to put food on the table and maintain a semblance of respectability in a period of austerity, was 'morals' (Hoggart, 1957, p.117). The Methodist preachers of this period, those 'with what admirers called the "gift of tongues"' (p.118), were direct descendants of nineteenth century-peripatetic Wesleyans like Samuel Keeble, who preached to the working class poor of Leeds between 1887 and 1890. Keeble had read and approved of Marx's *Das Kapital*, presumably having recognised a confluence of ideological commitment in the otherwise mutually exclusive philosophies of spirituality and materiality. He concluded that 'purified Socialism is simply an industrially applied Christianity' meaning that Christian moral imperatives found a close approximation in

Marx's utopian vision of human equality, even if the latter necessarily stopped short of appending the suffix, 'before God' (Benfield, 1994, p.83). One of the theoreticians of the Christian Socialist movement Frederick Denison Maurice, perceived no obstacle to an accommodation with embryonic forms of radicalism such as Chartism, even where the underlying philosophy of such movements tended towards atheism. Profound recognition of the terrible conditions amongst the manufacturing classes justified a teleology based on equality before God, and provoked an early attempt to shift religious emphasis away from the ideas of repentance through prayer, fasting and rigorous discipline, all of which overlaid material servitude with an extra, and unsustainable, psychological patina.<sup>43</sup> Keeble, amongst many contemporaries, may also loosely be termed a Christian Socialist, and it is possible to infer from this Victorian expression the origins of a religious social conscience which have infected the interim period in every morally problematic arena from the Holocaust to the Peace Movement, and has finally precipitated an occlusion of faith by humanist concerns, in the clergy itself. That the Rev. Donald Soper and the late Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins, came to publicly question literal interpretations of the Bible is one indicator of a tectonic shift in Church thinking which began, in the middle nineteenth century, with the first tentative suggestion that scripture be divested of its sharper dogmatic elements in order to diffuse the explosive debate between faith and reason.

Although there is unfortunately no evidence of any explicit connection with non-conformism in either his notebooks or poems, it seems likely that Harrison's own heightened social conscience is an oblique and partial resonance of that same Leeds landscape which heard Keeble declaim against the greed of the local plutocracy fifty years before the poet's birth. Inferences are persuasive. The notebooks, especially the earlier ones, and as I will indicate throughout this thesis, are bursting with references to Christianity: tantalizing glimpses of what seems at times very like a species of faith, though contradicted at every turn by repulsion. The inconsistency is pertinent, and is reified by the presence of fire both in the poet's notebooks and in subsequent poems. It would be silly to claim the status of religious 'tub-thumper' for Harrison, but the fact remains that his conscience, and the compulsion to apportion blame for injustice, produce

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. Jay (1986, p.63) for an elucidation of this theme.

a rhetorical admixture which is able to declaim an intellectual humanitarianism in the unlikely strains of John Wesley. The self-proclaimed artisan-wordsmith Harrison is clearly aware of the provenance of a declamatory, public verse tradition as it was manifested particularly in the early period of industrialisation in Yorkshire. Indeed, the whole of one of his nineteen seventies notebooks is devoted to an examination of nineteenth century working-class poets including John Nicholson, who eventually formed the basis of Harrison's play *Poetry or Bust*.<sup>44</sup> He is also clearly indebted to the potency of the fire symbol to that tradition, as it suggested the insinuation of religion in all socio-cultural intercourse. The Sheffield public balladeer, Joseph Mather (1737-1804), a Methodist by influence and inclination, provides a rough-hewn template for Harrison's acute sense of injustice, and declaims the visitation of fire and evisceration upon the oppressors of the working classes, in this instance the 'mester' cutlers of South Yorkshire :

And may the odd knife his great carcass dissect,  
Lay open his vitals for men to inspect,  
A heart full as black as the infernal gulph,  
In that greedy blood-sucking bone scraping wolf.  
(in Vicinus, 1974, p.23).

The formal limitations of the verse seem secondary to the calculated appeal to Mather's contemporary audience, whose taste for the morbid would be satisfied possibly more fully than its desire for retributive justice. Harrison's public verse is similarly rough-hewn and sometimes subordinates precision to the *Sturm und Drang* of effective emphasis. He is also poetically vengeful, and it would be tempting to adduce an artisan-class independence of mind of the sort that exercised the Victorian clergy of Leeds, were it not that the connection is obscured by the poet's cultural and intellectual distance from his local ancestry:

Yet in a great industrial city like Leeds there was a thickly visible stratum of men and women who were generally held to be socially and politically unreachable.  
(in Vicinus, 1974, p.81).

Harrison shares the obstinacy if not the ignorance of this class of people and uses it to denounce iniquity in a language of revenge which mimics the vigour of non-conformism. His outrage is messianic yet simple and does not demur at the naming of names,

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<sup>44</sup> Book 30 in the *School of Eloquence* notebook collection.

particularly of those associated by posterity and the present, with fundamentalism in all its castes. It is significant, in this regard, that Harrison is drawn to the utility of the fire binary in his selection of pivotal and damning poetic images. Very early in the narrative/diatribe of *The Blasphemers' Banquet*, he occupies the imagined voice of Voltaire to describe an act of brutality which precisely encapsulates the clinical efficiency and the injustices of contemporary French Catholicism :

A boy in Abbeville for having sung  
a mildly blasphemous ballad had his tongue  
ripped from its roots, and on his blazing body  
my *Philosophical Dictionary* was flung.  
(CFP, p.138).

The child is burnt for punishment, and responsibility for his fiery metaphysical purgation is laid at the feet of a rabid clerisy. His literal reduction to muteness becomes a metonym for an historical silence which is redeemed only through Voltaire's pen. In a fundamentalist inversion of the Latin expression used by Dante as a justifying framework for degrees of divine retribution manifested by extreme levels of fire and cold - *Ordo Poenarum* - the punishment clearly does not fit the 'crime'.<sup>45</sup> Harrison is seduced by this single, clarifying image as a focus for anger, and if some potency is conceded here and elsewhere in the written text, it is restored in the measured, alliterative vigour of the poet's voice in the television version, a medium for which the poem was in any case conceived. The anger, however, remains unequivocal.

Harrison does not conform strictly to the Freudian psychoanalytical model by repressing any personal guilt the better to deal with a sense of complicity: instead, he externalizes universal injustice graphically whilst conceding humanity's part in its perpetration.<sup>46</sup> The philosopher Herbert Marcuse's compelling description of ongoing human atrocity embodies Freud's definition of the purpose of the instinct for repression :

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<sup>45</sup> See Rachel Falconer (2005, p.14) for a fuller explanation of the meaning of *Ordo Poenarum* .

<sup>46</sup> Harrison corrects the invective of the poem v. throughout with the suggestion that previous generations have shaped the marginalisations and desecrations of the current socio-cultural landscape. See 'It isn't all his fault though. Much is ours' from v., amongst several other admissions. (CP, p.267).

Not those who die, but those who die before they must and want to die, those who die in agony and pain, are the great indictment against civilization. They also testify to the unredeemable guilt of mankind. Their death arouses the painful awareness that it was unnecessary, that it could be otherwise. (Marcuse 1998, p.235-236).

For Freud, we cope with the horror of our complicity in the making of victims only through the mechanism of repression, and it remains the compulsion of poets like Harrison to 'scratch' the 'itch' of guilt to the point of bleeding, in the service of the silenced many described by Marcuse. He is, in many respects and particularly since the public airing of *v.*, a performance poet to many observers. His art is an externalisation of an inner urge coupled with an actor's talent for mimesis. In this measure only, Harrison resembles the lay-preachers of early twentieth-century Leeds, who remained within the psychological bosom of the working-class community whilst enjoying middle class powers of expression:

They were 'one of us', with what admirers called the 'gift of tongues' but doubters knew as 'the gift of the gab'. [...] The heat of all this has long since died down, but many working-class people can today, on occasion, produce a flicker of the old fire. (Hoggart, 1957, p.118).

Where Victorian non-conformism provoked observers into metaphorical descriptions of linguistic enablement through transformation -

The speaker is on fire throughout, but it is not in occasional flashes of flame that the fire appears, but in the sustained white-heat of the furnace. (Jay 1986, p.90).

- Harrison prosecutes the iniquities of fundamentalism, censorship, foreign policy and class, generically, and sometimes in an unsubtle tongue of barely-controlled spite :

O gentlemen, a better way to plumb  
the depths of Britain's dangling a scholar,  
say, here at the booming shaft at Towanroath,  
now National Trust, a place where they got tin,  
those gentlemen who silenced the men's oath  
and killed the language that they swore it in.  
(from 'National Trust' – CP, p.131).

Here, the poet attempts the restoration of a lost regional lexis through the medium of commemoration. The characteristic *mea culpa* of guilt through scholarly complicity does not, however, disguise the central iniquity and a near-audible element of *Schadenfreude*

infects Harrison's tone respecting class redress. The bellicosity of his posturing echoes both Keeble's diatribes, and the attitude of certain eighteenth-century Wesleyans to whom E. P. Thompson refers in *The Making of the English Working Class*:

It was possible not only to imagine the 'reward' of the humble but also to enjoy some revenge upon their oppressors.  
(Thompson, 1968 , p.37).

Harrison, in 'National Trust' and elsewhere,<sup>47</sup> does appear to revel in his own polemic and it is with no irony that his atheism is declared in similarly strident tones,<sup>48</sup> even where that atheism may disguise the possibility of agnostic uncertainty, as Part Two of this chapter will hope to demonstrate. His unambiguous rhyming of the words 'Nazareth / Death' in the poem 'The Heartless Art' (CP, p.234), which yields for Luke Spencer a clear indication of the polarisation of death and the futile hope of resurrection, may not, when all things are considered, give conclusive evidence of an imagination closed to religious suggestion.

The process of institutionalised 'chastening', such as we find in the following mantra from the early Wesleyan church, would have fallen heavily on particularly youthful working class imaginations :

There is a dreadful hell  
And everlasting pains,  
Where sinners must with devils dwell  
In darkness, fire and chains.  
(Thompson, 1968 , p.400).

The application of metaphysical threats found a natural consonance with the imperatives of market forces so that a dereliction of employment duty might result in an eternity of misery. Thompson notes the testimony of one little girl to the Commissioners on Child Labour in the Mines, which confirms the ergonomic efficacy of such a concordance :

If I died a good girl I should get to heaven – if I were bad I should have to be burned in brimstone and fire. (Thompson, 1968, p.415).

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<sup>47</sup> See, particularly, 'Them & [uz]' II, where Harrison is declaring an affiliation with his class at least as much as with the language of that class :

'So right, yer buggers, then ! We'll occupy  
your lousy leasehold Poetry.' (CP, p.134).

Martha Vicinus, referring to the maintenance, in the nineteenth century, of dialect traditions amongst the literate working classes, paraphrases a contemporary attitude of loyalty and antagonism, simulated to some degree, by Harrison's poem :

'my region and its culture against the rest of the country.' (Vicinus, 1974, p.190).

<sup>48</sup> 'I get it all from earth my daily bread.' (CP, p.168).

The girl is persuaded, presumably no less than Harrison's Patience Kershaw, that duty is a precondition of metaphysical salvation. For her the 'chains' of divine punishment are therefore also mental in the sense that they necessarily shape and restrict her behaviour and attitudes in life. There is little need to labour the incidence of precedents of fiery purgation any further as they were a historical commonplace, but the infinite variety of examples, with attendant social injustices, stalk Harrison's imagination like shadows. The blurring of boundaries between the material and the metaphysical, the bringing forward of purgation from the after-life into the corporeal, demonstrates the kind of binary attribution of fire which is further clouded by unjust practices. In a rare departure from the backward-glance of lived experience, Harrison embeds his narrator in the historical context of sixteenth-century Spain in the poem 'Nuptial Torches', the better to describe the arbitrary cruelties of an ostensibly Christian era. His occupation of the sexually brutalised imagination of Queen Isabella lends authenticity to the concurrent fire imagery, even as it is applied in questionably voyeuristic tones:

O let the king be gentle and not loom  
Like Torquemada in the torture room,  
Those wiry Spanish hairs, these nuptial nights,  
Crackling like lit tapers in his tights,  
His seed like water spluttered off hot stone.  
(CP, p.62).

For Harrison's unifying, connective mindset there is little to choose between Torquemada's Inquisition and the psychological tyrannies of the idea of divine punishment in the early days of industrialisation: all are conducted in the name of religion and all are repressive and iniquitous. It is significant that his panoptic view of history obtains a picture of the outline of injustice whilst failing to locate differences in the detail. His panacea, whilst sincere in tone, undermines a frequently confrontational poetic engagement with occasional acts of near abandonment, almost as though his characteristic urge to make injustice public were compromised at every turn by his failure to resolve the depressing concurrence of it.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> One reading of Juvenal's aphorism '*Insanabile cacoethes scribendi*', echoed by Harrison in his own prose (Harrison, 1991 (2), p.33), nicely encapsulates the problem. Several itches are compulsively and repetitively serviced in an *ad nauseam* polemical attempt at amelioration.



About a five minute walk from my old home in Huddersfield is a monument whose inscription precisely illustrates the metonymic value of the forgotten injustices of early industrialisation to imaginations like Harrison's, particularly as those injustices are themselves inscribed in flame. Only a transcription of the whole epitaph will give a full measure of the symbolic resonance of what I am tempted to call a tragedy. I list the names and ages of the victims for reasons which will shortly become clear :

NEAR THIS PLACE  
LIE WHAT REMAINED OF THE BODIES  
OF SEVENTEEN CHILDREN  
A STRIKING AND AWFUL INSTANCE  
OF THE UNCERTAINTY OF LIFE  
AND THE  
VANITY OF HUMAN ATTAINMENTS

TO COMMEMORATE  
THE DREADFUL FATE OF  
SEVENTEEN CHILDREN  
WHO FELL  
UNHAPPY VICTIMS TO A RAGING FIRE  
AT  
MR. ATKINSON'S FACTORY  
COLNE BRIDGE FEB 14<sup>th</sup> 1818

MARTHA HEY	AGED	9
MARY HEY		9
ELIZABETH DRAKE		9
ABIGAIL BOTTOM		10
ELIZABETH STAFFORD		11
FRANCES SELLERS		12

ELLEN HAYTACK	12
ELIZABETH ELY	13
MARY MOODY	13
ELLEN STOCKS	13
MARY DENTON	14
MARY DUTTON	14
SARAH SHEARD	14
MARY LAYCOCK	14
NANCY CARTER	16
ELIZABETH MOODY	17
SARAH NORTH	18

Harrison's acknowledgement of the incident is confirmed by an unidentified newspaper clipping in one of the poet's early scrapbooks. The text of the clipping, beneath a 'pasted in' photograph of another, at that time recent, mill fire, is as persuasive to the general reader as it clearly was for Harrison:

A girl of ten is said to have warned an overseer of the outbreak, only to be told that if she did not get back to her machine, she would be punished.  
(Books and Collectables, Box 1, 1956 – c.1970).

That Mr Atkinson's factory doors were evidently locked preventing escape illustrates the terrible potential price of economic zealotry,<sup>50</sup> and lends a greater degree of savagery to the date in question. The mill girls were embraced by 'tongues of fire' on St Valentine's day, transforming the happy sound of children's voices, in the idealised Blakean sense, into a deafening existential silence. This sardonic 'epiphany' is a cruel illustration of the converse landscape of Blake's teleology. Published, coincidentally, only a single generation before the fire at the textile mill, the poem 'The Chimney Sweeper' mentally restores children to their natural habitat:

Then down a green plain leaping laughing they run  
And wash in a river and shine in the Sun.

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<sup>50</sup> The locked factory doors are corroborated in research conducted for *The Story of Huddersfield* by Roy Brook, 1968, London, MacGibbon & Kee. ( p.99).

Then naked and white, all their bags left behind,  
They rise upon clouds, and sport in the wind.  
(Blake, 1970, p.136 ).

In a similar spirit, the poem's protagonist, 'little Tom Dacre', is consoled for the loss of his shorn blond locks by the redeeming knowledge that his hair cannot therefore be spoiled by tarnishing soot. Harrison's less abstract transcription of the mechanics of injustice cannot restore hair to the bald head of Patience Kershaw, nor hope of restitution other than that which is rendered by the act of commemoration. His narrator's act of quiet contemplation before the hearth -

I stare into the fire. Your skinned skull shines.  
I close my eyes. That makes a dark like mines.  
(CP, p.135).

- is therefore more than a focus for reverie: the fire discloses a range of oppositional possibilities which may, given Harrison's predisposed urge to rake up evidence of historical injustice, include the transformation of children in a locked room, to ashes.<sup>51</sup> The poet's groundswell of socialist anger is Victorian in tone and turns its attention to capitalist greed and religious corruption with some vigour. Echoing Marcuse, Harrison appears to be saying that 'it was unnecessary, that it could be otherwise' (Marcuse, 1998, p.236). An early notebook from the poet's private collection sets the standard for future preoccupations. After noting the smoke and 'reek' of hypocrisy about the particular instance of the mill girls' death, he goes on to declaim against 'monuments to capitalist greed' before offering a justification for Art itself amongst the ash and the silence:

The fact that the dead and the exploited have no voice, and the corrupt

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<sup>51</sup> A not dissimilar incident at an orphanage in Cavan, Ireland in 1943, was met with howls of outrage after it was revealed that the Catholic church had attempted to 'cover-up' certain pertinent details of the conflagration, particularly as the nuns who controlled the institution were deemed to be at least partly culpable through negligence. The doors here were also locked, providing fuel for the fires of outrage which followed. Austin Clarke's understatedly entitled 'Poem about Children' combines Harrison's olfactory gift for the stench of hypocrisy with a quite literal belief in metaphysical salvation :

'Has not a Bishop declared  
That flame-wrapped babes are spared  
Our life-time of temptation ?  
[...]  
These children, charred in Cavan  
Passed straight through Hell to Heaven.'

From *Austin Clarke – Selected Poems*. 1976. Dublin : Dolmen Press, p.26.

language of religiosity that cloaks a multitude of human sins, are motivations which make the form of rebellion linguistic, and at the point where language most draws attention to itself, poetry.

(*School of Eloquence* Notebooks, Book 27, page not numbered).

Harrison turns the 'flamethrower' of his 'Art' on what John Kirk, referring to Patience Kershaw, calls 'the barbarism of the ruling class who cloaked their activities in discourses aligned to the concepts of progress, modernization and values' (Kirk, 2003, p.96). Mr Atkinson of Colnebridge no doubt ascribed his mill's success to a sincere belief in the virtue of hard work, thrift and bible, and applied the tenets of that belief to his juvenile workforce with according rigour. The locked doors inscribe his commitment for posterity, and the tendency, even of the local burghers who erected the gravestone, to explain away the complicity of the local 'ruling classes' in terms of the arbitrary 'uncertainty of life' looks like just such a cloaking activity. For Harrison, hymns to 'the vanity of human attainments' deflect attention away from institutionalized forms of employment tyranny. Such invocations develop the illusion of arbitrary 'fate' so as to avoid the apportioning of blame. A platitude that looks on the surface to declare a demographically level playing-field before God is actually a sleight-of-hand which, like the more recent invention of Received Pronunciation, 'posits a homogeneous culture...viewed as a kind of axis of equivalence *suggesting parity*' (my italics) (Kirk, 2003, p.95).

Grand ironies such as a terrible fire on St Valentine's day are grist to Harrison's connective imagination, and in an attempt to wring every drop of emotional value out of them, the poet's enthusiasm is more than prepared to make casualties of both documented history and assumed verisimilitude. That, as Luke Spencer notes (Spencer, 1994, p.70), Harrison reduces the age of the documented Patience Kershaw from seventeen to fourteen may not, however, undermine the authenticity of representative historical experience. The device makes a more sympathetic 'martyrdom' for the modern reader's imagination, and adjusts the iniquity of an historical condition in order to maintain its ongoing potency and social relevance. This point is missed by Tony Bex in a discussion which necessarily skews interpretation by unaccountably re-assigning the gender of the young girl (Bex, 2009, p.12-13). It is instructive, in any case, that fourteen represents the mean age of Mr Atkinson's mill children, which fact disinters a more general truth about the usage of underage labour and of gender-specific injustice. To this

extent, the poem 'Working's' particularisation of an historical instance may stand, intertextually, as a useful figure for galvanised sociological consciences both contemporaneously engaged and historically reflective.<sup>52</sup> Luke Spencer is right, therefore, to infer an attempt at personal salvation in Harrison's process of 'reaching back' through this particular poem, although the critic's assertion is a representative synopsis of the poet's ontological thinking throughout Part One of the *School* sequence. For Spencer, Harrison's act of remembrance draws Patience Kershaw, and contextually the mill girls, into a figurative metaphysical light in order that an alternative unity may be realised:

In her, Harrison has found an object for his imaginative appropriation that advances his political understanding: the more the girl's experience is articulated, the more it is grasped in its historical as well as its personal reality. The text achieves a unity of theory (politics) and practice (poetry) which itself represents the true alternative to what, for the girl, was an inescapable destiny. The act of imaginative recuperation becomes an assertion of transhistorical solidarity. (Spencer, 1994, p.71).

But Harrison's attempt at 'transhistorical solidarity' is conditional upon his own sense of certainty. He makes a definitive statement which *does* bind his historico-political stance with his poetic purpose, but at the same time fails self-consciously to connect with his subject. The poet's own continuing uncertainty as to Art's capacity for redress is inferred, I think, through the hearth-reverie. 'Working' admits to failure in a darkness which renders even the act of communion unrealistic, or *unrealisable* :

I stare into the fire. Your skinned skull shines.  
I close my eyes. That makes a dark like mines.  
(CP, p.135).

The darkness then is heavily figurative; the compound metaphor is reinforced by a hint of ambiguity at 'mines'. If one interprets the word as 'mine is', then a suggestion of real psychological depression is vouchsafed wherein the narrator's own mental 'darkness' is made visible. If it is possible to interpretatively conflate the mill fire with Patience's plight, then the darkness shadows a connection with a past which is illuminated by both the fires of Christian damnation and of corporeal destruction. In his access of emotional engagement, we may overlook the narrator's lack of subterranean knowledge. As a former potholer, I can confirm that the closing of one's eyes does not replicate the utter

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<sup>52</sup> I am thinking, respectively, of Henry Mayhew and E.P.Thompson here.

darkness of mines, although it is conceivable, apropos of my earlier point about uncertainty, that a failure of verisimilitude is precisely Harrison's point. By this reading, the poet's imagination imposes its own limits on the making of a profound connection of identity, investing this final line with an unlikely suggestion of humility.

Such points, and they are persistent, of fractured engagement seem to me to be pivotal in Harrison's work. Anxiety as to the value of poetic effort, and ongoing intra-personal dialectics which by turns both support and reject his own intention, sometimes precipitate the condition for a process of abandonment where focus and strategy are suddenly mediated. It is possible that such a process is a culminating negation of the tortuous ambiguity of Harrison's own intuitive approach. Making a general point about the *School* sequence, H.G. Widdowson appears perplexed by Harrison's own proclivity for confusion :

They (the poems) are expressions of an ambivalence of position, a dilemma of identity. They are intellectually detached with descriptions distanced in the third-person, the poet apart from what he describes, but at the same time he is emotionally involved in the first-person, a part of it all as well. (Widdowson, 1993, p.22).

The concatenation of conflicting socio-temporal 'voices' in 'Working' echoes the ambivalence of Harrison's position in relation to his own poetics but, far from creating an ontological inconsistency as Tony Bex suggests (2009, pp.12-13), the approach seems here, and elsewhere, to be a studied precondition of an exegesis of uncertainty. In 'Working' for example, the poet yields to an act of fireside contemplation which allows for the intrusion of unconscious religious echoes. The shape and rhythm of the lines noted lean towards the kinds of gradual language disengagement and ultimate silence which are characteristic of prayer. In a general assessment of the relationship between poetry and spirituality Sarah Law affirms the contiguity, in terms of commitment, of oblation before the Divine, and a secular 'yielding up' to moments of emotional crisis.<sup>53</sup> The intensity of the moment, in both forms, leads the protagonist to the edge of the 'sayable':

Concentrated poetic texts sometimes hint at the limitations of language itself [...] both poetry and mystical prayer not only include but point towards silence. (in Kennedy, 2007, p.56).

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<sup>53</sup> For a comprehensive reading of the relationship between poetry and the mystical through the examination of the work of several writers, see Elizabeth Jennings (1961).

Although the emotion of the poem 'A Close One' is contained, for reasons which will shortly become clear, Harrison gravitates towards a culminating metrical slowing of pace which appears to prefigure silence and in so doing resembles an act of devotion. Amongst a welter of preceding World War Two cultural artefacts, Harrison picks out a seemingly incidental, yet highly-charged and apparently totemic, focus for contemplation:

How close we were with death's wings overhead !

How close we were not several hours ago.

The lines to hold the still too living dead -

My Redhill container, my long-handled hoe.  
(CP, p.172).

The Redhill container was a fire-trap for the gathering up and extinguishing of incendiary devices<sup>54</sup> during the war, and the crucial re-assertion of the fire trope here appears to ignite the emotional register of the narrative subsequent to the abrupt switch from observational to contemplative tones after the first four verses. An early draft of the poem supposes a more direct and less subtle connection between poetry and commemoration and racks up the incendiary power of language, whilst imposing a quasi-religious injunction on the reader at 'let poetry become [...]'

where inspiration's like magnesium  
giving the words of love that white-hot glow,  
with careful speed let poetry become  
Redhill container and long-handled hoe.  
(*School of Eloquence Notebooks*, Book 29).

Peter Sacks identifies the process of trope substitution in the published poem, in this instance the replacing of a reverse attribution of a seminal memory with an apposite cultural artefact, as a characteristic process of mourning through elegy (Sacks, 1985, p.5). Rick Rylance's conviction that the 'relentless' juxtaposition of superimpositions and substitutions exudes an emotional and moral energy appears to support such a claim, but the narrative of 'A Close One', for me, remains colourlessly cluttered until the fire trope exerts an attempt at unification through symbol at its conclusion (Rylance, 1997, p.141).

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<sup>54</sup> For a full description see Antony Rowland's transcription of an accompanying explanation taken from the original *Stand* magazine publication. (2001, p.167).

Here, the text becomes its own form of 'container' through which attempted exegesis is facilitated whilst the contents, the symbolic 'fire' or vitality of emotional memory, is protected in perpetuity.<sup>55</sup> To the extent that the Redhill 'contains' fire it is, of itself, a valid metaphor for Harrison's own poetic contemplations which, in Bachelard's terms, are 'concentrated' powers of expression (Bachelard, 1964, p.50). That such contemplations will fail to resolve Harrison's ongoing existential crisis is one characteristic of the ambiguity of the poem's title, which gives a vernacular indication of the close proximity of death whilst inscribing, perhaps unobtrusively, his relationship with his recently demised mother.<sup>56</sup> If, however, such moments come close to distilling the essence of extreme contemplation, then elsewhere Harrison's focus is skewed by abandonment in a quite other spiritual sense. It is to this phenomenon which I now turn.

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<sup>55</sup> We should, however, be wary of assuming authenticity of memory here. Line fourteen, for example, suggests that the poet composed the lines within hours of his mother's death.

<sup>56</sup> For Geoff Hall, Harrison's frequent use of cliché is deliberate. Countering any criticism of the poet's tendency to repetition in this regard, Hall suggests that the process is one part of the overall strategy to wrest linguistic authority away from conventions of Received Pronunciation and 'establishment' English. (Hall, 2000, p.45)



## Part Two - The Song within the Flames : 'Marked with D' & 'Fire-Eater'

For Antony Rowland the relationship between Harrison, his past, and generalised history is nearly symbiotic; its potential for symbolism irresistible: 'Fire tropes connect the personal and the historical' (Rowland, 2001 p.176). And, he might have added, 'the personal and the universal', for the urge which drives Harrison to an attempt at reconciliation through memory is shadowed, always, by his fear of the silence of annihilation. Ironically, the realisation of such a fear would render all connections meaningless. Neil Roberts suggests that Harrison's tendency to cling to the 'wreckage' of the past through incessant negotiation and renegotiation is an act, above all, of love (in Day & Docherty, 1997, p.54).<sup>57</sup> But what Roberts does not measure is the degree to which Harrison's emotional commitment may be interpreted in terms of a transcendent spirituality; in other words, a possibility that the poet sometimes 'loses' himself in sudden accesses of contemplative identification otherwise anathema to his materially-anchored polemical attitude. It is characteristic of Harrison's disdain for the tyranny of historical registers of religious purification that he sometimes repudiates the fires of cruelty as applied for example to the boy from Abbeville, in favour of imaginative explorations of recreation and resurrection enacted through the same 'redemptive' medium.

The pursuit of fit metaphorical vehicles for the expression of fire's powers seems, for Harrison, to demand an ongoing engagement with the Christian religion because the two ideas – fire and Christianity – are indivisible. That the possibility of metaphysical regeneration is an illusion predicated on the notion of faith does not gainsay the counter-

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<sup>57</sup> Cf. also Kelleher, who draws a similar conclusion as to the ultimate object of Harrison's 'vocation'. (1996, p.16).

intuitive sense of emotional amelioration yielded by the poet's occasional acts of cathexis.

This, for Harrison, seems to be the point:

When the chilled dough of his flesh went in an oven  
not unlike those he'd fuelled all his life,  
I thought of his cataracts ablaze with Heaven  
and radiant with the sight of his dead wife,  
light streaming from his mouth to shape her name,  
'not Florence and not Flo but always Florrie'.  
I thought how his cold tongue burst into flame  
but only literally, which makes me sorry,  
sorry for his sake there's no heaven to reach.  
I get it all from Earth my daily bread  
but he hungered for release from mortal speech  
that kept him down, the tongue that weighed like lead.

The baker's man that no one will see rise  
and England made to feel like some dull oaf  
is smoke, enough to sting one person's eyes  
and ash (not unlike flour) for one small loaf.  
(*'Marked with D.'*, CP, p.168).

Blake Morrison describes the corrective 'but only literally' as a cool retreat from the poet's to some degree emotional metaphorical exploration, as though the poem was thereby restored to the characteristic thematic paths of disappointment, loss and failed socio-linguistic aspiration (Morrison, 1991, p.59). But this analysis makes conventional assumptions about poetic intention which necessarily deflect attention away from the possibility of transcendence, or at least of an attempt at grasping a unity which is more than a spiritual affectation. Harrison's use of fire here underlines the point at which the narrator is about to make a signal leap into a psychological dimension which will temporarily transform the tone of the poem and the linguistic means by which that tone is represented. The sudden act of 'abandonment' upon which the narrative of *'Marked with D'* hangs is another way of reading this 'retreat' to transcendence. Metaphorical possibilities seem irresistible here. Clearly aware of the Empedoclean idea that eyes entail fire,<sup>58</sup> the poet finds a 'melting' point between early Greek philosophy and Christianity in order to summon posthumous recognition for his father through the compelling image of blazing cataracts. As I have suggested, and in spite of the corrective, he briefly appears to

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<sup>58</sup> See chapter entitled 'The Fire and Light of the Senses' in Eva Parisinou's *The Light of the Gods* for a fuller analysis of classical associations. (2000, p.114).

share in the possibility of spiritual regeneration and through love of his father embraces a heaven which is, literally, beyond reach. At such rare moments, Harrison's atheism struggles to restrain an intuitive, possibly counter-intuitive, sense of the metaphysical in an attitude of mind which yields a reverse echo of Gerard Manley Hopkins's general approach to poetry. In, for example, the poem 'The Starlight Night', Hopkins seems barely able to contain his linguistically acrobatic and to some degree abandoned enthusiasm for the beauties of nature within his declaration of devotion to the sacrament and to the idea of Christian penitence:

Look at the stars ! look, look up at the skies !  
O look at all the fire-folk sitting in the air !  
The bright boroughs, the circle citadels there !  
Down in dim woods the diamond delves ! the elves'eyes !  
The grey lawns cold where gold, where quickgold lies !  
Wind-beat whitebeam ! airy abeles set on a flare !  
(in Richards, 1980, p.508 ).

Nature and the Divine are reconciled in the figuring of Christ towards the end of the poem, and it is significant that the fire trope acts as a metaphor for both celestial and natural phenomena, thereby implying that its presence is providential and unifying. Harrison's own mental leap is reciprocated in a single unifying moment. The restoration of the healing authority of the emotion is illuminated in images of fire and gives an echo of the sense of universal benefaction immanent within the deeply messianic, and androgynously erotic, figure of Prometheus in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* :

The overpowering light  
Of that immortal shape was shadowed o'er  
By love; which, from his soft and flowing limbs  
And passion-parted lips, and keen, faint eyes,  
Steamed forth like vaporous fire;  
(Shelley, 1907, p.172-173).

Sandie Byrne has suggested that the success of Harrison's poem is predicated upon a not dissimilar tension between 'the materialist and the metaphysician' (Byrne, 1998, p.39) and locates the origins of Harrison's eloquent materialism, as is particularly manifested in the regular metrical certainty of 'I get it all from Earth my daily bread' (CP, p.168), in the reflexive urge to defend his early working class constituency of home, hearth and class. 'Marked with D.' is suffused with biblical metaphors which disguise, for many

commentators, a political agenda otherwise symptomatic of a large proportion of the *School of Eloquence* sequence. Joe Kelleher is one such critic, but before asserting Harrison's wider political strategy (Kelleher, 1996, p.42-3), he comes close to confirming my own thesis that the tone and form of the poet's sudden exultation, along with the insistent resonance of the crematory smoke in the final quatrain, describe a spiritual consciousness which finds comfort and a sense of continuity in unlikely places:

[...]where those figures of speech seem to claim an achieved resurrection, a transfiguration of the dead man, the lost man, into a metaphoric complex that will suffice, *and suffice for some time*. (My italics) (Kelleher, 1996, p.42).

The moment of unexpected transcendence, appearing between lines three and seven of the poem, is the point at which an act of poetic artifice is almost consumed by heightened emotion:

I thought of his cataracts ablaze with Heaven  
and radiant with the sight of his dead wife,  
light streaming from his mouth to shape her name,  
'not Florence and not Flo but always Florrie'.  
I thought how his cold tongue burst into flame,  
(CP, p.168).

The critic who provides the most detailed description of Harrison's fire fixation here is less inclined to point up the transformational possibilities of the poet's intuition than to be drawn, voyeuristically, into his visceral tableau of images. Stephen Spender was one of the earliest commentators to note Harrison's drive towards making connections through fire signifiers, but undercuts any claim to incisive analysis by a tone of slightly peevish middle class revulsion which clouds his subcutaneous vision. He seems unable to get beyond the 'grotesqueries' of corpses and ovens in a literalist critique which ironically mirrors his own perception of Harrison's imagination (Spender, 1991, p.224). Spender does, however, establish a relatively early critical connection between the material and the metaphysical when he identifies 'burning flesh with burning soul [...] burning cataracts with heavenly vision' (p.224). Harrison's grotesquery seems to me to be a marginal consideration in 'Marked with D.' It is much more effectively interpreted as a deliberately macabre mannerism, as a means of illustrating a specific historical incident which is

significant, either directly or indirectly, to the poet.<sup>59</sup> Here, the unusually elevated tone indicates a spiritual conjunction which appears to remain undisturbed by the sudden self-correction, a tone which briefly transforms the writer himself at least as much as underlining his extrinsic intention, which is, as Sandie Byrne rightly argues, to assert the ‘transcendancy of love and art’ (Byrne, 1998, p.40).

Towards this specifically secular end Harrison immerses his narrator, paradoxically, in the language of the Pentecost, and in so doing appears to echo that sense of ‘loss of self’ amongst the iconography of salvation, which Elizabeth Jennings identifies as one of T.S. Eliot’s preconditions of a ‘union with God’ (Jennings, 1961, p.176). The ground for this synoptic interpretation of Eliot’s *Four Quartets* is prepared in the following appropriately prosaic illustration of the transfiguring power of resurrection:

And what the dead had no speech for, when living,  
They can tell you, being dead: the communication  
Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.  
(from ‘Little Gidding’, in Gardner, 1972, p.892).

At the moment that his father’s tongue bursts into flame in ‘Marked With D’, thereby conferring an articulacy which could not be materially restored, Harrison himself ‘bursts’ through the flimsy narrator’s disguise towards his own brief ‘transfiguration’, restoring continuity through love and a sense of restitution. The circle of the family is poetically inscribed as the ‘light’ of re-birth streams through the father’s mouth, just as Eliot’s teleology of a union with the divine is affirmed in a knot of flames, and in a language similarly transformed :

And all shall be well and  
And all manner of thing shall be well  
When the tongues of flame are in-folded  
Into the crowned knot of fire  
And the fire and the rose are one.  
(in Gardner, 1972, p.897).

Using Mallarmé’s template – ‘Donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu’ – Eliot is himself attempting to express the inexpressible in a new and purified form of language (Mallarmé, 1982, pp. 51-52). And Harrison invests fire with transformative powers in

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<sup>59</sup> Two good examples of the use of the macabre as it is employed to describe both personal experience, and well-documented, but non-personal, experience, are ‘Illuminations I’ (CP, p.157) and ‘The Nuptial Torches’ (CP, p.61).

order to create a symbol of the 'new' language which 'redeems' his father from the incoherence of the old. This process of yielding to the moment takes the form of a conscious and direct religious mimesis which is as close to visionary as Harrison's earthly material style will allow, but remains one indicator of spirituality amongst the otherwise secular. The proximity of fire metaphors at such moments imbues the medium with the status of both religious symbol and metaphorical device. The transmuting fire which the poet harnesses for narrative development appears, itself, to transform poetic attitude as though Harrison's conventional voice was surprised or wrong-footed by aesthetic or metaphysical urges. It would be churlish not to acknowledge the insinuation of a calculated alternative register at such moments, but the point of departure seems to me to be just that: a departure from pained reality or an escape into a democratised fantasy as apparently cathartic for the poet as it is purgative for the surprised and newly articulate dead :

Theirs are the tongues of fire I'm forced to swallow  
 then bring back knotted, one continuous string  
 igniting long-pent silences, and going back  
 to Adam fumbling with Creation's names,  
 and though my vocal chords get scorched and black  
 there'll be a constant singing from the flames  
 ('Fire-Eater', CP, p.182).

I use the expressions 'catharsis' and 'purgation' as distinct to illustrate the literal impossibility of a meeting of epiphanies beyond the restitutive and the imagined. Catharsis in the Aristotelian sense is earthly and pre-Christian, and represents a state which is arrived at, in George Steiner's words, by a process of 'aesthetic empathy and response' (Steiner, 2000, p.84). Purgation, as purification of the soul, is a traditional Christian metaphysical precondition of entry into Paradise. Clearly, the attempt for Harrison here is personally cathartic although the 'messianic' creation of an emphatic new lexis on behalf of his inarticulate antecedents is an image of quasi-spiritual purgation.

Harrison's hyperbolic bodying forth into the metaphysical realm declares both the extent of his class and family alignment,<sup>60</sup> and the anxiety of religious influence on his

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<sup>60</sup> Such an alignment is most succinctly expressed in the following lines from the poem, 'Turns' :  
 'and *me*, I'm opening my trap  
 to busk the class that broke him for the pence  
 that splash like brackish tears into our cap.' (CP, P.162).

fundamentally humanist imagination. By this reading, the process may be construed as one of atonement for the 'sin' of his own act of class and family disengagement. Far from recovering irretrievably lost ground, Harrison's narrator gives himself up to an attempt at fusion through the agency of unifying fire. To some degree these moments amount to an ironic failure of the possibility of reconciliation and restored parity: the metaphysical flame seductively fills the space otherwise occupied by insoluble earthly questions. In this sense fire is a vehicle for imaginative escape and the medium extrudes, rather than the expected silence of contemplation, a lyrical articulation as clarifying as that experienced by some of the denizens of Dante's Purgatory. Since there can be no metaphysical pay-off, the narrator's song amongst the flames looks like an act of celebratory defiance, illustrating one more of the oppositional antagonisms which are well-served by the poet's refusal ever to relinquish the fire trope, at least until relatively recently.

The singing voice, above all, is constant. It will not be stopped or remaindered and it will retain its vigour, as Eavan Boland's 'voice' of Irish memory finds liberation rather than the ironic anaesthesia of healing, in her expatriate American home: 'Here in this scalding air, / my speech will not heal. I do not want it to heal' (in Hulse, 1993, p.54). In this poem, 'IX. *In Exile*', her own memory of two German refugee girls, of their loss of indigenous voice through deracination, is rediscovered and the girls commemorated in the reflective isolation of temporal and geographical distance. Although her impulse does not exhibit the control of Harrison's poem, her intention bears a close resemblance. Like Harrison, she is returning a voice to the powerless, in spite of the 'scalding' or 'scorching' purgatorial pain endured in the process. The filial imperative of Harrison's poem – the overt demonstration almost of a sense of symbiosis with his father's memory – demands endurance of the burning pain of absolute identification, but the cleaving, as Neil Corcoran perceptively notes, also embodies an attempt to articulate an impossibly utopian desire (Corcoran, 1993, p.159). And that desire has a political component: the need in the end to be the poet his father reads would always, by dint of the socio-cultural gap which separated them, be denied him.

Harrison's failure then to resolve and, as in 'A Close One', to contain his own burden of memories sometimes leads his narrator towards moments of 'transfiguration'. The poet

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appears to reach out into the metaphysical in order both to countermand, and paradoxically, to evade the unpalatable manifestations of class and linguistic repression. In both 'Fire Eater' and 'Marked with D', the voicing of largely unnoticed existences becomes a paramount urge that remains doomed to return little beyond a notional symbolic balance entirely at odds with the uncharacteristically elevated lexis in which the attempted epiphany is enacted. The high level of abstraction coincidentally reverses the negativity of vengeful fundamentalism by asserting an imagined cosmic beneficence in its place. Whether such abstraction is guilty of evasion at least compared to his later anti-extremist polemics,<sup>61</sup> seems secondary to the purity of Harrison's poetic motive which mimics, in secular terms, a little of the declared doctrine of his religious Leeds antecedents. Amongst the inaugural pieties at the inception of a new Congregational church in Chapel Allerton in 1889, was the following precondition:

The absolute necessity of his (Man's) regeneration and sanctification  
by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit.  
(Benfield, 1994, p.89).

'Regeneration' and restoration through compulsively re-enacted memory distil Harrison's own approach, particularly in 'Fire Eater'. Here we might, if only facetiously, suspect conceit in the apotheosis of the narrator who appears to assume dominion where the Holy Spirit otherwise dwells. The over-arching sense of identification with the voiceless dead leads Harrison towards a form of self-conscious atonement through 'consumption' of the sins of the fathers,<sup>62</sup> yielding an ontological side-effect made no less emphatic by the pre-eminent authority of the fire trope. The lines are worth repeating:

Theirs are the tongues of fire I nerve myself to swallow  
  
[...] and though my vocal chords get scorched and black  
there'll be a constant singing from the flames.  
(CP, p.182).

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<sup>61</sup> The film poem *The Blasphemers' Banquet* and the poem 'The Pomegranates of Patmos' are both anchored in the material world of perceived religious intolerance, and are conceived in registers which reflect Harrison's knee-jerk defiance. The roused, expostulatory Harrison is as tonally removed from his introspective self as to indicate a corollary schizophrenia of theme and approach.

<sup>62</sup> An interview with Peter Lennon in *The Guardian* of 19 March, 1990 in which Harrison described himself as 'half missionary, half comic' underlines his awareness of his own zealous compulsions. See bibliography for reference.



If Harrison's 'magic wand'<sup>63</sup> of poetic power admits the presence of a secular 'sleight-of-hand' amongst the religious imagery, then the process of 'imaginative healing', which Joseph Brooker (2010, p.83) rightly identifies as a generic reflexive urge, is lyrically ignited, suggesting an engagement reinvigorated through fire. Here, the narrator shoulders the burden of the 'sin' of inarticulacy in order to re-invent the shadows of his father and uncle in a furnace of purifying fire. Clear precedents for Harrison's sense of distillation in fire exist in several variations in the Christian tradition. The poet's urge respecting the memory of his family and his class of origin is, as noted a little earlier, overwhelmingly benevolent even where conflicting vocal registers embody the bitterness of unresolved emotional difficulties. His use of fire, most notably in the 'family' sonnets, is intended to facilitate a 'redemption' through purification effectively reversing the arbitrary, crematory violence of purely punitive doctrines. It is instructive to note that the two poems were conceived as one at the germination stage, as though the father figure's imagined linguistic liberation in 'Marked with D.' were bolstered by the son's atoning act of swallowing of fire in 'Fire Eater' in order to confer an energised articulacy. The poet's figurative consumption of 'sin' accords neatly with the earlier version of the unified poem which has the father's 'eyeballs radiant with Heaven' instead of at the sight of his dead wife (Poetry Notebooks, P2, p.177). The religious connotation is enacted, as I have noted, without the slightest metaphysical hope. But one reading of the poem 'Marked With D' nevertheless allows the intrusion of subtextual Dantesque resonances, not least in terms of the shift of emphasis away from punishment in order to accommodate a space for joyful regeneration.

The prevalent Western religious attitude prior to *The Divine Comedy* located purgatory as Hell's ante-chamber: a sort of departure lounge of torment. Dante, as described here by Anderson, re-focused its purpose :

By removing purgatory so completely from Hell, he devised an environment that gave a new aim and joyfulness to the doctrine of purgation.  
(Anderson, 1980, p.281).

Without intending to labour the resemblance, Harrison's imagined cosmos in the 'Family' sonnets purifies and cleanses the memory of his deceased relatives in a spirit of

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<sup>63</sup> Taken from the poem v. – 'This pen's all I have of magic wand.' (CP, p.268).

consolation which is temporarily secured from the potential dilution of oppositional complications. The lyricism of Geoffrey F. Nuttall's description of the purgative process in Dante tends, coincidentally, to underline Bachelard's intuition noted in Chapter One<sup>64</sup> that fire resists quantifiable analysis:

For righteousness they now hunger and thirst, till, refined as in a  
refiner's fire, they regain their lost saintliness.  
(Nuttall, 1969, p.46).

Saintliness, for Harrison's atheist temperament, can be neither conceded nor demanded, but Nuttall's commentary gives an illustration of the degree to which the poet and the critic may be seduced by fire's open-ended lyrical and spiritual serviceability. It is significant that Dante's use of the fire trope schematizes a way of thinking as much as a descriptive tool. The seventh terrace of Purgatory purges through *flamma* that sin of lust which Dante ironically frames in metaphors of fire throughout *The Divine Comedy*. In a contextual inversion of *Ordo Poenarum*, Dante reshapes the symbolic fires of corporeal perversion into a metaphysical epiphany. The fire at such moments, for both Harrison and Dante, may give off a fearful 'intensity of heat' (Dante, 1985, p.291), but it is also characterised by its regenerative and consolatory properties. The boundary between pleasure and pain is tested to Freudian levels of oppositional ambivalence:

[...] as we go running round  
this road, our pain is constantly renewed [...]  
Did I say pain ? Solace is what I mean !  
(Dante, 1985, p.251).

And there is an echoing affirmation for Harrison's ghostly father as he embraces his own *Vita Nuova* :

I thought of his cataracts ablaze with Heaven,  
and radiant with the sight of his dead wife,  
(from 'Marked With D, CP, p.168).

More significantly still, a narrative act of complicity in which the poet appears to insert himself, Christ-like, between his fellows and a condemnatory class system is an occasion for joyous catharsis:

and though my vocal chords get scorched and black  
there'll be a constant singing from the flames. (CP, p.182).

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<sup>64</sup> Chapter One, p.36

As much as acting out of empathy, it seems clear that Harrison is making a belated attempt at atonement here. The object of his expiation is a father-figure from whom estrangement was made inevitable by the son's own perceived neglect. The poet's paean then is also a song of thankfulness which echoes the hymn of the 'shades' in purgatory who proclaim divine beneficence from within the flames :

*Summa deus clementiae* I heard then,  
sung in the very heart of the great heat;  
this made me want to look there all the more.

And I saw spirits walking in the flames.  
(Dante, 1985, pp.172-173).

Harrison's act of sublimation in 'Fire-Eater', though some might call it conceit, embodies a cleansing process which by implication purifies the poet himself. To this degree, his sudden burst of lyricism is the appropriate vehicle for describing a redemptive process which 'shadows', in secular terms, Dante's schema for the recuperation of 'illness' or sin through devotional song :

The cure of flames, the diet of the hymns –  
with these the last of all wounds is healed.  
(Dante, 1985, p.273).

The cleansing process, or the restoration of individually 'flawed' humanity to its prelapsarian state in effect recreates a condition of childhood innocence in preparation for the ascent to Paradise. The narrator's father undergoes a baptism of fire in 'Marked With D', and it is significant that the process bears a strong, no doubt deliberate, resemblance to that described in the Gospel of Luke, Book III, though clearly without a metaphysical intervention:

I baptize you with water, but He who is mightier than I is coming [...] he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.  
(the *Holy Bible*, 1971, p.1343).

Harrison may be declaring in 'Marked With D' a rare moment of 'oneness' in the flames, almost as though, in Norman O. Brown's epigrammatic expression, 'the apocalyptic fire burns up the reality of the material world' (Brown, 1966, p.183). The sense is therefore one of a sudden spatio-temporal shift and a restoration of that purity, *qua* Blake's vision of 'innocence', which was always one component of Harrison's poetic rendering of his

father. Using the tools of his own trade of etching and printing as metaphors, it is conceivable here that Blake is describing such a process of metaphysical revelation, as a form of 'uncovering':

[...] this I shall do by printing in the infernal method, by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid.  
(in Keynes, 1966, p.154).

The revelation is a form of alchemy, a transmutation of matter through an amalgam of fire, chemicals and base metal. For Harrison, the notion of alchemy is a reflective tool, a metaphor for that which appears to engender change excepting where the reversal of time is as literally improbable as Elizabethan alchemical assumptions are scientifically risible. That alchemy was in any case largely a medium for philosophical enquiry makes of the 'science' itself a metaphor, thereby qualifying the ambiguity of Harrison's own speculation. In the poem 'Aqua Mortis' for example, the alchemist's proclivity for skulls is appropriated as a macabre repository for contemplation which yields little beyond evidence of its own verisimilitude and symbolic usefulness :

Alchemists keep skulls, and you have one  
that stretches your skin taut and moulds your face,  
and instead of a star sphere for sense of space  
there's the transatlantic number of your son,  
a 14-digit spell propped by the phone  
whose girdling's giddy speed knocks spots off Puck's  
but can't re-eye dry sockets or flesh bone

My study is your skull. *I'll burn my books.*  
(CP, p.148).

A weaker vessel for transformation than a religion which clearly occupies the fabric of Harrison's psychology, alchemy, in its very speciousness, is one echo of the impossibility of reversing the material conditions of his father's decline, even where it provides a paradoxical vessel for over-burdening reflection. It is fitting, then, that the poet's final capitulation is a concession to guilt. The Faustian echo of the book-burning, noted by both Sandie Byrne (1998, p.173) and Luke Spencer (1994, p. 85), appears to resolve Harrison's problem of familial estrangement through education, with a grand, if disingenuous, Mephistophelean pay-off.

Harrison's pseudo-metaphysical vignette from 'Marked With D', instead, illustrates an alchemy of the imagination which attempts to reassert the value of the lost individual voice through transformation, a revealing of personal essence. Corrosion, in Blake's sense, becomes a *de facto* act of creation, which for Luke Spencer underlines an imperative in the poem 'Fire-Eater', but might equally be applied to 'Marked With D':

Harrison must assume an Adamic role in shaping names that will bring order out of chaos, and thus ensure that the flames which consumed his parents become world-creating fire and also the fiery furnace from which an indestructible humanity can be rescued.  
(Spencer, 1994, P.83).

Harrison's compulsion to restore some sense of metaphorical order to a chaos of historical entanglements both personal and universal, is most persuasive when projected in 'unifying' ontologies of the fire trope. 'Marked With D' applies a symbolic comb to the knotted hair of language or more specifically to the perceived inarticulacy which occasions feelings of huge inadequacy amongst the poet's loved ones.<sup>65</sup> A sense of purpose and rectitude is suddenly and briefly established which offers a tangential echo of that order facilitated by the guiding hand of the Divine, in Augustan interpretations of redemption:

As flame ascends  
As bodies to their proper centre move,  
(from 'The Pleasures of the Imagination' by Mark Akenside, in Bush, 1950, p.71).

In 'Marked With D', Harrison appears to be restoring justice where it is otherwise subverted by the *lingua franca* of cultural domination. He is, in fact, creating an autonomous 'voice' by burnishing the remnants of the old in flames, and here his thinking resembles that of the Portuguese poet Ferdinand Pessoa who 'invented' several heteronymous personas each with a distinct poetic voice which emerged fully formed in his imagination. That Pessoa describes such an emergence in terms of a 'stripping away' in an act of revelation suggests an instinctive leaning towards a symbolism of fire tempered by his understanding of, and psychological wrangling with, Catholicism: 'Some act on man [...] like fire, which burns out all the accidental in them and leaves them bare and real' (Pessoa, 2000, p.20). Not 'infinite' and immortal like the product of Blake's

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<sup>65</sup> For a fuller description of the origins of Harrison's poetic concerns, see Harrison, 1991(1), pp. 436-438.

metaphysical process, but as 'real' as invented autonomous voices can be, and as materially important to Pessoa's sense of his own art as powerful vestiges of memory are to the satisfaction of Harrison's poetic imperative. It is ironic, I think, that Pessoa's name translates into English as 'person'.

To the degree that the father's epiphany in 'Marked With D' and 'Fire Eater' is achieved as a result of the poet's burning commitment for a currency of restitution and re-assessment, Harrison's poems are as instinctively political as Adrian Mitchell's rhetorical anti-Vietnam war performance piece, 'Norman Morrison,' which I quote in full for comparison :

On November 2<sup>nd</sup> 1965  
in the multi-coloured multi-minded  
United beautiful States of terrible America  
Norman Morrison set himself on fire  
outside the Pentagon.  
He was thirty-one, he was a Quaker,  
and his wife (seen weeping in the newsreels)  
and his three children  
survive him as best they can.  
He did it in Washington where everyone could see  
because  
people were being set on fire  
in the dark corners of Vietnam where nobody could see.  
Their names, ages, beliefs and loves  
are not recorded.  
This is what Norman Morrison did.  
He poured petrol over himself.  
He burned. He suffered.  
He died.  
That is what he did  
in the white heart of Washington  
where everyone could see.  
He simply burned away his clothes,  
his passport, his pink-tinted skin,  
put on a new skin of flame  
and became  
Vietnamese.  
(in Summerfield, 1974 , p.221).

An undated entry in one of Harrison's early notebooks describes Mitchell's own polemical style as made of 'simplistic oppositions' and it wouldn't surprise me to learn that he had 'Norman Morrison' in mind when he made this comment (Journals and Commonplace

Books, Box 2, Book 15). Leaving aside the issue of quality and the poem's now dated and brutal literalism, it is significant that the Quaker Morrison's act of martyrdom emulates, in spirit, Blake's melting away of the corrupted carapace in preparation for the ultimate declaration of identification. An oceanic and purifying oneness is conferred upon Morrison's documented immolation by Mitchell's poetic commemoration, whilst Harrison attempts a similar epiphany through the agency of the imagined. Harrison's concern to restore credibility to the linguistic struggles of the historically 'silenced' such as his father, is obliquely echoed in his conflation of several myths in the play *Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*. The flaying of Marsyas by Apollo may, by one reading, figure for the suppression of 'lower' forms of culture by the holders of the linguistic cards. Harrison's attempt at redress subverts conventional commentaries on the myth which tend to establish the brutal act as a necessary purgative. In an analysis of the poet's use of Marsyas, Adrian Poole describes the mythical figure's fate as 'the necessary humiliation of the body as a pre-condition for the release of man's true, inner, spiritual nature' (Poole, 1999, page not numbered). Harrison's Blakean 'revelation' of the essence of his father in 'Marked with D' necessarily elides the precondition here: the British establishment, like Apollo, is to be chastised.

If Norman O. Brown's epigrammatic interpretation of the fires of the holocaust overstates the resonance of the merely individual, it hints at a similar sense of submersion into a collective identity :

The true sacrifice is total, holocaust. *Consummatum est*. The one is united with the all, in a consuming fire.  
(Brown, 1966, p.177).

The idea of an all-consuming universal fire is replicated, in a particularist sense, in the literally revelatory aspects of the concluding biblical book which is otherwise so offensive to Harrison.<sup>66</sup> D.H. Lawrence's reading of the final individual epiphany therefore makes an irony of Harrison's sense of his father's 're-birth' :

Then the final flame-point of the eternal self of a man emerges from hell, and at the very instant of extinction becomes a new whole cloven flame of a new-bodied man.  
(Lawrence, 1972, p.105).

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<sup>66</sup> Harrison's diatribe against *Revelation*, 'The Pomegranates of Patmos', is examined from different thematic perspectives in my chapters 'Eros and Thanatos' and 'Fahrenheit 451'.

It is not difficult to see, here, how the fluid mechanism of the fire trope dictates the tonal register of the respective poems of both Harrison and Mitchell, as it drives each narrative towards metaphor. The convergence of identities which results from Brown's interpretation of fire's consuming properties in the holocaust, is visible to constructive effect in 'Fire Eater'. The reversal of fire's application serves the collateral purpose of binding the narrator/Harrison within the 'charmed' family circle which was hitherto riven by the increasing socio-cultural gap between son and parents. Harrison's emotional engagement here is corollary to the intense investment tendered severally elsewhere<sup>67</sup> through the potent symbol of the fire-burnished wedding-ring, and at such moments of heightened contemplation, interpretation is a multi-layered entanglement.

I touched, briefly, on the poem 'Timer' in chapter one in the context of regression and the imagined womb. Here I might usefully add to the discussion with an examination of the idea of a continuity which is made emblematic in the notion of the ring that survives and whose symbolic powers, themselves representative of the unifying aspects of the Christian faith, are possibly reinforced by the crematory flames. Bachelard's psychoanalytical reading of its potency suggests that the process of fire-burnishing may engender a change in human perception: 'That which fire has shone upon retains as a result an ineffaceable colour. That which fire has caressed, loved, adored, has gained a store of memories and lost its innocence' (Bachelard, 1964, p.57). That Harrison may have no knowledge of Bachelard's description does not diminish the resemblance of the poet's evaluation of the burnished ring's significance to the philosopher's lyrical treatment of fire's effect on memory and the material tokens of memory. Harrison's use of tokens to some extent enables contemplation of death and disharmony, creating a counterpoint which is characterised by lost 'innocence'. Both Antony Rowland and Luke Spencer, probably coincidentally, describe the trans-generational potency of Harrison's sense of continuity.<sup>68</sup> Spencer, particularly, seems content to applaud the apparent maintenance of such a temporal link which thrives in spite, or possibly because, of the socio-cultural gulf separating son from parents during the latter's lifetime. The critic is referring here to the

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<sup>67</sup> Cf 'Continuous' (CP, p.154), 'Illuminations' (p.157-159), 'Timer' (p.179), 'The Effort' (p.174) and 'Under the Clock' (p.180).

<sup>68</sup> See Rowland (2001, p.182) and Spencer (1994, p.82).



poem 'Continuous' but the same analysis may usefully be applied to both poems, which, by one reading parallel the durability of the fire-tested ring with the survival of the idea of love through the depredations of bitter experience. If the possibility of transcendence here is negated by the lack of metaphysical support, the sifting of the remains through a symbolic ring finds a paradoxical echo in Zoroastrian traditions of post-mortem purification. Though pre-Christian in origin, the Zoroastrians harboured strong millennialist leanings in terms of visions of an apocalypse. One of the manifestations of such a vision is described by Frederic J. Baumgartner:

At the end of this trimillennium, all the dead will arise, be purified by walking through molten metal, and be given immortality.  
(Baumgartner, 1999, p.10).

Here, the molten metal catalyzes the process of transfiguration just as Harrison's burnished but unaltered ring inscribes the significance of sustaining memory in an act of measured and contemplative dissipation. Harrison's film/poem *Prometheus* removes the trope to the realm of the universal where, in a slowly-panned and solemn moment, the cremated character of Mam/lo is survived by her wedding ring which is discovered amongst her stirred ashes by a contemptuous *Hermes*. In the context of the film's overarching themes, the burnished gold is a figure for fidelity to human independence as much as for marital love and continuity (P, p.79). In line with the omnipresence of dualistic interpretations, another reading still may yield the ring as a figure for illusion; an illusion where the pretence of continuity and generational links fragment as the ebbing of the sand's grains, or the mother's cremated ashes, signify a process of 'slipping away'. Interpretation is complicated by the co-existence of several possible definitions: the metrical *rallentando* of the ebbing lines of the poem 'Timer' reflects a terrible moment of pulling apart which induces a paralysis of contemplation in the poet.

Harrison appears to be striving at such moments to fabricate some semblance of hope against the background of his own atheism, a paradox underlined by his two-handed relationship with Epicurean nihilism which again muddies the waters of simplistic oppositional interpretations. In Jeffrey Wainwright's assessment, Harrison's narratives try to: '[...] make some framework of identity and belief that will resist the sceptical reductiveness represented by Palladas' (Wainwright, 1991, p.415). Occupation of the

'voice' of Palladas through translation and adaptation is a partial rendition of Harrison's authentic own, so that a tension is created between the blunt cynicism of the following lines, and the burnishing fires which attempt to transcend the scope of the material :

Think of your conception, you'll soon forget  
what Plato puffs you up with, all that  
'immortality' and 'divine life' stuff.

*Man, why dost thou think of Heaven? Nay  
consider thine origins in common clay*

's one way of putting it but not blunt enough.

Think of your father, sweating, drooling, drunk,  
you, his spark of lust, his spurt of spunk.  
(CP, p.79).

When Harrison wrote in an early notebook: 'one has the sense indeed of form in Palladas being the one thing between him and anguished speechlessness', he was fully aware of the necessity for continued articulation to countermand the anguish of failed hope (*Palladas Notebooks*, Book 2, p.327). The regenerate voices of his father and uncles in the two poems which form the basis of Part Two give form and structure to that rage for articulation, even where the 'resurrection' fails, beyond providing momentary cathartic release, to achieve the durability which Harrison most seeks.

## Part Three - The God of the People : Fires of Ritual

Even where the poet is not pushing what Rowland refers to as 'the iconography of Christian myth' (Rowland, 2001, p.17) to abstraction, or appearing to internalise the language of spiritual emotion, his awareness of the socio-cultural value of religion may lead to an awkward admiration for its propagators. It is significant in such instances that Harrison's attitude in relation to the institutional corruptions of established religion is ameliorated by what he perceives as the sincerity of cultural practice at 'grass-roots' level.<sup>69</sup> The poet's sympathy is instinctively with the little man, so that the affiliation he naturally feels for the class of his origin is elsewhere extended to the ordinary pieties of Neapolitan Catholic ritual. In the event, Harrison's attitude to the otherwise uniquely ghoulish rituals of exhumation and re-interment in the film poem *Mimmo Perella non è Piu*<sup>70</sup> is neither patronising nor overly cynical, but instead half-approving, once more giving the lie to interpretative expectation. Certain restraints to Harrison's characteristic polemical approach may in any case have been demanded by the producers of the film. This is one of a quartet on the subject of death and the mourning process featuring even-handed verse-observations on ritual and regional culture.<sup>71</sup> But the poet's disclosure affirms the value of a regionally-appropriated version of Catholicism as a catalyst and focus for the maintenance of continuity through ritual acts of remembrance.

Although Harrison may not be persuaded by the machinery of illusion or the macabre ceremonies which fascinate as they repel, he recognises the social value of ritual to the

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<sup>69</sup> Harrison's antagonistic relationship with religious fundamentalism is examined at length in Chapter Three.

<sup>70</sup> Literally, 'Mimmo Perella is no more'.

<sup>71</sup> Collectively entitled *Loving Memory*, the quartet comprises *The Muffled Bells*, *Mimmo Perella non è Piu*, *Cheating the Void* and *Letters in the Rock*. (CFP, p.71-132).

grieving process. The 'fantasy', in Antony Rowland's words, requires 'endorsement' (Rowland, 2001, p.216):

So Neapolitans believe with few exceptions.  
I'm the odd one out in disbelief.  
But if they fool themselves, then the deception's  
at least a healing way to handle grief.  
(CFP, p.105).

Harrison's own lack of self-deception disbars effective personal 'healing'. If the final listing of the dead<sup>72</sup> is an incantation which paradoxically proclaims finality, then it also offers a subtextual echo of the possibility, for Harrison, of a world view without the certainty of resurrection, or otherwise. The poet's 'absenteeism', his failure to make an appreciable connection with his parents at crucial moments of existential need, figures as both a metonym and a catalyst for perpetual uncertainty. Perhaps this is why a characteristic voice of religious mimesis haunts the text alongside the grotesque and the mildly cynical in an act of mitigating engagement, and notwithstanding the demands of film-documentary production. Harrison's use of the fire trope at such junctures again defines a tendency for psychological immersion which is contained within a disquisition on the passage of departed 'souls' through Purgatory on their way to Paradise. One reading of the following quatrain appears to echo Dante's metaphysical journey although in a juxtaposition of the linguistically elevated and the iambic ordinary which bears a linguistic resonance of the Augustan mock-heroic tradition. But the imitation of the process of apotheosis on behalf of those Neapolitans who hold to a quite literal belief in the Catholic notion of resurrection, goes beyond satire to a realm of affectionate engagement:

*If prayer can ease the purifying blaze,  
give balm to the abandoned where they burn,  
their gratitude to someone when he prays  
comes back as graces granted in return.*  
(CFP, p.100).

Harrison recognises that to deny the efficacy of such illusory 'graces', or favours predicated on prayer, would be a cynical manipulation of a sincere and simple tradition. The aggrieved grab scraps of comfort where they are able, much as the poet consoles

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<sup>72</sup> This act of remembrance pays homage to the dead whilst declaring the absolute finitude of human life. It also represents a poignant and effective device for 'wrapping' the film. (CFP, p.105).

himself for the loss of his own father in the regenerative Dantesque realisations of the poem 'Marked With D'. But Harrison's own attempt is temporary, a willed and self-conscious product of the imagination. His sense of continuity is contradicted by the finality of his mother's crematory ash sifting, again in imagination, through her wedding ring in 'Timer'. It seems significant, in this respect, that the Neapolitan process of disposal involves only the cremation of the coffin. Human remains are dried and cleaned prior to interment and subsequent to exhumation in preparation for their final metaphysical journey. Harrison's imputation of the importance of corporeal unity to the culture is measured in an inventory of body parts which, reassembled, restore the deceased to the deity, whole:

a hysterectomy, an amputation,  
a liver or a kidney cut away,  
even these aren't given a cremation  
but get put into the soil till Judgement Day,

when everything that's rotten is restored,  
soul, head, body, arms, legs, feet.  
No one expects to limp up to the Lord  
Or be resurrected only half-complete.  
(CFP, p.99).

Nothing remarkable distinguishes the above verses of pure documentary voice-over except that the second quatrain, notwithstanding its insouciant tone of *ersatz* metaphysical certainty, cannot fail to make a crushing irony of that earlier inventory, where life and hope represented in the mother's crematory ash, ebb metaphorically through the symbolic circle of the ring. Harrison's objectivity and detachment return dried 'husks' of humanity to metaphysical completion in sentiments of mock-certainty, which yet take no issue with the sincere beliefs of the bereaved.

Oppositional signification in Harrison's poetics, then, is complicated by a relationship with subject-matter which may be characterised by social observation, affectionate cynicism, polemic and apparent religious engagement, all within the span of a single text. Even where his agenda is specifically that of cultural and linguistic realignment and the prosecution of his argument is restricted by the demands of historical authenticity, Harrison sometimes makes choices which contradict the rooted secularism of his world view. His adaptation of *The Mysteries* cycle of religious plays demonstrates, in Luke

Spencer's words, a commitment to 'honour(ing) the thwarted and often forgotten creative energies of the unnamed common people of the North of England' (Spencer, 1994, p.55), thereby establishing a clear motive.<sup>73</sup> But the resolutely religious theme hints at an interest which is inherently abstruse and goes beyond conventional critical preoccupations. The freedom of Harrison's adaptation, aside from authenticating his claim to authorship of the various texts,<sup>74</sup> is one manifestation of an urge to exercise linguistic control, to re-inscribe an old story for new ears in an odd hybrid of thorough research and an intuitive feel for the world-view of the mediaeval Christian. To some degree freedom is conferred by the temporal detachment of the original. The *Mysteries*, to paraphrase Elizabeth Jennings's comparison with modern spiritual verse, embodies more a poetics of religion itself than of the spiritual experience (Jennings, 1961, p.97). The mechanics of ritual and tradition, of social cohesion, of language and simple moral questions, are highly amenable to Harrison's dramatic sense, and are accommodated within a linguistic overhaul of the original which makes no appreciable compromise to its religious integrity. It is, however, significant that the poet's transcription of particularly moral discourse is once more 'cut loose' by the fire which is as vigorous as Harrison's own sense of theatricality. In the following passages it is clear that dualistic use of the trope describes and reinforces such a sense of moral probity and in so doing helps to impose order upon chaos, an intention which may figure, coincidentally, for a synopsis of Harrison's entire poetic agenda. Lucifer, who garners some of the best lines here, besmirches the irony of his own 'incandescence' as he is lowered towards the pit. The bombastic conceit of the following words makes a mockery of the conventional place of holy 'light':

The beams of my brightness are burning so bright ,  
 And so seemly in sight myself I now see.  
 Like a lord I am lifted to live in this light :  
 (M, p.12).

And :

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<sup>73</sup> In a comprehensive description of the history of representations of religious plays, Sandie Byrne urges caution as to Harrison's assumptions about the socio-linguistic provenance of historical performances. (Byrne, 1998, p.47-49).

<sup>74</sup> For a thorough reading of Harrison's departure from extant original forms of the *Mysteries* cycle, see Bernard O'Donoghue, 1991 (2) pp.319-320.

The beams of my brightness are bigged with the best.  
My showing is shimmering and shining,  
So bigly to bliss am I brought;  
(p.12)

The Devil is a peacock whose narcissistic preening is 'pricked' by Harrison's effective appropriation of early English alliterative measures and the application of his own compound neologisms. Very shortly after, Lucifer's humiliation is made complete at his dawning recognition that the certainty of bliss is to be supplanted by an eternity of flame, torment and remorse:

My beams ere so shining all beshitten and shent  
I fall to fierce fire through t'whole firmament.

[...] Now am I laithliest, alas, that ere was so light.  
My brightness, Beelzebub, blackest and blue now.  
My bale is ay beating and burning  
That gars me go growling and girning  
Out, Ribald, wracked am I by rue now.  
Thrust into this fire, flung out for a thought !  
(M, p.13-14).

It is difficult to distinguish authorial relish from the Devil's own ribaldry in such scenes of extravert theatricality,<sup>75</sup> once more underwriting Harrison's clear absorption of religious imageries, and the fire trope through which they are most naturally expressed. The simplicity of the moral lesson in its chiding of over-bearing pride dovetails neatly with the fundamental ethical schema of Greek tragedy. *Moirai* is inevitably followed by the correcting mechanism of *Dike*, and the association remains at the forefront of Harrison's thinking throughout his *oeuvre*.<sup>76</sup> Such simplicity, it must be noted, betrays the complexity of the oppositional processes of fire and light which infect the passages quoted. Until the Apollonian voice of God restores the notions of good and evil to their appropriate elemental repositories of light and dark, or temporal day and night, the fallen angel Lucifer is trapped in an illusion of fiery brilliance which, in appearance, resembles Paradise.

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<sup>75</sup> The influence of Music Hall and pantomime is clearly visible in this passage.

<sup>76</sup> *Moirai* and *Dike* respectively embody the notions of fate and justice which guarantee a corrective punishment for acts of hubris.

It is not difficult to imagine such vigorous language given loud and unambiguous demotic voice in the theatre, even from the necessarily restrictive standpoint of the written page. The 'metrical pulse', in Hallie Marshall's words, 'propels it forward and keeps it alive' (Marshall, 2010, p.43), and in so doing heightens perception and therefore reception even in the silent and self-referential space surrounding the reader. Co-mingled fire and light references in the passage quoted above define and illuminate the language as oppositional shades. The words 'Shining' and 'beshitten' for example are unified in a guttural relish which may subordinate meaning to an attempt at euphony, possibly counter-productively.<sup>77</sup> That such linguistic mechanisms helped to render *The Mysteries* an highly effective piece of drama for contemporary audiences, is one sub-text of a point perceptively made by Michael Billington in a review for *The Guardian* :

But the interesting question is why, in an age of scepticism, an audience should be so stirred by a piece of medieval religious drama [...] what is most extraordinary about *The Mysteries* is that, through the sheer imaginative power of the production, it penetrates and sometimes even shatters the agnostic detachment of a modern audience.  
(Billington, 1991, p.324).

Harrison the self-proclaimed atheist seems here to have made a paradoxically persuasive case for an old religious ritual either through the agency of an extremely adept piece of actorly linguistic mimesis, or through an emotional engagement, sharpened on images of fire, which transcends the bounds of his dramatic intention. To some degree, the profound impact of this particular adaptation, and of his dramatic version of the *Oresteia*, qualify my thesis that one of Harrison's most durable impulses cleaves toward the religiose. Mantra-like repetitions of the guttural and the otherwise vulgar are accommodated within the poet's tonal schema with no evident devaluation of elements of ritual or, in places, solemnity.

As an expression of bombast, aggression, destruction, creation or continuity, fire is a singular defining tool in Harrison's work. The propinquity of the Christian faith to the poet's imagination at moments of extreme emotional engagement, with its pervasive

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<sup>77</sup> At least one component of Harrison's theatrical agenda is the foregrounding of the sound of the spoken word in order to elucidate meaning. The practice has been adopted to extraordinary length by the *Northern Broadsides* company, often in close association with the poet.



manifestation through fire, mitigates an atheism proclaimed almost in the same textual breath. If a comprehensive reading of Harrison's work is to be achieved, then the critical idiom surrounding it must widen its somewhat narrow lens to include varieties of contextual experience and knowledge which colour the poet's interpretation of, for example, class interests. The focus of this chapter has been trained on the influence of religion, and particularly regional variations of the Anglican and Non-Conformist churches, on Harrison's imagination. Some of my assumptions are necessarily speculative, based as they are on limited available materials; the poet has maintained a relative silence over this area of his childhood experience. But close consideration of the clear religious engagement within his work enables certain inferences to be made regarding provenance. It is possible to detect, in Harrison's 'soap-box' messianism, shades of an earlier period of heightened social conscience, more specifically that of the Christian Socialists of nineteenth-century Britain who found an unlikely accommodation between nascent theories of radicalism and their own religious beliefs. The fire trope, which is the means of defining both religious fervour and the notion of restitution for the socially ill-used or similarly downtrodden, colours Harrison's otherwise atheistic temperament. Northrop Frye's description of William Blake's philosophy unifies the Church of England with the idea of liberty, and provides a synoptic introduction to another of Harrison's apparently counter-intuitive preoccupations:

To purify Christianity is to release human liberty: to release liberty is to kindle a flame that can never be extinguished until it is merged in the final consummation of all things.  
(Frye, 1962, p.160).

If Harrison cannot share a commitment to faith, he can attempt to restore value to an hitherto derided 'second-class' lexis through the agency of commemoration, so that, in Edmund Gosse's apposite industrial-age metaphor for apostolic tongues of fire, 'the lips are touched with the burning coal, once and once only' (Gosse, 1907, p.203). That considerations of class and regional dialect no longer bear the social stigma of the period in which the 'family' sonnets were conceived, if in fact such stigma could reasonably be applied to the nineteen seventies, seems secondary to the vigour of Harrison's approach. The poet's appropriation of fire and of its unlimited metaphorical possibilities, harnessed in conjunction with an intuitive religious sensibility, releases moments of near

transcendence which render the transition from atheist to unlikely metaphysician almost possible. Harrison doesn't 'believe', but makes a persuasive fist of the act of mimesis even where the isolated moment of apparent epiphany is lost in a tide of polemic. I say 'persuasive' with particular reference to the 'family' sonnets because the condensed intensity of the form of certain of the 'transformative' poems appears to encourage an act of total psychological immersion amongst the flames. One reading of the most telling example of this species, 'Marked With D', describes a Dantesque epiphany, a regeneration of the lost father figure; another, it is arguable, embodies an elegy for the loss of purpose associated with the narrator's inability to engage with any sense of faith beyond the imagined. Fire draws Harrison to the heart of a visionary doctrine which cannot vouchsafe Blake's conception of human liberty, yet his secular humanism craves a Blakean imaginative teleology not dissimilar to that defined in Northrop Frye's commentary on *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*:

Revolution is a sign of apocalyptic yearnings, of an impulse to burst loose from the world altogether and get into a better one, a convulsive lunge forward of the imagination. There is thus a connection far deeper than a resemblance of sound between revolution and revelation.  
(Frye, 1962, pp.201-202).

The urge to 'burst loose' is clearly facilitated by the metaphorical possibility of fire, and if such moments in his work are too nearly mediated by the presence of corrective secular impulses to be called numinous, it is possible that Harrison is making a 'convulsive lunge forward of the imagination' which suddenly contradicts the general character of his poetics.<sup>78</sup> On one level, and as the philosopher Mary Midgley notes, such 'convulsive lunges' are simply facets of 'normal' psychological experience (Midgley, 2004, p.42). But Harrison's compulsion and its attendant symbolisms indicate an inability to marginalise the influence of a Christianity which, in modern Britain anyway, is popularly supposed to have become reduced to a cultural footnote. Not unlike his elitist and somewhat patrician attitude towards 'high' cultural evaluation, Harrison's spiritual impulses hint at a form of

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<sup>78</sup> Rudolph Otto's comprehensive study of the supra-rational elements of religious mysticism makes very general, and to the modern mind, spurious assumptions, about the *a priori* immanence of mechanisms of divination in human nature. He does, however, concede that an unholy sense of the numinous does exist in the extremity of artistic engagement. (See Rudolph Otto, 1958, *The Idea of the Holy – An Inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational*, New York : Galaxy Books).

anxiety borne out of major social change; a sense of losing grip on traditional cultural registers. To this extent his work resonates with an unadmitted agnostic anxiety which was highly visible in the immediate wake of Darwin's theories, most particularly amongst influential poets such as Tennyson and Arnold. If a loss of faith in the Victorian sense cannot obtain here, then the presence of moments of near abandonment in some of the poems continues to suggest a psychological failure to relinquish a seductive, and above all, *simplifying* religious influence. The voluminous evidence of religious references in Harrison's early personal notebooks indicates an ambivalent attitude to Christianity tempered by a desire for meaning and assurance, and an obvious taste for the clarifying language of the Bible.

It is characteristic of Harrison's thirst for religious knowledge that almost all of his recorded weekly trips to 'Tommy' Campey's bookstall on Leeds Market appear to have yielded at least one book on, or around, the subject. Thomas Campey is another 'Promethean' influence from Harrison's distant past. The poet speaks very fondly of the bookseller throughout his early notebooks, and is particularly taken by a kindness which is maintained with almost complete disregard for financial reward. He is, in essence, a Promethean dispenser of the 'fire' of textual knowledge to the people of Leeds, and it is fitting that Harrison's homage in the poem 'Thomas Campey and the Copernican System' (CP p.15) should describe the bookseller's back made crooked over years of carrying his heavy load. The imagined redemption towards the end of the poem straightens Tommy's 'warped spine' in much the same way that the agency of 'tongues of fire' elsewhere applies a comb to knotted words.

It is nevertheless surprising to find examples of religious text describing and occasionally defining Harrison's contemporary preoccupations randomly scattered throughout his notebooks of the late nineteen fifties and early sixties. That they often develop the fire theme seems axiomatic of his particular choice of subject-matter: accompanying his newspaper clipping of the Huddersfield mill fire of 1818, I find the following text from the Bible (2 Peter 3 v.10).

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up. (Journals and Commonplace Books, 1956–1986, Book 1956–1970).

This is an early, unfortunately undated, example of Harrison's urge to make connections, and the symbolisms reverberate outwards gathering possible interpretations as diverse as Christian zealotry appropriated to excuse class tyranny, to regenerative fires of class restitution, to fires of annihilation. It is not difficult here to infer the origins of the dualism which infects Harrison's later work, nor to trace the occasional impulse to transcendent abandonment amongst the metaphysical alchemy of the flames.

The very frequency of similar moments of 'infinitely neutral splendour' in Philip Larkin's work slightly undermines Seamus Heaney's doubt as to whether the poet's impulse is strong enough to 'chloroform the exactions of his (Larkin's) common sense' (Heaney, 1988, p.17). But both Harrison and Larkin remain anchored to the material conditions of their respective agendas: Larkin through a kind of introspectively 'defensive' idiom, and Harrison through an anger which is rendered more effective by the liberal use of fire imageries. And both, coincidentally, apply corrective reminders of a 'common sense' which stands four-square against their own suggestions of transcendence. Peter Forbes's contention that Harrison's poetry does not, in any case, share Larkin's 'visionary quality' is persuasive to the extent that the former's poems are a close approximation of his cultural and political attitude, but exceptions to this general rule are clearly visible (Forbes, 1991, p.487). It remains a matter of no little ambiguity that Harrison's declarations of atheism are muted by acts of poetic epiphany, whilst Larkin's sudden shrug at his own contemplation of the moon in the poem 'Sad Steps' - 'there's something laughable about this' - is rendered bloodless and reflexive before the totemic 'wolves of memory' and the 'immensements' which soon follow (Larkin, 1988, p.169).

I have noted, in this chapter, the complications which may inhere to simplistic oppositional examinations of Harrison's material. The fluidity of the fire trope does not lend itself to convenient compartmentalisation, and the poet's application of fire adds stratum to stratum of interpretative difficulty. One such entanglement concerns the notion of 'Tongues of Fire' which is common to all areas of Harrison's work. The most obvious definition of this expression derives from the fires of salvation descending from heaven upon the heads of the apostles, but many other possibilities obtain, particularly that which engages with the ideas of communication and articulacy. Other than a cursory

glance here, I have chosen to examine the expression if or when interpretation becomes appropriate to each of my themes.

## Chapter Three

### Fahrenheit 451

*Heav'ns ! what a pile ! whole ages perish there,  
And one bright blaze turns Learning into air.*  
(From Pope's 'The Dunciad')

Harrison's anticipation of eternal silence triggered by nuclear war engages with the possibility of a new Dark Age where language, or the documented record of language for posterity, enters a manmade vacuum. Not unreasonably this is the greatest fear of a poet and humanist who foresees the prospect of time and language 'slow-chapt', in Marvell's memorable phrase (from 'To His Coy Mistress' in Gardner, 1972, p.335). What is now very loosely known as the last great 'Dark Age', or that period roughly spanning the collapse of the Roman Empire and the eleventh- or twelfth-centuries, may be characterised less as an era of cultural and intellectual regression than one upon which few records are extant and therefore little is known. That the expression may be a misnomer is not, however, to gainsay the significance for posterity of a paucity of documented knowledge: its very sparseness remains one indicator of some degree of inertia. And it is not a little significant respecting Harrison's faith in fire's symbolic resonance that such a protracted indication of historical inertia may have been catalysed by a highly specific conflagration. Whether it was accidentally caught up in a city-wide firestorm, or a calculated 'design' of the Romans to shift a major centre of learning to Rome, continues to be debated by historians. But the consequences for several centuries of the burning of *um al-maktabat* – the 'mother of libraries' – at Alexandria in 48 B.C.E., outweigh the material causes. Lucien Polastron points to the incalculable potential lost among the ashes:

Regardless of the length of Cleopatra's nose, its (the library's) works offered the possibility of a Greek, not Roman, future. Its durability might well have created a dam to hold back the monotheistic tidal wave, and according to some, made it possible to leap squarely over the early Middle Ages. "If this Library had survived, the dark ages, despite the preponderance of Christianity, could have been considerably lighter."  
(Polastron, 2007, p.23).

If the Romans did orchestrate the burning and therefore unwittingly precipitated a lengthy period of history which was otherwise unconscious of the tenets of Greek thinking, they didn't also possess the means to extinguish humanity. The 'million-petalled flower' of life in Larkin's expression was always going to reassert itself, and if the Dark Ages were characterised to some degree by stasis, then they were not entirely 'silent', as the cultural efflorescence of the eighth-century court of Charlemagne would attest (Larkin, 1988,p.196).

But Harrison's sense of a new 'Dark Age' foresees the end of all things, which denouement necessarily includes the tools of communication and continuity - language and books. And he has a tendency to make apocalyptic inferences through local detail. The several pages of notebook which he gives over to newspaper clippings of the Morden Tower fire at Newcastle in 1973 give notice of an imagination preoccupied by the potential for censorship on a scale much grander than the regional interests affected in this instance. Morden Tower housed a poetry centre, and it is easy to recognise a shaping and reformulation of the idea of the destruction of the creative impulse in much later work, especially as the fire was an act of arson. Documented localised incidents such as Morden Tower are templates for Harrison's own fire 'reverie'; he stores them until he is able to find a wider existential connotation. They illuminate his darkest visions (*School of Eloquence* Notebooks, Book 26, page not numbered).

Conflagrations on the scale of the Alexandrian one amount for Harrison to a form of censorship, regardless of whether or not the fire was prosecuted deliberately. That the incident may have helped trigger many centuries of cultural 'darkness' would tend to reinforce the poet's absolute belief in the sanctity of the written word. The Dark Ages are meant to describe an epoch nearly devoid of textual scholarly activity, except perhaps for the noted example of Charlemagne and the assiduous transcribers and illustrators of religious materials who were scribbling away in the farthest outreaches of the former Roman Empire. Some of these last also find a place in Harrison's connection-obsessed oeuvre, and their scholastic and aesthetic significance in European terms colourfully undermines the figurative 'darkness' of the period's spurious nomenclature. The Farne Island cormorants which illuminate the scripts of Eadfrith and Billfrith in the poem 'Initial

illumination' come to represent a beacon of continuity; the survival of language and Art from a 'Dark' age of thirteen centuries ago:

but the initials in St John and in St Mark  
graced with local cormorants in ages,  
we of a darker age still keep calling Dark,  
survive in those illuminated pages.  
(CP , p.311).

Our age is evidently much darker, and the juxtaposition of chiaroscuro shades of glinting 'fishscale confetti' (CP, p.311) and 'the blackened in Baghdad' (CP, p.312) underpins Harrison's existential fear. For all that the manuscripts represent a faith to which Harrison cannot subscribe, and is elsewhere a focus for rigorous invective, here they are a jewelled and golden hymn to the survival of the word; illuminated torches of besieged hope which survive the depredations of misappropriation and abuse:

The word of God so beautifully scripted  
by Eadfrith and Billfrith the anchorite  
Pentagon conners have once again conscripted  
to gloss the cross on the precision sight.  
(CP, p.311).

The purity of the anchorite's vision of the 'word of God' is besmirched by the fires of Baghdad during the Gulf War, themselves dispensed in the name of an Americanized Christian deity. The modern Dark Age 'censors' the 'begemmed' older by imposing its own form of control on religious interpretation and, in Sandie Byrne's expression, by 'looting the gospels' to reinforce a spurious moral case for war (Byrne, 1998, p.66). As Byrne notes, however, the poem's connection of the two worlds has only a limited resonance: George Bush Snr. may have misappropriated parts of the Bible for the US's military ends, but he did not 'loot' illuminated manuscripts, as did the Vikings.

Harrison's fears for the loss of Word, of meaning, extend almost to the point of the sublimation of his own powerfully held secularism. As Byrne suggests, in this poem the narrator has no truck with criticism of either Islam or Christianity for being in themselves corrupting (Byrne, 1998, p.66). If we may assume that narrator and poet are one and the same voice, then Harrison appears to have a great deal of unexpected sympathy with the simplicities and comfort-provisions of religious rituals both ongoing and redundant. My examinations of *The Mysteries* and *Mimmo Perella Non è Piu* in Chapter Two were



intended at the very least to indicate such a counter-intuitive tendency in his work. The purity of religious ideas *per se* is the problem insofar as it has been corrupted through time to satisfy the demands of political pragmatism, to effect social control, or to help facilitate conquest. But when Harrison turns invective on what he perceives to be the fundamentalist strangulation of Art, free thought and life-affirmation, he is defending the sanctity of the written word beyond any consideration of its provenance. And it is significant that he once again appropriates the fire trope as a measure of both that which is symptomatic of censorious destruction, and that which defends the right to free-speech.

My aim in this chapter, then, is to limit my examination to those poems which best describe Harrison's preoccupation with the destruction or proscription of Art and language as they are promulgated in fires both literal and figurative. Harrison's most direct political engagement since the publication of *v.*, the TV film/poem *The Blasphemers' Banquet*, is a broadside against Islam's 'knee-jerk' fundamentalism which had earlier manifested its outrage at Salman Rushdie's novel *Satanic Verses* by issuing a *fatwa* or death sentence against the author *in absentia*. The spectacle of book-burnings in Bradford's Forster Square, provoked by the *fatwa*, provides the focus for Harrison's own complex polemic. And it is a deliberate polemic as his choice of medium would corroborate: the poem's language spares fewer blushes than the testosterone-filled teenagers who allegedly hijacked the demonstration for the purpose of a punch-up. Peter Symes, who directed the film and who speaks *for* the poet to some degree, finds a healthy confrontational reciprocity in the process of film-making:

The film took on a darker and more aggressive feel. If the fundamentalists could attack us, why could not we, the inheritors of the European rational tradition, attack in our turn.  
(CFP, p.xlviii).

Harrison's words are inflamed, some might say inflammatory, in the context of race relations. In either case they were viewed as culturally insensitive by contemporary commentators and the suspicion is endorsed by Luke Spencer whose several years of hindsight is necessarily coloured by a revisionary political correctness (Spencer, 1994, pp.125-126). Harrison is more inclined to make a highly contentious point than to consider the consequences, and in this sense his film has much more in common with the

earlier v. than might be supposed. Both poems are borne out of dissent and social fracture, and both coincidentally point an accusing finger at a pervasive and corrupting philistinism, whilst conceding some degree of complicity in the engendering of its most disturbing elements.

Harrison's fears for the future of mankind in a figurative conflagration are mirrored by specific instances of destruction, particularly of Art in its manifold forms. In 'The Mother of the Muses', for example, the poet engages with the burning of Dresden's *Semper Opera*, amongst other considerations. But his fears for the survival of free-speech provoke in him a brutal poetic reaction which may amount to little more than fiery denunciation, of the sort employed by Victorian Methodists. If his decision, in *The Blasphemers' Banquet*, to suborn the voices of the Revs. Alexander Wallace and Ian Paisley as examples of Christian fundamentalism declares a kind of democratisation of 'target' for invective, then the invective itself is applied with the same degree of unequivocal stridency. Using the transcript of the film as the primary focus for investigation, this chapter will attempt to dislocate the provocation from the reaction, and in so doing examine the ways in which fire is used to define both positions. Harrison's aggressive response to what he perceives as Islamic fundamentalist censorship supported by ignorant thuggishness, is, in one sense, little divorced from his own simplistic acclamation of those pleasures which are abjured by his opponents.

The film's action takes place in an Indian restaurant in what, by supreme irony given the centrality of the Bible to the 'morally improving' hypocrisies of colonial exploitation, was formerly a Methodist chapel. The historically persecuted literary luminaries who gather there celebrate with wine and curry, not unlike the gourmandising figure of Omar Khayyam, after whom the restaurant is named, and with whom Harrison instinctively identifies. The flagrant epicureanism is a deliberate broadside against the alleged life-deniers and 'nay-sayers' as much as an assertion of artistic integrity. The dinner table heaves with Peshawari nan, Rogan Josh and Vindaloo, the fire and colour of which dishes contrast markedly with the pinched austerities and absurd, humourless certainties of the Ayatollah Khomeini's pronouncements on adherence to Islamic tenets. The table's contents embody no less than a celebration of material enjoyment, of itself as palpable a statement of defiance as the Sociologist Bruno Bettelheim surmised amongst certain of

the more florid 'still life' paintings of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Dutch School. The pictures of overflowing plates of game, fruit, fish and sparkling wine goblets stand, for Bettelheim, brazenly 'against a religious teaching which looked upon this world as a sham without merit' (Bettelheim, 1980, pp.418-419). Harrison hints at this connection in one of his own notebooks, and no doubt finds this early reaction to religious stricture gratifying and persuasive.<sup>79</sup> The violence of his invective to some degree makes him complicit with the philistinism of his 'enemies', and it might be that this is an interpretative point with which Harrison himself would concur. He is urged to his own denouement as he looks into the flames and recognises the anger and the tendency to proscription and nihilism in himself. If the character of 'Daniel' in an early piece of prose fiction from his personal notebooks is to any extent autobiographical, then his imagined fate may be read as an act of self-mortification for the failure to transcend the boundaries of engagement, and make an appreciable cultural difference: 'All the poems I have begun have turned to ashes. A sudden draught of air and all might be ablaze again' (in *Journals and Commonplace Books*, Box 1, Book 1, page not numbered). Harrison wasn't quite twenty-two when he wrote these words on 30 December, 1958 and it seems clear that, on the verge of a new year, he was anxious about future poetic recognition. But the sense of worthlessness recurs throughout his body of work, and if he does not know it himself, part of the problem lies in his compulsion to fight fire with fire itself, and without the kind of subtlety which brings resolve or solution.

It is instructive, I think, that Harrison mentions Savonarola in the same notebook. Savonarola was a Renaissance Florentine friar whose own adherence to a strict code of religious obedience resulted, at his instigation, in what became known as 'The Bonfire of the Vanities', a pyre of books and artefacts of adornment perceived as decadent or profane, including the seemingly innocuous cultural impedimenta of 'lutes, women's false hair, cosmetics, mirrors, dolls' (Hole, 1998, p.184). The 'cleansing' process appears to have provided a 'release' for the fire's audience in spite of the prohibition which the act embodied, and the irony is as noteworthy as that sense of celebration which is

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<sup>79</sup> See *Poetry Notebooks*, P2, p.160. One important side-effect of Harrison's identification of loose historical connections is to bolster his own claim to judgemental even-handedness. His highly-charged polemical position does not discriminate between different colours of religious straitjacket, whether they be, in these connected instances, Christian or Islamic.

undermined by the spectre of Hiroshima in Harrison's VJ Day poems. Noting 'the great *Auto da Fe*, Piazza Della Signoria, 1499', Harrison is referring to the later burning of the friar himself, and is acknowledging, one suspects, a degree of symmetry in the response of the Florentine people to the extremity of Savonarola's strictures. Since it resulted in his own immolation at the hands of a credulous populace who now found themselves not yet ready for the rigours of his puritanism, Savonarola's burning embodies an act of public self-censorship to which, like Socrates, he willingly submits. There may be some sense of this abandonment in Harrison who appears to concede, in an early manuscript draft of the poem 'Ghosts : Some words before breakfast', the fatal binary entanglement of his own compulsions: 'Words, dreams, and deeds the mind relates/ in haunted words, the mind cremates' (in *Loiners Notebooks*, Book 1, page not numbered). Is Harrison, here, accepting that he is drawn to reject the blandishments of the philistine with which he is also integrally connected ? The poet's relationship with the cultural effluvia of his class by birth is complex and contradictory. He embraces Music Hall comedy and the work of the Victorian balladeer precisely as he condemns the outpourings of modern popular culture. He is sympathetic with the material consequences of poor education and inarticulacy, but not with the populist impedimenta which spews relentlessly from the exercise of misplaced cultural certainties. And for Harrison, there exists a dim connection between the ignorant tyranny of Bradford teenagers and the kinds of obscure Art, graffiti chief amongst them, which are emblematic of that culture. The details of that culture remain a mystery to the poet, but they serve to reinforce his anachronistic sense of isolation, and to confirm his worst fears about the degrading, and ultimate censoring, of language. But these fears are sometimes self-generated and are borne out of a similar ignorance of that world. Harrison's anger is preconceived and precious; it informs his polemical tone as transparently as George Gissing's burning of his character John Pether in the novel *Workers in the Dawn* stood for his own loathing of the late Victorian popular press. Pether, an avid consumer of what Gissing conceived to be second-rate proletarian literature, is cremated alive when a pile of his own newspapers accidentally ignites (Gissing, 1880, pp.94-96). Harrison's urges are more culturally prolix: he takes a figurative torch to some of the vicissitudes of popular culture whilst harbouring a genuine loathing of the proscriptions perpetrated by fundamentalist religion.

The landscape of *The Blasphemers' Banquet* enables Harrison to give material life to polemical ideas which were hitherto bound in narratives of fiction or fantasy. An example of this type of poem, 'The Pomegranates of Patmos', to which I will return, attacks Christian fundamentalism through the portal of the biblical *Revelation* and its supposed creator, John of Patmos. The contemporary currency of the *Satanic Verses* furore, however, provided a substantial platform on which to construct a riposte to the notions of Islamic fundamentalism and censorship, and it is not difficult to understand Harrison's choice of medium. The film's broadcast on BBC1 on 31 July, 1989 in a primetime slot underwrote the immediate relevance of the affair and its aftermath. It also gave Harrison a mouthpiece, as had *v.*, for a muscularly vocal delivery which tends to subordinate subtlety to fiery language, the better, in Peter Symes' view, to unsettle the Establishment (CFP, p.xlv). Where fire is not borne out in material representation, it is present metaphorically: in rage, and in anger at the consequence for language of such 'blind' forms of proscription. When, in the film, Harrison reiterates a view prevalent at the time that many of the protestors had not in fact read *The Satanic Verses*,<sup>80</sup> he impugns such ignorance, even where he stands accused by some commentators of making simplistic and homogeneous assumptions about race and motivation.<sup>81</sup> The point, they imply, is that Harrison is similarly blinded by his own generalisations, though it does seem likely that the motivation amongst the protestors to burn and rampage far outstripped the imperative to evaluate the cause of their anger. And in this regard, their behaviour would be little removed from the many civilians who willingly aided in the anti-semitic destructions of *Kristallnacht* during the nights of 9 and 10 November, 1938. The wanton raising of shops, businesses and synagogues was conducted all over Germany by the SA military with the tacit approval of the Nazi High Command, but the destruction was exacerbated and magnified by thousands of civilians whose impulses were fuelled, at least in part, by the excitement of the moment. Aside from the wholesale smashing of glass, whose generic German nomenclature ironically conjures benign, and rather pleasant images of kaleidoscoping crystals, the nights were also defined by fire, and across the whole Reich

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<sup>80</sup> Harrison's text reads : 'When I see bigots wanting Rushdie dead / burning a book I'm sure they've never read.' (CFP, p.137).

<sup>81</sup> See in particular, Antony Rowland . (2001, p.293).

synagogues were deliberately targeted, together with their contents: philosophy texts, scrolls and prayer books. The cabalistic and 'secretive' literatures of Judaism clearly inflamed many who had never opened the *Torah*, but *had* read *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, an elaborate hoax purporting to outline a plan for Jewish world domination which was disseminated through German school curricula from 1933 onwards. If the outrage of the citizenry of Germany was more directed than that of the Bradford rioters, it seems likely that the focus of hatred in both instances was skewed by ignorance and misunderstanding, and fuelled by testosterone. The burning of the Frankfurt Opera House in 1989 by an East German immigrant, Michael Wortha, who was disillusioned with the capitalist West, is noted in one of Harrison's personal notebooks from the Leeds archive and gives the connection contemporary salience (*Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* Notebooks, Book 70, p.2537). For Harrison, the Opera House is no less a 'Palace of Art' than Rushdie's repository of the written word, and the perpetrator's hubris as misjudged and dangerous as the Bradford demonstrators' own. That the two arrived at a destructive conclusion from different premises does not, for Harrison, obscure the potential danger of extreme commitment.

Wanton destruction fascinates Harrison, and he is altogether too 'knowing' a writer not to acknowledge some degree of vicarious complicity in the sense of collective narcosis which sustains abandonment to a wholesale destructive impulse. That sense of abandonment is, as Andrea Lauterwein notes of Anselm Kiefer's deeply symbolic, binary-conflicted pictures of desiccated post war German landscapes, embodied in fire and its infinite possibility, which focus induces an overwhelming collective euphoria. The burning of books, of synagogues and of Jews, Lauterwein writes, both fascinates and repels Kiefer, much as it also does Harrison, so that fire becomes the central agency of 'destruction and catharsis' (Lauterwein, 2007, p.43). The scale of the act of attempted 'censorship' often massively outweighs the material benefit for the perpetrators themselves which sometimes resides in little more than nihilistic satisfaction. One of the central conceits of the poem 'The Mother of the Muses' is the erasure of memories both individual, in the attrition of Alzheimer's disease, and collective, in the all-consuming firestorms of 1945 Dresden. At least one of Harrison's concerns in the latter instance is to establish a complicity on the part of Allied Bomber Command, which was directed largely by the

British. What subsequently became known as ‘revenge raids’ were acts of mass-scale ‘erasure’, and the estimated 35,000 who were killed in Dresden during the nights of 13 to 15 February, 1945, were victims of a brutal retributive impulse inaugurated by, amongst others, Churchill and Air Chief Marshal Arthur ‘Bomber’ Harris. To paraphrase Antony Rowland, the connection between the notions of love and atrocity – some of the raids took place on Valentine’s night - is balanced precariously here (Rowland, 2001, p.224). Though they are not doves, Harrison’s summation of the process of erasure finds a neat expression in the image of the birds of the *Tiergarten* taking instinctive flight into a firestorm from which they cannot escape:

Flamingos, flocking from burst cages, fly  
in a frenzy with their feathers all alight  
from fire on the ground to bomb-crammed sky,  
their flames fanned that much fiercer by their flight;  
(CP p.307).

As the birds conflate with the flames in an alliterative blending process, Harrison encourages the reader to consider the human cost of the firestorms: the extinction of huge numbers in the vast crematorium created by Lancaster bombers. The refusal of successive governments to erect monuments to the memory of the thousands of bomber aircrew who were killed in action throughout the war tacitly concedes a sense of national guilt in the matter, and the latest proposal for one such commemoration was only recently overturned. For Harrison, the bombings were acts of ‘knee-jerk’ revenge, and the thought may still have ranged in his mind when he contemplated the instigators of the Bradford book-burnings only a couple of years after he completed ‘The Mother of the Muses’. It remains clear to this observer at least, that Harrison’s limitless compulsion for connection-making sometimes disables his ability to distinguish between the scale of atrocities, and certainly all are examined and judged with equal gravity. For all that the Bradford incident is intended as a metonym for wider considerations of censorship and subjugation, it is entirely possible that Harrison’s argument is weakened by the portentous nature of his polemic.

Although he does not allude to the fact in the poem, Harrison would probably be aware of three other ‘victims’ of the Dresden conflagration: the city’s nationally significant libraries which were totally destroyed along with their contents. The libraries

contained many very old texts of Europe-wide provenance and the consequence for a sense of historical continuity was the greater compounded by the fact of their longevity. Lucien Polastron's lyrical assessment of the philosophical damage of this act of wilful destruction could not stress Harrison's own concern for the survival of books, and of memory, more concisely:

In the smoke of the burning pages glided the ghosts of thousands of incunabula, including one of the first illustrated books, printed in Paris by Jehan Bonhomme, Jacques Millet's *The Destruction of Troy* from 1448. (Polastron, 2007 p.177).

Millet's book, and theme, span a period of literary productivity begun in ancient Athens and continuing to resonate in meaning in our time, and it is no coincidence that the temporally- disparate 'ghosts' of Voltaire, Molière, Omar Khayyam and Byron inhabit the vacant restaurant seats in *The Blasphemers' Banquet*. Harrison's inclusion of himself at the 'top' table of luminaries may be intended to complete an historical circle of connection; he is in a sense Salman Rushdie's one living spokesman. In another sense, the 'circle', the feasting assemblage, is an embodiment of time's levelling finitude; a re-iteration of one aspect of Harrison's characteristic 'O' of oblivion where all, including literary figures, end:

That great big O of nothingness that swallows  
poets and priests, queens and Ayatollahs  
not only infidels but fundamentalists  
whether in black turbans or dog collars.  
(CFP, p.141).

But it is also possible to construe the poet's own inclusion as an entirely other form of literary conceit. Harrison's democracy of seating – 'there / on mirrored cushions will sit Voltaire,/ me, Molière, Omar Khayyam, Lord Byron' – inflates his own claim to immortality by default (CFP, p.137). As the critic Peter Lennon noted in a *Guardian* article responding to the film, several of Harrison's contemporaries viewed the conceit as something of an ego trip (Lennon, 1990, p.21). But the shadowy figures are in fact mouthpieces for the criticism of acts of proscription, and their words are imagined by and presented in Harrison's own voice in the film. In a sense they are historical precedents for the many modern writers who are unable, for whatever reason, to express their opinions freely. In a more recent *Guardian* piece, Ian McEwan, novelist and friend of Salman Rushdie, noted



that since the imposition of the *fatwa*, Rushdie's own writings have become defined by an imperative to speak out for 'imprisoned or otherwise silenced writers around the world' (McEwan, 2012, p.3). Harrison's figures are, as Polastron imagines, also 'ghosts' at the feast and their presence retrospectively reinforces his defence of the freedom to exercise the written word, whilst their imagined gourmandising affirms a commitment to embracing 'this fleeting life' (CFP, p.138). The words are Khayyam's by way of the poet Edward Fitzgerald, and they are sung at deliberately repeated intervals in the film by Harrison's then wife, the opera singer Teresa Stratas.

Harrison's polemic is bound to be complicated by the shifting landscapes of complicity, ignorance, disparate perceptions of 'high' and 'low' art, and differing evaluations of religious fundamentalism. But his position is clear from the start of the film's narrative. The inflamed 'war cry' of some of the demonstrators is vocalised precisely in order to illuminate an explosive combination of ignorance and suddenly-realised violence: '*Kill the bastard, burn him...kill the bastard...burn him to death*' (CFP, p.137). It is almost as if the fire-lighters were displacing the focus of the lost hearth with a different kind of reverie, or possibly reverie's obverse, an hysterical mantra of destruction. The words are not Harrison's, they were recorded during the demonstration, and the association of death and fire clearly appeals to his sense of urgency. Harrison is in no doubt that the novelist would be joining his own books in the conflagration were he present; the impulse to destroy spreads rapidly like fire itself. The inexorability of such an inflammatory compulsion was noted by the poet Heine in 1823, and it seems likely that Harrison would be aware of Heine's depressing prognosis before he himself put pen to paper: 'Where men burn books, they will burn people also in the end' (Heine, 1982, p.187). That the poet is referring to the burning of the *Qur'an* by Jews ironically reverses the telescope of victimhood, and usefully, if coincidentally, underlines Harrison's own commitment to defending written opinion, of whatever shade. Heine was a Jew, which was one of the bases of his own rejection by the German public. His eventual dissidence manifested the prescience of his comment in relation to his own fate; and the play from which Heine's line is taken – *Almansor* – was one of the volumes committed to the flames by the Nazis during the Berlin book-burnings of 1933. It is no surprise that Heine's statue in Toulon

forms the central plank of the film/poem *The Gaze of the Gorgon*, given Harrison's commitment to the idea of the defence of freedom against tyranny.

The Bradford demonstrators are out of control like the Dresden firestorm and they can have no sense of the wider symbolic resonance of their compulsion to prosecute a 'crime' of which they themselves have only dim or misunderstood knowledge. To this degree, they give an echo of the Lancaster bomber crews who similarly could have little understanding of the broader ramifications of their actions. 'Sold' on the idea of military imperative and purpose, their acts of organised revenge magnify outwards at point of impact, like napalm. Fire, as Denis Donoghue notes, 'destroys difference' and 'is the element most congenial to blasphemy and daring' (Donoghue, 1974, p.93). It is an inclusive phenomenon rendering everyone susceptible to its seductive blandishments, and it may be used or interpreted to support oppositional positions, or seemingly oppositional positions which amount in actuality to a simulacrum of destructive tyranny. Harrison, even at his most 'daring', is aware of fire's capacity to render difference invisible and of his own potential complicity in acts of unfocussed rage. And alongside the human victims of such acts burn the vestiges of Art, of wisdom and of knowledge; collateral considerations which come, relentlessly in this poet's work, to stand as symbolic reminders of total mental annihilation. His unperformed play *The Common Chorus* only serves to reiterate the inflammatory potential of ignorance and specifically male aggression:

Remember, if you can, that with man goes the mind  
that might have made sense of the Hist'ry of Mankind.  
It's a simple thing to grasp: when we're all dead  
there'll be no further pages to be read,  
not even leaflets, and no peace plays like these  
no post-holocaust Aristophanes.  
(CC, p.49).

Harrison's use of the Augustan, particularly Popean, approach to common sense didacticism seems intended to confer gravity on what is actually a commonplace pronouncement in his oeuvre. This, he says, is the aggregate cost of self-imposed, unrestrained mental blindness. And in *The Blasphemers' Banquet*, Harrison hangs on to the compelling image of fire where it is appropriated in the most terrifying way by those who resemble, in their reiterative inexorability, the circumstantially-degraded boys in *Lord*

*of the Flies*: 'Kill the beast ! Cut his throat ! Spill the blood !' (Golding, 2004, p.160). The mental attitude is both blind and driven, and exacerbated by the collective safety of the mob. And, as if to underline his conviction that the demonstrators are ignorant of the cause of their own outrage, Harrison refers to the book-burners collectively as 'fools', thereby nailing his polemical colours even more firmly to the mast, and it should be added, further arming his critics. An image, once again from *The Common Chorus*, of First World War soldiers blinded by chlorine gas in the trenches gives some gravitas to Harrison's point. Intended by both German and Allied armies to inhibit the enemy's ability to function, the gas canisters took no account of wind direction thereby frequently inflicting greater casualties in the originating trench. But the irony of unintended self-mortification notwithstanding, the effect was to blind, choke and maim the victim, making him a useless liability to his own comrades. Harrison here makes use of a variation of the fire trope in order to drive home that other central irony, which more or less illustrates the Mahatma Ghandi's own about the taking of an eye for an eye:

Ay, gas, 22 April 1915  
that was the date the Huns first used chlorine.  
And only five days later, five fucking days  
and us blundering and blind with eyeballs all ablaze  
and comrades croaking from the Kraut's chlorine  
27<sup>th</sup> of bloody April 1915,  
women, bloody women have their pacifist pow-wows  
over in the Hague with a bunch of fucking Fraus,  
boatloads of the buggers, peacettes in petticoats...  
I wish a Gerry sub had torpedoed all their boats.  
(CC, p.37-8).

For Ghandi, acts of wilful, cynical destruction render the whole world symbolically blind. The veterans' inability to see beyond a cycle of revenge aggression irreversibly foregrounds the central images of burning eyeballs and charred lungs with alliterative emphasis. They have a point, but, like the somnolent and lumbering movements of the army divisions they represented, their argument grinds to a stalemate. The taking of eyes elsewhere prevents the victim from reading, from learning, so that the propagation of useless violence destroys that which enables discriminatory intelligence, and once more suggests a form of self-censorship leading to oblivion. The circularity of grief as is described in pointed couplets by the keening chorus of women, finds only faint

consolation in the image of a son, who was once also an innocent child, picking his way round a 'Scaleless zodiac' by touch: 'I see the dimpled fingers learning Braille/ because my boy is blinded at Paschendaele' (CC, p.40).

That I am stretching a limited connection with *The Blasphemers' Banquet* by illustrating the consequences of 'blind' ignorance elsewhere in his poetry, no more overstates my argument than Harrison's engineering of connections between the very local concern of a demonstration in a Bradford square, and the historical luminaries whose presence is intended to bolster his position. The ignorance of the demonstrators is directly counterpointed with the erudition of the 'ghosts' at the feast. All victims, in one context or another, of persecution and/or misunderstanding in their own lifetimes, it is a given that they would recognise the nature of censorship. I would like here to look especially at the figure of Voltaire partly because he endured direct experience of proscription of his work, and partly because he, like Rushdie, saw the acts of censorship manifested in flames. The central image of the executed boy from Abbeville onto whose burning body is tossed Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary* is clearly a compelling one for Harrison. In the film/poem he describes the punishment meted out immediately prior to the burning: 'A boy in Abbeville for having sung/ a mildly blasphemous ballad had his tongue / ripped from its roots' (CFP p.138). The fate of the nineteen-year-old victim, who was Jean-François de la Barre, seems intended by Harrison to be a figure for the hideous end of Catholic fundamentalism and its censorious extremities. That the people, the local judiciary and the clergy appeared to clamour for the extraordinary violence of the punishment and found in Voltaire's work an inflammatory hereticism suggests, to Harrison, a connection with Rushdie and a reincarnation of extreme zealotry in the form of persecution. Voltaire's inquisitors are Catholic rather than Muslim and the difference lends a sense of trans-theological parity to Harrison's polemic, just as Heine's acute prognostication about inflamed Judaistic fundamentalism manifests a default empathy with that very Islamism whose extremities are questioned in *The Blasphemers' Banquet*. Harrison's appropriation of the 'talking head' of the Rabbi Meir Kahane advocating pre-emptive murder as the only sane Jewish approach to religio-cultural provocation further illustrates the boundless limits of fanaticism (CFP, pp.149-50). The inclusion of Ian Paisley amongst several other notably vocal figures adds to the crucible of invective noise in an

attempt to alchemise a cross-cultural fraternity of folly from the unspoken metaphor of fire. The anger, as Bruce Woodcock noted soon after the film appeared, is directed at *all* forms of life-denying fundamentalism (Woodcock, 1990, p.50).

Aside from singing profanities, De la Barre stood accused of besmirching the image of the Cross and pronouncing blessings in foul language, and his horrific punishment stands in sharp contrast to the detail of the actual 'crime'. It is clear that Harrison attaches great significance to the act of tongue removal and the flames which subsequently reduced De la Barre's body, and Voltaire's book, to ashes. In addition to being a useful, eighteenth-century illustration of Dante's *Ordo Poenarum* in the sense of the punishment fitting the perceived crime, tonguelessness serves as a metaphor for an inability to articulate the spoken word, just as it does in the wholly different context of Harrison's father, on behalf of whose voiceless class and culture the poet 'busks' in verse (in 'Turns' CP, p.162). Voltaire's book is likewise cast to the flames, and hope dissipates with the dissolution of the text. The reality of De la Barre's complicity in heresy is as insubstantial as ash. Had the crimes he stood accused of been genuine, the punishment would have remained ludicrously overreaching. De la Barre was to be made an example of, as was Voltaire's reputation, and the book is burned with the boy in order to impugn the presence of a malign philosophical influence which requires no further substantiation than suspicion.

Harrison's noting of the tongue removal adds further interpretative possibilities to the already densely serviceable image of 'tongues of fire' which comes to shape so many meanings elsewhere in his work. The tongue tossed to the flames here cannot be redemptive, except in the sense that Harrison is finding a parallel vindication of the right to disseminate the written word through the offices of a powerful metaphor. It can represent a form of survival in that time has failed to extinguish the words of Voltaire. Harrison intends the tongue to symbolize an act therefore of defiance: its immolation is a form of alchemy which underwrites that defiance. It also becomes a looking-glass to the future, yielding from the flames a warning about zealotry, rather as the poet Hieronymus Fracastorius predicted the inevitability of syphilitic plagues, climatic extremities, death and destruction as consequences of the over-arching imperial aspirations of the Conquistadors. I mention Fracastorius specifically because Harrison translated the scenario described, in the poem 'Travesties' (CP, pp.32-33), but more precisely because, in

a telling footnote, he found it necessary to mention the fact of the earlier poet having been born without a mouth. According to this footnote, Fracastorius died in 1553 of an 'apoplexy, speechless' (p.33). I can find no documentary evidence to corroborate either medical condition or apoplectic silence, but both give a convenient symmetry to Harrison's thinking. That he considers Fracastorius's alleged physical limitation to be befitting of a poet underlines, once again, the power of the written word to transcend the obsequies of death and disability. Fracastorius's poetic prognosis is doubly prescient because rendered in a reflective, introspective silence. His words, like Voltaire's, and like the symbolism of De la Barre's riven tongue, speak beyond the flames and across the centuries.

Some of the tyrannies of the twentieth century, even beyond the suppressions of religious fundamentalism, exerted a censorious power which appears to confirm Harrison's own thesis as to the ongoing circularity of fear and paranoia. Under the yoke of Stalinism, the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova was obliged, along with many of her contemporaries, to render *herself* silent. Joseph Brodsky recounts the difficulty, and the response :

Naturally enough, poems of this sort couldn't be published, nor could they even be written down or retyped. They could only be memorised by the author and by some seven other people, since she didn't trust her own memory.  
(Brodsky, 1990, p.356).

The survival of language and of ideas in this quietly defiant way may be interpreted as a further metaphorical facet of Harrison's 'Tongues of Fire', since the conspiracy of silence is itself as conspicuous and ultimately effective as the transmission of flames. Whether or not he is aware of it, Akhmatova's diligence is subordinate to her actions: they define the impulse to speak out, and in so doing help to guarantee the survival of a language of stoical perseverance whose wider meaning enables Harrison to make the kinds of connection which unite past and present. Akhmatova's besieged obligation mimics, by ironic default, the oral tradition of those ancients like Homer who could engage nothing but the spoken word in order to make allegorical shapes out of myth and legend. For Harrison, the fact of continuity is sufficient indication that language thrives under siege, as surely as the beacons upon which he invests so much symbolic authority in his own

translation of a Greek Tragic legend . The Achaean torches at the opening of his version of the *Oresteia* are prismatic, particularly for this poet: as metaphors they yield advance warning, prophecy, and an invitation to posterity to recognise the timelessness of ambition, and of folly. The ‘fresh flame bearing the firenews’ (TW, p.197) from Troy is at the same time undermined by a ‘Guilt (that) can’t be curtailed, it glows through the nightdark’ with as much prescient intensity as a beacon of celebration (TW, p.199). Harrison’s view is idiosyncratically simplistic, arguably to the point of being repetitive. For all of its oppositional possibilities, one of the major appeals of fire as a metaphor, for the poet, is that it may enable a clarity of received vision. As a film-maker, the poet is ‘hands-on’ and takes a proactive directorial attitude even where the title of ‘Director’ is someone else’s. When, towards the beginning of ‘*The Blasphemers’ Banquet*’, the viewer sees Voltaire’s bust with a book burning projected on it (CFP, p.138) , she is looking vicariously at Harrison’s simplistic symbolism. The fire burns the idea of continuity of language into the mind’s eye, precisely as it is a literal manifestation of destruction of that same language. Above all else, Harrison as polemicist loathes the certainty of the religious zealot, a certainty which appears to demand the dissemination of intolerance: from the small boy who is a trans-historical conflation and cries ‘*Mort ! Mort ! Mort !*’ to Rushdie (CFP, p.147), to the ‘hell-fire such fanatics love to fan’ (p.151).

The poet’s affiliation with Greek and Roman modes of thinking may partly be explained by the respective resistance of these cultures to the idea of philosophical surety. Writing at the *fin de siècle* about Judaism specifically, Samuel Butler made a general point about the narrowness of religious orthodoxy:

On the contrary, if asked what feature of post-Christian life we had derived most distinctly from Hebrew sources I should say at once ‘intolerance’ – the desire to dogmatise about matters – whereas the Greeks and Romans held certainty to be unimportant and unattainable.  
(in Wilson, 1999, p.240).

And Harrison would concur with Butler to the extent that he manipulates the Ayatollah’s most febrile and one-dimensional musings on the nature of Islamic law precisely in order to set up a contrast with the only certainty of the human condition, which is that of life’s finitude and finality:

Omar loves ‘this fleeting life’ and knows

That everything will vanish with the rose  
And yet, instead of Paradise, prefers  
This life of passion, pain and passing shows.  
(CFP, p.152).

Another symptom of dogmatic certainty is the proscription of pleasure, and Khomeini's pronouncements make easy, possibly facile, targets for Western observers. His documented inventory of the impure includes, variously, 'urine, excrement, sperm, blood, dogs, pigs, unbelievers, wine, beer, and the sweat of the excrement-eating camel' (CFP, p.139), and it is no coincidence that Harrison counts the first four of these, and wine, amongst his own preoccupations, for reasons, we trust, which transcend the morbid or the mundane.

Harrison's long poem 'The Pomegranates of Patmos' takes a somewhat blunt instrument of redress to the censorious certainties of biblical *Revelation*. And again, he commends wine, fucking, and the 'good life' as natural antidotes to the vehicles of suppression. Even where Harrison is appropriating the logos of Christian doctrine merely to undermine the proscriptive 'batty old bugger' Saint John<sup>82</sup> of the Greek island of Patmos, he inadvertently draws the tropes of creation and destruction into one highly-charged symbolic litany and thereby complicates any opposition of meaning by virtue of his own tonal register, which, in the second verse below, is convincingly biblical.<sup>83</sup>

He tried to convince me but didn't succeed  
as I spiked out the vermilion gel  
from the pomegranate, that its seed  
stood for the sperm of the Future flame-lit from Hell,

An orb of embryos still to be born,  
a globe of sperm globules that reddens  
not with the glow of the Aegean dawn  
but the fires of his God's Armageddon. (CP, p. 293).

Harrison's change of register at verse two is tricked out in patinas of fire, the better once again, to describe John of Patmos's revelation in tones that ravish the very language in

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<sup>82</sup> John of Patmos was the alleged author of what is now the final book of the New Testament, *Revelation*. Steeped in symbolisms and metaphors of divine retribution and cataclysmic unravellings of all earthly pleasures, *Revelation* is at once the most risible, and the most likely to be appropriated for purposes of unhinged fundamentalism, of all the Bible's elements.

<sup>83</sup> It is possible that Harrison derives at least some of his verse techniques from early readings of the Methodist hymnal. The suggestion appears to be corroborated by the poet himself in a barely legible prose entry in one of his early notebooks. (See Journals and Commonplace Books, Box 1, entry undated).



which his lunatic extremism is otherwise to be condemned. Recognising the defining influence of metaphor on interpretations of *Revelation*, Harrison's narrator purges a literary device which is harnessed almost exclusively for the dissemination of images of destruction, even in the agency of life:

I'm so weary of all metaphorers.  
From now on my most pressing ambition's  
to debrainwash all like Prochurus  
made Moonies by metaphysicians.  
(CP , p.296).

Not sufficiently hidden behind the adopted persona of Prochurus's brother, Harrison's narrator's insouciant end-stopping in the first line above does little to disabuse this reader of the belief that the sentiment is disingenuous. The poet's moments of greatest engagement here are not to be found within the lexically elaborated variations of Stanley Holloway's jocular verse, which unfortunately incline the reader to take any poetic intention much less seriously. One example, among several in the poem, suffices to show how a serious theme may be undermined by misplaced, if amusingly alliterative, metrics :

He sits in a cave with his guru  
a batty old bugger called John,  
and scribbles on scrolls stuff to scare you  
while the rabbi goes rabbiting on.  
(CP, p.291).

Harrison's nod to Holloway's comic style seems deliberate here. Popular at the nether end of a Music Hall tradition with which Harrison is familiar and deeply sympathetic, Holloway's monologues represent the dying embers of a sense of cultural homogeneity which still flickers in song and remembered dialect. Since some of the competing 'voices' within his poetry depend for their emphasis upon (now possibly questionable) interpretations of dialect, Harrison would not take issue with Martha Vicinus's assessment of the significance of this theatrical genre :

The music hall is crucial to the study of working-class literature as the summation of an oral and communal art expressive of class interests.  
(Vicinus, 1974, pp.239-240).

Balanced on the edge of ambiguity, a polemical loathing of extremism sits in an uneasy ontological relationship with a relishing of the language of Armageddon through the conduit of fire. Fire appears to define both the significance of religious symbolism and the

limit of Harrison's fascination with its linguistic potential, particularly where earthy, and questionable, sexual metaphors effectively posit worldly urges in opposition to John's equally poetic but morally-repressive conception of divine retribution:

The pomegranate ! If forced to compare,  
to claim back what eschatology stole,  
what about, once you've licked back the hair,  
the glossed moistness of a girl's hole ?<sup>84</sup>

*He* could take a gem-packed pomegranate,  
best subjected to kisses and suction,  
and somehow make it stand for the planet  
destined for fiery destruction.  
(CP, p.293).

More subtle, and generally less partisan than 'Pomegranates' perhaps because his material engages directly with the life-affirming detail of the modern Greek island and with the restoration of memory, Michael Hulse's recent poem 'Break of Day on Patmos' prepares the reader for the approaching 'bad smell' of blind fundamentalism with images of closure and warning. Draining the narrative of colour, and, in an echo of Harrison, the symbolic pomegranate of its juices, the voice of Hulse's zealot with a megaphone is drawn in an italicized register which is complicated by the narrator's own Revelatory insinuations:

She prowled the promenade growling Apocalypse,  
judgement, the seven last plagues, the brimstone  
lakes of fire. The ancient sadistic dross.  
The waiter with a tray

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<sup>84</sup> The metaphorical association between the obvious fecundity of the Greek island, and unbridled sexuality, is mirrored elsewhere in poetry. In his poem 'Patmos', Lawrence Durrell describes the song of the lark as if it was forced, or ejaculated, into existence, in a complexity of images:

'While each in rising squeezed  
His spire of singing drops  
On that renewed landscape  
Like semen from the grape.' (Durrell, 1957, p.198).

If it seems unlikely that Durrell's poem is making a critical point about John the Divine's life-suppressing strictures, then Derek Walcott's 'As John to Patmos' takes a more engaged metaphorical view, investing John's imagination, vicariously through his narrative own, with the lineaments of an onanistic animist fantasy:

as here surrounded  
By the strewn-silver on waves, the wood's crude hair, the rounded  
Breasts of the milky bays [...]' (Walcott, 1986, p.5).

of Amstel beers, translated, tapped his forehead, was  
there ever any woman so alone ? I watched  
her raise the megaphone : *And in those days  
shall men seek death,  
and shall not find it – did  
she care if anyone*

was listening ? - *and shall desire to die.* Entire  
unto herself. Unmeek. By proxy merciless.  
The enemy of peace.  
(Hulse, 2009, p.60).

‘By proxy merciless’: for both poets, but particularly for Harrison, the stark cruelties of fundamentalism on behalf of a vengeful God are made especially manifest in the fires of Revelation. The scatology of ‘joyless shits’ (Hulse, 2009, p. 60) and ‘it’s crap, his apocalypse’ (CP, p.292), seems only to declare a sudden and anchored polemical position lest there should be any doubt as to the meaning of the excitable usage of languages of Armageddon and fire:

There’ll always be people who’ll welcome  
the end of the sea and the sky  
and wail to their God to make Hell come  
and rejoice to hear the damned cry,

a date ringed in red in their diary  
when they know that Doomsday will be  
sure they’ll be safe from the fiery  
Gehenna engulfing, among billions, me !  
(CP, p.292).

Harrison’s narrator here might as well be referring to Hulse’s female antagonist; the fiery Gehenna engaged in the language of apocalypse, if anything reinforces a revulsion, shared by both poets, to the seemingly ageless mental tyrannies instigated by John the Divine. Hulse’s comment on such an association of loathing also serves to underline the importance of the presence of compelling beauty, beheld even by atheists, amongst the more forgiving works of the New Testament. Referring to Harrison’s poem, Hulse writes:

What we clearly have in common [...] is an aversion to the anti-life aspects of the book of Revelation. I think of it as psychoterror, an eager supply of traumatising sticks with which to beat the faithful for centuries, and personally find it abhorrent that such a text should even be bound together with the rest of the New Testament, which has so much

in it that is morally of the highest beauty, even for atheists.<sup>85</sup>

Harrison needs little encouragement to turn those same ‘traumatising sticks’ upon the instigators of such dogmatic misery, though oppositional complications of fire are made the more so by the serviceability of a trope which comes, in places here, to take on a ‘doubleness’ of meaning. A harnessed Gehenna persuasively shadows a ‘real’ conflagration, so intimate is its detail to the narrator’s imagination. In a poem with such evident structural weaknesses as the misplaced form noted above, sudden immersions in the singular logic of the flames slightly derail the passage of Harrison’s polemical juggernaut, even where they describe only the limiting metaphorical purview of his antagonists. The compulsion to ravish the visceral language of those he seeks to condemn is in one sense no more of a contradiction than the simultaneous presence of radically opposed interpretations of *Revelation*, which ‘reveal’, as one finds in Blake, a new metaphysical order as much as a tableau of corporeal destruction.

When, in the film/poem *Prometheus*, he ‘voices’ the old man’s valedictory disgust at Hermes’s idea of denial, the former’s antagonised defiance is no doubt Harrison’s own. Written ten years after *The Blasphemers’ Banquet*, the range of his concerns here are calculated to include, amongst many others, the destructive certainties of dogmatism, and it is a characteristic of Harrison’s work that he should assert the value of the humdrum and the proscribed against the backdrop of Prometheus’s gift to mankind:

Dictators, deities, they’re all t’same  
forbidding men fags, fruit or flame.  
First Zeus wi’ fire then t’God of t’chapel’s  
obsession wi’ forbidding apples.  
One crunch into that contraband  
gave men t’knowledge God had banned.  
We’ve got t’knowledge, we’ve got t’fire,  
we’ve raised ussens up out of t’mire.  
Diso-bloody-bedience got us over  
t’barbed wire fences of Jehovah.  
But men thesens bring back t’barbed wire  
round t’Bramleys and round t’bakehouse fire.  
There’s not one joy but what some berk’ll  
want it ringed wi’ a red circle.  
(P, pp. 82-83).

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<sup>85</sup> Reproduced, with the kind permission of Michael Hulse, from an e-mail to the present writer of 15 November, 2010.

The self-contained couplets give the verse a rhetorical flavour through rhythmical accretion, although it remains more or less impossible to imagine any other poet trying to reinforce an argument by rhyming 'circle' with 'berk'll': this is the armoured division, the John Prescott, of poetic language. The diatribe continues in the poem, and if Harrison appears to overdo it on the written page we should take into account the intended medium and the received effect on a cinema audience, in conjunction with the visual imagery. This effect is unambiguous: the old man is a fictionalized mouthpiece for at least one of Harrison's alter egos, and his linguistic vigour mimics the working of the flames which both create and destroy. His insight is sufficiently robust to identify both the constructive utility of fire, and its potential for inducing obeisant complicity in the application of mindless violence. Harrison himself brings a paradoxically disconcerting certitude to his own invective, and fire is one of the means by which he tries to maintain strategic coherence when he is defining the parameters of a dialectic between absolutely opposed voices. But his mind, often afflicted by a tendency to 'knee-jerk' literalism, remains fixed on objectives which are made more vivid, and more simple, by the focus of the flames. To this extent, the fate of the boy from Abbeville represents, for Harrison, both hideous punishment and redemption, and the fire is intended to burn pain and remembrance into the viewer's consciousness. His voice, like the voice of the old man in *Prometheus*, and by implication that of Salman Rushdie, refuses to be censored. Amongst the convenient detritus of a 'cut-price' Bradford in *The Blasphemers' Banquet* - its graffiti, auctions, and forgotten graveyards - Harrison finds shards of redemptive colour in the marginalised and derelict, even where he is revolted by the linguistic deformation of that culture.

The lit cigarette is for Harrison, himself a lifelong non-smoker, emblematic of both a dying working class culture and its defiance: a symbol of beleaguered solidarity in the face of overwhelmingly contrary medical evidence and social stigmatisation. The old man's call to arms - 'Smokers of the world unite!' - may be facile, but Harrison is making a more serious point about the nature of choice and of the right to exercise that choice whether the tyrannies which threaten that freedom are government departments, dictators or deities (P, p.30). The cost to health of long-term fag use which Harrison concedes severally in his poetry - the emphysema-charred lungs and 'cold gobfuls' of phlegm -

pointedly does not disturb the right to declare a bloody-minded adherence to the idea of resistance to perceived proscription (in 'Cremation', CP, p.136). The old man's sense of complicity in this tyranny is insightful because it is Harrison's own, and if cigarettes exercise their own form of 'tyranny' on the human body then it is ironic that Walter Sparrow, the actor who portrayed the old man in *Prometheus*, should die not long after the film was broadcast, of a smoking-related illness. If life here is not exactly mirroring Art, then the actor's degenerative condition lends a greater poignancy, and possibly relevance, to both his performance and to Harrison's point. Fire, even in the form of lit cigarettes, is clearly congenial to ironic expression. The symbolic burning away of the old man's culture in the cinema fire which concludes the film/poem is an act of self-destruction as much as defiance. The fire, occasioned by a cigarette butt insouciantly tossed into an image of a pool of petrol on the cinema screen, combines and reflects both impulses simultaneously. The old man's penultimate speech is Promethean in breadth. He reasserts the power of fire to mirror and shape the human instincts of destruction and creation, averring: 'its fiery nature and its light/ its first defiance of dark night' (P, p.83).

Harrison's setting of a derelict fire engine outside the cinema is ironic though over-heavily so; the audience's inference is obvious, but if they are only able to evaluate the engine in terms of its ironic inutility, then they miss a neat intertextual counterpoint. This self-imposed tyranny of flames is only one expression of a human proclivity which may also, in extremity, be manipulated into accepting a total form of censorship and social control as is characterised in the dystopian landscape of Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451*. Here, fire engines are dispensers of fire, flamethrowers, utilized to destroy all vestiges of 'corrupting' culture and especially books.<sup>86</sup> The people look on with approval at the book burnings which are no less than an affirmation of the new status quo. If the fire engine of *Fahrenheit 451* is to be interpreted as a paradoxical instrument of oppression by the reader, then the redundant machine which is powerless to extinguish flames in *Prometheus* is a metaphor for a failure to act against it, even where the conflagration is self-imposed.

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<sup>86</sup> The novel takes its title from the temperature at which paper ignites. (Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 1979, London : Granada).

The fire which destroyed a London art warehouse owned by Charles Saatchi in May 2004 effected a strange reversal in terms of public perception. Amongst the inventory of lost artefacts were works by Tracey Emin, Damien Hirst and Jake and Dinos Chapman, prompting a species of *Schadenfreude* in those observers who were disposed to rail against the perceived limitations of modern art. The fire therefore performed an act of unintended but beneficent censorship for some, and was much approved in those quarters. It 'cleansed' corrupting culture of its facile excesses, not unlike those excoriated and burned by Savonarola in his 'Bonfire of the Vanities'. This view was reinforced, and fed, by the popular press, and it is instructive to consider what Harrison would have made of the irony. Although I have no evidence in corroboration, I suspect that Harrison's artistic traditionalism would lead him to find contemporary art by and large wanting. His attitude towards the tabloid media is well-documented and generally negative. Insofar as Harrison's work is an autobiography of his own closely-held opinions, and the representation of those views is characterised by what psychologists refer to as 'cognitive dissonance', or the facility for holding opposing beliefs simultaneously, is it possible that he could embrace the destruction of Art in the same moment that he defends the right to create it? Or is it more likely that the two impulses exist indivisibly? His own definition in the Introduction to *Prometheus* clearly subordinates this apparent contradiction to the imperative for survival through commemoration and remembrance:

The fire in which Man discovered his poetry is used to destroy poetic endeavour. Poetry will either be tempered in that burning history or disappear. (P, p.xx).

## Chapter Four

### Prometheus and the Fatal Gift

#### Part One : A Blaze out of the Blackness

I have already attempted to define the significance of Christianity to Harrison's imagination. My specific focus has been to underline the totemic centrality of the fire trope within doctrinal conventions, and to define the influence, absorption and appropriation of fire's metaphorical fluency in the area of Harrison's poetics. If the presence of fire in the context of the Christian faith provokes moments of transcendence in his work, then elsewhere the poet's vigorous anti-fundamentalist polemics establish a clear-minded atheism in opposition to them, creating a tension which ironically appears not to compromise the possibility of an accommodation of both attitudes. On a personal level, Harrison's affiliation with the classics and in particular Greek tragedy is not exposed to that same tension, and it is my intention in this chapter to explore that relationship in all its forms.

Harrison's scholarship education opened his imagination to a more pragmatic form of human 'redemption' through catharsis, a notion which pre-dated the Christian church by several centuries and did not tyrannize its followers with a brutal system of metaphysical punishments and rewards, constantly subjected to revision. The impulse to retreat chronologically to a period which the poet perceives as more ethically streamlined, more definitively human, more relevant even to the modern condition, also embodies the means, in Christopher Butler's words, by which Harrison tries to persuade us '[...] to think our way back past Christianity and the moral and social arrangement it has presupposed' (Butler, 1997, p.106). Although I have identified the infiltration of a counter-intuitive



spiritual sense in Harrison's work, the poet also finds a strong general affinity with the idea of a unifying 'space', a space in which redemption may be achieved through an emotional response to staged interpretations of the 'worst' of human history. The 'shared space and shared light' (TO, p.ix) of an Athenian afternoon during a performance of a tragedy creates for Harrison the idea of a democracy of reception and in another sense a limitless arena for the exposure and enactment of necessarily co-existing oppositions. The fire which animates such oppositions is, as Marianne McDonald suggests, to be found in the sun which lit the ancient performances, offering illumination in both senses of the word (McDonald, 1991, p.481). Harrison's own approach to poetry tries to project the realms of celebrant and sufferer as though they were indivisible, thereby closely mirroring the Greek model as defined by R. P. Draper: 'The terrible and beautiful are emotionally co-ordinated in the cathartic effect of tragedy' (Draper, 1980, p.34). As fire is a means of defining the notions of redemption and spiritual regeneration in Christian terms, so is it a conduit for the synthesis of opposed impulses.

Harrison's complex usage of fire is a reflection of the mutability of the medium in the ancient Greek interpretation, and that complexity demands a breaking down of this chapter into subsections for the sake of overall coherence. Beginning, here, with a general introduction, I will go on in Part Two to discuss the relationship between fire and language in the early Greek sense of *logos*. Using specific examples from Harrison's work to establish the blending of the two notions to create unified meaning, I will demonstrate the poet's tendency to reinforce meaning by giving 'life' to fire through personification. Part Three will give a comprehensive reading of the binary potential of fire as it is developed in the film/poem *Prometheus*. An oblique re-working of the Greek myth, the film embodies a culmination of many of Harrison's preoccupations, and defines the two-handed nature of the Promethean 'gift' of fire against the backdrop of a post-industrial European landscape. Harrison's obsession with the classical cultural landscape of myth and tragedy is overwhelmingly represented in both literal and figurative terms in his work, and it is possible that an over-reliance on defining philosophical registers may actually skew the focus of his approach to contemporary concerns. Bruce Woodcock has noted a 'nostalgic idealisation of virtue in a lost past' (Woodcock, 1990, p.53) in Harrison's work, and this view might be extended, temporally, to include an Athenian history to which

Harrison was not a witness, and of which he may have made a halcyon distortion. To this extent, Harrison's liberal use of, and faith in, a fire symbol which was central to pre-Socratic and classical thinking may serve to reinforce such a distortion.

I used the word 'pragmatic' earlier for reasons of convenience. For Harrison, the practical application and relevance of the Greek sense of the tragic for twentieth- and twenty-first century universal dilemmas is not difficult to define because, in his view, very little has disturbed the essential elements of the human condition in the intervening period. But the total immersion in classical registers comes at the price of Greek shadows inveigling their way into contemporary crises on an effortlessly regular basis. It is characteristic of Harrison's taste for connection-making that shortly after the time of the Watergate scandal, he noted, cut out, and pasted in to his *Oresteia* notebooks several clippings from an *Observer Review* relating to the classical, particularly Oedipal, propensities of the central protagonists (*Oresteia* Notebooks, Book 33, page not numbered). If the 'shadow' of Christianity pervades the emotional detail of Harrison's poems in vague numinous suggestions of the metaphysical, then the imprint of the Greeks provides a template for earthly survival and continuity, through an open-eyed sense of clarity and a lack of self-delusion. Simone Weil, to whom Harrison declares a debt of understanding in his notebooks, gives here a clear general analysis of Greek cultural thinking:<sup>87</sup>

The Greeks, generally speaking, were endowed with spiritual force that allowed them to avoid self-deception. The rewards of this were great; they discovered how to achieve in all their acts the greatest lucidity, purity and simplicity. But the spirit that was transmitted from the *Iliad* to the Gospels by way of the tragic poets never jumped the borders of Greek civilization; once Greece was destroyed, nothing remained of this spirit but pale reflections. (Weil and Bernal, 2005, p.35).

The ongoing usefulness of such a template is evidenced in all areas of Harrison's work, both implicitly, in poems which resonate with the Greek feeling for inherent oppositions, and explicitly in the several translations and adaptations. To some degree the classical and Christian ideologies come together in an image of fire which cauterizes the notions of guilt, suffering and joy as though they were unified, creating in Terry Eagleton's words a

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<sup>87</sup> Harrison makes several references to Weil's influence in his personal collection at Leeds. See, especially, Book 30 of Journals and Commonplace Books.

'secular theodicy' (Eagleton, 2003, p.36) which may provide its own meagre justification for suffering. If one were to remove his references to 'vengeful spite' and 'injustice' and to recall that the transformation here is strictly corporeal, then George Steiner's summation of the effect of Greek tragedy on its central protagonists echoes Dante's depiction of *Purgatorio*:

It is a very stark insight into human life. Yet in the very excess of his suffering lies man's claim to dignity. Powerless and broken, a blind beggar hounded out of the city, he assumes a new grandeur. Man is ennobled by the vengeful spite or injustice of the gods. It does not make him innocent, but it hallows him as if he had passed through flame. (Steiner, 1961, pp.9-10).

Here, in fact, is a framework of meaning with which Harrison gives shape to his own preoccupations of language, affirmation and human continuity. Within the architecture of its approach, one of the major symbols of the tragic – fire – helps to mitigate what Oliver Taplin refers to in this context as the 'hurtful twists of life' (in Poole, 1987, p.65). It remains a very serviceable coincidence that Harrison's father was employed as a baker, if only because the very real and daily presence of fire to his labour draws the actual and the metaphorical into a circle of meaning. The occupation which drives Harrison (the poet) towards religious symbolism, and towards the invention of metaphors for his universal preoccupations, also serves to restore memory in the visible and the tangible. In this sense the lineaments of actual fire usage may reinforce Harrison's father's, and by association Harrison's, claim to the kind of unique pride which is conferred by artisan effort. Gaston Bachelard refers to such a relationship as 'the reciprocity of dream and work' (Bachelard, 1987, p.79), stressing the binary paradox of a labour from which the labourer instinctively recoils - in this instance the extreme heat of the oven - standing in unlikely harmony with the invigorating and transformative powers of heat and hard work. The 'dreaming' to which Bachelard refers consists in the power of the imagination to consider 'heat as growth' (p.79), thereby conferring a sense of personal enrichment on the labourer, or baker, who has now become master rather than servant of his fire.

The dignity of the working man, as is conveyed very visibly in Harrison's inventory of bakery ephemera throughout the family sonnets of the *School* sequence and in the iteration of working-class occupations – 'butcher, publican, and baker' – in the long poem

v. (CP, p.264), returns the reader to Steiner's sense of the 'hallowing' of the tragic protagonist through the metaphorical fires of suffering. I am not suggesting that 'ennoblement', in the flames, of Harrison's stuttering uncle and inarticulate father confers tragic status on them, but rather that the hallowing process is as cathartic for Harrison's imagination as it doubtless was for Greek audiences obliged to reflect upon the newly-won dignity of the suffering characters of Oedipus or Orestes. To this extent, Harrison's imaginative projections in the two poems which illustrated the central tenor of my argument in chapter two<sup>88</sup> are a product not only of his knowledge of Christian traditions but also of an intuitive classical sense. Such moments affirm Sandie Byrne's general suggestion that moments of poetic epiphany link modern with classical audiences and thereby indicate that the relevance of the tragic form is supra-temporal (Byrne, 1998, p.223). Leaving aside the undemocratic demography of Greek audiences, the point for Harrison seems to be that performances of tragedy levelled expectation, so that a form of secular redemption for all might be obtained by facing the very worst of human experience without hope of redress beyond the 'hallowing' process itself. Here might be vouchsafed a template for human survival that perhaps finds its most succinct expression in Terry Eagleton's ironic synthesis, where 'redemption' 'can be lit only by the flames which consume the protagonists' (Eagleton, 2003, p.121). The mechanics of tragic performance resolve the schism of crushing oppositions in a single unifying and cleansing moment shared by a whole audience, and are here succinctly described by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*: 'At the moment of supreme joy, we hear the scream of horror or the yearning lamentation for something irrevocably lost' (Nietzsche, 1993, p.20).

The disappearance of the *principium individuationis*<sup>89</sup> in an oceanic, collective catharsis of both 'awe and terror' (Nietzsche, 1993, p.20) echoes in psychological terms the drawing of polarised oppositions into the same circle of light. It is not difficult to deduce the relevance of this two-thousand-five-hundred-year-old model to Harrison's imagination, even beyond his most obvious interests in translation and adaptation. It is present by

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<sup>88</sup> 'Marked With D' (CP, p.168) and 'Fire-eater' (CP, p.182).

<sup>89</sup> Literally, 'principle of individuation'. For Nietzsche, the sense of 'primal unity' occasioned by Dionysian abandonment releases the individual from the Apollonian straitjacket of individual, organised thought. The collective yielding of early Greek audiences to catharsis echoes the same impulse for release.

subtextual implication in many of the poems, and particularly where war or the backdrop to war appears to compel narratives into the dimension of philosophical conjecture. And it is at such moments that the instinct for celebration sails closest to Nietzsche's 'scream of horror', not least in Harrison's case at the incalculable potential cost in human terms of the 'Bomb-Age' (CP, p.203). To some degree a sonnet from the same short sequence,<sup>90</sup> 'Snap', projects an amalgam of both instincts and I quote the poem in full to show, particularly, the characteristic change in tone of the final octet:

Uncle Wilf in khaki but decapitated,  
and he'd survived the jungle and the Japs,  
so his grin's gone when we all celebrated  
Hirohito's empire in collapse.

My shorter father's all in and looks glad  
and full of euphoria he'd never found  
before, or since, and I'm with the grocer's lad  
two fingers turned the positive way round !

Innocence, that fraying Kirby wire  
that briefly held the whole weight of the nation  
over the common element of fire  
that bonded the A-bomb blast to celebration,  
our VJ bonfire to Jehovahspeak,  
the hotline Jesus got instructions from,  
and, at Pentecost, Apostles their technique  
of saying in every language : *Ban the Bomb !*  
(CP, p.201).

The poem's concluding lines foreground the ambivalence of biblical inferences, from the apocalyptic insinuations of 'Jehovahspeak' and the propagation of a *Gott mit uns*, 'might is right' nationalistic bombast, to the claims for universal peace bound up in regenerative apostolic fire. The Apostles' collective act of articulation, as Neil Hairsine notes in a different context but with the same intention, carries with it at all times the connotation of pain. The universal apothegm '*Ban the Bomb !*' presupposes the existence of destruction by fire, of loss and of silence (Hairsine, 1997, p.213). To some degree such ambiguity underlines Sandie Byrne's detection of a whiff of self-justification amongst the 'flames' of euphoria (Byrne, 1998, p.85). Accretions of layers of meaning cohere to

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<sup>90</sup> 'Sonnets for August 1945' (CP, pp.196-203).

attempt a reinforcement of Harrison's position as though the combing in line of every thread of interpretation would render his case certain. The actual presence of religious imagery and the implicit presence of the Greek sense of co-existent dualities<sup>91</sup> in the poem is not co-incidental, but a manifestation of Harrison's instinct for the fusing of connections, here as elsewhere. In all respects, fire is the language, the 'common element' through which the disbelief of the 'body politic' is temporarily suspended. Celebration is frail because it is borne as much out of an innocent, though to some degree willed, blindness to the presence of darker possibilities, as a sense of relief. The flames of the bonfire mislead as they seduce. Harrison's 'fraying Kirby wire' of innocence is barely able to support the nation's personified *corpus*, rendering a tangential reminder that fire may consume both celebrant and sufferer with an equanimity as effortless as Vesuvius's laying waste of Pompeii in AD79. That such a juxtaposition is pivotal to almost all of Harrison's thinking corroborates his absorption of the Greek tendency towards parataxis, or the holding of oppositional attitudes synchronically and seamlessly in mind.<sup>92</sup> The torches and beacons of Aeschylus's *Oresteia* provide a significant focus for a tragedy which, by one of Eva Parisinou's readings, devotes large sections of its narrative to the exploration of fire's meaning as a symbol of 'both destruction and triumph' (Parisinou, 2000, p.112). And certainly Harrison has a parataxis of oppositions, and no doubt the Greek compulsion, firmly in mind when he recalls the double-edged but totemic bonfire celebrations of 'The Morning After'. The child formerly gazing into the domestic hearth has become the public poet of the 'village campfire' who, like the fire itself, seduces his audience. Harrison's intention as poet is to help such an audience face, in Peter Robinson's words, the 'totalitarianism of everyday life' through an open-eyed willingness to accept a shared platform for both constructive and destructive impulses (Robinson, 1999, page not numbered).

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<sup>91</sup> The Classicist Simon Goldhill refers to the immanence of this phenomenon to the Greek organization of things as 'the logic of polarized definition.' (See *Reading Greek Tragedy*. 1986. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, p. 61).

<sup>92</sup> For an interesting and wide-ranging discussion on archaic configurations of mind, see Raymond Adolph Prier (1976).

The commonality of reception, the alchemy of Harrison's expression 'one space for the celebrant and the sufferer' (TO, p.vii), echoes the unfolding of the cathartic elements of Greek dramas in the poet's own reading of them. By this connection, the young Harrison's engagement with the VJ day bonfire in a spontaneous outpouring of celebration is a direct reflection of the Greeks' own emotional engagement with tragic performance. Catharsis in either case is borne out of a blending of both types of psychological response, if we may trust Harrison's simplifying vision which sometimes gives the impression of grafting its own interpretation of history *onto* history. Thus, in his introduction to *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*, the poet reinforces the sense of bonding within his *own* community on the strength of an assumed Greek precedent: 'It was a drama open-eyed about suffering but with a heart still open to celebration and physical affirmation' (TO, p.viii). Making a general point about Harrison's approach with specific reference to the poem 'Illuminations I', Antony Rowland corroborates the intuition that the poet frequently defines the public concerns of the present through the demands of the past: '[...] public events must be mourned in order to satisfy the poet's sense of historicity' (Rowland, 2001, p.163). But he is less inclined to question Harrison's subjective interpretation, or re-interpretation of that history.

It is clear that fire, even where it is only implied through the suggestion of the holocaust, defines the landscapes of celebration and destruction in Harrison's work. If the sense of a cleaving towards a unity of forms is Greek in origin, Gaston Bachelard has expanded upon the psychoanalytical component of a primal compulsion which appears to draw the poet towards imaginative exploration through the building, accretion and final coalescing, of images. This process, he argues, creates a 'syntax of metaphors' (Bachelard, 1987, p.32) which embody the purest expression of a poetic mind. That Harrison is not, as Peter Forbes finds, an obsessively metaphorical poet in an otherwise metaphorical era (Forbes, 1997, p.199), need not obscure the relevance of Bachelard's central point, which seems to be that the poetic imagination, or 'oneiric' temperament, is defined by certain primal points of reference, such as fire, whose significance is thereafter immanent within the poetry. In any case, Harrison's anchored materialist position and the occasional conjectural conclusions to his poems, manifest instead a taste for the kinds of symbol which best describe the grand scale of his terror of the future and the real prospect of

universal silence conjured by memories of the original, and defining, atomic blast. In lines one and two of the following extract, the 'hidden fire' (Bachelard, 1987, p.33) compels the poet towards a condensing and blending of imagery, creating a unity where, in Heraclitean terms, opposites are made identical in flame.<sup>93</sup>

Apostles of that pinioned Pentecast  
of chirrupings cremated on the wing  
will have to talk their ghosts down, or we're lost.  
Until we know what they sang, who can sing ?  
(from 'The Birds of Japan', CP, p.203).

Here human continuity is contingent upon a 'facing up', in the Greek tragic sense, to the worst of human possibilities in order to guarantee the future survival of language itself. Song is in fact a symbol for language in 'The Birds of Japan', just as the conflated noun 'Pentecast'<sup>94</sup> figures as a 'richly suggestive' and precise symbol for language-generating apostolic fire, and for nuclear holocausts both remembered and anticipated (Spencer 1994, p.116). Bachelard's analysis of the oneiric temperament and its reliance on elemental inspiration underlines the significance of a reflexive linguistic approach: 'Besides, fire metaphors are the natural flowering of language. The words' softness or violence find the fire to express them' (Bachelard, 1987, p.45).

I tend to lean towards 'violence' in Harrison's case, though only because he has an instinctive relish for the kind of consonantal vigour which sometimes draws this reader, anyway, to spontaneous if ridiculous living-room 'performances' of his poems. To some degree of course this is not surprising as Harrison's ravishment<sup>95</sup> of language lends a declamatory quality to his verse, even in silence. The vigorous diction of the following passage from the same poem makes an irony of the theme; layers of sibilance and alliteration force the idea of commemoration into the background, distancing the 'pain' of

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<sup>93</sup> Cf. Prier (1976) for a discussion of early Greek reasoning in this regard.

<sup>94</sup> The expression appears as 'Pentecost' in *The Gaze of the Gorgon* volume, thereby greatly weakening its effectiveness as a symbol. (GG, p.16).

<sup>95</sup> A letter to Peter Hall of 13 September, 1981 regarding the making of the *Oresteia* gives a brief indication of Harrison's highly-charged, possibly erotic, feel for the substance of language :

'It's not the percussiveness of consonants but their sensuality, their sexuality if you like. Vowels are spirit, consonants body, people say. Then I'm for bodies...'  
(Harrison, 1991 (3), p.279).



a memory which is as remote as its originating Japanese location. This, in any case, may be Harrison's point :

men made magma, flesh made fumaroles,  
first mottled by the flash to brief mofettes  
and Hiroshima's fast pressurizing souls  
hissed through the fissures in mephitic jets.  
(CP, p.203).

Here the poet finds, in Bachelard's terms, a metaphorical vehicle for the expression of a fire trope which is both intuitive and highly apposite to the subject-matter. Such a unity of instinct and expression is itself one minor derivation of the great template of the Greek tragic form which, for George Steiner, conjoins action and the moral experience of the protagonists through the connective-tissue of metre (Steiner, 1961, p.239). But the foregrounding of language and the fitting of language to the precedent of the 'common' tongue must be the key to Harrison's dramatic success. Although his theatrical productions do not take such liberties with the class of the protagonists he portrays, Harrison's adaptations of the *Oresteia* and the earlier *Phaedra Britannica* beggar Steiner's certainty that the tragic oeuvre, *qua* the Greek sense of ritual and moment, is dead:

The verse tragedies produced by modern European and American poets are exercises in archaeology and attempts to blow fire into cold ash. It cannot be done.  
(Steiner, 1961, pp. 304-305).

Harrison has devised a new means of making 'archaeology' persuasive, quite literally so in the narrative development of *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*, and it is significant that his favoured means of symbolic representation re-ignites Steiner's dead embers from within a framework of language whose vigour is, of itself, a metaphor for conflagration. Popularity of course is not an evaluation of quality, merely a register of success. It is quite possible to infer, from the demographic breakdown of Harrison's typical theatregoers who are drawn largely from the educated middle-classes, that he may be speaking *for*, but he is mostly not speaking *to*, his intended audience. There is some irony in Harrison's adherence to the Greek template here: what passed for common entry to the *Dionysia* was by no means 'democratic' in our sense of the term. The poet's apparently earnest, and initially prohibited, attempt to put real fire on the stage for the *Oresteia* performances both underlines and renders questionable his determination to authenticate the ritualistic

aspects of Greek tragedy, and to reproduce in the imaginations of the audience a profound sense of the totemic and mysterious potential of the hearth.<sup>96</sup> The sincerity of Harrison's preoccupation with tragedy extends as far as the making of one such into a general metaphor for fire. That the words are spoken by the character of Gilbert Murray in the play *Fram* does little to disguise Harrison's own affiliation, and debt: 'There's no poetic fire / blazes brighter in the firmament / than his *Oresteia*' (F, p.10).

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<sup>96</sup> The ban was subsequently overturned by Horseferry Road Magistrates bench on the 27 November, 1981, and the episode is heavily and one suspects proudly documented, together with contemporary newspaper clippings, in Harrison's *Oresteia* notebooks. (Book 43, pp. 2468-2469).

## Part Two : The Glossolalia of Fire

One of the predominant preoccupations of Harrison's oeuvre concerns the continuity and survival of language against the backdrop of the prospect of post-apocalyptic silence, and, by virtue of the trope's inherent oppositional tensions, he is able to use the symbolic powers of fire to define both the threat and the solution to that threat. With recurrent reference to the precedents of, particularly, the Nazi death camp crematoria and the Hiroshima conflagration as prognostic touchstones, Harrison manifests his concern for the preservation of language in several genres other than the purely poetic. We see evidence of such a preoccupation in the film/poems *Prometheus*, *The Shadow of Hiroshima*, and *The Gaze of the Gorgon*, and in the play *The Common Chorus*, though it is an implicit consideration in other areas. It is significant that where such examples reflect on the terrible flashpoints of the past they also hold up a mirror to the future; the double-edged expression 'shadow' for example is evidence of one eye being fixed firmly on the depressing prospect of universal nuclear annihilation. The Greek mask that is for Harrison essential 'existential survival gear' (TO, p.x) in his re-enactments of tragedy, provides an equally serviceable template for modern reflection :

The toll of the twentieth century on poets is a commonplace by now [...] Our century needs dark glasses, welding masks to be sure. Is it not better to look into the fire and live to tell the tale ? Is it not better than succumbing and allowing events to crush not only the poet but those who look to his example ? Or even if they don't look to his example they are offered an example of defeat when he succumbs. Maybe what is treated as 'form' and my interest in it is that form is that welding mask that permits the fire to be worked with, without being blinded.  
(from Poetry Notebooks, Book 2, p.233).

The central symbol is reiterated elsewhere in Harrison's notebooks.<sup>97</sup> The headwear, for example in the *Oresteia* productions, provides a 'welding mask' which protects the

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<sup>97</sup> cf. particularly the *Oresteia* Notebooks, Book 42, p. 2309.

audience against the 'intense flame' of abandonment and terror (*Oresteia* Notebooks, Book 42, p.2309). It is significant, I think, that he perceives the mask's function in industrial terms, an attitude no doubt intended to give the dramatic performance some contemporary relevance, and which identifies the idea of 'artisan' playwriting effort with manual labour. The building block of writing is the art of constructing a syntax of meaning by joining words together, rather as the process of welding fuses products from disparate pieces of metal. As Bernard O'Donoghue notes in a perceptive article about Harrison's *The Mysteries*, the Greek term '*Techne*', for which there is no English equivalent, means both 'art' and 'tradesman's work' thereby linguistically 'fusing' the ideas of artisan labour and playwriting in a way which would no doubt please the poet (O'Donoghue, 1991 (2), p.322). Taking the metaphor one step further, Harrison invokes the welding-mask as the notion of protection against fire, or in the context of the drama, as a mechanism of amelioration for language which has the power to disturb. In one sense the act of speaking in the face of the unspeakable, as Harrison's poetry often does, embodies its own intention. The poet's tone in the extract above is melodramatic because he regards the risk of losing language, humanity's only means of shaping meaning, as entirely possible. The 'fixed, silent scream of the mask' (*Oresteia* Notebooks, Book 42, p.2309) therefore underscores the necessity of language's survival through the ever-open mouth, and allows, in the classicist Oliver Taplin's terms, the emotion of Greek tragedy to be 'presented openly in word and action' and 'not left to be inferred or guessed at' (Taplin, 1978, p.14). Harrison's relentless desire for *aletheia*, for 'disclosure', is a means of maintaining a sense of 'unforgetting' whilst attempting to establish the sanctity of the word in perpetuity. It is important I think that the mask also has ever-open eyes: the facing of reality with a fixed stare leaves little room for ambiguity. In Harrison's play *The Kaisers of Carnuntum*, the Empress Faustina reverses the function of the 'mask' by turning the flame of the figurative torch on herself :

Sometimes when I imagine that I hold  
my Commodus again a one-year-old,  
I cradle carcasses whose eyes can't close,  
to whom no gentle rocking brings repose.  
(P3, p.99).

The staring babies' eyes are 'masks' of accusation, sleepless metaphors for the ghosts of those slain by Faustina's son, Commodus. The Empress is being made to face her own muse of memory through eyes which never shut. It is somehow characteristic of Harrison's seriousness of tone that he appears to have insisted on the use of masks during the production of the *Oresteia*, and equally unsurprising that the physical encumbrance met with resistance from some actors, as Stephen Fay and Philip Oakes have described in detail (1991, p.289). The poet 'lives' the dramatic possibility he conveys and his attitude is made urgent, underlined even, by varied use of a fire trope which, as noted earlier, embodies the material elements of holocaust or conflagration, and directs interpretation of such acts by way of symbolic and metaphorical connection. Harrison's adaptation of the past to fit the present is in the end his best means of reaffirming the possibility of human continuity against the loss of memory. His warning and solution are precisely mirrored by Nicholas Humphrey and Robert Jay Lifton in their introduction to an anthology of apocalyptic writings:

Life after death – there will be no one to remember or succeed us, and the notion of immortality itself is threatened [...] and war – not war but a Nuclear End. [...] Yet, if we are to prevent the Nuclear End, imagine it we must.  
(Humphrey and Lifton, 1984, p.13).

My intention in this section of the chapter is to investigate the often contiguous relationship between fire and language in Harrison's poetry against the background of early Greek thinkers such as Heraclitus who drew little distinction between the unified notions of fire and *logos*, or, in the context of this discussion, 'word'.<sup>98</sup> Heraclitus's overwhelming expression of fire's mutability, his reiteration of fire's contradictions and endless symbolic permutations, makes of the medium an alchemy which, as Bachelard stresses paying lip-service to Heraclitus, defines 'a principle of universal explanation' (Bachelard, 1964, p.7). And the drawing together of fire, the sun and Word into such a circle of coherence, of *logos*, would as Raymond Prier notes, have been a natural intuition for the ancient Greeks (Prier, 1976, p.64). Harrison's instinct for clarification is inevitably both abetted and clouded by an element which, for Heraclitus, *embodies* language. The

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<sup>98</sup> The Greek expression *logos* carries several, generally related, interpretations including 'word', 'knowledge', 'discourse' and 'language'.

poet is obliged to stand outside of this symbiotic relationship, to view the alchemy as figurative. His desire to mitigate the negative effects of co-existent oppositions by 'facing' them with language, tends, through the protean fluidity of the fire trope, towards an accommodation of the two terms whilst falling short of removing the distinction altogether. The Kalashnikov rifle in the poem '*Dichtung und Wahrheit*' for example is the mouthpiece through which 'tongues of fire' potentially 'spit' bullets, representing a unification of the ideas of fire and language which in no way compromises the meaning of either :

Dulciloquist Dos Santos, swear to them  
whose languages you'll never learn to speak  
that tongues of fire at a 1000 rpm  
is not the final eloquence you seek.

Spondaic or dactylic those machines  
and their dry scansion mean that truths get lost,

and a *pravda* empty as its magazines  
is Kalashnikov PK's flash Pentecost.  
(CP, p.195).

Addressed to Marcelino Dos Santos, the propagandist for Mozambique's FRELIMO anti-colonialist group, the injunction framed in these final three verses of the poem calls for caution in applying a violent revolutionary code. Appropriating Dos Santos's own abilities as a polylinguist and poet, Harrison translates a relationship of words into the possibility of one of bullets, indicating through use of the fire trope that one may easily precipitate the other in times of crisis and clashing ideology. By way of an oblique sub-textual connection with the early Greeks, it is possible that Harrison is making an Alcibiades figure of Dos Santos. Alcibiades was a great communicator and rhetorician who persuaded the Athenian people into an ultimately disastrous conflict with Syracuse, and was deemed guilty of a level of hubris which ultimately undermines action. If Dos Santos is guilty of over-reaching ambition, then that ambition will be exercised through 'tongues of fire' and measured in bullets and the dead to whom he will never now 'learn to speak'. The stuttering spondees and dactyls of machine-guns will spit fire and bullets rather than measured words, rendering Dos Santos's dulciloquy a cacophony of noise in silence. To some degree, the interpretative ironies of Harrison's dense lexis reflect the intractable

complexity of fire's own. Harrison twice plays around the edges of negotiated meaning: once with the title *Dichtung und Wahrheit* meaning 'poetry and truth', and again in the culminating reference to the Marxist leanings of FRELIMO and the notion of *Pravda* deliberately distorted here to mean empty truth.<sup>99</sup> The failure of successive Communist governments in the old USSR to impute any sustainable interpretation of the word 'truth' to their West-bound propaganda, particularly with respect to their involvement in unprecedented levels of human rights abuses, makes a deliberate irony of the title of the Soviet chief media organ. When Rick Rylance made the following comment about this poem he intended it to have a more general resonance: 'The image that unites these ideas is that of the tongue of fire: the gifts of poetry and eloquence for the dispossessed, but also the flame at the end of a gun barrel' (Rylance, 1991, p.63). The one side of this binary image precludes the other for Sandie Byrne, who finds an interpretative weakness in the poem in the appropriation of the Pentecost. Machine-gun tongues of fire which lead inexorably to the apocalypse, she argues, cannot accommodate redemption in the same pentecostal metaphor (Byrne, 1998, p.135). But both Rylance and Byrne fall short of identifying the tongues of fire which must accommodate the ambiguities of propaganda and political duplicity within the same interpretation, because they are also a part of the complex whole. To paraphrase Damian Grant, Harrison's acknowledgment of the suggestion of fanaticism alongside the gift of articulation is allowable. Fire as mutable metaphor illuminates the possibility of redemption in the unlikeliest of circumstances, as long as an albeit corruptible eloquence survives (Grant, 1991, p.108).

In an interpretative commentary/translation of Heraclitus, Ruben Berezdivin describes fire as the personified embodiment of life itself :

Fire is that which most imperiously manifests what life is, how life is a constant consuming of contraries. Fire is the principle of things. (Berezdevin, 1980, p.76).

Here fire is a repository for the working-through of oppositions, no less in fact than the originating definition which shapes all other elemental, and human, conditions, including that of language. Berezdivin's examination of extant Heraclitean textual fragments is lyrically imitative in places, conveying the latter's sense of a purpose happily, though to

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<sup>99</sup> *Dichtung und Wahrheit* is taken from the title of Goethe's autobiography.

the modern ear paradoxically, unified in contradiction. Heraclitus achieves this by the accretion of layers of interpretation, each describing an association of facets or a single facet of the symbiotic whole, such as the notion of 'breathing' as a type of fire maintaining a spark of communion with the natural surroundings with every exhalation, even in sleep.<sup>100</sup> By this scheme of thinking, fire both originates and accommodates oppositions. It is immortal to the extent that its existence is predicated upon the consumption of both itself and other elements; in Berezdivin's transliteration, it 'lives the death' of such elements (Berezdevin, 1980, p.76). Although fire is therefore inextinguishable, the power of the *logos* which it shapes survives only as long as it continues to feed on its essential nutrient.

In Harrison's long poem 'The Mother of the Muses', the power of *logos*, which by an Heraclitean reading also confers sense and meaning, is faltering in the wake of fading memory and growing senility. The nutrient of fire is quite literally buried beneath a blanket of snow and ice which for Harrison, here and elsewhere in his work, are metaphors for the decline of language, reason and the physical faculties.<sup>101</sup> In an early draft of the poem, one subsequently unpublished line blends the notions of cognitive decline and snow in a single image which acts like an alliterative 'sleeping draught' on the reader's own thought processes: 'and bright forgetfulness falls from the air' (Poetry Notebooks, Book 9, p.134). At the very beginning of the poem the poet is keen to establish his own yardstick of meaning: the restoration and maintenance of memory against the slow mental attrition of advancing age. He does so in characteristic fashion by positioning the 'nourishing' flames of the hearth between the narrator and the bleak exterior landscape which figuratively 'locks' or freezes language:

After I've lit the fire and looked outside  
found us snowbound and the roads all blocked,  
anxious to prove my memory's not ossified  
and the way into that storehouse still unlocked,  
(CP p.302).

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<sup>100</sup> Such a symbiosis of exchange and support mechanisms as we find, for example, in the relationship between oxygen and carbon dioxide, would now be described as fact in scientific terms.

<sup>101</sup> Cf. the film/poem *Black Daisies for the Bride* (CFP, p.177) and the recent play *Fram* (F).



The words 'ossified' and 'storehouse' seem to be connected here. If Harrison's prognostic view of the slow running-down of the mind is correct, then the metaphorical 'storehouse' of memory may be extended to include its opposite, an ossuary or charnel-house repository for the bare bones of language where memory itself is finally obliterated. It is ironic in the extreme that the later stages of Alzheimer's disease dislocate the present from the past almost completely whilst restoring the details of that past in vivid detail. The mind rewinds, creating in Philip Larkin's ironically memorable phrase, a 'hideous inverted childhood' (from 'The Old Fools', 1988, p.197) where cognition of the 'now' has ceased to exist.<sup>102</sup> Harrison chooses the Greek goddess *Mnemosyne*, or the 'Mother of the Muses', as his title for this poem in order to establish the importance of even vestigial memories to the maintenance of personal and collective human identity. This is a point well made by Joe Kelleher, who describes the poet's own attempt at restoring connections using the fire-associated expression 'forged' (Kelleher, 1996, p.36). Adapting an Aeschylean reading to 'The Mother of the Muses', Kelleher's analysis indicates that 'forging' is the technology by which Prometheus's gift of the fire of knowledge metaphorically enables the restoration of memory with the reconstructed building blocks of 'descriptions, accounts, testimonies' (Kelleher, 1996, p.37). To some extent, the poem is made up of such 'accounts' of the past, each adding a little temporary warmth to the 'hearth' of remembrance, whilst yielding to the danger of the fire and language finally being extinguished. Emmanuel Stratas, to whose memory the poem is dedicated, figures as the Alzheimer's-suffering exemplar: the babbling in his birth dialect of Cretan Greek whose cognition of the present is as devoid of locators as the detail-smothering snow blanket outside the home. Harrison's imperative here is to forge a connection with the past in an apparently hopeless attempt to melt the ice with fire, much as his then wife Teresa Stratas intended to achieve with her deceased mother in the following fragment from an unpublished poem called 'Elements':

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<sup>102</sup> A 'hideous' perversion for the onlooker perhaps, but sometimes a thing of joy for the sufferer, for whom the ghosts of the past are 'magically' restored. These lines from an earlier version of the poem confirm Harrison's own ambivalence: 'Are they the blessed ones, or the accursed/who have no memory of history, children, friends?' (Poetry Notebooks, Book 9, p.142).

You called her through the ground in Cretan Greek  
lips brushing short grass blades with her pet names  
like someone blowing embers back to flames.  
(Poetry Notebooks, book 3, p.131).

In his essay 'Facing up to the Muses' conceived a couple of years later, Harrison reiterates the theme of contingency:

The mother of the Muses...is Memory (*Mnemosyne*), so that we can't celebrate our existence, we can't have those 'unalloyed pleasures', that 'happiness without qualification' that E.R. Dodds wrote about, simply by forgetting the terrors of the recent past or by ignoring the frightening future. (Harrison, 1991 (1), p.440).

In a sense, the television images of the wartime firebombing of Dresden, which form a prominent motif in the poem, fill the space vacated by the synaptic connectors of memory in those patients who have reached the final stages of senility. Harrison is in effect attempting to restore the past in the present, a power of mind which for Heraclitus was a function of *logos* affirming the cosmic ordering of things.<sup>103</sup> The fires of memory are, for the Greek, 'ingathered' into communion with the present. The sense of fire everlastingly 'becoming' but never 'being', the fluid accommodation of its contradictory qualities, enables Harrison's contemporary reading, which also probes the prospect of a flame-enveloped Armageddon :

along with fire the Gods withheld from men  
who'd lived like ants in caves deprived of light  
they could well end up living in again  
if we let what flesh first roasted on ignite  
a Burning of the Books far more extreme  
than any screeching Führer could inspire,  
(CP, p.302).

The 'screeches' and 'screams' of the animals in Dresden's burning *Tiergarten* are corollary to the anthropomorphic force of the fire itself, which rages through the city in Harrison's interpretation of the TV documentary. The vivid evocation of the destruction of the zoo and of the claustrophobic, cellar-hidden victims of the bombing turns terror into the repetitive language of a rage which is rendered inarticulate by circumstance :

Crouching in clown's costume (it was *Fasching*)

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<sup>103</sup> See Berezdevin (1980, p.75) for a fuller interpretation of Heraclitus's position.

aged, 40 years ago, as I was, 9  
Eva remembers cellar ceiling crashing  
and her mother screaming shrilly : *Swine ! Swine ! Swine !*<sup>104</sup>  
(CP, p.307).

The moment is made more urgent by emphatic use of alliteration and sibilance here, as fire consumes and moves language towards inarticulacy in a perverse, and rapid, imitation of the mechanics of senility. That there is some doubt as to whether one of the residents of the Toronto rest home can even recognise the television's detailing of a history which also included him, if only peripherally, underlines the irony :

Is that horror at what's on the TV screen  
or just the way the stroke makes Jock's jaw hang ?  
Though nobody quite knows what his words mean  
they hear Scots diphthongs in the New World twang.  
(CP, p.305).

The silence of mental obliteration is preceded by a return to the speech patterns of the past so that Jock's adopted Canadian disappears behind a Scots accent no doubt made the more impenetrable by the ravages of his illness. Such a rediscovery is evidence of an existence having come 'full circle' (CP, p.305) and affirms the idea of cosmic circularity: 'eternity's encirclement' figuratively serpentine in the poem 'The Lords of Life' (CP, p.247), to which Harrison obliquely alludes in the same verse. The restoration of Dresden's *Semper Opera* which plays in the same documentary to an unseeing rest home audience, figures in Harrison's accompanying narration for an affirmation of that same circularity. Except that such a restoration promises to recreate 'each bleb of blistered paintwork'(CP, p.308), thereby making a phoenix of the building's metaphor for the survival and continuity of a language, which each of the following characters represents for posterity :

the dead Cordelia in the lap of Lear,  
Lohengrin who pilots his white swan  
at cascading lustres of bright chandelier  
above the plush this pantheon shattered on,  
with Titania's leashed pards in pastiche Titian,  
Faust with Mephisto, Joan, Nathan the Wise,  
all were blown, on that Allied bombing mission,  
out of their painted clouds into the skies.  
(CP, p.308).

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<sup>104</sup> *Fasching* : a carnival indigenous to Munich.

One of Harrison's points here appears to be that no such transformation awaits the eroded 'architecture' of Jock's linguistic range; existence has turned full circle, returning him to the 'Scots diphthong' which will eventually become silence. Another point, by way of a characteristic connection, is that the historical silence of the many is reified by the attitudes of holocaust-deniers like Ernst Zundel, to whom Harrison refers in virtually the next poetic breath. The 'wiping' of the knowledge of concentration camps and the crematory detritus of the Jewish race from the history books would force several millions out of the reach of proper commemoration. Harrison's strong sense of presence in a universalised circle of history to some degree validates his compulsion to make connections between various socio-temporal points within it; connections which commonly link the apparent minutiae of domestic history with, in context, grander considerations of carpet-bombing and firestorms. The poet's albeit tenuous sense of complicity in the poem 'The Effort' and his desire to explore the darker possibilities of seemingly humdrum domestic details, provides its own ethical benchmark in relation to the efficacy, or otherwise, of the so-called 'revenge' raids. The compulsion connects the memory of wartime Leeds directly with the documentary relaying the fire-bombing of Dresden to the 'denizens' of the Toronto rest home. Here Harrison's final line is an ironic attempt at guilt-mitigation, but the uncharacteristic full-stop ending the preceding line gives it, instead, the compromised weight of an afterthought:

They took our iron railings down to dump  
on Dresden as one more British bomb,  
but mam cajoled the men to leave a stump  
to hitch the line she hung the washing from.  
So three inches didn't end in German flesh.  
(CP, p.174).

According to the Heraclitean model, there is a sense in which fire embodies the life it also defines. Heraclitus's style appears to invest fire with an anthropomorphic vigour which naturally personifies its tendency for example to breathe, or to consume rapaciously. It figuratively judges that which it consumes by blindly manifesting the mechanics of the process of consumption, and entirely without reason. This would be the 'how' rather than the 'why' of interpreting meaning (Berezdevin, 1980, p.77). To some extent, and to paraphrase Nietzsche's interpretation of the Prometheus myth, fire has

always remained resistant to human control and this may explain the continuing tendency, in literature, to personify its powers in terms of a dangerous and arbitrary killer.<sup>105</sup> Such a blind and omnivorous rapacity declares a 'psychopathy' which is most serviceably described in terms of its human attributes in the poem 'A Kumquat for John Keats', and the reference again draws on the poet's knowledge of Greek mythology:

dehydrated Naiads, Dryad amputees  
dragging themselves through slagscapes with no trees,  
a shirt of Nessus fire that gnaws and eats  
children half the age of dying Keats...  
(CP, p.222).

Here, in an extension of arguably the most deliberate poetic binary in Harrison's entire corpus, we find the kumquat's bitterest aftertaste figuratively served up in the form of an exploded nuclear weapon, and its fire-ravaged aftermath. The poem's sanguine inversion of Keats's 'blushful Hippocrene' makes blood of wine in an ironic transubstantiation, where a replete beaker 'With beaded bubbles winking at the brim' (From 'Ode to a Nightingale', 1988, p.169) becomes, for Harrison, a grim crater of bloody leers (CP, p.222). For N. S. Thompson, Harrison's application of classical imagery metamorphoses the innocence of the mythical beings into a hideous perversion of a pastoral landscape, and the shirt of 'Nessus fire' image develops the allusion further (Thompson, 1997, p.130). The mythical Heracles's death wrapped in a 'burning' shirt soaked in the blood of the centaur Nessus is conflated and magnified by Harrison to create the irradiated agency of a post-apocalyptic dystopia where fire embodies its own effect, and literally consumes humanity in a way that could never have been conceived by Keats, or Euripides. As it 'gnaws and eats' the image of the child's body like napalm, or more appositely in the context of Harrison's slightly earlier reference to 'ravished' silence (CP, p.221), like untreated syphilis, fire becomes a personification of uncontrolled energy, an intelligence that appears to 'judge' the act of 'communion' out of which the powers of creation and destruction were born. To some extent, Heraclitus's obscuring of boundaries between the material agency of fire and its abstract expression is echoed in Harrison's compulsion to remove temporal limits to interpretation. For Gaston Bachelard, the unconscious, in imitation of its own

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<sup>105</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche (1993, p.49).

prehistoric instincts, is unable to separate the *word* from the *thing*, and it is characteristic of his description that fire is the agency through which the occlusion of boundaries is expressed: 'If it (the unconscious) speaks of man as being full of fire, it wills something to be *burning* within him' (Bachelard, 1964, p.48). In the following diptych from Harrison's play *The Labourers of Herakles*, the fingers of an imagined victim of the Serbian conflict weave Herakles's fatal shirt: 'Who wove the blistering blouson that Herakles can't loose ? / The fingers of the raped girl who wove herself a noose' (P3, p. 147). The repeating of the diptych in several different contextual guises underlines the blending of received contemporary reality and myth, of conflict and abstraction expressed in a language which nearly embodies the contortion of flames enveloping a body. The fire, *qua* Bachelard, is as alive within the poet's sense of historical purpose as it is in his description. The serpentine vowel sounds - 'wove', 'blouson', 'loose', 'noose' – help to suggest a particularly tortuous form of death. It is characteristic of Harrison's instinct for connection-making that Herakles's fate, dressed in alliterations of fire which conflate the abstract qualities of guilt and complicity with material pain, finds common ground with the conflict in the former Yugoslavia. It is also typical that the poet leaves no room for audience inference in this blunt rhetoric of assumed connection :

I wear a fitted furnace. My scalded body squirms.  
 My ethnic cleanser's conscience crawls with caustic worms.  
 If you pull this garment from me, you'll pull away my skin.  
 This is Europe's conscience I'm cremated in.  
 (P3, p.148).

Where the Greeks used the power of the imagination to invoke the sanguine horrors of tragic necessity, the literalist Romans put real human blood on the stage. In these lines from *The Kaisers of Carnuntum*, specific use of the fire trope helps the reader to conceptualize the difference between these cultural approaches to public performance: 'And I don't want any Orphean music taming / these wild animals; I want them enflaming' (P3, p.77). The presence of real, insatiable and 'enflamed' beasts in the amphitheatre is in one sense a metaphor for the bloodthirsty and decadent arc of Roman cultural trajectory, as epitomised in the figure of Commodus. The shirt of Nessus fire becomes an animal which will 'gnaw' and eviscerate before the eyes of the audience. It is not untypical of Harrison's concern to maintain narrative tension in the play that the extremity of

Commodus's excess is balanced by his father Marcus Aurelius's slightly other-worldly stoicism. Such an impulse to animate inanimate fire is a primary component of the work of the unconscious according to Bachelard's psychoanalytical model, and is distinguished by its commonality of use in both poetry and prose over many centuries. Noting, for example, that the human tendency to 'feed' fires is synonymous with the idea of keeping them alight, Bachelard almost describes Harrison's own powerful relationship with the domestic hearth. The necessary prelude to the reverie I described at length in my first chapter is the 'feeding' of kindling and paper into the fireplace, an act which Harrison rehearses to the point of alchemical conjuration in several poems, as though to bring the 'beast' of memory into life (Bachelard, 1964, p.64). Elsewhere, in an early longhand manuscript version of *Oresteia*, fire takes on an entirely new animated rapacity, where the beast does not wait to be fed – 'The gnashing jaws of fire gnaw / only the corpse's rotten flesh' (*Oresteia* Notebooks Book 39, p.1545).

Louis MacNeice's poem 'Brother Fire' explores the random and vigorously destructive power of fire by investing it with sentience as well as body. Set against the backdrop of the London 'Blitz' to which he was a witness, MacNeice holds up a mirror to the dualism of human psychological impulses. The 'tongues of fire' here hymn their own lack of restraint, babbling not like brooks, but rather in the spirit of the religious fervour of speaking in tongues. Fire, like the glossolalia on which Harrison has reflected at length, is, in the most meaningful sense, abandoned:<sup>106</sup>

O delicate walker, babbler, dialectician fire,  
O enemy and image of ourselves,  
Did we not on those mornings after the All Clear,  
When you were looting shops in elemental joy  
And singing as you swarmed up city block and spire,  
Echo your thought in ours: Destroy ! Destroy !  
(MacNeice, 1979, p.48).

The necessary ambiguity of such a relationship between fire and the human imagination, in a sense provides a framework of definition for Harrison's ongoing meditation. The capacity to create and to destroy are material properties of fire, except that destruction is inevitably followed by transmutation into other forms, a scientific fact which co-

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<sup>106</sup> Harrison's *Oresteia* notebooks in the special collection at Leeds contain many references to the phenomenon of glossolalia or 'speaking in tongues'. See, particularly, Book 33 p.159.

incidentally validates Heraclitus's unscientific, metaphorical sense of fire's inextinguishable life-energy. Fire therefore manifests several 'languages' which are collectively and simultaneously engaged in a 'dialectic' of apparent contradictions, and such contradictions are mirrored in the ambiguity of human interpretations of, and responses to, fire's own incoherent 'tongue'. Though fire does not figure in Harrison's poem 'Wordlists I', it 'babbles' subtextually in that desperate groping for meaning which is also mirrored in the random inventory of the title itself :

Words and wordlessness. Between the two  
the gauge went almost ga-ga. No RI,  
no polysyllables could see me through,  
come glossolalia, dulciloquy.  
(CP, p.127).

The final lines reveal only their own ambiguity. Is Harrison saying that no amount of lexical artistry will shield him against the socio-cultural fracture yielded by his sense of desertion from his roots ? Or is he invoking the power of his own 'tongue of fire' to articulate a passage between Dionysian abandonment and rhetorical fluency? Where MacNeice, in 'Brother Fire', gives animal life to the flames he is immersing the narrative in a furnace where the boundaries between observation and expectation are blurred. As the fire 'sings' in recognition of its own destructive powers, the desire for destruction is echoed in the narrator's counter-intuitive final exclamation which assumes complicity of his or her contemporaries. The human urge to 'Destroy ! Destroy !' is one psychological component among several: the voice perhaps of Dionysian energy which provides a counterweight to that of the futile, flailing anger of the Dresden mother in 'The Mother of the Muses' whose victimhood is barked at the moon: '*Swine ! Swine ! Swine !*'. Opposed voices, oppositional attitudes, are accommodated within the human experience of fire, and to some degree they are reconciled in the rebuilding of the *Semper Opera* which is intricately detailed in Harrison's poem. The Allied, but particularly British, urge to obliterate Dresden with scant alleged regard for human cost, the knee-jerk compulsion to 'Destroy ! Destroy!' is mitigated by the German urge to re-create, in facsimile form, a revived language from the ashes of the old :

Repainted, reupholstered, all in place  
just as it had been before that fatal night,  
but however devilish the leading bass



his demons are outshadowed on this site.  
But that's what Dresden wants and so they play  
the same score sung by new uplifting voices.  
(CP, p.308).

For Luke Spencer, the restoration of collective memory is exactly the point here: noting that *Semper* is the word for 'always' in Latin, he goes on to describe the phoenix-like recreation of the opera as a 'willed recovery of cultural riches from virtual obliteration' (Spencer, 1994, p.113). *Mnemosyne*, for Harrison, is the agent of cultural restoration, the muse of commemoration and connector of memory through the offices of language, and it is an intended irony that the reified symbol of the *Semper* is 'outshadowed' by the memory of its own destruction, just as the shadowy backdrop to Alzheimer's is the loss of cognition and eventual silence. Harrison's early draft title of this poem - 'Semper – or the Mother of the Muses' - suggests that he was making a deliberate semiotic connection between 'always' and 'memory' (Poetry Notebooks, Book 9, p.108). The epithet 'always remember' has come to define his work since it was inscribed as a preoccupation with the *School* sequence of poems.

Fire, for Heraclitus, is intelligence, and in Berezdivin's commentary it also 'grants sensibility' (Berezdevin, 1980, p.75) in the sense that humanity is able, through fire's power and suggestibility, to develop a technology for existential definition as Harrison attempts in the above quotations from 'The Mother of the Muses'. Harrison's effort to erect some barricade of hope against the darkness of history and of personal mental decline is characterised here as elsewhere by the image of the hearth which commences the narrative, and the impulse to express love whilst memory allows it, which more or less concludes it. The blending of Harrison's personal concerns with grander issues of grief, atrocity and culpability create, for Antony Rowland, a deliberate 'tension' within the poem (Rowland, 2001, p.218). Harrison's concern at the loss of his own power to recall some lines from Aeschylus's *Prometheus* in the original Greek; the degeneration of his faculty, in fact, to master the language of memory, is only partly mitigated by the warming properties of the hearth because it is viewed against a background of almost-overwhelming universal tectonic shifts. It is significant in this regard that Harrison's final exclamation of defiant life-affirmation is conceived in terms of that most fragile of

metaphors, the wick of an oil lamp, whose flame is steady but whose ultimate source is finite:

In that silent dark I swore I'd make it known,  
while the oil of memory feeds the wick of life  
and the flame from it's still constant and still bright,  
that, come oblivion or not, I loved my wife  
in that long thing where we lay with day like night.  
(CP, p.310).

Any certainty here is undercut by the tension alluded to by Rowland, who incidentally performs his own service to 'public remembrance' by mistakenly multiplying the single character of 'Gene, Eugene, Yevgeny' into three Alzheimer's sufferers (Rowland, 2001, p.218). The value of Harrison's declamation is weakened by his own recourse to the language of nominal aphasia,<sup>107</sup> which in turn is a deliberate appropriation of Lilian, one of the rest home patient's, inability to name names whilst taking a circuitous adjectival route towards definition:

*He had a beautiful...all made of oak...  
silk inside...brass handles...tries to find  
alternatives...that long thing where you lie.*  
(CP, p.304).

That neither Lilian nor the vicarious narrator can find the word for 'coffin' does not shelter the reader from the possibility that life and language, like the oil which 'feeds' the flame, are not infinite resources. The 'wick of life' represents, in Rowland's words, only 'a temporary reprieve from the possibilities of effacement' (Rowland, 2001, p.224). The final tracing of a bird's tracks in the snow outside Harrison's Toronto home is a symbol of both the 'blurred' vestiges of language and of the apparently indelible imprint of a message in Cretan Greek, establishing a connection with the native land of the poet's then father-in-law, and making an intentional irony of the Dresden fire-bombings. Some of these raids took place on 14 February, 1945, and the sepulchral resonance of the notion of annihilating fires reducing bodies to ash, and language to silence, on Valentine's day is clearly irresistible for Harrison. The poet's scrapbook entry noting the Valentine's day fire which killed nineteen mill girls in 1818 in Huddersfield was pasted-in some twenty or so

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<sup>107</sup> In correct medical terms 'anomic aphasia', a symptom of senility which diminishes the faculty of the patient to locate nouns when speaking.

years before 'The Mother of the Muses' was conceived, but a mental connection with the more recent work seems extremely likely.

Against this semiotically-complex backdrop of mental attrition and architectural regeneration, Harrison affirms the necessity of the survival of language, and the pre-eminence of the value of Art in defining that necessity. His preoccupation with classical literature and myth underlines a further connection between fire and language in the figure of the Aeschylean Prometheus, whose words Harrison falteringly recalls in 'the Mother of the Muses'. For Harrison, the contiguity of fire and poetry which embodies the introduction to his own film/poem *Prometheus* parallels 'Prometheus's gift of fire to mankind' with 'the gift of poetry' (Hardwick, 1999, page not numbered). For Lorna Hardwick, the vernacular dialogue interchange between the miners in the film is an affirmation of that fire through life itself. The scene in which the miners surprise themselves with instinctive, unconscious rhyming, represents the essence of iambics, of the heart-beat, so that the life gifted by fire is also language. In the following exchange, natural rhythms and rhyme unify the loose ends of language as effortlessly as fire will ultimately join the miners in one molten consummation with the statue of Prometheus :

Miner 1

An t'barriest thing of all's like when  
we talk in bloody rhyme like I did then.  
I don't like it. It's more than bloody queer  
spouting bloody poetry like King Lear.

Miner 3

It could well launch us on a new career.  
Did you hear that ? Did you hear me ?  
Hey, now we're redundant, we could all go  
to bloody Blackpool as a Pierrot show.  
(P, p.37).

Harrison here employs demotic strategically. Its muscular energy breathes life into a language which has no lesser claim to existence than 'Received' English appropriations of Shakespeare's plays. The dialogue re-affirms the continuity of vernacular forms particularly, and language generally, amongst a landscape of industrial decline and redundancy. Working-class resentment and possibly reticence about 'higher' forms of Art instinctively replaces 'King Lear' with promenade 'Pierrot' performers, though the latter are a throwback to a much earlier period of proletarian culture and are as unlikely to

make an appearance in actual modern dialogue as Dan Leno or Marie Lloyd. Respecting the reservation I expressed at the head of this chapter, Harrison is so keen to define the oppositional elements of his reading of that great unbridgeable 'versus' of 'high' against 'low' culture, that he sometimes either wilfully, or mistakenly, applies an anachronistic schema of demotic and material detail to it, for binary emphasis. When he wrote *Prometheus*, Pierrots were already an historical footnote, and no more likely to be called forth for purposes of comparison than to be declaimed in a kind of comedic pre-war vernacular. The point here appears to be that Harrison tries to clarify through oversimplification. The miners, who represent a sub-species of the Greek chorus in the film, are innocents whose language will remain their 'stamp' of continuity and their mettle long after their unforeseen molten denouement. The fiery vigour of the miners' dialogue, and the redundant class it stands for, will survive through the portal of memory much as the gift of fire itself consistently re-emerges in different forms and re-engages with poetry reflexively.

An undated newspaper photograph in one of Harrison's *Oresteia* notebooks of an unspecified, bombed-out German city returns me to the fire-engulfed Dresden of 'The Mother of the Muses'. Three elderly male figures stand amongst the ruins, looking directly into the camera. In the margin, Harrison has inscribed the single word 'chorus?' (*Oresteia* Notebooks, Book 42, p.2408). These are the silent historical witnesses for whom Harrison feels compelled to give voice. Their forebears are victims on whose behalf tragic choruses declaimed and for this poet they survive only through the language of poetic or dramatic/poetic commemoration. They are 'the Greeks who'll watch Troy blaze', whose voices are only redeemed when recorded (GG, p.69). That Harrison's own memory is faltering in 'The Mother of the Muses' adds a further complexity to the symptoms of decline and destruction which stand in opposition to, and to some degree atrophy, the life-affirming properties of the hearth and the human bond. It is characteristic of such narratives of human continuity that they should take on the appearance of an unresolved dialectic between past and present, language and silence. As Sandie Byrne perceptively notes of Harrison's general poetic approach, the dynamic is in tension but never in stasis, leaving conclusions to particular poems more often than not 'conditional or absent' (Byrne, 1998, p.195). In a translated fragment, Heraclitus cuts to the heart of a dialectic of

fire which subsumes as it creates: 'Fire consumes, its life is constant consumption; it lives the death of other things. This is the contradiction. Life is a living of death' (Berezdevin, 1980, p.76). The contradiction is therefore constant and unresolved. A very early version of Harrison's poem 'Ghosts : Some Words before Breakfast', subtitled 'I gave you life', and reproduced in *Poetry and Audience* magazine, strips the definition of such a tension down to the bare, interchangeable bones of language and fire. The extract bears no relation to the poem which was later published in *The Loiners* collection :

Words, dreams, and deeds the mind relates  
In haunted words, the mind cremates;  
Those moving words have all returned  
Among the buried, dead and burned.  
And though by words I exorcize the will  
The hours remaining leave me still  
To wonder as the day grows bright  
About the next descent of night.  
(*Poetry and Audience*, 1959-60, pp.6-7).

The poem, or the psychological trauma which underpins it, clearly haunts Harrison.

### Part Three : *Prometheus*

The phoenix image which describes the emerging *Semper Oper* in 'The Mother of the Muses' adopts a greater degree of irony in the film/poem *Prometheus*. The dereliction of post-industrial Europe, our awareness of continuing destruction and our somewhat threadbare expectations for the future, together put siege to the central figure of defiant hope. The golden statue of Prometheus and his journey across Europe and the Balkans towards his 'homeland' look absurd visually, rendering any sense of defiance, or affirmation, less potent. The image is static and one-dimensional, so that Harrison's balancing of oppositions is unintentionally destabilized by the further prospect of audience indifference or derision. His earnest apotheosis of the Titan, which is as blindly ambitious in its own way as Keith Sagar's hyperbolic ascription – 'Prometheus himself subsumes God and Lucifer, Adam and Christ' – undermines the poet's argument at the point of visual presentation (Sagar, 2005, p.1). But this may be Harrison's point: by one reading Prometheus is a messianic figure as likely to be ignored as to be heeded. Hope is increasingly enfeebled as Prometheus's gift of fire gutters under the burgeoning weight of history. The sense of inevitability and import which colours Harrison's narrative unintentionally mirrors Herbert Marcuse's psychoanalytical reading of the post-war imagination. Marcuse finds that the unrestrained application of technology and science on landscape and culture is itself a general metaphor for the divestment of psychological repressions, which in turn has resulted in the 'unfreedom' of disease, cruelty and genocide:

Concentration camps, mass exterminations, world wars, and atom bombs are no "relapse into barbarism," but the unrepressed implementation of the achievements of modern science, technology and domination. And the most effective subjugation and destruction of man by man takes place at the height of civilization, when the material and intellectual attainments of mankind seem to allow the

creation of a truly free world.  
(Marcuse, 1998, p.4).

Fire, for Harrison, is the best expression of technological achievement and of subjugation, the means of consolidating an irony which connects Promethean possibility with Freudian notions of renunciation and release. Freedom from restraint comes to confer its opposite just as the Promethean gift of fire comes to burn its abusers. If Marcuse ultimately rejects Freud's assumption that civilization is defined by an association between repression and freedom, Harrison tries to find a solution to Promethean duality in the recovery and maintenance of memory and language from the potential for silence. For Joe Kelleher, Harrison's interpretation of the figure of Prometheus as a 'body of suffering' may stand, in a metonymic sense, for the material power of 'memory, history, subject-matter' to act as counterweights against 'dematerialization' (Kelleher, 1996, p.39). The original, ultimately non-redemptive Prometheus, the provider of the 'technologies of recording and remembering', also gives the power to erase landscape and signifier through the same fire-driven agency of knowledge (Kelleher, 1996, p.45). Since socio-cultural and linguistic signs are, as Kelleher rightly argues, Harrison's chief mechanisms of recognition and definition, the poet's strategy for human survival is contingent upon the exploration of a 'sign-less' and unthinkable alternative, or upon a 'facing up to the worst' in the sense of Greek tragedy. The 'Scaleless zodiac' or planet-less sky inferred from within the bonfire-scorched circle of Harrison's poem 'The Morning After II' (CP, p.197) is one measure of the poet's compulsion to register his own existential unease. Another appears in the form of a threat from the character of Hermes in *Prometheus* :

It's doomed all that. You wasted time  
grovelling underground in grime.  
Those steaming fortresses you pray  
'll last till your grandchildren's day  
are doomed, *doomed*, on their way out,  
destined (as you'd say) to be *nowt* !  
*Nowt ! Nowt ! Nowt ! Nowt !*  
(P, p.55).

Addressed to the Old Man, Hermes's vitriol scorns both Prometheus's redundant 'gift' and, by extension, the futility of the former's lifelong effort. In the final line, however, Hermes 'wraps' a thumping repetition of a 'scaleless' universe in the miner's own

vernacular, rendering the grander possibility of a world tending towards existential silence, like the racket of a spinning frame in a textile mill slowly running down, or an inarticulacy of 'nowts' receding into infinity. This is a vision apparently shared by the poet A.D. Hope in these lines from his poem 'Prometheus Unbound':

Go, set the Titan free;  
And let his torment be to wander wide  
The ashes of mankind from sea to sea,  
Judging that theft of fire from which they died.  
(Hope, 1966, p.89).

These words of Zeus, I suspect, thinly mask Hope's own depressing world-view. The ash is a clear reference to the burned-out remnants of a post-war landscape grotesquely disfigured by mankind's inability to separate technologies of creation from those of destruction. Equally determined to 'judge' Prometheus's theft, Harrison's 'Hermes' figure conjures a prophetic vision of the future which is to some degree the poet's own. But the balance between the ideas of hope, embodied in the figure of the Old Man, and oblivion, as predicted by Hermes, is redistributed in Harrison's filmic medium. That the messenger God is portrayed as pompous, silver-clad and arrogant reduces his potency as rhetorician. Hermes's textually capitalized henchmen KRATOS (force) and BIA (violence) may be constant reminders to the audience of human predisposition and culpability, but the film undermines the possibility of serious existential considerations with near comedy in places. I remain to be convinced in fact that *Prometheus* works more effectively in film than in text. These are the outpourings of a non-visual poetic imagination which instinctively subordinates 'pictures' to the sound and feel of language; the striking images of Prometheus and Hermes look like the dramatic reconstructions of a 'blind' poet directing the studio. Harrison's choice of brilliant gold for the colour of the statue is one indication of the poet's mind working in earnest misapprehension of the limitations of the filmic medium. It is possible he had the alchemical process in mind, here described by Bachelard, when he chose to startle his audience with the gilded image – 'Frequently it even happens that the alchemist will attribute a value to gold, because it is a receptacle of elementary fire' (Bachelard, 1964, p.72). By an associative reading, Prometheus may be seen as the embodiment of fire, a metaphorical inference which demands too much of the viewer presented with the large static figure on the screen. The fire which unites the



several themes of *Prometheus* is a signifier which works more resonantly, perhaps, on the written page, and thence through an imagination bearing the luxury of time to formulate a symbolic evaluation.

Harrison's decision to illuminate recent historical experiences in an assumed vernacular of the present, and in terms of a journey, would appear to have militated against his conventional choice of medium, drama, in both logistical and aesthetic terms.<sup>108</sup> Film remains a relatively new medium for the poet, a fact which places entirely new demands on modes of expression and textual delivery. It may enhance and breathe life into the sensory receptors which Douglas Dunn rightly identifies as being Harrison's poetic 'antennae'. Harrison, Dunn suggests, is the poet of: '[...] what can be seen, heard, felt, smelled and touched', except that the former is myopic in relation to vision (Dunn, 1991, p.254). The poet's unambiguous assertion of his twin 'obsessions' of fire and cinema underpins the film's trajectory, and to this extent it provides a substitute focus for the hearth-reverie which animated his childhood (P, p.xxiii). It is therefore no coincidence that fire crystallizes the full range of perceptions in the poet's cinematic imagination, allowing the audience to infer meaning through, or possibly be unmoved by, such a direct medium of visceral engagement. In this highly visible sense, the golden figure's journey may echo the *Lampadêdromiai*, or torch-races, which took place between the altar of Prometheus in the Academy and the Acropolis, through the streets of classical Athens. If the connection of ideas occurred to Harrison before he wrote the text for the film, then he would certainly have recognised the symbolic resonance of the beacon of continuity, or, in the words of Eva Parisinou, 'the concept of ever-burning fires in temples and in the *heart of city centres*' (my italics) (Parisinou, 2000, p.30). Such rituals helped to maintain the fabric of cultural coherence in Athens, and were a tangible demonstration of it, as much as Harrison is attempting, unconvincingly, to assert the value of hope amongst the 'ruins' of the heartland of urban post-industrial Europe.

The relationship between the myth and its modern context also removes the need for the ritualistic formality of tragic drama. To paraphrase the classicist Kenneth MacKinnon, Harrison's version of *Prometheus* takes much more from the myth than from Aeschylus's

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<sup>108</sup> W.H.Auden's use of poetic rhythm in his transcript for the 1936 GPO Film Unit documentary *Night Mail* is a deliberate device for rendering a sense of movement, and is similarly inextricably tied to the medium for which it was conceived.

impression of it.<sup>109</sup> Myth and the agency of fire clarify Harrison's imagination so that his vision of the world sometimes resembles the simplistic vision of primitive man which created a 'syntax' of meaning out of its own 'vocables' of recognition (Broch, 2005, pp.107-108). I use Hermann Broch's term for describing a way of seeing the world which is as phenomenologically different from our own as Marx's notion of a 'syntax' of capital is remote from classical Athens. I am not suggesting here that Harrison subscribes to myth in any literal sense, rather that the earnest tenor of his approach gives the impression of a universe orchestrated by the kind of inexorable 'Fate' which was indivisible with *logos* for post-Heraclitean Greek philosophers, of forces beyond human control. The high visibility of Prometheus in the film appears to transcend the purely symbolic; the procession of history is made to seem both grave and inevitable in the shadow of the Titan, and the fiery medium through which history is described looks over-defined and simplistic at times. To this extent, Harrison's own examination of oppositions, or the rhetorical style in which that examination is projected, is guilty of a kind of determinism: he seeks cause and resolution through the relentless identification of connections which may sometimes be specious for the very reason of being forced. By Denis Donoghue's definition, Harrison is a thief of fire. In the sense that some writers are guilty of varying degrees of incaution – their reach being somehow beyond their grasp - they may be interpreters and 'thieves of fire', figurative Prometheans:

Fire is the unitary element, it destroys difference, it sponsors the release of essence from existence, it is the element most congenial to blasphemy and daring. Thus Bachelard gave the name 'Promethean' to all those tendencies which drive us to know more than our fathers.  
(Donoghue, 1974, p.93).

If he is not quite overstepping the bounds of credulity with the narrative development of the film, there is a sense in which Harrison's enthusiastic use of the fire trope falsely clarifies and reinforces a claim to rhetorical certainty, entirely on the basis of historical and geographical knowledge and binary supposition. His imagination is itself 'Promethean' by the lights of Donoghue's generic assessment, which is to say that it thrives on tension and struggle, and is alien, except for an occasional retreat into transcendental reflection,

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<sup>109</sup> Mackinnon (1999, page not numbered).

to the concept of true harmony (Donoghue, 1974, p.62). Harrison's narrative is an act of self-determination thriving on that which most resembles the crackle of fire: the viscera and charge of demotic aggression. It is almost as though he was trying to compensate, with words, for an excess of emotion. To paraphrase Donoghue's examination of 'Promethean' writers further, Harrison's mind 'seizes what it requires, it steals the divine fire' (Donoghue, 1974, p.61) and becomes a metaphorical mirror to that which it portrays. Through the defiant character of the Old Man, the poet builds a barricade round the limits of his own vision, and illuminates the perimeter with symbolic beacons:

And I were glad we could produce  
fuel for fires that angered Zeus.  
That bloody Zeus that you kowtow to  
but a man like me will never bow to!  
Power stations fuelled by t'pits  
blow smoke at you immortal shits.  
(P, p.55).

But the fire of the language fails to make the imagery any more visual on the written page. Harrison's analysis of the contemporary landscape is as blind to epistemological possibility as Prometheus was unable to foresee the long-term consequences of his actions. It is somehow not surprising to find the poet, subsequent to filming, reflecting over the dismembered body of the statue in a quarry owned by the ironically-named 'Titan Cement' of Elefsina, and identifying Prometheus's outstretched arm, alone and intact amongst the embers of burnt fibre-glass.<sup>110</sup> For Harrison, the coincidence makes the extraordinary of the ordinary, giving him the imaginative freedom to drive home historical connections with the Shelleyan Republicanism of *Prometheus Unbound* and to reassert a symbolism of defiance. The refining qualities of fire do not, however, facilitate a comfortable engagement with the postmodern landscapes of modern Europe, whose complexity may transcend the bounds of mythical interpretation. And for all that he invests earnestly in symbolisms of defiant hope, Harrison must remain aware that his vast tableau of urban desecration almost overwhelms any possibility of redemption, and thereby makes an irony of Shelley's sense of fleeting messianic idealism:

Life of Life ! thy lips enkindle  
With their love the breath between them;

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<sup>110</sup> See introduction to *Prometheus*. (P, p.xxviii).

And thy smiles before they dwindle  
Make the cold air fire.  
(in Gardner, 1972, p.581).

The Old Man's valedictory summation of Prometheus's two-handed 'gift' is too knowing, his sense of symbolic purpose too simple. The sentiment is too limited a repository for the containment of such complex meaning because the language in which that sentiment is framed subordinates such considerations to a claim for polemical parity: the demotic voice demands to be heard -

Fire, that's brought Man close to t'brink  
were t'first to help him dream and think.  
Imagine men first freed from t'night  
first sitting round t'warm firelight,  
safe from t'beasts they allus feared  
until Prometheus first appeared.  
Watching logs burn, watching coal  
created what's been called Man's soul,  
that like a ... (*he coughs*) ... lung or liver gnawed  
at t'orders of t'great overlord,  
reasserts, gets rent, and reasserts,  
for all its rending and raw hurts,  
its fiery nature and its light,  
its first defiance of dark night. (P, p.83).

Whilst the critic Peter Robinson is right to defend Harrison's making of linguistic concessions in order to support the imperatives of the filmic mode of projection, this passage seems too complete a recapitulation of the poet's argument (Robinson, 1999, p.221). The oral tradition to which Harrison is instinctively drawn confers the undoubted benefit of visceral immediacy, but here the declamation cannot hope to hold the scope of its own meaning, rather as the 'Redhill container' in the poem 'A Close One', examined at length in Chapter Two, is a fragile metaphor for the containment of the 'fires' of memory.<sup>111</sup>

That the figure of Prometheus stands, like a sentinel, over this relatively recent culmination of all of Harrison's preoccupations, is another indicator of the defining power, for the poet's imagination, of fire. The final two lines of the Old Man's soliloquy unite light and fire in a single metaphor: identify, as the Greeks did, the kindled flame 'as the

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<sup>111</sup> See CP, p.172.

very seed of brightness', and negate the power of darkness (Parisinou, 2000, p.3). Since visual impact seems to be central to Harrison's conception of film direction, the statue's literally titanic size and brightness combine to underline the sense of outrage which accompanies the mythical figure's revelation of the mechanics of fire to mankind. The character of Hermes is the insidious corrective to Prometheus's defiance, the agent of silver-tongued doom, the Goebbels to Zeus's Hitler casting a new dawn, or a Thousand Year Reich, in an illusory aetiology of fire :

What my boss Zeus longed to do  
was melt Man down and mould a new,  
smelt the old stock and recast  
a better Mankind from the last.  
(P , p.24).

The furnace of this image is significant. It is an ironic reflection of the end of mass-industrialisation, at least in the West, but more crucially in the absence of the possibility of recreating mankind, it foreshadows Zeus's own 'plan' for the final humiliation of Prometheus. 'Man', in the form of the redundant miners, is melted down to create the figure of the now inert Titan who will, on his pan-European odyssey, re-atone for man's historical misappropriation of fire. Transformation through fire, as noted at length in Chapter Two, is one of Harrison's enduring preoccupations, and here the alchemical process produces a symbol of continuity in gold whilst also, as Edith Hall notes, metamorphosing literal 'capital' out of the abstraction of human labour in a terrifyingly concrete visitation of Marx's theory of dialectical materialism (Hall, 2002, p.132). Gold, of which the totemic wedding rings of the *School* poems are made, stands for continuity and memory, or survival through memory, even where the fabric of existence is threatened. Harrison's interest in the visual image of Prometheus evidently pre-dates the film by many years: a cutting from the New York Times of 22 December, 1980<sup>112</sup> pasted in to one of the poet's notebooks, shows a large, presumably lightweight, gilded statue of the Titan being held aloft in an unspecified celebration. Differences between the photographic and subsequent filmic statuary are negligible (in *Oresteia Notebooks*, Book 42, p.2199).

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<sup>112</sup> Harrison was himself in New York at this time, co-incidentally only fourteen days after the shooting of John Lennon.

The statue of Prometheus, then, is made to survey the irony of his own beneficence: the echoes of fire-driven industry, the silence of Auschwitz and its crematoria, the summoned choirs of the Dresden dead who perished in the firestorm of 1945. The Promethean fire which Edith Hall identifies as one component of the constructive transformation of the world 'at the level of matter' is given over, instead, to massive destruction (Hall, 2002, p.130). The silenced voices of the past are the 'ghosts in the machine' of the sonnet 'Illuminations I' (CP, p.157) upon whom the young Harrison is obliged to reflect, underlining the presence of an unspecified psychological 'darkness' behind the seaside fun. If such ghosts remain indistinct in this poem, the contingency is a necessary component of the child Harrison's as yet not fully formed understanding of the actuality of material suffering. The ghosts of *Prometheus*, by contrast, are manifestations of a much more palpable sense of existential duality, this time sharpened on varieties of documented historical experience, and on a generally negative view of the present. In Miroslav Holub's poem 'Discovery of Fire', the narrator's rhetorical interjection in the second stanza is the voice of 'historical experience': human self-determination appears to drive Prometheus's tentative but narcotic 'blue-purple' gift towards the inevitable working of oppositions:

He showed it to them,  
the blue-purple  
gay  
flame,  
deeply troubled  
that it was not going to work,  
that it was not it.

It was it,  
the first steak  
could be smelt  
and the feet of the first heretic  
started to burn.  
(in Silkin, 1973, p.147).

Prometheus's uncertainty is his undoing. Releasing the genies of celebrant and sufferer from the fire's lamp, his fate mirrors that of the human 'heretic' except that his punishment, relative to his divine status, is infinitely more protracted. Hermes's

persistent lambasting of the figure of Prometheus in Harrison's film is a reaction to the Titan's transgression :

but for Prometheus and his schemes,  
whose theft of fire first blurred the line  
dividing Mankind and divine,  
letting lower challenge higher  
by giving mere men Zeus's fire.  
(P, p.25).

Man's vaulting ambition is a reflection of Hermes's own arrogance, and it is tempting here to deduce a connection between the 'theft' of fire and Harrison's own wresting of linguistic authority away from the advocates of 'Received Pronunciation' in the poem 'Them & [Uz] II'. The assertion of class interests in the face of perceived linguistic tyranny holds up an earthly mirror to Prometheus's gift which enabled the liberation of mankind from the yoke of divine control. When Harrison's narrator chooses to 'occupy your lousy leasehold poetry' (CP, p.134) he is rehearsing Prometheus's service of 'letting lower challenge higher', and rendering one more interpretation of the expression 'tongues of fire' as it relates to the 'unbound' demotic voice. As noted earlier in this discussion, Harrison's reliance on the relevance of the myth seems emphatic even to the point of over-simplification. If he takes nothing from pantheon or singular Godhead figure, then he owes a great debt to the time-transcending fables of those who thought their lives were orchestrated by such wanton divinities. It is in this spirit, and in a letter to the present writer, that he is able to declare an unambiguous atheism: 'I have no religious affiliation whatsoever', before underlining the resonance of the myth's symbolic mechanism in a quotation from *Prometheus* :

Fire and poetry, two great powers  
that make the so-called gods' world OURS !<sup>113</sup>

The powers to create and to articulate define a secular humanity whose destiny, though conditional, remains a beacon of rebellion and hope.

The film's failure to contain and describe the enormity of its own themes was probably inevitable. But any process of critical evaluation here is secondary, respecting my thesis,

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<sup>113</sup> In an undated letter to myself of June, 2011. The original quotation may be found on p.84 of the text, and has the vernacular 'mek' for 'make'.

to the scale of Harrison's engagement with fire; more especially the fire which shapes and determines the landscapes of decline as they embody the framework of those themes. I hope, in this chapter, that I have underlined the centrality of the Greek classical tradition to the poet's thinking. *Prometheus* may not be a reworking of the Aeschylean original but it pays a great deal of attention to the myth where, elsewhere, Harrison has concentrated exclusively on adaptation or translation of tragedy. His preoccupation with the Greeks, however, is clear and has received much critical attention. Fire's mutability, its capacity for material as well as metaphorical interpretation, is equally central to the Greek world view. Its limitless potential as signifier and as essence was explored at length by Heraclitus, and there appears to be an unacknowledged connection between the serviceability of the medium in Heraclitean terms and its wide-ranging usage in Harrison's work. Heraclitus recognised a symbiotic interconnectedness between fire and the range of forms it defines, inhabits, mutates and consumes, so that the complexity of its attribution is mitigated by its power to clarify. Harrison finds in the complexity of the medium a compelling mirror to the destructive and creative impulses of the last century, but he is unable to locate clarification or resolution amongst the flames. It is as though the natural regenerative harmonies which Heraclitus's vision of fire encourages are inadequate to the task of establishing the hope of re-birth amongst the ash of post-industrial dereliction, or nuclear wasteland.

The importance of the ideas of language, and its converse, silence, to Harrison's imagination are obvious: they represent a choice between human continuity and extinction. One of the several definitions of Heraclitus's envisaging of *logos* is 'Word', and fire's mutating authority, of itself the essence of all definition, shapes the limits of Word to include all other interpretations. By this reading, borders between what we regard as separate considerations sometimes become occluded or overlap, and fire here may take the form of the element it describes. I hope I have exemplified this tendency towards indivisibility in Harrison's own work at the level of the particular, and more pressingly, in terms of universal annihilation. That fire can be the agent of despair; that metaphorical and literal interpretations of fire in the poems compound to create a unified image of destruction, is one indicator of the influence of the Greek instinct for clarification. Another is Harrison's relentless attempt to make a symbolism out of fire as a means of



fusing and reinforcing existential connections. The stuttering gun in the poem *'Dichtung und Wahrheit'* is an embodiment of fire. It is a metaphor for that which spits words of fire in the form of propaganda, and it fires bullets that silence the language in whose name words, specious and otherwise, are delivered.

## Chapter Five

### *Eros & Thanatos*

#### Part One : Too Much Spawning - The Flames of Lust and the Soft-Backed Tick

The facet of fire which I did not examine in the last chapter is that which is represented by the destructive capacities of the sun: the burning and oppressive heat often metaphorically associated with violence, disinhibition and sexual transgression. In Racine's version of the Greek tragedy, the character of Phaedra is the granddaughter of the Sun God Helios, and her terror at the kind of sunlight that burns is a physical manifestation of both the power exerted by lineage, and the burden of guilt. To this extent, the sun is Eumenidean in its chastising inescapability. It is that which corrects hubris and it embodies the inevitability of revenge.

Harrison's extraordinary transposition of the action of *Phaedra* to nineteenth-century India substitutes India for the Sun God, or at least the part-mythologised, hot, claustrophobic, wild and sexually licentious India which Victorian moralists imagined. Harrison, here describing a version of the play he saw in France, discovered a template for his own play, *Phaedra Britannica*:

The all-pervading presence of the sun, either seen as light or felt as heat in a darkened room, became also a physical counterpart for Phaedra's mythological kinship.  
(Harrison, 1991 (4), p.189).

Which is to say that Phaedra, the issue of a relationship between King Minos and the bestial Pasiphaë, is condemned through genealogical lineage and tragic necessity to

embody the character dynamic of 'alien', and that her condition is as intrinsic and unavoidable as the glare of the sun. In Harrison's adaptation, the blood-bound propensity for transgression is succoured by the sun, and comes to figure for Victorian hypocrisy in respect of that '[...] apostrophised INDIA upon which the exiled British projected all that was forbidden in their own culture' (Harrison, 1991 (4), p.178). The sun and the intense heat of India lie at the heart of Harrison's symbolic vision of 'discontent' (p.178), exacerbating and defining the cultural idiosyncrasies, resentments and prejudices of British imperialism. This is one more example of the way light, fire and heat shape tension in Harrison's oeuvre: the sunlit landscape of *Phaedra Britannica* is a long way removed from the apparently bountiful light of a Greek afternoon. India, or cultural assumptions about the moral decrepitude of heat-inflamed Indian primitives, is the motor which drives the decontextualized relevance of Harrison's drama. One expression of this native bacchanal is sexual deviance or the breaking of taboos, of which the Memsahib's desired 'incest' with her stepson Thomas Theophilus is the defining feature.<sup>114</sup> Her compulsion is inexorable like the heat of the sun: it defies the fact of Theophilus/Hippolytus's consecration to the goddess Artemis and according vow of chastity, and it exercises a hubris as shocking to the collective moral sentiment of the Raj as to the Greek pantheon. Harrison's substitution of the extremity of the Indian climate for Helios reinforces the sense of suspended, corrective judgement which overhangs the character of Phaedra throughout Racine's version. The Memsahib's vigorous avoidance of the sun's punitive rays imitates the burden of ancestral retribution which is tangible in Greek tragedy, and in Racine. But the sun here is also a metaphor for conscience, for guilt, and for idiosyncratically Victorian notions of moral propriety. Its power, to paraphrase Jonathan Dollimore, saps the energy of 'civilized' subjects, literally *de*-moralizes the individual whose behaviour begins to mirror the perversity of the primitive (Dollimore, 2001, p.148).

The theatre critic Irving Wardle writing in *The Times* of 10 September, 1975 summed up the stage production of *Phaedra Britannica* in the following words: 'Sex and fire and where they all conjoin in the blazing Indian heat' (*Phaedra Britannica* Notebooks, Book 13, p.892). This trinity of symbols, for me, accurately condenses Harrison's concerns but their application is by no means restricted to this drama. The depictions of promiscuity,

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<sup>114</sup> These characters are representations of, respectively, Racine's Phaedra and Hippolytus.

pederasty, and racial/sexual abuse which define the narratives of the long poems 'The White Queen', 'The Songs of the PWD Man' and some of 'The Death of the PWD Man', take place under a burning African sun, and this sun to an extent licenses transgression in the minds of those unreconstructed colonials who viewed, and to some degree go on viewing, the natives as 'fair game' by virtue of their moral 'degradation'. The character of the White Queen is both repelled and fascinated by the writhing primordial sexuality of native *Untermenschen*: 'Rustle and gasp, black creatures claw/ At one another in her packing straw' (CP, p.28). Ambiguity underpins this sequence of poems, but particularly respecting the interplay of suggestions of complicity and guilt. To some degree Harrison restores balance to otherwise distasteful narratives by investing his protagonists with a sense of masochistic futility borne out of guilt. The sun which undermines the integrity of imported fruit and drives exiles to warm beer and sexual craving, delivers its own metaphor for self-inflicted pain: 'Flat on my back, beneath the Galaxy, I fear/This burning in my groin is gonorrhoea.' The Queen is summarily punished for his own decadence: 'as I slash I shout: / *The white man's water turns back into fire !*' (from 'Manica' in 'The White Queen', CP, p.35). However determinedly tangential the metaphor, fire remains central to Harrison's thinking, embodying as it did for Bachelard, an inescapable and ambiguous cycle of germination and destruction, of engendering and burning (Bachelard, 1964, p.41). Reduced to an ignominy of sex and immediate gratification the sunburned, priapic narrator becomes a reflexive animal, not unlike those natives who litter his own narrative: 'The one red thing, I squat and grab/at myself like a one-clawed crab' (CP, p.37). The clawing actions here and in the earlier example are conjured by a narrator who perceives no difference between his own inflamed nihilism and the animalistic posturing of rutting natives.

The White Queen is seeing what Joseph Conrad saw in the Belgian Congo, if the exploitation here is a little less overtly violent: the perception of racial superiority is one component of the 'civilised' European mind. His attitude is ambivalent; simultaneously fascinated and repelled by the rutting black 'creatures' in the presumably foetid straw. He is redeemed only by his own insight: that he himself is reduced to the single reflexive 'claw' of degeneracy, which is where, for Conrad, the most heightened paths of 'civilisation' regress, even amongst banal images of clerks sweating within starched collars

in the physically and morally enervating heat. Referring explicitly to *Heart of Darkness*, Jonathan Dollimore notes that in 'relentlessly' undercutting the assumed superiority of the civilised over the primitive, Conrad almost collapses 'the one into the other' in narrative terms (Dollimore, 2001, p.204). This may be true of Harrison's approach to 'The White Queen' whose ontological relevance is sustained by the continuing presence of the racial stereotype, even in our own time. The Queen's tacit admission of his own fallibility is not intended to excuse his illiberal sexual excesses: to appropriate the words of the critic Neil Hairsine, he remains an 'executor of phallic power and exploitation' (Hairsine, 1997, p.50). But it does give notice of his self-awareness. He is faintly redeemed by an acknowledgement of his own complicity, much as Conrad's contemporary Roger Casement's instrumentality in bringing the colonial brutalities of the Belgian Congo to public attention to some extent mitigates his own racist revulsion. In a diary entry relaying his experiences in Brazil, Casement's loathing of specific groups of natives is seemingly unequivocal:

[...] hideous crossbreeds – of Negro and Portuguese, with, up here in the Amazon, a very large admixture of native blood. Altogether the resultant human compost is the nastiest form of black-pudding.  
(in Sawyer, 1984, p.70).

But Casement's attitude to the plight of the abstract, unseen mass of exploited black humanity is more complex, as was evidenced by the steadiness of his eye during his period in the Congo, and his angry commitment to disclosure, diary and report-writing. The fact of his concealed homosexuality, at least until his later deliberate and pernicious 'outing' by the British government, adds to the contradictory nature of Casement's position. The Queen's behaviour is similarly riven by ambiguity. His guilt-compromised venality remains a compulsion and he is unable to subordinate his randiness for the 'thin bums' of young black boys to wider concerns of obscenity, abuse and rape. In the grip of an ethical dilemma, the narrator reverts to an evasive determinism which is intended to excuse his behaviour:

I can't escape  
Our foul conditioning that makes a rape  
Seem natural, if wrong, and love unclean  
Between some ill-fed blackboy and fat queen. (CP, p.24).

But the tone of faux-insouciance which pervades the Queen's entire monologue does not draw his audience into a circle of complicity, excepting where that audience continues, itself, to form a part of the historical mechanism of colonial exploitation. His behaviour is a matter of personal responsibility. The Queen's 'throwaway' remark about the oppressive West African heat is intended almost as an admission of guilt: 'We permit ourselves too much satiric mirth/ At their expense, and blame the climate' (in 'Satyrae' CP, p.25). But the delivery is too conversationally knowing and any sense of mitigation is overwhelmed by the presence throughout the narrative of the visible architecture of fecundity and organic growth, which is itself impelled by the unremitting fire of the sun. The super-growth of the rain forest is counterbalanced in figurative terms by human enervation, an enervation which is embodied psychologically by futile sexual transgression embraced purely for its own sake. For the philosopher Georges Bataille, the sun's finite rays are the supreme metaphor for expended, wasted energy: they are an expenditure leading ultimately to the death of that which creates the energy (Bataille, 1986, p.249). The Queen's sexual exploits mirror that same waste of energy, and his compulsion is a form of regression which, by Bataille's associative reading, binds eroticism and death (p.84). The heat which engenders death and decay as much as growth, which manifests itself in the burning symptoms of syphilis and gonorrhoea, is itself a catalyst for, and a mirror to, a deeper more perverse erotic compulsion.

Beverley Clack, paraphrasing Freud's late assumptions about the tension between the instincts of *Eros* and *Thanatos*, makes a virtue of the self-evident with the comment – 'Human life consists, in some sense, of a struggle between the sex/life and death instincts' (Clack, 2002, p.70). To some degree Harrison's thinking is defined by extremity. The major preoccupations of his work are circled by the psychoanalytical immanence of 'pull' factors which draw many of his narratives towards the polar needle points of unthinkable oblivion, or of transient and ultimately unfulfilling sex, or of both at the same time. Close readings of Harrison's work show a mind given to fusing disparate instincts often symbolically, confirming Freud's belief that *Eros* and *Thanatos* are not 'diametrically opposed' (Clack, 2002, p.70). The raging, endlessly unsatisfied urges of the White Queen are coterminous with powerful leanings toward oblivion so that both impulses remain uncontrolled, or in Freud's terms, unrepressed. The cleaving towards satisfaction of the

sexual urge, and the small death which follows the expelling of semen, are coterminous with the desire for abandonment to the cosmos, to the death which eventually brings 'the quiescence of the inorganic world' (Clack, 2002,p.70). The discharging of semen, which I will examine at length in Part Two of this chapter, was associated even in pre-Christian times with the idea of debilitation of life essences, a foreshadowing of death. For Aristotle, depletion of semen affected brain-power, in turn occasioning post-coital dejection (See Dollimore, 2001, p.100).

For Harrison, the heat of the Nigerian jungle and the unyielding sun of the Memsahib's India are the mechanisms which encourage and to some degree impel his protagonists towards unrestraint, and towards the twinned poles of sex and death. If the connection between *Eros* and *Thanatos* is in any case inherent, then the impulses to which they give rise are inflamed by, and often defined in, metaphors of fire. Harrison foregrounds the notion of compulsion in the following lines from *Phaedra Britannica*. The words are spoken by the character of Memsahib/Phaedra, and here the heat of the sun is the agent of both perversion and revelation:

That's where it all started, that red fire.  
...blinding, consuming...Ayah  
Its light sinks in, right in, to scrutinise  
The sordidness concealed behind my eyes.  
(TW, p.78).

The geographical and cultural circumstances in which the characters in such narratives find themselves to some extent dictate an attitude of nihilism and amorality. In *extremis*, the resulting confusion resembles Herbert Marcuse's definition of Freud's psychoanalytical model:

The fusion of Eros and death instinct, precarious even in the normal human existence, here seems to be loosened beyond the danger point. And the loosening of this fusion makes manifest the erotic component in the death instinct and the fatal component in the sex instinct.  
(Marcuse, 1998, p.51).

'Normal human existence' for Marcuse is that condition which describes the relationship between the demands of societal authority and the absorption into the personal conscience of social norms as impulses of repression. It becomes possible, therefore, to

determine a connection between Marxism and Freudianism, since the instruments of bourgeois power appear also to be able to impose the yoke of economic control on the minds of individuals who are now subjugated through a complicit repression of the *Id*.<sup>115</sup> Negation of, in Freud's expression, 'the pleasure principle', before the imperatives of labour and the working day fetters an instinct which otherwise demands 'timeless and useless gratification' (Marcuse, 1998, p. 47). The 'danger point' to which Marcuse refers is the ultimate consequence of a protracted denial of such an impulse where the ensuing psychic conflict emerges in the indulgence of, particularly, sexual perversion. Perversion is the mental confluence of *Eros* and *Thanatos*, where 'loosened' fusions of sex and death impulses are subverted, paradoxically tightening the knot of deviancy. It is necessary, now, to explore the 'knot' of transgression in those of Harrison's ideas which most engage with the point at which instincts of *Eros* and *Thanatos* are bound through the perverse and the morbid. I feel justified in conducting this examination against the backdrop of Marcuse's most seminal work, *Eros and Civilization*, since much of the material I will investigate was conceived in a period when Marcuse's work was enjoying its greatest acclaim, and because the influence of the liberal philosophies of the nineteen sixties is particularly evident in the thematic development and tone of Harrison's *Loiners*.

Harrison's use of images of heat and fire, which serviceably complement Freud's own sense of the symbolic, together help to support a framework of definition here. The 'primary' mental processes which lead to the foregrounding of the unconscious in the development of a symbolism of defining images are, for Jacques Lacan, the same processes which engender a technology for expression. Finding here a correspondence with Structuralist principles, Lacan avers that such a mechanism ultimately determines an outlet of signification through those '[...] most radical aspects of the effects of language, namely metaphor and metonymy' (Lacan, 1977, p.298). It is a characteristic compulsion of Harrison's thinking to signify a local detail or a universal issue in substituted metaphors, or metonyms, of fire. In the context of Victorian India, or of the Nigeria of the nineteen sixties, the burning sun becomes a metonymical agency for oppression, and, along with the subversion of 'civilized' locators of recognition, for perversity. It describes a melting-point of infected perception where notions of colonial and cultural supremacy assert

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<sup>115</sup> Cf. *Eros and Civilization* (1998, pp.46-47) for a fuller description of Marcuse's position.



themselves in a hideously deformed manner. But Harrison's engagement with variations of the fire trope does not end with *Phaedra Britannica* or 'The White Queen'. A Freudian reading of the poem 'The Nuptial Torches', which describes the *autos da fé*, or ritual burnings, of 'heretics' during Philip V of Spain's reign, must also tackle the theme of religious suppression alongside the confluence of the instinct for sexual gratification and death in the simultaneous marriage celebration. For Marcuse and Freud as much as for Harrison, the public and the personal are intertwined so that inner impulses may be used to magnify events in the public arena, and through these, to define the course of history. If, for Freud, repression played only a minor role in pre-industrial notions of Christian indoctrination, it is because the perpetrators of religious persecution understood and acted upon a form of the 'liberating gospel' only in a very stylized and brutal form.<sup>116</sup> This understanding had no need or use for restraint in relation to the vicious struggle against perceived heresy. Philip's brutalities and apparent ignorance of the need to temper justice with restraint are therefore of a piece with the period in which they were dispensed. His valedictory comment in 'The Nuptial Torches' - '*Come Isabella, God is satisfied*' - is an intended poetic irony which would necessarily have eluded the King himself (CP, p.63). It appropriates the certainty of salvation through burned human offerings and in so doing rationalizes the 'unconscious instinctual forces' which rise violently to the surface and lay waste amongst heretics and weak alike (Marcuse, 1998, p.71). Marcuse's astute assessment of, amongst other institutions, the Inquisition, illustrates a paradox which draws the vigour of violent life forces into a deeper conjunction with the desire to destroy:

The executioners and their bands fought the specter of a (spiritual) liberation which they desired but were compelled to reject. The crime against the Son must be forgotten in the killing of those whose practice recalls the crime.  
(Marcuse, 1998, p.71).

In 'The Nuptial Torches', Harrison adds a sexual component to the mix with the implication that the central protagonist and possibly even his wife are sexually aroused by the presence of human immolation. The celebratory tone of the poem's title is turned into an oxymoron by the torches' grim application, and it is testimony to Harrison's

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<sup>116</sup> Cf. Marcuse's analysis of Freud's approach in *Eros and Civilization* (1998, pp. 70-72).

sustaining power that fire imagery remains constant throughout, to the point of defining the relationship between life, sexual cruelty and violent death.

The moments at which the instincts of sex and death seem frequently to conjoin in terms of metaphorical exploration in Harrison's work appear commonly in the notion of semen, ejaculation and the transmission of sexual fluids. Sexuality and death are unambiguously linked through HIV and through certain types of untreated sexually transmitted disease, so that semen comes to represent both *Eros* and *Thanatos* in direct material terms. The connection fascinates Harrison to an arguably morbid degree, and where it is not represented directly in his work, its presence by implication may shape or support a poem's general argument. If a direct engagement with semen is a defining feature of the poems 'Ginger's Friday' (CP, p.17) and 'The Pocket Wars of Peanuts Joe' (CP, p.18) amongst several others, then it is also implied in the gonorrhoea of the White Queen, a disease which in a sense combines the instincts of sex and death in one burning rejoinder. Since semen is one of the starting-points of life, and since it features so largely in Harrison's earlier work, it will form a useful foundation for Part Two of this chapter. Although the subject has been examined at length by Antony Rowland and to a lesser degree by Luke Spencer, my intention is to investigate its significance through the attribution of a fire which greatly enhances its metaphorical value: from the burning spermatozoic globules of 'The Pomegranates of Patmos' to the semen which hisses as though on hot stones in 'The Nuptial Torches'. A protracted engagement with 'The Nuptial Torches' will be pivotal to my argument in Part Three since it deals with an incidence, albeit poetically embellished, of documented reality. If the sexual inference is purely Harrison's own then it also seems plausible, and the conceit is a persuasive way of investigating the various mental connections through a psychoanalytical prism. Part Four will commence with a thorough examination of the themes outlined in the opening section of this chapter respecting the African poems, and will concentrate almost exclusively on 'The White Queen'. Although the extremities of abusive colonialism are clearly evidenced in the 'PWD Man' series of poems, fire, and its associated metaphorical conditions appear only tangentially in the respective narratives, and the poems will be referenced only minimally. The sub-chapter will continue with an investigation of the play *Phaedra Britannica*, and will examine perverse sexual manifestations as they embody both

*Eros* and *Thanatos* and as they are defined in metaphors of heat and oppression. I will at any rate examine the relationship between the sex and death instincts and the attribution of fire against the backdrop of Freud and Marcuse, and of Lacan and Foucault whose work seems especially germane to the underpinning theories. I hope to show that where they do not necessarily embody Harrison's exploration of enacted instinctual drives, images of heat and fire sharpen both his and his audience's perception of the extremity of contemplative experience.

## Part Two : Toxins and Fire – The Paradoxes of Semen

A *New Scientist* article of 16 July, 2003 highlighted the kind of connection which Harrison finds irresistible. Regular masturbation, research found, had been shown to protect spermatozoa against a build-up of natural carcinogens which otherwise may lead to the development of cancer of the prostate (*New Scientist*, 2003, page not numbered). To some degree the finding provides a philosophical corrective to a clipping from the *New York Times* of 10 March, 1981 which Harrison subsequently pasted into a notebook. The article was headed: 'Sperm found especially vulnerable to toxins' (*Oresteia* Notebook 42, p.2238), and Harrison was sufficiently impressed to include a variation of the line in an unpublished poem entitled 'Particle Blight.'<sup>117</sup> The more recent study adds a further level of irony to a paradox which is already multi-layered. The tragic inutility of the protagonist's 'cascadoes' of arcing sperm in the poem 'The Pocket Wars of Peanuts Joe' (CP, p.18) may have found a medical use had he not succumbed to a premature 'wankers' doom' by cutting himself to ribbons in prison. But one of Harrison's points here as elsewhere is that life is always and ever co-existent with death; life-engendering sperm blighted with the contagion of oblivion. Where semen is itself the medium of death, it becomes also a perfect vehicle for expressing paradox poetically. For Luke Spencer, Harrison is only able to develop a full understanding of the implications of 'the forces that threaten life' by a direct engagement with such 'life-creating aspects of sexuality' (Spencer, 1994, pp.21-22). And the engagement is presented in a direct muscular style which seems firstly, intrinsic to Harrison's linguistic approach, and secondly, to be a reflection of the philosophies of liberationism which were current at the time of writing, and which Spencer has examined at length. I have already touched on Marcuse's contribution to the philosophy of psychoanalysis in Part One and will further elaborate throughout this chapter, but at this stage it seems prudent to move Spencer's, and to

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<sup>117</sup> The line ran - 'a carcinogen is present in male sperm' (Poetry Notebook 4, p.120).

some degree Antony Rowland's, examination a step further by acknowledging the refracting impact of fire on Harrison's understanding, and poetic descriptions of, semen.

As seems characteristic of Harrison's general definitions of the relationship between life and death in other aspects of his work, fire is used here to describe a tension in that condition usually associated with the creation of life. And even where the poet is reflecting without irony on the starting-point of his own existence and the hallowed family circle, the conjunction is perceived in terms of the heat of an electrical charge. The final quatrain of the sonnet 'Illuminations II' unambiguously inscribes acts both of creation and of remembrance:

Two dead, but current still flows through us three  
though the circle takes for ever to complete –  
eternity, annihilation, me,  
that small bright charge of life where they both meet.  
(CP, p.158).

The 'circle', almost, of hands transcends the prospect of death so long as memory is maintained. This process of melancholic rehearsal is, for Antony Rowland, the means by which 'survivors repeat the desire to remain faithful to the loved object' *ad infinitum*, thereby reaffirming the circle as signifier (Rowland, 2001, p.163). The potency of the charge or 'spark' for fusing the means of creation and unification renders it difficult here to avoid recalling the 'Creation of Adam' sequence of Michelangelo's fresco from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Shifting the focus of the narrative from the ephemeral detail of a linking of hands round a Blackpool pier machine which dispenses electric shocks, to the work of existential abstraction may seem an overblown conceit. But figuratively-speaking, Harrison's narrator is created in the image of his parents, rather as Adam mirrors God. He cannot, therefore, completely disentangle himself from the context and geography of the place of his engendering, just as Adam is eternally bound within the consequences of his own transgression in the Garden of Eden. Here, Harrison seems to be momentarily free of the 'Frankenstein' spark which shadows any idealistic vision with destructive binary contradictions. Such contradictions remained, in any case, close to the surface even at the time of the *School* sequence's conception. An early draft of his play *Medea: A Sex/War Opera* indicates an obsession with the mechanics of electrocution, emphasised by the presence of numerous newspaper articles and pictures dealing with

the minutiae of death by this method. Harrison originally intended that the play's audience should decide Medea's fate by pressing, or not pressing, a button on their seats, triggering her electrocution on stage, or exonerating her on grounds of mitigation. Clearly devised to satisfy the moral complexity of the Euripidean original in a democratic fashion, this somewhat macabre method manifests some of the elements of the Milgram psychological experiment in coercion.<sup>118</sup> It seems certain, however, that the 'small bright charge of life' in the poem 'Illuminations II' has a constructive emotional resonance and is one metaphor for the mechanism of procreation, a possibility overlooked by Rowland whose reading of the line, and the poem generally, is more concerned to stress a family conjunction hermetically sealed in elegiac memory. If the narrative of Harrison's television film *Letters in the Rock* is strictly autobiographical, then the following lines corroborate a connection with the earlier poem and return the locus, with characteristic circularity, to the Blackpool of childhood memory:

In Blackpool August 1936  
Dad planted me inside my mother's womb.  
The fact of my conception's hard to mix  
with letters etched by chisels on a tomb.  
(CFP, p.119).

The 'spark' of 'Illuminations II', then, may also be a metaphor for fertile semen, the beginnings of life. The heat invested in the charge is life-affirming and, at this stage, resistant to the abstract concept of death. But, as Gaston Bachelard's corrective in *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* suggests, the equation between 'spark' and 'seed' is almost a 'given' in literary terms; an over-reliance, perhaps, on metaphorical intuitions which lead the poet towards seemingly impervious assumptions about fire's significance:

At the source of this assimilation, there is, we believe, the impression that the spark, like the seed, is a small cause which produces a great effect. Hence an intense value is ascribed to the myth of the igneous power. (Bachelard, 1964, p.46).

This seems clear in the context of Harrison, whose subscription to an over-evaluation of 'igneous power', to 'myth' making, is vouchsafed by his willingness to invest a momentary connection on a pier in Blackpool with a multiplicity of symbolic resonances.

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<sup>118</sup> Cf. *Medea Notebooks*, Book 51, pp. 619-20.

The counterpoint to Harrison's temporary affirmation of what Rowland asserts to be a spirit of survival (Rowland, 2001, p.163) rests on the medium of sexuality/life generation containing within itself the inevitability of extinction. Here fire is directly engaged as a metaphorical facet of semen indicating the presence of death or pain, and to some degree a much later piece of poetical cynicism, 'The Pomegranates of Patmos' (CP, p.291), uses the compound image liberally in order to undermine Christian fundamentalism. Such a connection may also be partially dislocated so that images of fire, or of fire's remnants, are intimated in juxtaposition with sperm's inutility, wastefulness, or helplessness to be born. The juvenile masturbators of post-war Leeds come, or in the case of the boy in the poem 'Allotments', fail to 'come', to figure as ironic and localised manifestations of a life-force, against the background of universal concerns of genocide and atomic war. The 'gabbling, foreign nut' who stalls the boy's sexual fumbings in 'Allotments' is a catalyst for more than *coitus interruptus*: he is the voice of authentic experience who embodies a reminder of the crematoria at Buchenwald through the local image of an abattoir chimney. The Pole's albeit unwelcome presence helps the boy to negotiate a first tentative step towards the making of existential connections :

Nearly midnight and that gabbling, foreign nut  
had stalled my coming, spoilt my appetite  
for supper, and gave me a sleepless night  
in which I rolled frustrated and I smelt  
lust on myself, then smoke, and then I felt  
street bonfires blazing for the end of war  
VE and J burn us like lights, but saw  
lush prairies for a tumble, wide corrals,  
a Loiner's Elysium, and I cried  
for the family still pent up in my balls,  
for my corned-beef sandwich, and for genocide.  
(CP, p.21).

Celebration and pain are enjoined in the frustration of a child who, still toying with a figurative kaleidoscope, is unable to render the disparity of images coherently meaningful. His grief is palpable but undirected, and the regular pentameter which leads to this moment of tentative groping for truth slows to a reflective conclusion with the nicely-

placed apostrophes of the final two lines.<sup>119</sup> If, however, the poem is an authentic evocation of a post-war age and place, Harrison appears to have muddled the chronological accuracy somewhat. Assuming that the experiences are at least partly autobiographical, and that Harrison is referring to the immediate aftermath of the VE and VJ day celebrations of 1945, then the poet would have been eight years old. It is unlikely, I think, that a child of that age would have been a protagonist in the sexual negotiation described in the early part of the poem, and possible that Harrison is carelessly conflating authentic memory with generic notions of loss and dislocation for binary poetic effect.

In any case, the boy's bursting testicles are an effective repository for the containment of oppositional ideas and impulses which go beyond the procreative. Here, the bonfires of celebration and cremation also meet, and it is tempting to view the conjunction of 'balls' and fire as a metaphor for the process of acquiring experience, for the generation of learning. For Luke Spencer, such a sensibility is a component of the youthful Harrison's developing 'moral consciousness', and if we may take this reading a step further, the poet's use of fire reinforces the sense of 'awakening' to an appreciation of mass murder, as much as to victory parties (Spencer, 1994, p.21). An early, undated draft of the much more recent poem 'The Pomegranates of Patmos' clearly demonstrates Harrison's continued preoccupation with the association. 'Balls' and semen are centrally important in the published version, but even in sketched outline the theme of 'potential' is neutralized by an image of fiery Armageddon: 'Balls ache for the future/ spermatozoa bask in megadeath' (Poetry Notebook 11, p.3). The poem 'Allotments' which at a literal level describes a quiet location for lovemaking, also allows the possibility of mental spaces 'allotted' or allocated for varieties of experience and of perception. The protagonist's instinctive efforts to direct his sperm into reproductive channels seem doomed as much by his burgeoning world-awareness as by the third-party intrusion which helps to facilitate it. For Joe Kelleher, the drive to life is necessarily sublimated by the growing seriousness

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<sup>119</sup> An untitled fragment dated September 1968 and taken from Harrison's *Loiners* Notebook 1 makes an explicit, if less than subtle, connection between sexuality and death: 'Relieve my tension. I can't come/ The world's a crematorium'. The lines appear to corroborate Antony Rowland's suggestion that Harrison's preoccupation with holocausts, both genocidal and nuclear, invariably colours his use of the image of the crematorium. Historical atrocity, he argues – 'saturate(s) the contemporary use of signifiers with its presence' (Rowland, 2001, p.25). The couplet was later reworked into the poem 'The Chopin Express' which is unaccountably missing from *Collected Poems*.



of experience, as though the boy's own perception was suddenly subsumed by a poetry of horror and negation:

[...] it is the procreative aspect of sex which seems most determinedly damned by that dialect as the verse [...] channels the youngster's fantasies into terror. The wet dream is frustrated, or at best imaginatively sublimated into a lament for others, others long gone or yet to spring as damned as oneself from one's own balls. (Kelleher, 1996, p.4).

A similar process of reproductive inutility illuminates the poem 'The Pocket Wars of Peanuts Joe', though here the narrative is animated by misdirection and misunderstanding. Far from being frustrated by a developing sense of empathy and existential awareness, the 'gormless' Joe waves his prodigious penis in an act of misguided celebration, utterly without restraint or social awareness, and perceiving a dim purpose in commemorating the gravitas of the celebratory moment with an erectile display: 'It was something solemn made Joe flash/His mitred bishop as they played *The King*' (CP, p.19). Innocent 'flashing' is what he does in the spirit of the moment without the remotest conception of the consequent affront to the solemnity of the occasion. Joe is in fact an idiot *savant* who, for Antony Rowland, unconsciously exposes the 'ridiculous concept of fixed masculinity', itself equated to the notion of military braggadocio and phallic weaponry, by an act of shocking mimicry (Rowland, 2001, p.48). Once again, Harrison wraps the connection in images, direct and indirect, of fire, underlining a personal compulsion best satisfied by an agency which metaphorically 'binds' opposing ideas. Even the word 'flash' bears vague echoes of the illuminated brilliance of a nuclear blast, reminding the poet's audience of the metonymic 'Rising Sun' of Japan tarnished forever with the stain of an experience which can never be unlearned. The possibility of a *Vernichtungsfeuer* or 'annihilating fire' is contained within the semen itself as Harrison arrogates the life/death contradiction whilst simultaneously ambushing male hegemonies of sex and violence. As such, the unknowing Joe's penis is the 'fluted' medium for stutter firing 'ack-ack *ejac-/ulatio*' through darkness, even if the gushing volume of the ejaculate works less well as an all-consuming metaphor for Hiroshima. As Spencer notes, some of Harrison's poetry of the *Loiners* era is an unsurprising reflection of his interest in the 'political dimension of sexuality', propagated at length by Marcuse (Spencer, 1994, p.22).

'Peanuts Joe' is of a piece with, and thereby ontologically constrained by, the period in which it was conceived, particularly as it draws a too obvious connection between the idea of the sexual instinct and universal horror, or between phallus and weapon. Innuendos of military hardware lock the poem's narrative into a two-dimensional dialectic which relentlessly hammers an anti-authoritarian message against both the dominant male, and the dominant masculine power structure of which he is a part. The 'fluted rifling' (CP, p.18) noted earlier is only the first masturbatory/military metaphor of several in the poem, which later includes: 'no kid's toy/ He fired and loaded in his handkerchief', 'wooshed cascades' and '*ejac-/ulatio* shot through the dark' (CP, p.18). The images are as hyperbolic as male bravado: gross inflations of the shamefully shrunken cock which retracts on public view as Joe is later arrested. His indictment is demanded by what Emile Durkheim referred to as the collective sentiments, which is to say that for them Joe is a highly visible re-visitation of that which should be hidden behind closed doors, like homosexuality and the effects of radiation. On another level, he might be construed as a pervert with an excessive libido; a primitive, decadent 'throwback' who embodies a lack of control, and gives firm evidence that public masturbation denudes mental capacity. Identified by the social anthropology of the time as degenerate, Joe's 'disease' needs to be excised so as to prevent its spread, like unchecked Nazi impulses. But his wanking could never be construed as a sardonic rebuttal of society's affront. Joe's is not the 'cynick friction' of the sixteenth-century poet John Marston who, through his alter-ego 'Kinsayder', uses the act of onanism to represent a satirical rejection of all other sexual forms, in an allusion to the abstinent Cynicism of the early Greek figure of Diogenes (Marston, 1764, p.181). Joe's cascades of semen are innocent and instinctive, as life-affirming as a child's beaming smile at a firework display.

If anything the presence of fire, in these instances as an association of battle and gunfire, reinforces Harrison's concern to frame a conjunction between sexuality, or the desire *for* a liberated sexuality free of the constraints of repression, and freedom *from* the psychological tyranny of nuclear annihilation. The connection, like all of Harrison's connections, is hamstrung by an inherent ambiguity, and the use of fire does little to streamline the process of interpretation, even where its use appears to manifest the poet's most fundamental metaphorical instinct. This same ambiguity has been noted by

Rick Rylance who imputes the inescapable power of historical context to shape and occlude the boundary between the instinct for sexual creativity and for destruction:

In these poems, as in many others written by Harrison later, there is no abstract stony opposition of Eros to Thanatos; the parts mingle like blood under the pressure of events [...] Harrison writes of the contamination of innocence and its complicity with, and adjacency to, violence. (Rylance, 1997, p.160).

Fire defines the existence of oppositional tensions within *The Loiners* sequence to which Rylance refers, but it does not reconcile them. In one sense, it is a figure, contained within semen itself, for potency and virility. The arcing spurts 'of ebullient blood-red' in 'Peanuts Joe' are like the flames of solar flares fit to subdue, at least in the juvenile imagination, each 'bare woman' 'flushed' with the heat of sexual excitement (CP, p.18). The urgency and vigour of Joe's blitzkrieg impulse serves to set the thin ejaculations of the narrator and his friends in sharp relief. By another reading, the undirected uselessness of Joe's sperm is encapsulated in the white ash of the expired bonfire. Aside from the clear references to cremation and nuclear annihilation, the bonfire's detritus is a metaphor for post-coition, and in terms of Joe's eventual fate, extinction. The conjunction of the rhyme 'flash' and 'ash' on alternate lines affirms a tone of impermanence which can only be mitigated by the existence of the poem, and its audience's recognition (CP, p.19).<sup>120</sup>

Significant though Harrison's political agenda may be in the *Loiners* sequence of poems, the connection between masculinity and particularly military hubris remained a preoccupation until the early nineteen eighties when the resurgent threat of nuclear Armageddon provoked the writing of *The Common Chorus*. The play, which was never dramatized,<sup>121</sup> used Aristophanes's *Lysistrata* and Euripides's *The Trojan Women* as classical templates, summoning the conceit of a group of women withholding sexual favours until the soldiers guarding an American Cruise missile base, modelled on Greenham Common, agreed to lay down their arms. Throughout the drama an explicit

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<sup>120</sup> Ash is a metaphor common to Harrison's work, and its association with the notions of cremation and of human extinction will be examined in the final chapter of this thesis, which will commence with a return to the idea of semen and cryogenic suspension in the poem 'A Cold Coming'.

<sup>121</sup> The failure to get the play to the stage almost corroborates Harrison's belief in the essential 'ephemerality of all theatrical realization' (CC, p.xvi). The 'moment' had evidently passed whilst the production team dithered: 'By the time various managements had lingered over this text, the tension of a topical present and a tragic past had leached away into oblivion.' (CC, p.xvi).

connection is made between permanently overheated genitalia and weaponry. Military penises smoulder and burn for release from the torment of enforced abstention like missiles bristling with conspicuous intent: 'Until his thing starts smoking he's so on fire' (CC, pp.30-1). The slightly demure expression 'thing' does not sit well with Lysistrata's ribald demotic elsewhere in the play, but this is a minor example of Harrison's tendency to re-locate, possibly through misunderstanding, post-war signifiers of the kind his mother might use, in contemporary language. However, the poet's concern to maintain some kind of linguistic authenticity to soldierly slang is successful to the extent that the text is peppered liberally with profanities. The 'knobs', 'dicks' and 'cocks' are spread more effortlessly than in a Frankie Boyle routine, and generally thrive within the potentially bathetic straitjacket of rigid rhyme. The connection between the phallus and military destruction seems explicit especially for the propagators of bombing raids, moved to gung-ho doggerel in salivatory anticipation :

Phantom flyers in the sky,  
Persian pukes prepare to die,  
Rolling in with snake and nape.  
Allah creates but we cremate.  
(CC, p.xv).

This verse, according to Harrison's research, is part of an airmen's song which was subsequently printed and sold in a publication of the USAF 77<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Squadron based, at that time, at Upper Heyford, and it is interesting that he does not see beyond the 'battle cries' to a wider reading (CC, p.xv).<sup>122</sup> The agents of destruction, the Sidewinder missiles and napalm, are also phallic extensions, bringing triumphal orgasm at the moment of crematory horror. The invocation to general celebration at the end of the play, after the guards have made an improbably beneficent, 'hands-across-the-water' gesture to erstwhile enemy soldieries, is a further re-visitation of the VE and VJ bonfire celebrations:

Dance, dance, join hands and glide  
in tune with the rhythms of the earth  
released from the curse of genocide  
pulsing with rebirth, rebirth.  
(CC, p.86).

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<sup>122</sup> The feminist Joan Smith cites examples of this 'gung-ho', phallocentric phenomenon in her study of the marginalisation of women by male interests, entitled *Misogynies* (1990, London : Faber & Faber).

For the no-doubt flushed carousers, the pulsing is also the throbbing of climax; the release, an ejaculation of 'ebullient blood-red' like that of Peanuts Joe, this time directed by the whole of the *dramatis personae* towards a common purpose. The 'rebirth' of concord is paradoxically prophylactic: it embodies the potential to protect the future against annihilation since, as Harrison notes of the Greenham Peace Women's banner at the Cenotaph, 'REMEMBRANCE IS NOT ENOUGH' (CC, p.xiii).

The preponderance of images of semen, and of the various refractions of such images through the medium of metaphor, suggests a process of liberalization in *Loiners*, or more specifically a deliberate attempt by the author to engage with themes, and vernaculars, which were shocking even as recently as the early nineteen seventies. Although unnerved at least partly by the intimacy of domestic and local references, Harrison's mother's 'knee-jerk' attitude to the book would have been shared by many others whose disdain implied more about their conceptualisation of sexual and moral mores than about their understanding of the poems' meaning, if indeed they had gotten beyond page one.<sup>123</sup> Such disgust is a social manifestation of Freud's mechanism of repression: the reaction insulates the individual against the perceived collapse of a moral structure. Marcuse's paraphrasing of Freud's position identifies a social necessity which the later part of the following analysis is obliged to revise:

In Freud's terms: civilized morality is the morality of repressed instincts; liberation of the latter implies 'debasement' of the former. But this debasement of the higher values may take them back into the organic structure of the human existence from which they were separated, and the reunion may transform this structure itself. If the higher values lose their remoteness, their isolation from and against the lower faculties, then the latter may become freely susceptible to culture.  
(Marcuse, 1998, p.196).

But, and as Luke Spencer notes, the 'naïve excesses' of the nineteen sixties and early nineteen seventies reflected a misperception of Marcuse's ideas (Spencer, 1994, p.22). The lowering of the 'bar' of civilized morality to accommodate the operation of the instinctual drives might not, for Marcuse, have been taken to imply free and unrestricted indulgence of the sexual appetites which could potentially be as psychologically

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<sup>123</sup> Mrs Harrison's voice, as represented in the poem 'Bringing Up', sounds authentic and typifies an attitude of mind much described in Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*. She admonishes her son - 'You weren't brought up to write such mucky books !' (CP, p.178).

destructive as excessive repression. Although these poems are shaped by a political and social agenda, there is a sense in which Harrison revels in the new liberalisation, not least in its power to inscribe the sexual language of the streets in the otherwise middle class medium of poetry. Harrison finds a personal voice in *Loiners*, a voice as far removed from the derivative exercises of his earlier volume, *Earthworks*, as his new sense of purpose is from the somewhat indulgent anxieties and ambitions of his youthful notebooks. *Loiners*, as the poems 'Allotments', 'Ginger's Friday' and 'The Pocket Wars of Peanuts Joe' clearly illustrate, is a 'coming-of-age' volume for both poet and subject, where Harrison identifies the social and religious proscriptions with which he wrestled as a teenager, and exposes the repressive apparatus of their respective positions. The poems' protagonists mirror Harrison's own earlier development from different perspectives. 'Allotments', as noted earlier, retails youthful sexual angst against a dawning realisation of existential considerations. 'The Pocket Wars of Peanuts Joe' describes that realisation in relation to the hypocrisies of prevailing social and religious mores, and 'Ginger's Friday' takes a scalpel to that most vigorous propagator of religious repression, the Catholic church, through the medium of a fictionalised teenager who engages with the notions of confession, sexual excitement and brutality in kaleidoscopic confusion. Semen is a recurrent thread in all three, particularly as it represents one conduit to serious contemplation, and where it is not itself conceived in images of fire, fire is a defining feature of the landscape which surrounds semen's associations. The poem 'Ginger's Friday', which I will examine shortly, is a third-person narrative and Harrison's cultural detachment from its subject allows him the freedom to explore the repressive mechanisms of Catholicism with greater alacrity.

A fragment of prose taken from a diary entry of September, 1960, in Harrison's archive at Leeds, illustrates the workings of a mind on the cusp of attitudinal change. Arranged within the diary as fiction, but suggestive of a real childhood memory, Harrison's notes run: 'I've been thinking about girls with no clothes on and I've watched a lady across the road get undressed every night.' The piece is followed by an invocation to say 'six hail Marys for your sins' (Journals and Commonplace Books, Box 1, Book 2, page not numbered), which, given that the poet is not to the best of my knowledge a Catholic, is clearly a fictional adumbration. The presence of 'sin', particularly of onanism and of pre-

marital intercourse, is a common feature of Harrison's early notebooks, however, and the evidence is so widespread as to indicate an entirely serious concern, or a concern which is voiced apparently without intended irony. In Chapter Two I gave an example of Harrison's sense of guilt in relation to the masturbatory impulse, and it is worth repeating here: 'I tried an experiment today. Whenever my mind dwelt upon trivia, or when I felt the temptation of lust or wilfulness, I repeated within myself "Almighty Lord, have mercy upon this sinner's soul"' (Journals & Commonplace Books, Box 1, Book 1, page not numbered). Written on the 10 January, 1959, this diary entry was conceived when Harrison was twenty one, and his relative maturity is one indicator of the longevity of the religious influence in his imagination. If Harrison was more concerned about maternal reaction than religious propriety, and in a sense they amount to the same thing, another fragment from the same period suggests a touchingly sensible restraint regarding pre-marital sexual relations:<sup>124</sup> 'I shall meet R. this afternoon to take her to Ilkley and the moors, and I shall suggest total continence until we feel we can accept a child' (Journals & Commonplace Books, Box 1, Book 1, page not numbered). The various fragments, along with a great deal of Harrison's often tantalizing diary-sketches of this time, were presumably originally intended solely for personal digestion, and it seems likely that without the Marcuse-inspired liberal interventions of the nineteen sixties, their eventual reformulated appearance in 'shocking' poems about masturbation, guilt and repression would not have been possible.

In 'Ginger's Friday' 'sin' finds a name. Masturbation is no longer merely implied, and the lady across the road, now 'Mrs Daley, all-bare on her knees,/Before her husband straddled in his shirt,' becomes a catalyst for the unseen voyeur's juvenile excitement (CP,p.17). It is characteristic of both the period in which the poem was conceived, and Harrison's taste for the linguistic 'nitty-gritty', that things otherwise unspoken burst forth: 'How he'd fiddled with his thing until it hurt/And spurted sticky stuff onto the floor' (CP,p.17). There is a real relishing of language and enforced metrical obedience, in a

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<sup>124</sup> Real-life events effortlessly mirror Harrison's poetic inconsistency. His best intentions were undermined shortly after by a stillbirth which was evidently conceived outside wedlock. The consequentially tarnished relationship with his mother, along with a keen sense of guilt, stalk the margins of the poem 'Ghosts: Some Words before Breakfast.' (CP, p.73).

narrative which now contains the 'furniture' of the sexual act, including a rutting husband and orgasm. Although the fictionalized 'Ginger's' libido is mitigated by confession, the narrator here and in 'The Pocket Wars' is inclined, like the Dionysian figure of Silenus with whom Harrison engages directly in his play *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*, to celebrate the moment of release for its own sake. The evidence of Harrison's notebook fragments which probably document the titillations of real events appears to corroborate Joe Kelleher's intuition about 'Ginger's Friday' that the persona of the poet is clearly visible in the protagonist's imagination (Kelleher, 1996, p.2). Harrison's use of sexual demotic in 'Ginger's Friday' and throughout *Loiners* shows a bravura disdain for the proprieties of poetic convention if it does not transcend the boundaries of Marcuse's revisionism noted earlier. The language and tone are new vehicles for expressing the urgency of desire and, for Kelleher again, 'the thrill of the scene and the fear of the punishment' (p.2). The two notions, sublimation and excitement, which Harrison as a young man has clearly learned to manifest in words, emerge in the poem as an almost seamless extension of the poet's own mental conflict, regardless of Catholic notions of punishment and absolution. The adoption of the otherwise alien thematic landscape of Catholicism distances Harrison from the object of his preoccupation, allowing a greater latitude to explore the extremities of masturbatory guilt, amongst other impulses. Towards the end of the poem we arrive at the crux-point where Kelleher's perceptive observation seems most astute. Here, the boy's mental conflict is played out against a synaesthiac backdrop of fire, olfactory sensation, and punishments both corporeal and divine:

And no Hail Marys saved him from that Hell  
Where Daley's and his father's broad, black belts  
Cracked in the kitchen, and, blubbering, he smelt  
That burning rubber and burnt bacon smell.  
(CP, p.17).

Here is the sharp end of Ginger's 'sordid lust': the anticipation of punishment is less for the 'spilling of seed' than for voyeurism and onanistic display. His activities, like Peanuts Joe's, have been made public, and if the offended proprieties are cultural rather than specifically religious, the two notions are bound in a material vision of hell. The alliterative fusing of images of suffering against an implied background of fire and brimstone does not disguise a suspicion that the adult protagonists are taking pleasure in



the wielding of their respective belts. There is a whiff of hypocrisy about Ginger's father's meting out of brutality. By blowing up and filling the 'balloons' with water earlier in the poem, the son is unwittingly mocking the 'rubbers' which his father is clearly keen to conceal. The father is presumably also a Catholic, and his application of prophylactics and subsequent containment and annihilation of life-giving 'seed', would otherwise be a sin. The process of concealment 'contains' the sense of guilt just as it does for Harrison's own father in the later poem 'Punchline' where a 'secret condom drawer' acts as a metaphor for the cultural claustrophobia of the provincial working-class imagination (CP, p.163). By contrast, the unleashed 'cascadoes' of Peanuts Joe are a perverse manifestation of freedom from such constraint. The presence of images of fire defines Ginger's extreme unease. His imagination lays siege to fantastical incarnations of terror gleaned from the Catholic grammar of suppression: the devil's jam pan and the boiled bodies of naughty boys. If, as seems likely, Harrison's personal detachment from the cultural themes of 'Ginger's Friday' allows him some latitude to prosecute the worst excesses of that culture, it remains possible to trace some sense of the emotional dialectic between parent and son in his own early, semi-fictional fragments. That the following notebook text from September, 1960 explores issues of guilt and foreboding in the third-person does little to persuade this reader that the images are not drawn from actual observation:

His mother and father sat on another side of the grate. His mother's eyes were as red as his own. His father's thick black belt lay on the table with its gilt buckles catching the light of the fire. His parents sat staring into the fire looking at the fierce coals.

(Journals and Commonplace Books, Box 1, Book 1, page not numbered).

The fiery imagery looks very like a sketchy template for the final sequence of 'Ginger's Friday', and I suggest that the absence of the family hearth in the poem by no means denies its existence, which is as palpable as the smell of scorched rubber and flesh. Harrison's voice in the notebook fragment exercises a Lawrencean intensity, which is to say that the simple, short sentences are barely able to contain either the dread of emotional inquest or the violence of recrimination. The red-eyed, presumably submissive, mother and the brooding father whose suppressed anger is given metaphorical life in the 'fierce coals', may represent an examination of Oedipal urges of a type which animate the narrative of Lawrence's novel *Sons and Lovers*. The personal notebooks corroborate a

tangential interest in the works of both Lawrence and Freud, and it is characteristic of Harrison's approach even to sketched fragments that fire is used as a focus for emotional discharge, as a central presence which acts as a symbol of division as much as of quiet contemplation.

Semen, then, is a central figure in 'Ginger's Friday', a material image but also a symbol from which other considerations proceed. It embodies both a dangerous lack of control and a 'sinful' casting adrift of precious life-giving possibility. Dissemination appears to precipitate the kinds of emotional crises which Harrison may himself have experienced in the extract above, and it determines the guilt and foreboding of Ginger in the poem. Crucially, semen begins the process by which the narrator is able to develop the architecture of fear in Ginger's mind, in images of fire. If autobiographical experience defines Harrison's narration in 'Allotments', it is presented at one remove in 'The Pocket Wars of Peanuts Joe' and made invisible in 'Ginger's Friday'. But the narrative detachment of the latter does not disable a powerful sense of experiential complicity wrapped in the detail, invigorated by the frequent references to intensely personal fictional and quasi-fictional familial tensions in Harrison's early notebooks, of which the extract noted above is only the most pertinent.

In a sense, Harrison's appropriation of a Catholic context for his poem is unsurprising. The narrative demands a point of friction, and posits an act of sexual licence in the form of masturbation against the church's doctrinal suppressions.<sup>125</sup> But the two ideas are by no means concrete representations of a single conflicted 'position', if only because the poet himself remained, during this period, cornered by contradictions. If the exercising of Ginger's sexual instinct is vicariously empowering for his creator, it may to some degree be because the act liberates Harrison from personal memories of guilt and sexual constraint. Ginger's and Peanuts Joe's wayward ejaculations are confirmation, by the lights of Augustinian thinking, that Man is condemned in perpetuity to be a slave to lust. His genitals refuse to obey him because Adam, in turn, refused to obey God in the Garden of Eden. A 'code' of disobedience to God is thereby passed on from generation to generation, and sperm becomes, by this reading, a metaphorical conduit for an organic

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<sup>125</sup> In socio-cultural terms, such a tension is also embodied in the vigorous reaction of the liberal nineteen sixties to the austerity and restraint of the immediate post-war period.

growth which will inevitably be compromised by the death which results from original sin. The womb, in this respect, is a paradoxical repository, a nourisher and container of death. As noted at length in Chapter Two, I am not suggesting that Harrison harbours any remote belief in the mechanics of religious faith, but that the shadow of a dialectic between life and death colours his narrative determinations, provoking the kinds of wider metaphorical powers with which Donne invested the sexual act when, in the poem 'An Anatomy of the World', he wrote : 'We kill ourselves to propagate our kind' (in Grierson, 1912, p.234).

Dissolution and ennui are contained within the act of dissemination along with the possibility of propagation and growth, and it is characteristic of Harrison's poems that the relationship of such oppositional tensions is described directly and by association in images of fire. In his much more recent rant against religious zealotry, 'The Pomegranates of Patmos', Harrison's aim is more direct but much less subtly developed than in the *Loiners* poems. That the polemical tone of the poem demands a purposeful style barely justifies the metrically jaunty pace which has more in common with music hall than serious debate. 'Professor' Leon Cortez may have some claim to parity with Professor Richard Hoggart in terms of cultural evaluation,<sup>126</sup> but if 'Pomegranates' is to make a serious point about fundamentalist distortions of religion, then it might better be served without the help of Stanley Holloway.<sup>127</sup> Using the metre and tone of comic verse diminishes the weight of the underlying philosophical point of the poem by destabilizing the received effect. An undated and unpublished poem entitled 'The Rebel', disinterred from his personal archive, suggests that Harrison considered using such an approach very early in his career. The theme revolves around a First World War 'Tommy' renouncing a futile religious faith in the face of horror. The monologue rhythm of the piece declares an allegiance with the working- class commonality of the battlefield, and it is significant that Harrison's narrator describes his bitterness in a metaphor of messianic fire: 'I have done with the Cross. I have done with the Lord./ I am Christ of the Fire and the Sword' (*Loiners* Notebooks, Book 1, page not numbered). The Kiplingesque fellow-feeling of writer for

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<sup>126</sup> Hoggart and Cortez represent a parity of working-class intellect and *faux*-intellect for Harrison. They are dedicatees in the poem 'Them & [uz].' (CP, p.133).

<sup>127</sup> The poem's form bears a striking resemblance to Holloway's comic monologue 'Albert and the Lion'. The original poem was written by Marriott Edgar, but its performance and the music hall tone and inflection of Holloway's recording define the recognisable version.

'poor bloody Tommy' is reinforced by Harrison's dedication of the poem, which is in fact to Stanley Holloway.

Where 'The Rebel' locates a precedent and an effective motive, the poem 'Pomegranates' grafts form onto theme creating a sonically-unwieldy and interpretatively-confused narrative. Comic exposure of the more ridiculous elements of *Revelation* is no doubt one of Harrison's intentions here, but the conceit runs headlong into a serious discourse about the nature of faith and ludicrous biblical prophecies given relevance and currency in earthly human terms. The narrator's explicit dedication of the poem to the 'here' rather than the 'hereafter' does little to underpin the reliance of the following quatrains on quasi-comic doggerel (CP, p.297). The taking of sides ill-disposes Harrison's judgement to coherence; stridency of tone compromises delicacy so that the tenor of his polemic is better suited to an audio-visual medium of broadcast such as may be found in the similarly bellicose television production of *The Blasphemers' Banquet*. Any cohesion of form and meaning is severely strained at moments in which Harrison seems inclined to contain disparate ontologies within single images. Since, however, my concern in this part of the chapter is with the incidence of fire as a metaphor contained within the transmissive mechanism of semen, I am concentrating on such meaningful images even as they are potentially destabilised by the jocular dactylic and anapaestic vehicle in which they are served. The following verses demonstrate the presence of the material 'here' and presumed 'hereafter' in a somewhat rickety variation of the Hollowayesque form noted earlier :

He tried to convince me but didn't succeed,  
as I spiked out the vermilion gel  
from the pomegranate, that its seed  
stood for the sperm of the Future flame-lit from Hell,

an orb of embryos still to be born,  
a globe of sperm globules that redden  
not with the glow of the Aegean dawn  
but the first of his God's Armageddon.  
(CP, p.293).

That the narrator is positioning the celebration of 'Earthly Delight' against his brother Prochurus's instinctive propagation of symbolisms of destruction, gives notice of Harrison's own sense of materiality. But the poet is insufficiently repelled by what Joe

Kelleher refers to as the 'closed, self-satisfied, symbolic machine' of Christian fundamentalism to deny the reader a countervailing evaluation of metaphors of death contained within the spermatic globules (Kelleher, 1996, p.63). This second, oppositional mechanism exists not only as a figurative manifestation of a reprehensible religious view, though that is clearly one intention, but also as an example of an intuitive metaphorical leaning. Metaphors of death and annihilation occupy a default position almost as persuasive as Harrison's advocacy of life and sexuality, which, for Kelleher constitute their own tyranny of 'closed' and 'complete' symbols (pp. 63-64).

In this sense the earthly act of pomegranate devouring, the 'kisses' and the 'suction', is as suggestive of cunnilingual eroticism as the ripe fruit in Christina Rossetti's poem 'Goblin Market' is of seduction and fellatio at the point of consumption (CP, p.293). Whilst I am not aware of any acknowledged connection between the two poems, similarities are noticeable in certain particulars. Harrison's eroticization of the red flesh of fruit is a possibly overworked component of his earthly material sense. Here, and in *The Blasphemers' Banquet*, sensuality and earthliness are seen as congruent. They appear, as Luke Spencer's general thesis suggests, to be the outpourings of an imagination which measures the general affirmations of life by its own priapic standard of taste. The scratching of carnal itches, for Harrison, is a benefaction rather than a time for reflection on personal phallocentrism. Considerations of male sexual hegemonies notwithstanding, the vaginal opening, to which the narrator makes actual reference in one verse,<sup>128</sup> is conceived to be of the same hue as the 'vermilion gel' of the pomegranate,<sup>129</sup> and each is a mirror to the flames of Armageddon. Fire, in chromatic and symbolic effect, appears ironically to bind a process which is otherwise intended to draw a line between celebration and eschatology:

My orb of nibbleable rubies  
 packed deliciously side by side  
 his roes of doom-destined babies  
 carmine with God's cosmocide.  
 (CP, p.293).

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<sup>128</sup> '...once you've licked back the hair/the glossed moistness of a girl's hole?' (CP, p.293).

<sup>129</sup> Interestingly but by no means significantly, Rossetti also refers to pomegranates amongst an inventory of fruits. (Rossetti, 1979, p.20).

Alliterative relish, and the omission of a punctuated pause at the end of the second line, compound the paradox of Harrison's position, already made difficult by his literal-mindedness and heavy-handed innuendo at 'roes'. Rossetti's 'seduced' figure of Laura manifests a similar ardour to Prochurus's brother. Her temptation is described directly, and indirectly through the fruit itself, in terms of fire. The 'Bright-fire like barberries' (Rossetti, 1979, p.11) mirror the flaming immanence of passion: 'Swift fire spread through her veins, knocked in her heart/met the fire smouldering there' (p.24). But the sense of ardent urgency is compromised with the discovery by Laura's sister of a bitter aftertaste: 'Her lips began to scorch./ That juice was wormwood to her tongue' (p.24). The scorching wormwood is the taste, vicariously, of Laura's earlier outrageous act - her figurative temptation in another garden of 'Earthly Delights', for which Lizzie is atoning. Laura's temptation, in Rossetti's imagination, is clearly intended to mirror the biblical precedent in Genesis, and the aftertaste is one measure of the 'poison' of transgression. The bitter properties of the plant wormwood find a more potent macrocosmic equivalence in the symbolism of the 'wormwood' star which falls to earth and poisons a third part of it in the cosmology of *Revelation*. Rossetti acknowledges the inference in the expression 'poison in the blood' which provides an intravenous corrective to the greedy, and pyrrhic, ingestion of 'fruits like honey to the throat' (p.25). For Harrison by contrast, 'flame-lit' prognostications of *Revelation* eschatology convey their own poisonous 'anti-life' message, but although his position regarding fundamentalism is broadly that of his narrator, he fails at times to convince the reader of his own polemical stance. In the quatrains noted above and elsewhere in the poem, his apparent savouring of the language of nemesis and retribution is an integral component of that which also craves life and continuity.<sup>130</sup> The narrator's engagement with the metaphorical fires of annihilation is paradoxical because his lexical enthusiasm embraces as it condemns. His urgency is as inexorable as the final moments prior to male ejaculation, and it is fitting that the vehicle within which both impulses are contained should be semen. Instead of establishing diptychs of opposing philosophies, the three verses present an obscured and indistinct dialectic where sperm 'shape-shifts' in the transmuting power of fire. Here semen is the

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<sup>130</sup> See particularly the neologism 'cosmocide' (CP, p.293). It is difficult to imagine Harrison not relishing the language of his verses in this section of the poem.

'vermilion gel' and, somewhat counter-intuitively, the 'nibbleable rubies' of life-affirmation, whilst also mirroring the livid 'red' of a Patmos dawn as much as the fires of Hell.

The urgency of Laura's desire, enabled by a metre which is runaway in places, similarly overwhelms Rossetti's narrative, and an obstacle to full satisfaction - a kind of *coitus interruptus* of eschatological 'poison' - has the effect of rendering her audience's vicarious ardour only marginally less flaccid. Where distinctions between life-affirmation and doom-mongering are occluded by Harrison's instinctive word-relish, Rossetti blurs the boundary between temptation and 'wormwood' with potentially erotic metaphors which have the paradoxical effect of making a consummation appear desirable, in spite of the ultimate cost. That such metaphors are congenial to erotic over-interpretation in modern critical terms does not make the possibility of some degree of authorial complicity any less resonant, or tantalizing. That complicity may, of course, have been unconscious: the suggestive signifiers of Rossetti's poem may be manifestations of repressed impulses in the Freudian sense. The crux of 'Goblin Market' is defined at the moments in which consummation is achieved: when, in fact, Laura's sister Lizzie 'atones' for the other's sin of temptation by eating the goblin fruit and thereby enacting a convenient metaphor for Christ's Passion. Her abandonment precipitates the corrective 'poison' in figurative scenes of sexual violence which blend the eucharist and eroticism almost interchangeably.<sup>131</sup> The 'fiery antidote' necessary for her sister's salvation is gotten in a brutal manner which metaphorically blurs the boundary between rape/forced fellatio and insatiable appetite (Rossetti, 1979, p.26). The goblins' ...

Held her hand and squeezed their fruit  
Against her mouth to make her eat.  
(Rossetti, 1979, p.21).

Lizzie refuses the invasion, but rejoices in the fruit's salvation-giving potential :

Would not open lip from lip  
Lest they should cram a mouthful in;  
But laughed in heart to feel the drop  
Of juice that syrugged all her face.  
(p.22).

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<sup>131</sup> Cf. Marylu Hill's (2005) instructive paper on 'Goblin Market' for an elaboration of the connection between the two.

The juices would appear to be as integral a product of the figurative sexual act as the Sapphic frenzy of sucking, kissing and squeezing which eucharistically, and finally, transfigure the poisonous effusions. 'Sucking', which is a component of both cunnilingus and fellatio, precipitates ejaculation of sperm only in the latter form, and it is at this point that the reader is able to establish a connection between the two poems. The outpouring syrups and juices of 'Goblin Market' are metaphorical manifestations of semen as much as Harrison's 'nibbled red bijou' (CP, p.295), and 'impaled' seeds (CP, p.294) render an implication of fertilization and the beginning of new life. The presence of images of fire within or in conjunction with semen underlines a contrasting evaluation of religious purpose. For Rossetti, atonement, transfigured within the fruit juice is the 'fiery antidote' to the poison of sin; for Harrison, images of fiery globules of sperm are emblematic of religious extremism's apparent loathing of the 'gem-packed pomegranate' of earthly existence (CP, p.293).

On the other hand Prochurus's inventive and colourful invocation of Doomsday is the work of a poetic imagination itself at least partly seduced by *Schadenfreude* and the means of embodying punishment in flames. For Neil Corcoran, the assertion of a 'dramatized self' as one part of a dialectic is a device common to Harrison's method, and if we may substitute the poet for narrator, the conceit holds for 'Pomegranates' as much as it did in the performance poem v. (Corcoran, 1993, p.161). The other side of the coin, for Corcoran, is the insinuation of an interruptive 'other' who is a construct of the narrator's own creative consciousness. Where the skinhead in v., or Harrison's parents in the *School* sequence, are vocally interruptive, the figure of Prochurus is conspicuous by historical association and by the depressing inexorability of his predictions. His heavily symbolic visitations occupy the same imaginative space as the narrator's/Harrison's own. Ablaze with double-edged metaphors, they subsume differences thereby rendering Corcoran's simplistic reading less persuasive when the reader looks beyond *prima facie* antagonisms. Such a discourse is made more interpretatively complex where Harrison's sense of self and purpose is partially undermined by intuitive leanings, producing what Romana Huk refers to as a 'negative dialectic' (Huk, 1996, p.184). The dislocations and cultural fractures of Harrison's formative period provide the basis for Huk's somewhat nebulous explanation of her own term:



A breaking up of the 'locked' and 'formed' unity of selfhood and a re-evaluation from starting points in the constellations of one's own inherent contradictions and exposed hierarchies of supposition. (Huk, 1996, p.188).

It does, however, seem clear that several tensions sometimes threaten the formulation of a coherent dialectical strategy. The narrative resolution of 'Pomegranates', which resounds with the deliberately anti-spiritual earthiness of a 'moistening cunt' and a 'fuck, fuck', is therefore complicated by what precedes it (CP, p.299). Harrison's narrator is not, above all, 'so weary of all metaphorers' that he cannot relish a few of his own (CP, p.296). On a long air-flight whose destination was not specified, Harrison did little to defuse the ambiguity of his own position respecting instinctive complicity, with the following comment, jotted in a notebook and conceived with deliberate authority in seven strong iambic beats: 'I cover my erection with St John's Apocalypse' (Poetry Notebooks, Book 1, p.87). Suggestive vignettes like this, and there are many, confirm the presence of 'inherent contradictions' even when glimpses of complicity form a part of a knowing strategy of cynicism. Where they appear in Harrison's poetry it is possible to detect an additional, otherwise concealed, voice amongst the heteroglossic competition which is a characteristic of 'Pomegranates' and many other poems. The linguist Bakhtin's theory of countervailing 'voices', though generally applied only to the novel form, might usefully be appropriated here to include that voice which has an unintentional presence but remains conspicuous and identifiably the writer's own, even as its presence potentially undermines a poem's general argument. Any attempt, in Bakhtin's terms, to create a unitary coherence of ideas is countered by the simultaneity of 'centrifugal' impulses of which the involuntary but authentic idiolect noted above is the most compelling among the poem's panoply (Bakhtin, 1981, p.272). Such a voice is counter-indicative so far as the tenor of the poem's argument is concerned, but it remains recognizable to the reader. It is inferred as a psychological tendency as distinct from an unequivocal statement of polemical intent, and it delivers interpretative uncertainty more than any other in Harrison's work. It is visible at that linguistic meeting-point where narrator transgresses his own projected belief, and is characterised by an inability to distinguish between, for example, the redness of an Aegean dawn and Armageddon, or, in the context of my specific theme here, between the close-packed, sperm-like gel globules of fruit, and 'the future flame-lit

from hell.’ An early and very rough sketch of ‘Pomegranates’ underlines Harrison’s own propensity for uncertainty of form and theme-approach. Once again, sperm and fire are dramatically foregrounded and significantly the poet appears not yet to have adopted the persona of Prochurus’s brother as narrator. The tentative nature of the following verses is at odds with the somewhat forced dialectic of the published article, and the distinction is marked still further by the stark differences in metrical form. If uncertainty is voiced overtly here, then that voice remains inherent to the finished poem in the confluent density of images of colour and sexuality, around which fire serves to subdue rather than sharpen polemical argument by compounding alternatives.<sup>132</sup> These verses give evidence of a philosophical positioning much more given to prevarication than the later version might suggest:

The future’s dangers glow in red fruit gel  
though it could be an island’s sunset or the dawn  
but I fear it’s the furnaces of hell  
that redden this packed globe of the unborn.

Though I see sperm or spawn near raging fire  
not consumed by flame but not far from  
doesn’t in any way dampen my desire  
though that conflagration could be the bomb.  
(Poetry Notebooks, Book 11, p.3).

The partial slippage of boundaries of meaning in ‘Pomegranates’ occurs as an unintentional result of Harrison’s instinctive relishing of language, the touchstone of his own idiolect. The seductive muse of flame distorts the votive’s perception regarding matters of creation and destruction. If his polemical position is not compromised by this default mechanism, then it is weakened at the point of juxtaposition. Even though a distinct dialectic between ‘here’ and ‘hereafter’ is established from the beginning, the reader is not convinced that the narrator/ Harrison does not share a fascination, at a subliminal level and in his darker moments, with Prochurus’s invocation of the ‘end’. Though not necessarily given to expressions of abandoned monomania, Harrison does sometimes manifest the kind of nihilistic tendency which characterised Hitler’s declaration

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<sup>132</sup> In an interesting digression on fire and annihilation, Antony Rowland notes that Harrison’s use of the ‘fire trope always compounds alternative events.’ (2001, p.56).

that the failure of a 'Thousand Year Reich' could only be followed by self-imposed destruction.

### Part Three : Fire and Scouring Flood - The Nuptial Torches

If Harrison's strategy in 'Pomegranates' is partially compromised by his own mental and linguistic reflex, then the relish with which he applies it is put to more effective use in the earlier poem 'The Nuptial Torches'. Set, as Luke Spencer notes, outside of the dominion of familial/regional imperatives, the poem is freed from the kinds of pressing political constraint which find an originating impulse in the local and the particular. The scene of the poem is, in Spencer's own words, 'unconnected with Leeds, with England or even with the twentieth century', and the narrative distance allows Harrison some license to engage with themes of sexuality and death at a more intimate level (Spencer, 1994, p.25). I extend intimate in this context to incorporate the negotiation of an ambiguous path through the narrative which at one level invites the audience's pathos and incredulity at the actions of the narrator Isabella of Spain, and at another, allows the subtextual possibility of voyeuristic authorial pleasure in the poem's unfolding burlesque. For Harrison to adopt the persona of a documented historical figure is a very rare departure, and it seems clear that his immersion in the role enables an engagement with the paradoxes and hypocrisies of a mental attitude which is characteristic of our own social universe as much as of the punitive power structures of sixteenth-century Spain. An undated fragment from a notebook, conceived when Harrison was teaching in Nigeria, and probably before 'The Nuptial Torches' had been drafted, illuminates the human capacity for entertaining horror and desire in the same mental image: 'We gaze like Isobel on the auto-da-fés (*sic*) on her wedding night' (Juvenilia Notebook, page not numbered). The poem's narrative, which retails the ceremonial procession to her marital bed illuminated by human torches, is presented in Queen Isabella's own words, and the reader is left to make inferences as to the heavy irony of her observations. Harrison's note therefore presupposes the relevance of the later poetic conceit for a modern audience: we recognise the irony of Isabella's actions because our vision remains prone to a similarly depressing ambivalence.

The poetic approach in 'The Nuptial Torches' appears deliberately to blur the boundary between titillation and loathing, and we may productively utilize Joe Kelleher's incisive comment about Harrison's poem 'Guava Libre' (CP, p.56) for the purposes of definition here: 'Thus, the lexicon of his poetic fantasy itself speaks against the freedom required, and taken, to speak that fantasy' (Kelleher, 1996, p.12). Any interpretative confusion in 'Guava Libre' is the more pronounced because Harrison is clearly narrator and dialectician. A discourse on the symbiotic relationship between 'Sex' and 'Death' in 'The Nuptial Torches' is not, surprisingly, less pronounced because the poet is hidden some distance behind his narrator. Harrison's persona infiltrates Isabella's own through the vigour of a lexis which bears his own inimitable mark, and thereby adds a further level of ontological complexity to the narrative. Not entirely persuaded by the adopted dramatic persona here, Kelleher identifies authorial complicity in the cruelties of a sexual encounter which simultaneously titillates (Kelleher, 1996, p.131). The various metaphorical attributions of fire add to this Bakhtinian reflex. The flames and the bittersweet relish reinforce Harrison's heteroglossic presence behind the throne of power and oppression, and that presence by definition serves to undermine Luke Spencer's assumption that the poet has given, in Isabella, a 'sensitive rendering of a woman's experience' (Spencer, 1994, p.35). 'The poet behind the poem', for Kelleher, lurks indulgently close to scenes of sadism, repulsion and pity (Kelleher, 1996, p.12). The following words are Isabella's, but the voyeuristic sexual fascination is drawn with instinctive Harrisonian relish:

Young Carlos de Sessa stripped was good  
For a girl to look at and he spat like wood  
Green from the orchards for the cooking pots.  
(CP, p.61).

Harrison, here, might equally be contemplating a spluttering coffin in the family sonnets. The corrective is pity. In a concluding reflection, Isabella addresses her mother: 'They curled like foetuses, *maman*, and cried' (CP, p.63). Yet the queen was earlier aroused as here she is repelled, and images of fire serve to mirror and heighten both impulses.

Harrison's instinct for making connections between particular and universal attributions of fire finds a minor, but interesting, intertextual mirror in Trevor Griffiths's play *Comedians*. The play explores the tangential relationship between an 'old-school' comedian and his young protégé, whose modern style of performance is utterly at odds

with his mentor's. Whilst delineating the narrow boundary between comedy and tragedy, the older man reflects on the simultaneity of the life and death impulses, and cites his own experience of being a soldier and visiting a death-camp just outside Weimar<sup>133</sup> in Germany shortly after the second world war has ended. He remembers looking at the doors of 'Der Straf Bloc' and, considering the scale of death dispensed there and then dispersed, in smoke, through the nearby crematoria chimneys, recalls developing an erection. 'Why?' asks the other. 'Something....loved it, too. We've gotta go deeper than hate', replies the older man (Griffiths, 1979, p.65). That I can find no documentary evidence to the effect that Philip of Spain derived any sexual pleasure from *autos-da-fé* does not diminish the interest of Harrison's Freudian inferences. His deliberate application of suggestive dualistic images defines a correspondence of sexual sadism, fear and death against the backdrop of the Spanish Inquisition, itself given individual presence in the form of Torquemada (CP, p.62). Antony Rowland's concise assessment of Harrison's intention here, that 'desire cannot be divorced from spectacle', might equally be used to describe Eddie Waters's *mea culpa* in *Comedians* (Rowland, 2001, p.90).

As Philip's inflamed 'tricks' approach consummation the details of them are left to inference and the imagination, but Isabella's fear is palpable, and it is at this stage in the narrative that the characteristic image of sperm is rejoined, and becomes the prism through which sexuality, cruelty and death are reflected. The passage appears to represent a culmination of Harrison's interests in *Loiners*, and in terms of condensed, resonant effectiveness it subsumes the autobiographical and semi-autobiographical dialectics of 'Peanuts Joe', 'Allotments' and 'Ginger's Friday'. I quote freely from the poem to give some suggestion of the density of meaning, and its envelopment in images of fire:

O let the King be gentle and not loom  
 Like Torquemada in the torture room,  
 Those wiry Spanish hairs, these nuptial nights,  
 Crackling like lit tapers in his tights,  
 His seed like water spluttered off hot stone.  
 Maria, whose dark eyes very like my own  
 Shine on such consummations, Maria bless  
 My Philip just this once with gentleness.

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<sup>133</sup> Also the home of Mozart. The character of Eddie Waters - the older comedian - is fully aware of the irony.

The King's cool knuckles on my smoky hair !

*Mare Mediterraneum, la mer, la mer*  
That almost got him in your gorge with sides  
Of feastmeats, you could flush this scared bride's  
Uterus with scouring salt. O cure and cool  
The scorching birthmarks of his branding-tool.  
(CP, pp.62-63).

The ejaculation of semen here is the culmination of Philip's own libidinous fantasy. He is galvanized, in Griffiths's sense, to erotomanic desire by the sight of burning heretics, and the 'seed' is a hot and 'spluttering' counterpoint to the 'porridge holes' (CP, p.61) of immolated human skin through which, in Isabella's imagination, heretical souls take flight. Semen is therefore a figurative, and paradoxical, meeting point for considerations of spiritual redemption alongside the more pressing immediacies of conception, cruelties both sexual and sadistic, and eroticism. It lies at the heart of the narrative because it is the hook on which several readings hang simultaneously. Philip's final declaration – '*Come, Isabella, God is satisfied*' – is a declaration made without irony (CP, p.63). *Autos-da-fé* were an opportunity for expressions of contrition amongst gawping audience members as much as the condemned, and Philip has performed his own act of duty to God by rooting-out and eradicating heresy. He may be certain that God is pleased with his actions. Harrison is too savvy a writer not to intend any irony to be inferred by the modern reader, however, who has Freud and hindsight to help her recognise *double entendre* in 'come' and 'satisfied.'

As I have noted, Harrison's tendency to project his own 'voice' into his narratives is an unavoidable, if not always productive, Bakhtinian reflex. The presence of sperm in several poems is only one manifestation of an unavoidable instinct for self-insinuation which is bound to colour interpretation, particularly where the narrator is a female historical figure. Sandie Byrne identifies this tendency in order to bolster a feminist reading of 'The Nuptial Torches' which is obliged to assume a pre-established male hegemony of narrative terms. That Isabella, for Byrne, is 'a thoroughly male projection' (Byrne, 1997, p.75) represents the latter's best means of refuting Luke Spencer's earlier contention (Spencer, 1994, p.35) that Harrison has given a sensitive reading of womanhood in the figure of the

queen. On the contrary, she argues, Harrison describes an objectified figure, a cypher at the mercy of the socio-cultural and political norms which inform Philip's perverse sexual inclinations. Isabella, for Byrne, is merely a 'fictional device' (Byrne, 1997, p.75), a construct and projection of male anxiety as to its own proclivity for making victims of women. And certainly the compound metaphor of the 'branding-tool' which delivers the scalding sperm whilst simultaneously marking Isabella as her husband's inalienable property, is too knowing a male perception for the queen to articulate. It is a device which acts to condemn the abuse from the viewpoint of a male onlooker, and Byrne is justified in questioning Harrison's judgement as he attempts a vindication of Isabella's position in her own voice. The inconsistency adds a further level of complexity to the poem. Harrison's cognisance of human abuse is clear and compelling, but his voice is visceral and lexically aggressive, each facet of which co-incidentally lends itself to definition in images of fire. His voice is as identifiably male as sperm, and if his 'autobiographical' narratives do not purport to take 'ownership' of the female figures described in them, they exhibit a proprietorial instinct because such an inference is inherent to the language in which they are presented. 'Branding' is, in fact, a horrific metaphor for taking ownership by burning and permanently disfiguring. It might serviceably be extended to describe the tyrannical limits of King Philip's power to subdue his empire's subjects, but in 'The Nuptial Torches' the branding-tool is most obviously the penis, the victim the queen, and the disfigurement the figurative salty scouring of her womb. Harrison's engagement with the image is complex: he is at once fascinated by its potency and repelled by the consequences of its misuse. Several years after this poem was published, the poet pasted a clipping from *The Times* in a notebook. The cutting is dated 27 February, 1974, and it reads: 'Amos Smith, aged 18, a gypsy, branded his girlfriend, aged 15, with a red-hot cleaver when she refused to answer questions about her sex life' (*School of Eloquence* notebooks, Book 26, page not numbered). This branding betokens punishment and declares ownership, and although Harrison has not annotated the text in any way, it seems likely that an idea first expressed in 'The Nuptial Torches' continued to resonate in his imagination long after the poem's original conception.

Isabella's vivid fear of what Byrne refers to as the 'inflictual' male drives of invasion and violation is dressed up in maritime images of sea and salt (Byrne, 1997, p.75). The



salty/bleachy properties of sperm are counterbalanced by an oceanic sense of purification which bears precisely the same heat-inflaming properties and is, not insignificantly, spiritually redemptive. The scouring of the womb mirrors the redemptive immolation of the heretics, and the pitifully curled, foetus-like aspect of the charred corpses reinforces the conjunction of *Eros* and *Thanatos*, the presence of heightened sexual desire and death. The queen's access of pity is deformed by Philip's power to subvert it. D.M. Thomas's novel *The White Hotel* engages with this interdependency of sex and death through a lengthy fictionalized account of a Freudian subject and experiences of the holocaust, and bears comparison with Harrison's poem in some particulars. Isabella's lascivious 'gaze' at the burning Carlos de Sessa shares the associative possibilities of Lisa's dream-fantasy in the Thomas novel, where the *Id* is unconstrained and eroticism and fire burst to the surface of the imagination:

I jerked and jerked until his prick released  
its cool soft flood. Charred bodies hung from trees,  
he grew erect again, again I lunged.  
(Thomas, 1981, p.23).

Thomas's decision to frame the entire 'Don Giovanni' sequence of the novel, from which this extract is taken, in blank verse gives the narrative a Miltonic feel if only rhythmically; and if adherence to such a poetic form, perhaps any poetic form, unavoidably contradicts the sense of linguistic unrestraint, it does confer movement in the idea of a mental journey. Excepting that the 'prick' here ejaculates an emollient and deathly 'cool soft flood' as opposed to the salty, scalding emission of Philip, registers of *Eros* and *Thanatos* are remarkably similar. The historical framework to 'The Nuptial Torches' therefore lends itself to Freudian examination: the terrifying and deliberate conjunction of matrimony and execution; a nightmare given fiery and idiosyncratic material form by the chief protagonist.<sup>134</sup> The sexual dimension is more than a possibility; it reinforces the potency of the opposition, and its immediacy is heightened by the flames, particularly, it appears, at the point of burning. One expression, by a Freudian reading, of *Eros*'s aspiration to bring life to a higher stage of development, the sexual instinct is subverted into a corruption of itself by the inherent presence of *Thanatos*. Sex re-emerges perverted as sadism or

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<sup>134</sup> Although *Auto-da-fe* was a common means of execution throughout the period of the Inquisition, it seems likely that Philip's peculiar appropriation of the form, and the enormous public enthusiasm for it, reached a zenith during the middle years of the sixteenth century.

masochism which, over time and repeated application, re-shape institutional ideas of power and control dispensed, in 'The Nuptial Torches', in the resonant image of scorching semen. Subtly domesticated sadism amounts, in real terms, to brutal human degradation.

To some degree, of course, Harrison is grafting the psychoanalytical complexities of the twentieth century on to a period which had no conception of them. His epigraph to the poem - written by J. L. Motley - is a short description of the royal procession to the nuptial couch lit by human torches, and is the only evidence I can locate of the event ever having taken place.<sup>135</sup> Several other historians mention the presence of Philip II at *autos-da-fé* including the one at which the heretic Carlos De Sessa was burned in 1588 at Valladolid, but none, other than Motley, establish a connection between executions and nuptial processions, less still between death by burning and sex. It seems likely that Harrison has made several of his own connective speculations here, the most promising suggestion of which resides in the Greek tradition of bridal torches, described here by classical historian Eva Parisinou:

The leading of the couple to the bridal chamber on their first night is illuminated by torches held by a woman (usually the bridegroom's mother). (Parisinou , 2000, p.80).

I have little doubt that Harrison is aware of this Greek rite of passage, or that fire and its metaphorical associations are the catalysts for further reflection. He often reverts to the Greek model as a source of inspiration, and at least one of the attractions here is the sense of innocence and purity which is a component also of the brilliant blue light of an Athenian day, casting a unique aura over performances of tragedy. Harrison is drawn to the light and the flame and it is from the innocence of such originating thoughts that the bitterness of abuse and control, both symptomatic of his interpretation of 'The Nuptial Torches', may suggest itself.

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<sup>135</sup> 'These human victims, chained and burning at the stake, were the blazing torches which lighted the monarch to his nuptial couch.' (J. L. Motley, *The Rise of the Dutch Republic*) (in CP, p.61).

## Part Four: Sun, Sin and Syphilis – ‘The Dark Continent of Fallen

Sex’<sup>136</sup>

The exchanging of bodily fluids, as I have already noted, defines the limits of a Faustian pact for several of the *dramatis personae* in Harrison’s narratives. The PWD Man and the White Queen, both ex-patriates like the poet himself at certain stages of his life, and with whom at least some experiences are possibly shared, pursue the extremities of sexual engagement as an end in itself. They excuse their increasingly self-serving appetites as a measure of the human degradation they perceive all around them in the wild African landscape, and, in the following passage the White Queen at least seems unable to escape the post-coital impulses which yield a lacerating clarity of conscience:

Then his thin bum  
That did seem beautiful will seem obscene;  
I’m conscious of the void, the *Vaseline*,  
Pour shillings in his hand and send him back  
With the driver, ugly, frightened, black,  
Black, black.  
(CP, p.24).

Any pity here is undercut by disgust, and disgust wins out in the sudden, perfunctory dismissal with guilt-money. The Queen indulges the stronger impulse because he is able to do so; the authority of generations of colonial acculturation has leavened the burden of mental discontent. But the guilt festers; his pact with the ‘devil’ of abandoned abuse demands atonement. The repeated ‘black,/Black, black’ is a self-imposed mantra intended to prosecute the memory in perpetuity, and here once more Harrison’s idiolect seems to break through the narrative’s hermetic seal, narrowing the gap between Queen and Queen’s creator. My latter point of course is informed by Harrison’s reiteration of ‘books, books, books’ in the poem ‘Bookends I’ (CP, p.137) which is approximal to the degree that it also identifies the presence of an indispensable pain deliberately measured in slow,

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<sup>136</sup> From Harrison’s poem ‘Heart of Darkness.’ (CP, p.42).

resounding beats.<sup>137</sup> Fictional and autobiographical narrators remain close bedfellows by virtue of the seductive possibilities of language, even though it is not possible, because 'The White Queen' is the earlier poem of the two, to infer a weakness on account of that confluence. Harrison looks to restore memory of act or relationship through repetition in both poems, and in doing so unknowingly foregrounds his own idiosyncratic voice. The act of repetition, for the linguist Bruce Kavin, is 'a vehicle for timelessness' in the sense that the compulsion to repeat is, for better or worse, an attempt to escape the mental ravages of time (Kavin, 1972, p.69). Paraphrasing Freud, he suggests that the action indicates a failure to master difficult material, an abandonment to signs which mentally restore a place of sense and purpose against the death instinct, to which the compulsion for repetition is in any case a self-fulfilling key (p.16). In reflecting on repetition as a psychoanalytical symptom, Kavin's reading would restore the poet's deepest inclinations to the forefront of his poems, respecting the reiterated linguistic hammer of nouns and adjectives, and the resonant metonymy which they embody.

The compulsive sexual encounters which are central to both 'The White Queen' are manifestations of an enacted narrative repetition which also appears to mirror the psychological inclinations of the poet. It would be unwise, however, to assume from such inclinations that Harrison is an experienced bugger or pederast. On the contrary, the relentless re-assertion of phalluses and pubic clefts throughout his oeuvre indicates an over-active, though firmly heterosexual, libido. But compulsive libidinousness is a significant point in the African narratives, as is the corrective mechanism of guilt and/or physical degradation which is co-terminal with the act of consummation. I have discussed the commonality of guilt at length here and elsewhere in this thesis, and I now wish to turn to symptoms of organic corruption which Harrison finds endlessly serviceable as metaphors for decline and which religious zealots have, even in recent history, appropriated as manifestations of divine punishment. If the small post-coital 'death' of depression as experienced by 'The White Queen' in the verse just quoted is realized with sudden disheartening clarity, the sexually transmitted diseases of random encounters may emerge later as painful counterweights to disinhibition and uncontained libido. As fire

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<sup>137</sup> Harrison's performances of this poem invariably slow the final line almost to a halt, with a protracted pause between each word. The received effect is very potent.

elucidates the dualistic properties of semen in the narratives I have already discussed, here it is employed as a descriptive component of gonorrhoea's symptoms. The burning sensation acts as a reminder of sexual transgression, becomes a symbol of a kind of punishment which, though not religious in the sense that it does not demand retributive justice for guilt, leans heavily on a coincidentally apposite connection. Fire describes the pain as stinging and inescapable like that inflicted by Io's gadfly, and to some degree the disease's inescapability is a mirror to the African sun's own relentless glare. The disorientation and dizziness which are filtered through the hearth flames in the poem 'Newcastle is Peru' are translated into a kind of delirium in the 'Manica' section of 'The White Queen'.<sup>138</sup> The indirect catalyst here, however, is the burning sun which reflects that delirium in a density of images of growth. 'Poisonous mangroves and funereal palms' (CP, p.34), organic life which thrives in its own heat-inspired toxicity: all are prescient oppositional images resonant of Conrad, and they provide the florid backdrop to the queen's mania. His soliloquy splices sadism, guilt, and annihilative impulses in a staccato, but ironically triumphal, metrical arrangement which is restored to regularity in the final couplet as a measure of the Queen's own suddenly realised sense of the material present. The fiery pain it seems is an inescapable corrective to sexual over-enthusiasm, picked out beneath a disinterested sky:

Omar, not Khayam, the Gambia's mad Marabout  
 Changed the Commissioners' bullets into water;  
 Into water being Moslem. I, being atheist,  
 Am full of more potent potions when I'm pissed.  
 A century later, full of *Guinnesses* and *Stars*,  
 I'm God's own Heaven, and as I slash I shout:  
*The white man's water turns back into fire !*  
 Braving castration at their scimitars,  
 And single-handed put Islam to rout,  
 And vanquish the missions with my bent desire,  
 Spouting a semen capable of slaughter.

Flat on my back, beneath the Galaxy, I fear  
 This burning in my groin is gonorrhoea.  
 (CP, pp.34-35).

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<sup>138</sup> 'Newcastle is Peru' is also, significantly, in *The Loiners* sequence of poems.

The drama here is one ultimately of self-effacement because the Queen recognises that he is unable to resist the cause of his own undoing. The narrator's atheism provokes a pastiche of apocalyptic religious images culminating in a reiteration of semen's paradoxical properties, and finally in the degeneration of the individual to single degraded organism, aflame with his own self-induced clap, the product of 'lovely Sodom's sin' (CP, p.34).<sup>139</sup> The oppositional possibilities of religion are manifestly close to the surface here, and even at this early hour of Harrison's poetic development the reader can detect the cynicism of much later work. The compulsive character of the poet's voice is present in images of fire which help to reverse propriety and make the metaphorical weapon of his narrator's penis paradoxical because his inclinations are 'bent' or homosexually deviant. It is also clear, however, that Harrison intends the Queen's flashes of insight, in and amongst the scenes of delirium, to manifest degrees of self-loathing, and it is no surprise to find the latter seeking escape from his turpitude in the very thing which is the major cause of it. The absence of the religious in the Queen's thinking does not enable a detachment from questions of moral transgression. Rather, to paraphrase Michel Foucault, does his reaction corroborate a paradoxical, but commonplace, embracing of a sense of sin in relation to sexual matters even where the individual has by and large escaped the psychological ligature of the ecclesiastical institution (Foucault, 1990, p.116). The 'personal' voice of Harrison stalks the margin of complicity here: as his personal notebooks and commentaries bear out, the cognitive dissonance is very nearly his own. Accordingly, the 'fires' of gonorrhoea and the fires of guilt which amount to the same thing in the uniquely mutable stream of metaphors emanating from the medium, establish in the poem, aside from the pain of disease, the resonance of an earlier inherence. And the natural conclusion to unsustainable anxiety is a species of abandonment. This surrender to self-annihilation is perfectly described in the deformity of 'the one-clawed crab' noted in Part One of this chapter, grabbing at itself in a futile masturbatory gesture. The figurative reduction of the queen's sensibility to a rudimentary state of organic existence almost enacts Freud's definition of oblivion-compulsion, here re-defined by Marcuse:

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<sup>139</sup> The poem's title 'Manica' may refer to either a part of the procreational genitalia of Lepidoptera, or a Roman armoured sleeve. Both meanings – penis, and sheath – carry some resonance in the context of the poem.

Under the performance principle the gratification of the sex instinct depends largely on the 'suspension' of reason and even of consciousness: on the brief oblivion of the private and the universal unhappiness, on the interruption of the reasonable routine of life.  
(Marcuse, 1998, p.223).

Organic growth is mirrored by decline throughout Harrison's convoluted exploration of 'The White Queen' and its tributary offshoots, each of which engages to varying degrees with the forensics of sexual decay.<sup>140</sup> As much as defining the narrator's position respecting his own complicity in a system of abuse, these offshoots underline Harrison's interest in the morbid which is frequently repeated elsewhere in his work, and owes much to some obvious medical research. Indicative of a frankly overwhelming fascination with human biological detail, the wider oeuvre appears to confirm Peter Robinson's view that Harrison's is a deliberate attempt to create a poetry of the 'whole body', not merely of the head or the imagination (Robinson, 1998, p.212). In places, Harrison's personal notebooks indicate an unusual if unsurprisingly phallogentric tendency to conflate the ideas of emotional state and physiognomy in telling single terms. From an early entry of 9 February, 1959, for example, I find the words 'enlarged', 'reduced', 'contracted' and 'abysmal contraction' as descriptive of mood (Journals and Commonplace Books, Box 1, page not numbered). In the later poetry, his preoccupation with medical terminology and its sometimes tortuous circumlocutions indicate that the language is more than a useful vehicle for expressing paradoxes. Harrison savours the words themselves almost like a child discovering language, especially the language of morbidity, for the first time, and those words are almost always a focus either for heat-infused degradation or open-sored symptoms of that degradation :

And also *Syphilis*: sores, foul sores  
will drive you back through storm and calenture  
crawling like lepers to our peaceful shores.

The malaise of the West will lure  
the scapegoats of its ills, you and your crew,  
back to our jungles looking for a cure.-

You'll only find the Old World in the New. (CP, p.33).

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<sup>140</sup> 'The White Queen' is made up of several sections of which the first, and longest, is an introductory 'autobiographical' narrative. The sections are as follows: 'Satyrae', 'The Railroad Heroides', 'Travesties', 'Manica' and 'from The Zeg-Zeg Postcards.' (CP, pp.23-40).

'Syphilis' and 'calenture': the words are taken from part three of the poem 'Travesties' and each rolls off the tongue like a warning. Part and parcel of the Renaissance rage for *discubrimiento* (CP, p.33) or geographical discovery, Harrison's narrator here is adopting the persona of the poet Hieronymus Fracastorius (1483-1553) who himself is acting for the colonial subject by scorning the instincts of the invaders for conquest. Within the instinct lies the deforming spectre of illness and death, so that *Eros* and *Thanatos* are once more contiguous. Calentures are tropical, delirium-inducing illnesses once thought to have been caused by exposure to excessive heat. The heat of the sun and the burning sores of syphilis conflate the idea of natural justice in the implication of fire but the protagonists, like the White Queen who is the ghost at the proceedings, remain compelled to pursue a delirious, and self-destructive campaign of discovery. There is, of course, no 'cure' for the fiery itches which go on demanding an emollient.

As I have shown, each medical reference conveys more than a biological diagnosis or a showcasing of Harrison's lexical fascination. The minutiae of African 'malevolence', the insects and the protozoa, are the teeming progenitors of human delirium and despair. Where, as Neil Hairsine rightly notes, the microbial poisons are metonyms for the corrupting influence of colonial appropriation, their methods of 'delivery', and symptoms, are often described in secondary metaphors of fire (Hairsine, 1997, pp.126-127). The insects in particular are invasive like the Spanish conquistadors; their probosces are figurative swords (or penises) which inject fiery toxins into the bloodstream. But the intrusion is as double-edged as the sexual impulse itself. The *Neisseria Gonorrhoeae* bacteria which turns '*the white man's water into fire*' and burns the Queen's groin is rendered ironic by his own 'disease' of 'randiness' (CP, p.36). His urges are inflamed and reinforced by the 'bottle-green Cantharides' (p.36), a drug with urogenital stimulant, or aphrodisiac, properties which, in turn, is manufactured from the ground up bodies of the Spanish fly. It is characteristic of Harrison's proclivity for military metaphors that he should inflate the queen's rejoined priapic urges in terms of cannon-fire, not unlike the 'wooshed cascades' of Peanuts Joe (CP, p.18):

Which of your probosces made  
my heart fire off this cannonade,  
or is its billion-gun salute



for lover or for prostitute ?  
(from 'Manica', CP, p.37).

The indecision of these lines mirrors the ambiguity of the Queen's position respecting the boundaries of sexual engagement. His delirium prevents self-knowledge: is his pounding heart tachycardic as he has already suggested, or is the 'Boom ! Boom !' (CP, p.37) of excitement otherwise lust ? To paraphrase Joe Kelleher, the invitation to indulge is counterpointed by resistance and negation at every turn (Kelleher, 1996, p.5). Alongside the aphrodisiac in the Queen's 'foetid room' (CP, p.36) is the blood-sucking taman tick which dispenses sleeping-sickness through the protozoa trypanosome, whose womb it inhabits. Energy and mortification - sex and stasis. From the microscopic particularity of the 'soft-backed tick' (CP, p.36) and the energy-conferring Spanish fly, Harrison moves to make a not entirely persuasive apocalyptic connection by considering universal annihilation through the prism of the Cuban missile crisis. The question of whether the Queen is a cannon-charger, or like Peanuts Joe, cannon-fodder, is not likely to be resolved because he is both.

The Queen's mocking self-awareness in the early part of the narrative adds a further level of complexity to the institutionalised system of control which characterised both early colonialism and post-war perceptions of our imperial past. He is cognisant of the systemic perpetration of abuse even as recently as the nineteen sixties, but his self-mockery merely sidesteps any serious sense of mitigation. For Kelleher, such defence mechanisms only illustrate the frustrating lack of a 'European-African dialogue in these scenarios' particularly at the time of this poem's conception (Kelleher, 1996, p.5). Kelleher suggests that the foregrounding of the sexual instinct, and its inherent contradictions, represent an unspoken manifestation of an attempt to fill that void. The Queen's 'disease', his dis-ease borne partly out of a sense of complicity with abuse – 'I can't escape/Our foul conditioning that makes a rape/Seem natural, if wrong' (CP, p.24) – seems inclined to avoid ultimate responsibility. But, the bacteria crawling deep within his groin is the yardstick of his guilt, a physical symptom of that terrible ennui which keeps him awake at night craving a held hand and 'Afraid of my terror, longing for the day' (CP, p.31). The 'alien invasion' of inflammatory microbes holds up a microscopic mirror to the rapacious colonial invasions of several centuries; the queen's increasing abandonment

may, as Neil Hairsine notes, be a distillation borne out of guilt, of a fear of the fires of the Day of Judgement (Hairsine, 1997, p.176). He may figure as a metonym for the post-lapsarian connotations of imperial exploitation.

The compulsion for sex, and the mental 'dis-ease' which seems corollary to its attainment, occasion less currency as discourse in the wake of HIV/AIDS. The Queen's solipsistic and to some degree willed rejection of conventional boundaries of restraint harbours an internal dynamic which would now overwhelmingly be halted at point of inception. The moment of masochistic self-satire at which he appears to abandon himself to impulse fails to convince because it follows a powerful dialectic of antagonisms:

My white shorts tighten  
in the market crowds.  
I don't know  
if a lean Fulani boy  
or girl gave me this stand  
trailing his/her knuckles  
on my thigh.  
(in 'from The Zeg-Zeg Postcards II', CP, p.38).

I am not persuaded by the over-arching simplicity of the undirected moment, which has more in common with the random, insightful sexual predation of the PWD Man: 'But bums like melons, matey, lips like lorry tyres. / They all know old Roller Coaster' (CP, p.45). But the facts of the Queen's uncontrollable impulse and of his guilt remain. The pragmatism and caution of a later period cannot yet ironise the unhindered direction of his discourse, and he is doomed to recognise the presence of fire and poison amongst his conquests as he plunders them. Following a similarly self-destructive course, the American writer Michael Rumaker drew on his own experience when he documented the liberal San Francisco gay scene in the period immediately before HIV began, in the most terrible possible way, to curtail excess. At one point he conflates *Eros* and *Thanatos*, imagining a beautiful 'ass' 'rampant with hepatitis, the penises that flamed with passion flaming with spirochetes' (Rumaker, 1979, p.28). Spirochetes are worm-like bacteria which cause syphilis, but what is significant here is Rumaker's usage of fire to describe both the abstraction of sexual passion and its material cost in terms of pain. The connection seems to mirror the ambiguity of Harrison's own relationship with the portrayal of homosexuality in 'The White Queen'. He describes, also in images of fire, that compulsion which

animates as it destroys, as though this were the natural habitat of abandonment. It may not admit of autobiographical complicity, but the first-person narrative suggests foreknowledge through the viscera of description.

'Abandonment', in fact, is a useful term for describing the sense of Empedoclean immersion in metaphorical flames which destroys boundaries between pain and pleasure. It is significant that Rumaker's autobiographical narrative, and Harrison's mostly fictional one, can afford to engage very closely with an attitude which borders on the nihilistic. Both were recorded in the days before HIV/AIDS emerged to distance subject from object, and to dissolve some of the more tempting embellishments of Freud's thesis in the new languages of pragmatism and survival. In *The History of Sexuality*, written in 1976, again just before the onset of the AIDS crisis, Michel Foucault could argue that the modern, or post-nineteenth-century experience of sexuality, is one not of repression in Freud's sense, but of total absorption and engagement. Under the heading 'Sex is Worth Dying For' Foucault averred that sex had replaced love as a justification for self-extinction :

The Faustian pact, where temptation has been instilled in us by the deployment of sexuality, is now as follows: to exchange life in its entirety for sex itself, for the truth and sovereignty of sex [...] When a long while ago the West discovered love, it bestowed on it a value high enough to make death acceptable; nowadays it is sex that claims this equivalence. (Foucault, 1990, p.156).

Foucault's argument, though persuasively wresting ground away from Freud's preoccupation with repression, binds sex and death closely through the portals of disease, endemic pornography, sexual violence, and the hideous phenomenon of the 'snuff' movie genre. The fact of death on the unprecedented scale of HIV/AIDS closes against Foucault's argument in the sense that the imperative for survival has overtaken it with a combination of medical measures and abstinence, at least in the wealthy West. Foucault's reflection is a convincing psychoanalytical abstraction which pulls up short before material considerations. It is significant that some of Harrison's relatively recent poems continue to engage with such sexual binaries but now at a narrative distance, presumably also in the wake of a disease which can inflict the possibility of death even on the new born. The poem 'Fruitility' which deals, like 'The Pomegranates of Patmos', with the symbolism of fruit as life-celebrant recourses to using the countervailing voice of an AIDS-suffering

homosexual whose gallows-insouciance is reminiscent of Rumaker's *danse macabre* in the bathhouse. Awaiting the insertion of an investigative rectal instrument, he records the following as the italicized voice of the narrator's 'friend', thereby detaching narrator/Harrison from any hint of complicity:

*I am the world's most buggered fag.  
Your rooter's nothing, every dick  
I've ever had's ten times as thick !  
(CP, p.360).*

For all the bullish and guttural wordplay, the braggadocio seems contrived because now it is informed by the real and imminent possibility of death, of death in the extraneous world of lived experience which acts contextually upon the poem. *Eros* and *Thanatos* are engaged in the sharpest of ironies here. Harrison has characteristically moved to tackle a serious topical issue, excepting that the AIDS victim/bar-room 'opera singer' subsequently embarks on a delirious *faux*-comic aside which resembles that of the narrator in the poem 'Manica'. Conceived in almost regular tetrameters with occasional hypercatalectic feet for rhythmical continuity, 'Fruitility's' couplets turn on the irony of Amazonian deforestation destroying the means by which the protagonist might be cured. Dressing, in his 'rabid' imagination, in the 'drag' of the opera character Violetta, he is a strutting, adored peacock, a colourful and animated mirror to the 'roasted birds that used to fly' (CP, p.361) in the fecund landscape in which he creates his art, like the character of 'Fitzcarraldo' in Werner Herzog's film of the same name. Whether Harrison's forced connection works is secondary in the context of my argument to the fact of fire, which acts as a metaphor for the depredations of AIDS, as a metonym for ecological destruction, and as shorthand for the victim's dream-like bravura performance. The imaginative delirium is a symptom of the character's abandonment to destructive sexuality and the disease it creates for him. He is the 'engulfed' lover to paraphrase Roland Barthes, subject to outbursts of annihilation which inflict upon him a sense of both despair and fulfilment, and fire is the natural means by which Harrison seems best able to express the paradox (Barthes, 2002, p.10):

*Those things like wine-stains on my skin  
those fucking things like spilled Merlot  
they ain't what you guys think you know.  
They came, these scars like fucking Claret*

*from the forest of the flame-flayed parrot.  
They're burns ! They're burns ! I tried to seize  
the cure for AIDS from blazing trees.  
(CP, p.361).*

And :

*Even now the forest flames  
are burning cures that have no names.  
In the ash of Amazonian oak  
the cure for AIDS went up in smoke.  
(CP, p.362).*

The deliberate sleight-of-hand which replaces the liver-spots of AIDS with fire-scars is a feeble attempt to garner the audience's complicity in an act of self-delusion. The victim is upholding an ambiguous claim to life, to performance, which will not submit to the marks of death's blandishments. His instinct is Promethean but in the end his effort is more hollowly unpersuasive than the White Queen's determination to foreground the emotional content of a relationship in order to disguise the suggestion of perversity and abuse: 'You'll call it filthy, but to me it's love,/ And to him it was. It was' (CP, p.24). 'They're burns ! They're burns !' – 'it was. It was': The audience, it is implied, is not convinced. But his grabbing of life, his sense of *carpe diem*, remains irreducible. He is a figurative Icarus whose outrageous sexuality burns him and the means of his salvation. He reaches for the skies beyond the tree-canopy where the 'roasted' birds used to fly, and scars himself. There is a suggestion of Blake in the homosexual's ambitions: 'On what wings dare he aspire ?/What the hand dare seize the fire ?'; he burns 'bright / In the forests of the night' (from 'The Tiger', in Hewett, 1982, p.144). His affirmation of material existence asserts the value of the human creative spirit in all of its colourfully perverse forms, and in doing so parodies the idea of the creating hand of the Divine. Fire, for Harrison, is fundamental to both attitudes.

Where fire is used as a metaphor for the malignant side-effects of teeming organic bacteria in 'The White Queen', it represents a 'burning' which is biological and transferred internally through the sex act. The fire in this sense is a figurative microscopic consideration which is invested with universal proportions through accumulative transmission. It multiplies rapidly in scale like the real Amazonian forest fires of the poem 'Fruitility'. In Harrison's drama *Phaedra Britannica*, the fire metaphor plays a more

significant role in driving the action from the outside. The sun and its associated conditions are amongst the universal shaping elements of human behaviour. In this context the sun comes to represent burning oppressive heat, humidity and inescapable glare, causing the central protagonist especially to recoil from it behind window shutters, and to acknowledge with horror the perverse stirrings for which it is a partial catalyst.

Harrison's choice of context for his translation of Racine's *Phaedra* greatly assists his impulse to foreground the impact of climate and culture on behaviour. Removing the action to India under the Raj enables a dismantling of the theocentric motors of the original, and an assertion of the idea of human motivation driven instead by considerations of imperialism, power, regional geography and custom. Harrison's radical decontextualisation of the narrative helps the drama to withstand independent critical assessment. Although his tragedy remains relatively faithful to Racine's version, his use of language, particularly where fire is used as a metaphor, is reinforced to accommodate the immediacy of the impact of relentless heat. The question of Memsahib, otherwise *Phaedra's*, personal degradation mirrors the sun's own inexorability and invests her with a perverse parity: she is reduced to the parlous moral status of indigenous culture as it is defined by the tenets of imperial preconception or misconception. She is debased by leanings which find an equivalence in the Tantric 'swamp' of extreme Hinduism, itself shaped and corrupted by the climate. To this extent the Memsahib pushes the boundary of received moral attitudes to the limit. She appears to embrace the psychological abandonment to sexual oblivion which is anathema to an imperial sense of order and moral purpose, whose keynotes are here described by Nirad C. Chaudhuri :

Intellectually, the European mind was outraged by the Hindu precisely in those three principles which were fundamental to its approach to life [...] that of reason, that of order, and that of measure. [...] To these men everything about these people appeared to be irrational, inconsistent, unholy and extravagant, also lush, awry, and hypertrophied beyond conception.

(Chaudhuri, 1965, p.94).

But, for the very reason that this moral dystopia is extravagant and therefore exotic, it seduces as it offends, and the Memsahib is a metaphor for the working-through of such a contradiction in the collective imagination. In tragic terms, the contradiction is a straightforward one between the Apollonian and the Dionysian impulses; between that

which is superficially ordered and civilized, and that which is drawn to the flames. The Mem sahib's inability to control her own destiny is shaped by the stifling wildness of the culture and the landscape, and *in extremis* her behaviour resembles that of the Hindu zealot, the Saddhu, towards whom Harrison's narrative nods, and whose animal frenzy appeared to fascinate, as it repelled, the literary imaginations of writers of the Raj. At one stage, the Mem sahib abandons herself to urges which originate in the Hindu pantheon: 'My body froze, then blazed. I felt flesh scorch/as Siva smoked me out with flaming torch./ I sensed the gods of India were there/behind the throbbing heat and stifling air' (TW, p.82). To paraphrase the Governor's wife, India has chosen *her* to victimise (p.94), and it is clear that the India of the imperial imagination, 'bestial India' (p.73), is both the cause of, and the moral equivalent to, her 'bestial lust' (p.72). The seductiveness of the culture would neatly be abridged in the character of Burleigh's sibilant words – 'Siva's avatars subdue sahibs' - were it not that the expression sounds more like a mnemonic device than a premonition of doom (p.76). As I have already noted, even commentators of the later Raj were irresistibly drawn to the flames in spite, or probably because, of a self-imposed religio-moral straitjacket which relishes precisely as it denigrates what it perceives to be obscene indigenous culture. Benita Parry describes the philosophical underpinning to such a Victorian attitude: 'The rites of this (the Hindu) system, in which sex plays a central symbolic role, give a metaphoric expression to inclinations which were vigorously suppressed in imperial Britain' (Parry, 1972, p.4). And moreover 'The Tantric tradition [...] was frequently invoked by the British as evidence of Indians' earthly depravity and intimacy with the forces of darkness' (pp.3-4). The received vision of India is visited on the remote English imagination as a curse borne out of depravity, and the, to some degree, fantastic imaginings of contemporary commentators reinforced the shock and the relish. It is instructive to find a Harrisonian vigour in the language of fire which novelists and short-story writers used as an instinctive tool for description here. Firstly, for example, Mrs F. E. F. Penny describes the obscenity of abandonment: 'Disciples' she says 'burned the fire of mystics bordering on insanity [...] the saddhu of the south, the follower of the Tantric cult, professes no austerities. He seeks to kill desire by an unlimited indulgence which brings satiety and extinction of emotion' (Penny, 1929, pp.47-48). Mrs Penny is clearly indulging in a sense of wild abandon with an inherent sexual component.

Another writer I.A.R. Wylie enjoys a more overt fascination with the Hindu ceremony; his own approach broaches the possibility of demonic possession :

Though he trembled, his blood was set on fire...it was the spirit of the Horrible yet mingled with the Sublime...it was lovely and hideous...it intoxicated the senses and benumbed the mind...all thought, all humanity were lost.  
(Wylie, 1912, pp.44-45).

The attempt at titillation is obvious even as early as 1912: the narcotic of sex and death. That Wylie was writing for Mills & Boon and never visited India allows, reinforces even by virtue of propinquity, the perception of horror in a sweltering, morally corrupt and strange land. The Memsahib manifests similar signs of 'possession' by her own admission, and it is a crucially ambiguous element of Harrison's narrative that the perception of extraneous evil, fanned in the heat of the sun, must prevail because it is a characteristic of the Victorian attitude to barbarian cultures. At one level, the Memsahib is a mirror to the Raj's own hypocrisy, and it is only the terminal impact of kinship and ancestry which endorses a sense of tragic inevitability in *Phaedra Britannica*. The play, like a great deal of Harrison's work, is not sealed in terms of interpretation. Harrison's commitment to making tragedy relevant guarantees a broad framework.

Her relationship with her stepson - Thomas Theophilus to Racine's Hippolytus - is not strictly incestuous but is perceived as a form of inexorable perversity, for which her sexually deviant parentage and grand parentage are held to retrospective account. The tragic idea of blood-guilt finds an interesting equivalent in Michel Foucault's theory of death regression which identifies the tendency of particularly Victorian 'pseudo-science' to find explanation for apparent 'degenerescence' in corrupted ancestry - '[...] a heredity', Foucault notes, 'that was burdened with various maladies [...] ended by producing a sexual pervert' (Foucault, 1990, pp.138-139). A misunderstanding of tragic purpose provides the basis for the development of specious offshoots of Social Darwinism such as Eugenics, together with a legitimisation through 'science', for stopping inevitable further degeneration by means of termination. Harrison's use of metaphors of fire adds a new dimension to Racine's original as the reader finds the Memsahib helpless to resist her own compulsion, her own 'degenerative' path. Here, the heat of the sun is inescapably transformative and the Memsahib internalises its power. Referring to the ineffable landscape of *Heart of Darkness*, Jonathan Dollimore might be referring to the India of



Harrison's play, and of Memsahib in particular, when he writes of the awakened 'memory of gratified and monstrous passion' (Dollimore, 2001, p.149). The path to destruction seems inevitable, the compulsion inescapable. Where, for example, one of Racine's lines has a simple 'I burn with love' (Racine, 1963, p.176), Harrison invests Memsahib/Phaedra's emotional state with the ontological possibility of 'to sizzle on love's spit until I burn' (TW, p.95). The embellishment is significant. The sibilance of Harrison's phrasing reinforces the binary interpretation of a love which is both highly seductive and destructive. Memsahib is skewered to her fate as much as the burning figure of Carlos De Sessa in 'The Nuptial Torches', and we may conclude that one part of her relishes being thus transfixed. Her fate, in the Greek tragic sense, is inevitable; it is the *Dike*, the exacting of justice for her unnatural compulsions. To the degree that such compulsions are inherent to her being, the Memsahib's retreat behind the darkened blinds in the scorching Indian afternoon can offer only illusory comfort.

Racine's Phaedra is the granddaughter of the Sun God and a product of the congress between King Minos and the bestial Pasiphaë. Harrison's cultural determinism re-invents her as an Anglo-Indian hybrid, at once racially insecure and potentially deviant. Her demand to close the blinds has the ironic effect of confirming the inevitability of her affliction. Here she acknowledges the inflammatory potency of the sun which is represented as both a withering presence, and a personification of nemesis:

That's where it all started, that red fire.  
...blinding, consuming...Ayah  
its light sinks in, right in, to scrutinise  
the sordidness concealed behind my eyes.  
This is the last time that I'll have to gaze  
on those all-seeing, penetrating rays.  
(TW, p.78).

Oppressive heat is an ever-present element in Harrison's play, as it is in the dramas of Tennessee Williams. If in Williams's *A Streetcar named Desire* it does not drive the action, then it is a claustrophobic corollary to Blanche DuBois's disintegration. And it is significant that her ancestors threw away the family fortune on fornication and improbity under the same relentless sun. A causal link is therefore established between the behaviour of those ancestors and Blanche's own importune, much as the perception of Memsahib/Phaedra is tarnished by the bestial ghosts of her past, 'each destroyed by lust and Eastern sun' (TW,

p. 82). When the character of Burleigh<sup>141</sup> in Harrison's play notes that 'blood will out !' he defines a misperception of miscegenated culture (TW, p.74). His exclamation may pay lip-service to the process of tragic inevitability, but it also affirms the effortless moral superiority of empire over its 'barbarous' subjects. Harrison's re-telling of tragic events therefore gives the Greek original a satisfying post-colonial relevance from the standpoint of a backward glance at the cultural contexts of imperialism. And in so doing, it disinters that culture's own inconsistencies, examining them through the glass of the Raj's own social attitudes, and finding hypocrisy and perversity in the detail. The conjunction of sex and death, of the compulsive itch for growth and of inevitable decay reified by the 'all-seeing' eye of the sun, invites a further psychoanalytical reading of personal disintegration and colonial abuse. Describing Freud's metapsychology, Marcuse finds an urge to seek answers in grand defining paradigms which are as incessant as Harrison's own. It is, Marcuse says:

[...] an ever-renewed attempt to uncover, and to question, the terrible necessity of the inner connection between civilization and barbarism, progress and suffering, freedom and unhappiness – a connection which reveals itself ultimately as that between Eros and Thanatos.  
(Marcuse 1998, p.17).

The extremity of the climate in the Indian sub-continent reinforces the extremity of the juxtaposition between 'civilization and barbarism', whether that relationship is psychologically inherent or inherited in bad blood on the Greek model, its ultimate outcome rendered inevitable.

Harrison's taste for the morbid and the macabre, for the organic processes of degeneration and death, is everywhere mitigated by his celebration of life for its own sake. He offers a simple *joie de vivre*, a cheap retsina or a Satyr's flagrant cock, as the ready alternatives to oblivion. But the minutiae of perversity and corruption, particularly across the spectrum of work I have investigated in this chapter, and certainly elsewhere, is so viscerally drawn as to indicate an obsession. Since there is little evidence of real hope amongst the forensically-examined detritus, it is tempting to construe a feeling that human existence is itself an aberration, as Freud and Schopenhauer thought. Fire and heat

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<sup>141</sup> Theramenes in Racine.

and sun serve to reinforce the inference as well as its contradictory antidote, and the ambiguity is compelling.

And one image from 'The White Queen', a more or less direct echo of Joseph Conrad, appears to underline a sense of overwhelming futility which beggars further consideration. Awakening to another sweltering day, the queen finds a metonym for the negation of existence in an unseen act of pointless aggression: 'The sticky morning comes and some loud gun/ Fires short distance shells into the sun' (CP, p.26). In *Heart of Darkness* Conrad has a steamer offloading ordnance into the Congolese bush, but the effect is the same.<sup>142</sup> Aside from the clear phallic reference in 'gun', Harrison again uses fire and its associations to underline a sense of the utterly useless. The gun gives synchronic order to otherwise endless time and sex reasserts itself in the circle of death. 'The sticky morning comes' are easily re-interpreted as the residue and *petite mort* of early morning masturbation towards which the Queen is uncontrollably drawn. Inner contradictions disable positivity here; there is little room for manoeuvre in the cemented relationship between *Eros* and *Thanatos* in Harrison's imagination, save for the dynamics of the urges themselves. Writing of the practical (ir)relevance of Freud's theory of the Death Instinct, Norman O. Brown noted - 'The theory, as he left it, results in complete therapeutic pessimism and is worse than useless for therapists' (Brown, 1959, p.81). Those who look for 'therapeutic' consolation in Harrison's early explorations of what it means to be a sexualized human will largely be disappointed.

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<sup>142</sup> See Conrad (2006) p.14.

## Chapter Six

### *Ordo Poenarum* - Fire, Ice & Silence

'Are we still strumming the right lyre  
to play us through the century's fire ?'  
(From *The Gaze of the Gorgon*).

#### Part One : The Freezereed Phoenix of our Fate

Harrison's vision, though mitigated by a powerful life-force, is apocalyptic. If his reliance on nuclear Armageddon as the means by which the 'end' is enacted looks increasingly outdated, it remains relatively easy to understand. Harrison's most fruitful period of writing was achieved in a world context of declining international relations and nuclear proliferation. The attendant dangers of nuclear war, their material realisations in intense heat and fire, enable Harrison to elevate destructive fire as a symbolic counterweight to constructive fire, and on the grandest stage possible given the limited prospects for human survival. Harrison's fears are reiterated, or implied, on an overwhelming scale in his work, and come to define several of the longer pieces such as the film poem *The Shadow of Hiroshima* and the play *The Common Chorus*. That, with the exception of certain geo-political flashpoints such as North Korea and Iran, the possibility of nuclear war has diminished in favour of new horrors will, for Harrison, represent only a shift in emphasis. If his career were beginning now I have no doubt that he would be wrestling

with the catastrophic potentialities of global warming and population growth. Whether Harrison is an intuitive pessimist, or a sage, is less relevant in this thesis to other evaluative considerations. I am hoping only to establish how fire is used to define his fears, and not to determine the prognostic accuracy of them.

It is not difficult to detect religious and classical components in Harrison's contemplation of the apocalypse. The kinds of symbolisms of fire offered by, for example, biblical examinations of the period preceding the Day of Judgement bear irresistible representational similarities to the realities of nuclear conflagration. The wider eschatology of cults, some of which survive today, manifests an almost generic perception of a flame-engulfed Armageddon which will be both 'cataclysmic and violent' in scale<sup>143</sup> (Baumgartner, 1999, p.1). That Harrison loathes fundamentalism in all of its manifestations does not inhibit his use of the imagery of *Revelation* as a kind of perverse mirror to that secular 'Day of Judgement' when posterity, if humanity survives, judges the actions of the present. Equally, the scarred, fire-ravaged plains of Troy in Euripides's tragedy *Hecuba* provide much food for thought for the poet. That Harrison has rehearsed, re-rehearsed and reconfigured Hecuba's sense of absolute loss and isolation many times in prose and drama suggests that this tragic moment has shaped and crystallized the poet's preoccupations arguably more than any other. The tableau, in Harrison's imagining, is a metonym for destruction, for suffering and displacement on a grand scale; the plains of Troy become an extended metaphor for the fire-stormed city of Dresden as much as for obliterated Hiroshima. The poet is drawn to the image of Hecuba as others such as R. S. Thomas are drawn to the symbol of the Cross, and the figures of Christ and Hecuba are united to the extent that they both define the experience of suffering. The image of Hecuba is, in Harrison's own words, one of 'total deprivation', her torment a useful figure for the unmitigated despair of the modern refugee. In the following extract from *The Guardian*, the poet underlines Euripides's ongoing relevance in tones of characteristic certainty :

In my notebooks where I glue pictures among the drafts of translations from the Greek tragedies I've adapted for the stage, is the recurring image of an old woman appealing to the camera that has captured her agony, or to the heavens that ignore it, in front of a devastated home or before her

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<sup>143</sup> Frederic Baumgartner's (1999) survey of millennial cultism confirms the generality of such beliefs.

murdered dead. They are all different women from many places on earth with the same gesture of disbelief, despair and denunciation. They are in Sarajevo, Kosovo, Grozny, Gaza, Ramallah, Tbilisi, Baghdad, Falluja – women in robes and men in metal helmets as in the Trojan war. Under them all, over the years, I have scribbled “Hecuba”. My notebooks are bursting with Hecubas. (Harrison, 2005, *The Guardian* online).

I can confirm Harrison’s persistence respecting the annotation in his notebooks. The ‘Hecubas’ are ubiquitous and their frequency seems symptomatic of his need to reinforce connections in his own mind, even where those connections are stretched to breaking point by a spurious sense of parity. Alongside images of the world’s stateless, displaced, and aggrieved are photographs of London ‘bag ladies’ whose homelessness might not be seen to confer tragic status by the standards of Harrison’s own definition in the newspaper article. He is also a great literalist, which is why there is so little light between his reiterative, alliterative prose and his similarly vigorous poetry. The ‘hammering’ of despair and the inventories of defacement in this extract find many equivalences in Harrison’s adaptation of *Hecuba*, which adds accretion to guttural accretion : ‘Instead of grinding me into the grave / Zeus grooms me for more grief, only grimmer !’ (Euripides, 2005, p.9). It is fortunate that Harrison has a persuasive sincerity because the lack of subtlety threatens to destabilize tone here. But he is completely preoccupied. Hecuba is a perpetual reminder of the potential for statelessness, for refugeeism, and Harrison is obliged to reflect on this single image at Thrace which is itself backlit by the ubiquitous fires of Troy, as though a sense of the tragic could be inferred through the focus of their flames. The prospect of the execution of Hecuba’s daughter Polyxena as a ‘blood-gift’ to the ghost of Achilles overwhelms the mother, and Harrison, in the voice of Polyxena, conveys the latter’s resignation in metaphors which meld the sense of an overpowering sun with the ritual of cremation (Euripides, 2005, p.15).

Even before I’m murdered, my heart melts  
from my mother’s keening; hers melts from mine.  
Daylight, sun, I can still call your name  
but only live one moment in your fire  
before the sword-thrust at Achilles’ pyre.  
(Euripides, 2005, p.17).

And the extended metaphor may usefully be expanded to incorporate the withering, or in this instance, ‘melting’ agency of the sun as it appears to inform heightened emotional

vulnerability. The body of Polyxena will shortly be joined in figurative union with Achilles, but in her own crematory pyre. Harrison's purpose, although the words are adapted from the Greek, is as clearly defined as George Steiner's general invocation in *The Grammars of Creation* to 'Picture to yourself the slow death of a tortured child' (Steiner, 2001, p.33). Both writers appear bent on making their interpretations of unpalatable truths inescapable, on creating a focus out of shocking pain. But most significantly they appear keen to establish the continuing relevance of the tragic figure in an otherwise meaningless universe. For Harrison, the 'blackened rubble' of 'Troy's burning' occupies the same frame of reference as the crematory pyres at Thrace (Euripides, 2005, p.35). The burning sun which oversees all things and acts as a mirror to the victimhood, vengeance and guilt of the human protagonists creates a kind of focus for audience inference, precisely as it was intended to do in Harrison's adaptation of Racine's *Phèdre - Phaedra Britannica*. Harrison's symbolically-pregnant vision, then, is apocalyptic in tone and usually mitigated by a sense of besieged hope: Hecuba, though utterly deracinated by the circumstance of the Trojan wars, survives, as do many of the despairing women of Grozny and Falluja. To paraphrase Harrison in an interview with Michael Ignatieff on the subject of Euripides's *Trojan Women*, Hecuba survives and achieves faint consolation in the prospect of being remembered, almost, it might be said, as an archetype of suffering.<sup>144</sup>

The roughly linear trajectory of this body of work has proceeded from the starting point of childhood reverie in the first chapter, to the fully 'awakened' adult awareness of what now appears to be a period of resignation. If the same broad fire binary of construction and destruction has informed Harrison's work and therefore my thesis throughout, my aim here is to consolidate and to move the earlier materials towards an interpretative cohesion. The sense of finality which colours Harrison's discourse at every turn is a fitting abstraction upon which to hang a closing consideration of fire's dualism, and I hope that a persuasive argument in support of fire's significance in his work, at least until relatively recent times, will explain, if not excuse, my frequent reiteration of the salient contradictions. As the poet's work has proceeded through apocalypses of nuclear conflagration, and crematory ovens first dimly apprehended from post-war newsreels as a

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<sup>144</sup> Interview first broadcast on BBC2 in the *Late Show* slot, 30 June, 1993.

small boy, it is also fitting that ash, fire's residue and a useful metaphor for oblivion, should make frequent appearances in the poems. Further, and, with some irony, it is an inescapable characteristic of Harrison's work of the last twenty five years or so that he finds an outlet in ice as well as fire. Where ash is used to render a kind of finitude – the 'cold clinker', for example, of cremated soldiers packed in 'army-issue urns'<sup>145</sup> – ice is conceived as a figurative representation of the irrevocable 'hardening' of dementia, or as the frozen backdrop to existential considerations such as are described in Harrison's relatively recent play *Fram*. Frozen landscapes, by one reckoning, are landscapes without hope which 'bury' reason and metaphorically 'lock' the future against the possibility of survival. Harrison's preoccupation may partly be a reaction to his own advancing age, but his approach is too measured to be driven exclusively by intimations of personal mortality. In one sense, narratives of death and destruction like the Gulf War poem 'A Cold Coming' are katabatic journeys, and in this instance the reader is guided through an Infernal wasteland by the ghost of an Iraqi soldier turned, significantly, to charcoal by enemy fire against the apocalyptic backdrop of a marooned and destroyed armoured division. The fragments of war are spread far and wide like the wreckage of Phaethon's chariot in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, a connection which incidentally corroborates Anthony O'Hear's thesis that the destructive manifestations of modern science and technology often find an uncanny, possibly originating, simulacrum in myth, magic and the imagination (O'Hear, 1988, p.44). Modern science, O'Hear suggests, is inadequate to the task of accurately expressing human tendencies which are inherently driven by anthropomorphism and symbolism (p.74). Phaethon is punished for his juvenile hubris by being struck out of the sky by a thunderbolt from the god Jupiter in order to save the world from the boy's recklessness. It is not difficult to infer an association between the myth and the protagonists in the Gulf War: the greater fire of the US arsenal is brought 'righteously' to bear on the outrageous hubris of Saddam's feeble variant. The 'pretender' is roundly punished and the rectitude of Western foreign policy is summarily vindicated.

But the central conceit here is the idea of the imagined cryogenic suspension of the soldier's semen in order to facilitate a sense of human continuity. Whilst the frozen sperm is a deliberate counter to the heat of both battle and desert, it enables a

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<sup>145</sup> See the poem 'Ballad of the Geldshark.' (CP, p.114).



contradictory utility in that it engenders the possibility of life. Harrison's representation of ice is one, therefore, of deliberate contradiction. The ice which contains the metaphorical potential for mirroring the final abandonment of the mind to the 'freezing' of Alzheimer's as is described in the poem 'The Mother of the Muses' and the film *Black Daisies for the Bride*, also holds the prospect of re-birth in suspense.<sup>146</sup> Or it would if the means for cryogenic suspension had been available to an impoverished Iraqi soldier. He is a victim of the US-led 'Turkey shoot', or the mopping-up operation which occurred when the effectively-defeated Iraqi army were in full retreat. The victors, with the huge array of military hardware vouchsafed by wealth and power, also invest in methods of cryogenic freezing in the event of untimely American deaths in action. The Iraqi loses his life, and the means of further propagation. He is twice victim.

The katabatic narrative which has defined all subsequent others is Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, and it is ironic not to say counter-intuitive to find an infernal vision culminating, in the final circle of Hell, in a featureless plain of ice and murky darkness. In a sense, Dante's metaphorical thinking is completely coherent: if ice represents a kind of absence or separation from feeling, from an engagement with the warmth of the human world and from God's love, then it is better suited to notions of punishment and expiation of the most extreme order. For their sin of treachery, the 'shades' of Hell are utterly removed from human contact in line with the restitutive symmetry of *ordo poenarum*. They are literally locked in the ice in perpetuity with no means of escape or redemption. The bleak interior worlds of the dementia sufferers in the poem and film/poem noted above are both conceived against cold exterior landscapes. If Harrison's metaphorical connection to some degree fails because it subordinates the genuine propensity for animation in the senile mind to the supposition, instead, of inexorable destruction, it is nevertheless intended to represent a gradual separation of individual mind from human engagement. The 'punishment', for Harrison, who recognised the early symptoms in his own father, is obviously of a different order to Dante's view but it is clear from the bleakness of the former's tableaux that the arbitrary cruelty of Alzheimer's is a defining vision of

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<sup>146</sup> The gradual 'locking' away of the mind is mirrored in the physical decline of the body, as Harrison strives to suggest in the poem 'Next Door III', which describes the 'the body's final freeze-up with no thaw.' (CP, p.142).

annihilation and terror.<sup>147</sup> It is also clear that the poet equates the final stages of dementia – loss of language along with thought processes – with human annihilation on a universal scale. Not insignificantly, the ‘shades’ in Dante’s ninth circle of Hell are doomed to eternal silence except for the briefest of expiatory moments, when some relay the history of their punishment to the writer and his spirit guide Virgil, reinforcing their own grief in the process and in so doing, illustrating the approximation to silence of futile words. John Freccero, writing of the icy wilderness of the final circle, finds there a symbiosis of landscape and loss:

The movement from *Dolore* to *Digiuno* in the last lines of Ugolino’s story marks the waning of his consciousness and his humanity. It is at this point that language is extinguished and that nature takes over. (Freccero, 1986, p.162).

It is as if the frozen wasteland is a metaphor for the final ‘locking’ of language, and the end of human sentience. Ugolino’s unconscious gnawing at the skull of another damned ‘shade’, Ruggieri, represents a deliberate perversion of the Eucharist since the *Corpus Christi* is of itself an image of unsullied purity. The impulse appears bestial, the degradation of the individual complete. Harrison sees the same degradation, the same autonomic urges unconsciously satisfied in the end stages of dementia: the impulses to eat, to urinate, to defecate. The symptoms are described against the significant backdrop of winter landscapes in the film *Black Daisies for the Bride* and, as noted earlier, in the poem ‘The Mother of the Muses’. But the crucial loss is that of language because the state of silence, where, in Freccero’s words ‘nature takes over’, mirrors the greater silence of a world bereft of meaning. If the skeletal and leafless winter trees in the grounds of the mental hospital in *Black Daisies* are a reminder of the declining tomography of the brain’s synaptic patterns, then the impression is diagrammatic and lifeless, without electrical charge. Harrison’s scene commentary describes the ‘bare brainscan trees’ in metaphorical terms, as ‘an X-Ray of forgetfulness’ (CFP, p.190). There is no sense of spring’s re-birth, and it is significant that the film narrative’s protagonists are often perceived, like the winter trees, at a distance, through windows and glass in locked doors, or down telescoped corridors, their frame of reference limited by visual constraint. The

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<sup>147</sup> The poem ‘Long Distance II’ (CP, p.145) explores his father’s grief at the loss of his wife, but hints, in the almost-hallucinatory nature of his imaginings, at the onset of dementia.

destination of High Royds hospital is as final as Larkin intended the labyrinthine impersonality of certain wards in a Hull hospital to appear, in his remorselessly depressing poem 'The Building' (Larkin, 1988, p.191). Although the patients of High Royds dementia wards in the film retain some semblance of sentience until the final stages – they occupy the 'lighted rooms' of the distant landscape of memory, to appropriate Larkin's memorable phrase from another poem, 'The Old Fools' – the prognosis is as terminal as a train to Auschwitz (Larkin, 1988, p.196). Winter, snow and ice act as clear metaphors for a sense of an ending. In Hell, and as Freccero finds, Dante's chosen landscape 'entraps its subject in an immobility which is the very opposite of the dynamics of language and of desire' (Freccero, 1986, p.134). The patients of High Royds are rendered similarly immobile in the 'ice' of mental degeneration; 'age's icy caves' in Shelley's metaphor become the final repository for this retreat towards stasis (Shelley, 1907, p.188). Their hospital 'incarceration' is, as Lucy Burke notes in an article on *Black Daisies*, a metaphor for the cognitive losses of Alzheimer's and ultimately for the inaccessibility of 'self' (Burke, 2003, p.4). Harrison's 'dulciloquy' and 'glossolalia', which may sometimes amount to little more than rhubarb and babble according to his own ambiguous definitions, take on the wonderful character of noise in a world of silence. But his recognition of some sense of consolation for dementia in the form of mental reorientation through song and the natural rhythms of language looks counter-intuitive in a film which foregrounds the vagaries of inexorable decline. The 'Daisy, Daisy' of collective Music Hall memory appears stylized and, to some degree, forced in the filmic context. The occluded borderline between the actuality of lived experience – the film is a work of fiction only up to a point – and artistic representation which Burke sees as ground-breakingly novel, may instead amount to an irreparable structural fracture (Burke, 2003, p.7). The memory of joyous colour and cacophony is bound to disappear into icy metaphors in the end, subsuming human noise into silence and rendering the earlier sense of purpose scant indeed:

Your steady blue-eyed gaze is  
through blizzards to black daisies,  
where once there grew of every hue,  
life as full as a flower stall.  
(CFP, p.208).

The word 'blizzard', as a means of describing the gradual erosion and eventual obliteration of language and thought process, is repeated often in *Black Daisies*. It is a convenient and fortuitous 'structural gift', to paraphrase Joe Kelleher, so that when in the narrative the dense snow mirrors the wedding-day confetti recalled by one of the dementia sufferers, the connection may be a cliché, but it does not, by virtue of its very sincerity, exploit vestigial cognition for dramatic ends (Kelleher, 1996, p.62). And the remains of awareness too will finally disappear: 'lost in mists I won't see clearing, / lost in the blizzard of days, the burying blizzard of days' (CFP, p.201).

The end, or Hell in Dante, is punishment without redemption, whereas the prospective end for the human race may, in Harrison's estimation, be an inevitability of unheeded warnings. The truth is circular like the 'O' of oblivion which plays such a central role in Sandie Byrne's examination of Harrison's work, but also a symbolic continuum containing the possibility of regeneration. Harrison's series of ecologically-conscious sonnets collectively called *Art & Extinction* and forming a part of the extended *School of Eloquence* sequence, contain the following parallel amidst reflections of species extinction – 'the poet preserved beneath deep permaverse' (from 'Killing Time', CP, p.209). Alert to the possibility of science cloning a mammoth frozen in the Tundra's ice and thereby breathing the organic heat of re-birth into an otherwise extinct species, Harrison uses the poem's deliberate affirmation of continuity to make a characteristically ambiguous connection. Does 'permaverse', a neologistic variant of 'permafrost' hint at temporary suspension with the possibility of poetry, and therefore language's, survival? Or does the verb 'preserve', as Byrne suggests, concede the inevitable 'divisiveness of high art' with the corollary metaphorical implication of verse forever distanced from popular appreciation by the unbreakable 'ice' of elitism? (Byrne, 1998, p.226). Either interpretation is reasonable, but for the purposes of this chapter I am concerned to stress a tension between fire and ice which enables Harrison to contemplate the sharpest end of the human condition: the viability of survival against the increasing likelihood of extinction. And it must be said that his recent near abandonment of the former metaphor echoes, and is echoed by, a decline in hope. I aim to conclude this thesis by identifying a distinct diminishment of the earlier compulsion in favour of a symbolism of decline.

For all its clear limitations as a work of drama – and it nearly sinks under the weight of Harrison’s accumulated existential preoccupations – the play *Fram* describes a frozen landscape which fixes its two central protagonists into inescapable proximity, and one, crazed, doesn’t emerge. The Arctic, in Harrison’s depressing perception, acts as a metonym for death and his choice of backdrop may embody a recognition of the ‘freezing’ of his own declining poetic powers as much as the appropriation of a deliberate literary device. It is almost as if his imagination is becoming overwhelmed by clouding intimations of death. Birds on the wing - some cremated in firestorms or nuclear holocausts, some extinct ‘resonances’ of a former vitality, others metaphors for the soaring human voice - animated very many of his earlier poems, wherein the possibility of redemption was vouchsafed by those other grand avian metaphors of freedom and hope. But the oppositional counterpoints of death and hope seem less sharply defined now, suggesting that ice is finally closing over the volcano of invention as much as of survival. The deliberate and powerful autobiographical persona which Peter Robinson rightly identifies as a consistent driver in Harrison’s work - the polemical class and family affiliated voice of the *School* sonnets - has withered with age, occasioning a similar attrition of symbolic emphasis (Robinson, 1998, p.98). The dynamism of fire is a casualty of that loss of engagement.

## Part Two : Katabasis - Plumbing the Faecal Furnace

Rachel Falconer's comprehensive selection and analysis of descent narratives in post-war Western literature identifies a generic tendency to equate the 'crowded, chaotic spaces of the Catholic Baroque inferno' with modern images of ghettos, concentration camps and nuclear destruction (Falconer, 2005, p.14). Her persuasive accounts of the works of George Steiner, Theodor Adorno, and especially the 'witness' prose of Primo Levi, corroborate Alasdair Gray's depressing fictional speculation in his novel, *Lanark : A Life in Four Books*, that the association is indicative of a fundamental psychological proclivity :

Modern afterworlds are always infernos, never paradisos, presumably because the modern secular imagination is more capable of debasement than exaltation.  
(Gray, 1994, p.489).

And certainly the sense of 'debasement', if that is an appropriate word, overbalances the wine, the sex and the *carpe diem* which Harrison asserts as consolatory alternatives to the continuing ubiquity of human tragedy. His intuitive awareness of the descent narrative, the proximity of its influence, is acknowledged at least as much in general terms as in the serviceability of striking metaphors. If the poet's usage of ice as a metaphor for annihilation, for the loss of language, for death, suggests a foreknowledge of, and probable connection with, Dante's envisioning of a frozen waste of hopelessness in the final circle of Hell, then his loose appropriation of the katabatic approach in several narratives indicates a wider familiarity with Dante's forms. The tiny nuggets of hope which litter the katabatic narratives of the film/poem *The Shadow of Hiroshima* and the poem 'A Cold Coming' are almost completely mitigated by the sense of finality which also appears to infect Harrison's more recent journeys. Harrison's preoccupation, to use Falconer's reading of the genre, appears to be characteristic of those post-war writers who did not experience the material reality of the Camps or of Hiroshima, but who 'inherit

the legacy of the Holocaust (and) live on in a spectral world of infernal memories’  
(Falconer, 2005, p. 28).

‘Nuggets’ is, in fact, a useful word for describing that thing of value which is got from protracted searching and which is an unlikely find in an otherwise unrewarding landscape. In an unpublished series of verses based on *Inferno*, and which may be found in his personal archive at Leeds, Harrison delves into the detritus of Hell’s hot ‘sludge’ to find meaning. Both pastiche, in the sense of Dante’s clear appeal to Harrison’s poetic sensibility, and parody, in that Harrison is satirizing Dante’s uses of religion, the text engages with the ‘salvation’ of secular truth. Harrison’s ‘dive’ into the shit of the Underworld – he is both narrator and guided pilgrim - is at once scatologically comedic, and an entirely serious corroboration of his much-reiterated interest in the alchemical powers of the furnace. After the narrator accuses Dante, his guide through Hell, of religious irrelevance and misplaced love for Beatrice, Dante comes to an accord with his ‘pilgrim’ by encouraging him to face the tragedy of his own century squarely:

He looked into the fiery shit, this heaving mass:  
If you want the poem you’re writing to survive  
And have a monument like me in brass

I dare you now to take a poet’s dive  
into this burning shit, this fiery mass  
that is your century and come back alive,

snorkel the Malebolge’s sludge to find  
that book, now somewhere molten, that I cast  
back into time disgusted with Mankind,

and etch it, when it’s cooled, with words that last.  
Time’s running out on all of you, and fast.  
(Poetry Notebooks, P5, p.151).<sup>148</sup>

Hope is alchemised here, and the *Divine Comedy* re-inscribed in flame and made relevant to the modern condition. The dialogue, which extends over many verses, foreshadows the fractious diptych between Harrison and skinhead in that most contentious of narratives, v. The contemplation of the earth’s ‘groynes’ beneath the subsiding graveyard, the passage

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<sup>148</sup> The verses quoted may not be an exact rendition of Harrison’s words which on the page are only partially legible in places, but a general interpretation is possible, I feel. The fragments are entitled ‘Writing with Light’.

of geological and human time, must underpin Rachel Falconer's belief that v. is Harrison's principal 'descent' narrative<sup>149</sup> even if there are more plausible candidates. In these fragments Harrison is still in the business of trying to conjure something durable from excrement, and in the process of re-inscribing Dante's purpose it might appear that he is advocating his own claim to longevity. He intends the endless banging of his poetical/polemical drum to achieve, at the very least, a strategy for survival: the 'words that last', the pearls growing in the hot excreta, are also supposed to be his own. Words are the key to Harrison's empathic sense, but also to his sense of self. Harrison wants to make a difference, and to be remembered for it. Shit, as Edith Hall's diverting essay on coprology in Harrison's oeuvre affirms-, is everywhere in his work, and mostly with positive metaphorical connotations. He finds value in effluent. The bog snorkelling in 'Writing with Light' may recover a sense of continuity inscribed in the written word, even whilst it is unavoidably reminiscent of the scene in the film *Trainspotting* where the character of Renton (Ewan McGregor) disappears down the lavatory in an hallucinatory search for an anal suppository. Although he may know nothing of this film sequence, or of Martin Luther's revelation about divine justice being conceived in the privy at Wittenberg Monastery, Harrison would no doubt take vicarious pleasure in the Freudian association between, in Norman O. Brown's words '[...] higher spiritual activity and lower organs of the body' (Brown, 1959, p.203).

Elsewhere, excreta is a metaphor for the bottom-feeding proletariat, for the degradations of 'popular' culture whose effluvial outpourings are mostly lost to the bourgeois world, but from whose ranks sprang Harrison himself, staking a claim to linguistic parity. Harrison, for Hall, subverts the conventional narrative approach where, if excrement is treated at all, it almost always bears negative interpretations and embodies that which is unpleasant to human experience (Hall, 2007, p.88 ). Plumbing the evil molten depths, the *Malebolge* of the penultimate circle of Hell, Harrison does not engage with the icy concentric plain which it surrounds. Nor has he yet sidelined the conflicted, but ambiguously affirmatory tone which characterised much of his work, until recently. His failure to mention the final circle of Hell is, of course, coincidental; his choice of

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<sup>149</sup> In her recent book, *Hell in Contemporary Literature* (2005), Falconer includes Harrison in an inventory of users of the form, without giving an example from his oeuvre. A subsequent email to the present writer, of 2 Nov, 2008, confirmed that her opinion was informed principally by v.



landscape is necessitated by thematic considerations. But the temptation to recognise a transition towards hopelessness in Harrison's work, and to find a figurative connection between the ninth circle of Hell and the landscape of *Fram* is great.

When in Chapter Two of this thesis I suggested that the poet's act of investing his father's tongue with fire in some of the family sonnets was an act of empowerment which approached a sense of transcendence, linguistically speaking, I was hoping to show that his effort performs the same cleansing/regenerative ministry as Dante's in his depiction of the flames of Purgatory. However, the fate awaiting the 'Counsellors of Fraud' in the twenty seventh Canto of Hell – the rendering of inarticulacy in the terrible heat of the punishing flames – comes close to describing Harrison's own fears for the future of humanity. The essence of language and the spontaneity of speech, which are as important for Harrison as for Dante, are removed when 'The harmonious passage from thought to word is disrupted', and flame and sinner become one (Foster and Boyde, 1981, p.50). The punishment is as close to a reversal of the apostolic tongues of fire as is possible. And it subverts Harrison's mandate for human survival. Falconer's noting of the huge infiltration of katabatic narratives since 1945 holds true for this poet: his engagement with fire, and subsequently with ice, mirrors Dante's progress through the *Commedia*. The trajectory, for Falconer, is vicarious, achieved without personal experience or complicity: 'If the victims and survivors of the Holocaust experienced Hell as a material reality then we who inherit the legacy of the Holocaust live on in a spectral world of infernal memories' (Falconer, 2005, p.28).

Harrison's engagement with *Inferno*, and the sense of embattled hope which his dialogue with Dante commends to the future, is given renewed, albeit extremely faint, expression in the katabatic exploration of *The Shadow of Hiroshima*. For Joe Kelleher, the imagination of the film's audience is in fact 'blind-sided' by the illusory impression of a 'comfortably *redemptive* fiction' until it is re-orientated through the filter of Harrison's own ideological and emotional agenda (Kelleher, 1996, pp.71-72). The film/poem deals with unprecedented nuclear destruction and, using fires both figurative and literal, distils the salience of Harrison's warning and recommendation in 'Writing with Light'. The faecal nugget pulled from the steaming *Malebolge* is reinvented as Dante's best hope for preventing the apparent proclivity of humans for destruction; a prophylactic against a

spiral towards oblivion begun with the dropping of 'Little Boy' on Hiroshima. Fire, in *Shadow*, is embodied in the kind of temperature which turns building materials to glass and people to silhouettes, dark outlines of the once material; death is achieved in huge concentrated numbers in heat which equals the sun's. Hiroshima is a suitable landscape for working on the nihilistic human imagination in order to avoid repetition. Guided by one of the victims of the attack, 'Shadow San', himself one of the people made silhouette, the reader is taken on a journey of descent into its terrible aftermath which transforms, through dialogue and philosophical negotiation with the present, into a consideration, ultimately, of human survival. The narrative is therefore a 'descent' into futurity to some degree, and it operates on the cinema audience in kaleidoscopic terms. The camera blends frames of reference in both the present and the past; its mode of presentation resting, uneasily for Kelleher, somewhere between drama and documentary (Kelleher, 1996, p.70). The disordered sense of time and place - the camera's eye roves from scenes of apocalyptic destruction and burned bodies to meeting places of the present with sustained alacrity – is unified only through the agency of fire imageries, if in fact unity is possible. Fire is ubiquitous in *Shadow* as it is also in the more recent *Prometheus*. Its use is visual and symbolic. The blending process effected in the alchemical furnace of a nuclear epicentre produces a dystopian 'revelation':<sup>150</sup> the stripping away of layers of human skin mirrors the denuding of the city itself, and an implicit metaphorical connection is forged between the skeletal framework of the remaining buildings and their former occupants:

The inferno flayed me as I fanned (CFP, p.237)

And further :

His schoolmates' shrieks from blackened lips  
haunt Hara San each time he dips  
his brush in water from the stream  
to give relief to those who scream,  
all his dying schoolmates, those  
whose skin slid off their flesh like clothes.  
Like clothes, three sizes oversize,  
their flayed skin loosens from their thighs.

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<sup>150</sup> The Hiroshima epicentre is described, in the American expression, as 'Ground Zero' in the film/poem (CFP, p. 241). The words were invested with a whole new significance subsequent to the events of 11 September, 2001. The association, one suspects, will not have been lost on Harrison.

Burns and blisters, bloated blebs  
burst as the Motoyasu ebbs,  
the tidal Motoyasu trails  
black flaps of flesh like chiffon veils.  
Like kimonos with their belts untied  
black sloughed-off skin floats on the tide.  
(CFP, p.241).

Here past and present meld on a 'canvas' of remembrance where the symbolic waters of the Motoyasu river signally fail to quench the fires of an anguish which goes on being re-enacted in a circle of oblivion. The use of brutal consonants describes a loss of hope to some extent; what is 'revealed' after the destruction is not a new teleology, but rather the risen phoenix of corporate, US-informed, identity, which for Harrison signals a cultural diminution. There is little room for redemption in the Dantean sense: the flaying of the flesh in flame does not prepare the departed for the ascent from Purgatory to Heaven, and it must be acknowledged that Harrison's militant and polemical atheism closes the door on the possibility of an alternative to finality, even in the sense of Eastern philosophy. The 'shadows' of Hiroshima are not, as John Freccero notes of the 'shades' in Dante's Purgatory, relinquishing their former selves in preparation for 'the beginning of new life' (Freccero, 1986 p.25). A poetics of conversion is not extended to them; their fate is final and they are redeemed only through the reiteration of commemorative narratives. The injustice of this fate, and the fates of the millions of victims of concentration camps, makes an irony of Dante's sense of rectitude, of divine *Justizia*. What remains is Harrison's somewhat facile connection between the idea of inexorable oblivion and what he perceives to be a wholly other 'shadow': that of the cultural degradation of wholesale Americanisation. The Coke cans and ubiquitous neon advertising of modern Japan, together with the specifically indigenous phenomenon of the 'Love Hotels', make up a detailed inventory of pejorative connotation in the narrative. Though, as Kelleher notes, the appearance of such an inventory muddies the interpretative terrain. 'Love Hotels' may convey superficiality but in the contexts of Hiroshima and Nagasaki they also come, ironically, to symbolize the kinds of emotional bond which were riven, in huge numbers, after the nuclear attacks. They are a means of presenting the past through the cultural and economic focus of the present (Kelleher, 1996, p.72).

Birds are another means of establishing a connection between world-shaping historical events and the re-focused present. A not uncommon conceit in Harrison's work, they are often identified with fire, especially airborne fire. The image of birds cremated on the wing figures both for freedom of expression, and for the fragility of hope. The birds caught up in the Dresden firestorm in the poem 'The Mother of the Muses' mirror those of Hiroshima in a parity of metonymy whose human victims each appear to point a single carbonised finger at the perpetrators of mass destruction of whatever national shade, and for whatever purpose. They are the embodiment of freedom and natural innocence, and they share the same element, the same aerial space, as the means of destruction. Birds are therefore defining symbols of that delicate binary of hope and hopelessness, and there is very little of the former in the Japanese poem. Here, the fragility of their symbolic position is echoed in the Promethean scope of the traditional Northern French 'Wren' myth as recounted by J. G. Frazer. Returning from God with the gift of fire, the birds are burned on the wing on the return journey as a punishment for the hubris of flying too quickly (Frazer, 1930, p.190). The immolation appears as inevitable as the fact of fire's existence and the prognosis, as the narrative of *Shadow* develops, also becomes increasingly clear. A rhetorical dialectic, conducted between the narrator and his own worst imaginings and first given expression in an earlier poem about nuclear holocaust, 'The Birds of Japan', offers the reader little beyond Hobson's choice :

Did the birds burst into song as they ignited  
 above billowing waves of cloud up in the sky,  
 hosannahs too short-lived to have alighted  
 on a Bomb-Age Bashō, or a Hokusai ?

Apostles of that pinioned Pentecast  
 of chirrupings cremated on the wing  
 will have to talk their ghosts down, or we're lost.  
 Until we know what they sang, who can sing ?  
 (CP, p.203).

The sonority and animation of the poetic voice in the shape of two historical Japanese figures - one a writer, one a painter -<sup>151</sup> is equated with birdsong, and both are lost to the possibility of a future 'Pentecast', itself a compound neologistic noun which splices the Apostolic notion of a fire 'anointing' with a nuclear 'kiss' of death. The end of language is

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<sup>151</sup> Both Bashō and Hokusai make reappearances in *Shadow*.

signified, and the avoidance of such a catastrophe is predicated on a process of listening to the voices, the songs, of history. The artist Anselm Kiefer responded to the devastation of Germany's landscape after the Second World War by appropriating the lyrics of a folk song, 'The Cockchafer's Song', for the purposes of metamorphosing a significant metaphor for memory into an art form which will endure. His picture, 'Cockchafer Fly', depicts an abstract scene of flame-thrown and sterile destruction animated only by the remaining resonance of the insect: the song embodied in the title with which it is associated in folk memory (in Lauterwein, 2007, p.139). The Cockchafer, or the survival of the idea of human continuity through the offices of folk memory, necessarily vouchsafes a symbolic figure for those voices silenced in the conflict. Harrison's concluding question in 'The Birds of Japan' offers no such hope. Birdsong is a metaphor for the human voice, and an inter-textual bifurcation is suggested at that point in *Shadow* in which the uplifted voices of the ghostly celebrants in an empty Baseball stadium are transformed by 'Shadow San' into a 'choir' of Holocaust victims:

'Where you see baseball I can hear  
all those thousands who can't cheer.  
Listen, can't you hear the choir  
of those who perished in the fire ?'  
(CFP, p.242.)

Shadow San's appeal is the appeal of the dead for remembrance, and its directness, though dealing with ghostly abstractions, is characteristic of Harrison's tendency to literalism. The tension which is created by the presentation of abstract ideas in literal forms renders inter-textual connection-making difficult, but the threads which unite Harrison's relentless re-workings of thematic preoccupations seem sufficiently durable to enable some inferences. The choirs of the perished in *Shadow* whose voices are silence must echo those 'choirs' in 'Birds of Japan' whose chirrupings are 'cremated on the wing'. The immediacy of the atomic 'moment' unites and to some degree blends animal with human, past with present, and material with symbol. But the association is again defined in literal terms. Here, for example, Shadow San speaks yearningly for his girlfriend who was also lost in the attack: 'Mitsufuji's little dove/'s so like my own cremated love' (CFP, p.249). There is no sense of ambiguity in the connection between past and present, between Mitsufuji's commemorative peace-celebrants - which, as though parodying the

act of remembrance are actually pigeons – and the innocence of the girl, Sonoko. Similarly, the urgency of Harrison’s intention directs his audience’s attention to the cyclical significance of such acts. But repetition of the time of the attack, 8.15, also inscribes Shadow San’s endlessly revisited suffering.<sup>152</sup> His fate is Dantean in its infiniteness, and it is instructive that his brutally alliterative ‘annual’ death should be mirrored by the destruction of a symbol of peace: ‘Before my eyes burst from the heat / a blazing dove falls at my feet’ (CFP, p.251). The image is crippling even if its expression is symptomatic of Harrison’s instinct for morbidity. And it is compellingly and uncharacteristically visual. Harrison has not been a witness to the detonation of an atomic weapon but he is drawn to the mental image of burning birds in the same way that one reported observer of a nuclear test on Christmas Island was preoccupied with tumbling, agonised birds almost to the exclusion of all other visual considerations:

And suddenly I could see all these birds, I could see the birds that I’d been watching for days before. [...] And they were smoking. Their feathers were on fire. And they were doing cartwheels. [...] Several seconds, it seemed like, long enough for me to see the birds crash into the water. They were sizzling, smoking. They weren’t vaporized, it’s just that they were absorbing such intense radiation that they were being consumed by the heat. Their feathers were on fire. They were blinded. [...] Instead there were just these smoking, twisting, hideously contorted birds crashing into things. (in Scheer, 1982, pp.16-17).

The observer’s gaze is temporarily transfixed by the scene unfolding before his eyes. His preoccupation seems counter-intuitive in the wider context, yet the depth of his focus invests the images of ‘hideous’ contortion with metonymic potency. The birds here take on an unintended symbolic resonance - unintended because the observation bears the immediacy of reportage - whilst in *Shadow* the intention is poetically explicit. From his portrayal of the ongoing suffering of Shadow San it is possible to infer that Harrison is unable to shake off his own burden of remembrance, or fear for the future. The ghost does more than act as a telling reminder: the bird at his feet is similarly without voice and the sense of hope embodied in its former flight is utterly undermined.

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<sup>152</sup> As the clock, and the hour, in Virginia Woolf’s novel *Mrs Dalloway* constantly underline the war-induced paranoia of her character Septimus Warren Smith, Harrison’s 8.15 marks the time of Shadow San’s endless revisitation of terror.

It is significant that the closing sequences of *Shadow*, which partly describe the fifty year commemoration of the attack through the image of the release of doves/pigeons into the skies above Hiroshima, should counterpoint any raddled moment of hope with the premonition of birds of prey circling for the kill. The connotation – the hawks ‘cruise’ the skies like fighter/bombers – is characteristically transparent, if not facile: ‘Peace’ has limited currency in a landscape of interminable conflict. The questions which the final lines pose precisely mirror those in the poem ‘Birds of Japan’, and are surely rhetorical :

Pigeons/Peace-doves brawl and fight.  
Is the world at peace tonight ?  
Or are we all like Shadow San  
facing inferno with a fan ?  
(CFP, p.254).

We feel as though we know the answer here, and the note of unambiguous resignation is inferred by Antony Rowland - ‘Harrison’s conclusion to *The Shadow of Hiroshima* is much more pessimistic: there is no possibility of catharsis in the portent of future catastrophe’ (Rowland, 2001, p.68). If the annual act of remembrance, around which one level of this fractured narrative is organised, sounds a dull note of hope, then that hope is dissipated by the end. The paper fan, an artefact of an earlier, more innocent Japanese culture, affords no protection against atomic fire, just as nothing appears to mitigate the terminal decline of the narrator’s sense of the future, and its icy resonance. One of the oppositional poles which Sandie Byrne identifies in Harrison’s work seems dominant in the poet’s imagination from here on: ‘the “terrible muse” is the high-tech fire which could consume poetry and life alike’ (Byrne, 1998, p.237).

The poem ‘A Cold Coming’, conceived a few years before *Shadow* and in response to the first Gulf War, is another katabatic journey. Its emphasis, however, marginalises descriptions of the surrounding landscape in order to foreground abstract ideas of overwhelming power and victimhood, of the negation of hope through poverty and a paucity of choice. The implicit identification of the narrator with ‘spirit guide’, an Iraqi soldier killed in battle, is made visible in Harrison’s refusal to make any concession to indigenous cultural or linguistic nuance. The possibility that his choice of tone and language may compromise authenticity is brushed aside by Harrison on the imperative of necessity; as Rowland notes, he is finding an authentic voice for the genera who can no

longer articulate grief or grievance in any language (Rowland, 2001, p.77). But the negative, and in the end, less than hopeful tone of the narrative goes beyond an appropriation of 'voice' for purposes of redemption: the soldier's rage and grief are Harrison's own, the sense of resignation apparently inevitable. The central narrative conceit – the cryogenic suspension of the semen of three US Marines before entering battle – introduces the notion of a frozen terrain where the possibility of life and continuity is encapsulated, thereby ironizing the deathly stasis with which such a landscape is usually associated. But the certainty of immortality which is vouchsafed for these 'three wise Marines' is sharply contrasted with the fate of the Iraqi. They are, by lucky accident of birth, privileged to likely survival and are therefore almost 'masters of their fate' in both senses (CP, p.314). The preservation of embryonic life in phials is a privilege denied to the Iraqi soldier, whose words are suspended on a counterweight of anger and longing rather than resignation or rapprochement. The longing for female presence and home echoes Harrison's own, and it is conceived as a beneficently warming contrast to the fiery extinguishment of death. The soldier's ghostly retrospective glance recalls the poet's tendency to retreat to the 'hearth' of home and nuptial love in the poem v., when faced with an uncomfortably close antagonism of inveigling voice :

I was filled with such a yearning  
to stay in life as I was burning,

such a longing to be beside  
my wife in bed before I died.  
(CP, p.316).

The dialogue between guide and guided is an heteroglossia in Bakhtinian terms, which is to say that it suggests the refraction of the poet's own voice through the prism of extraneous others, or the subordination of the poetic text to the contextual influences of the poet's own life and emotional engagement with memory. And it is undertaken with a sense of fatalism at its heart. The destruction of the Iraqi's life, here described in his own words and in images of immolation which are also typical of *Shadow*, invokes the spectre of a stripping away to the point of total denudation, a surrendering of flesh and ultimately sentience to an 'armature' behind which is nothingness :

'Don't look away ! I know it's hard  
to keep regarding one so charred,



so disfigured by unfriendly fire  
to think it once burned with desire.

Though fire has flayed off half my features  
they once were like my fellow creatures'.  
(CP, p.317).

The soldier/'guide's' direct address to the narrator/'guided' clearly mirrors Harrison's own reading of the purpose of the Greek Mask: the ever-open eyes which must face human tragedy squarely - a terrifying vision, in Kelleher's words, to somehow 'be coped with' (Kelleher, 1996, p.67). The much-publicized photograph which Harrison appropriated for the front cover of the original book of the poem was clearly intended to shock his audience.<sup>153</sup> It is a hideous representation of a recently killed Iraqi soldier and it becomes the self-referential persona of the figure in the narrative. It is as intentionally literal as that image which confronts the pilgrim in Dante's vision of Purgatory:

Gripping my hands together, I leaned forward  
And, staring at the fire, I recalled  
What human bodies look like burned to death.  
(Dante, 1985, pp.290-291).

Mark Musa's translation here enacts a moment of morbid shock which is momentarily devoid of any sense of the spiritual: one can imagine a reflective, deeply human, pause at this juncture. Harrison's image reinforces the viscera of his similarly brutal wordplay, which extends as far as the noting of a sinister, and ironic, rictus on the face of the skull (CP p.319). Photograph and words combine to confront the audience with the unpalatably blunt reality of war's direct effects, whilst yielding a theatrical reminder of Harrison's literalism. It is fortunate that the majority of Harrison's readers are likely to be white, Western, and Christian by origin if not by inclination, because such literalism might, by one measure, be seen to overrun Muslim sentiments. Cremation - even that achieved as a side-effect of war - is sacrilege in Islam, the whole human body being construed as the inviolable property of Allah. And the fire motifs are relentless: the soldier is severally charred, scorched and roasted. His bones crumble under the weight of their own enfeeblement, and each accretion potentially reinforces any religious offence. The rictus is a thin and cruel parody of that spontaneous physical manifestation of human happiness,

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<sup>153</sup> This, the original version in book form was published in 1991. (See bibliography).

the smile. The picture corroborates Harrison's narrative with brutal documentary evidence, as though he was trying to wrest the poetics of fiction violently into the world of lived experience. The impulse is counter-intuitive in the sense that the act of persuasion undermines the reader's reflexive leaning towards the intense, but safely removed world of the poem. Harrison's intention is characteristic and deliberate; he is imploring his audience to engage with the consequences of war as a prophylactic against future conflict, to re-orientate the diversions and consolations of imaginative inertia towards the sanguine and the visible. Jon Silkin's description of such a philosophy of retreat/inertia is intended to establish the presence of an acceptance, by default, of barbarism:

Because if nothing is left that will inform and erase our cruelty, what can we look forward to but a decline in which the flesh is melted, and charred into a blackness so omnipresent, the act of cruelty so intense and yet ordinarily and banally present, that we shall be glad to die.  
(Silkin, 1973, p.21).

Silkin leans here towards metaphors of fiery suppuration and extinction which ironically mirror Harrison's frontispiece photograph, as though finding confirmation in the charred features of the ever-present 'blackness'. Harrison frequently invokes the Greek Mask as the conduit through which the horrors of existence must be faced, but here, and towards the end of 'A Cold Coming', he appears not to be able to get beyond the sense of hopeless anomie which embodies Silkin's nightmare, so that the Mask renders an irreducibly brutal image instead of the promised amelioration.

The poem's closing couplets form a meditation on absence and dystopian conjecture: of the soldier who can never return home, and of his lost voice. The meeting of West and Middle East in war, and the religious baggage which continues to reinforce a schism of ideologies whose origins pre-date the Crusades, provokes Harrison to a parody of a pilgrimage in the unified image of 'Cross and Crescent' (CP, p.320). The two sides forever, in reality, riven by difference are envisioned conjoined on a pilgrimage to a 'Bethlehem' of the imagination wherein they will never meet, and at the heart of which lies the metaphorical 'frozen phial' of 'cold spunk', a Saviour, 'the congealed geni', who will never be born (CP, p.320). Harrison's tone is depressingly blunt, and the possibility of a secular teleology is as unlikely as that of religious redemption. The fires which charred the soldier are ash, and the skies are dark with huge clouds of burning oil smoke - 'Rainbows seven

shades of black /curved from Kuwait back to Iraq ' (CP, p.320). The landscape of these concluding couplets begins to resemble that of Dante's final circle; the vigour of the earlier fires is extinguished utterly as the cryogenic flasks take on the pallor of the post-apocalypse. Harrison uses 'frozen' three times in five couplets, and reinforces his purpose with 'chilled' and 'cold'. His somewhat vapid address to the effect that 'Mankind' cannot be plucked from the rocks of the future unless the 'World' renounces war is, in any case, sharply undercut by his own vitriolic pessimism – 'a bottled Bethlehem of this come- / curdling Cruise/Scud-cursed millennium' (CP p.320). The final couplet of the poem restores, or now fails to restore, the dead soldier to the narrative:

I went. I pressed REWIND and PLAY  
And I heard the charred man say :

(CP, p.320).

The blank page that follows is the silence which Harrison is committed to filling with words. But where Joe Kelleher sees an attempt to posit an eloquence of pity in the place of the petrifying Gorgon's witheringly empty gaze, I am inclined to infer resignation (Kelleher, 1996, pp.66-67). The ice is beginning to extinguish the fire. The dead soldier in the photograph is a profile in solidified ash; a representation of final earthly moment like the Pompeiian figures fixed in attitudes of agonising death subsequent to the eruption of Vesuvius. But he is as conclusively extinct as the contents of the urns of 'cold clinker' which stand for absence, of father, of husband and of son in the metonymy of the poem 'The Ballad of the Geldshark' (CP, p.114). The arbitrary dealing of death by the capricious god Ares in this poetic transcription from Aeschylus is secondary to the material consequences of his demands: the mingling of unidentified ash in jars, the hopelessness of loss and the yearning to be reunited with loved ones. Harrison's extract from the tragedian concludes with little hope for those left behind, much as the wife of the Iraqi soldier in 'A Cold Coming' is denied even the possibility of continuity through children.

And there is something of the same order of finality in Harrison's family sonnets which emerged a few years after the 'The Ballad of the Geldshark'. Poems such as 'Marked with D.' and 'Timer' were conceived during the nineteen seventies, long before the onset of the

period of resignation I am trying to impute to Harrison in this chapter. Indeed, my examination of both poems very early in this thesis underlined the possibility of transcendence, hope and continuity in the binary aspects of fire's metaphorical disposition. But the presence of ash in the final verses of each, by another reading undermines the salience of familial love's post-mortem entreaties. I repeat both verses for the purpose of argument:

The baker's man that no one will see rise  
and England made to feel like some dull oaf  
is smoke, enough to sting one person's eyes  
and ash (not unlike flour) for one small loaf.  
(*'Marked with D.'* CP, p.168).

I feel your ashes, head, arms, breasts, womb, legs,  
sift through its circle slowly.  
(*'Timer'* CP, p.179).

Both father and mother are 'contained': the former becomes a cypher, a metaphor for linguistic incapacity and class-foreshortened horizons; the mother, a vehicle for 'sifted' time and eventual disappearance. Ash, here, is a metaphor for reduction, for compartmentalization and for cutting down to the size of withered aspiration, for considerations of finality and extinction, and in the case of *'Marked with D.'*, for the final subsuming of man into the frame of his own 'dull' Art. If Harrison's anger is palpable, his power to alter the trajectory of class iniquity is defused by the ash of death, at least in the interests of his parents. Ash is fire's residue, and although both poems strive to assert the integrity of the individual against historical marginalisation, there remains a clear note of emptiness in the blown and sifted crematory detritus.

Harrison still maintains, even in relatively recent times, a tendency for identifying both sides of symbolic possibility, and it seems reasonable to take a brief look at the poem *'The Grilling'* which finds utility, one might almost say 'fruitility', in volcanic ash, before concluding with an image of extinction which overturns all earlier speculation. The published version of this very uneven poem was clearly a long time in the process of germination, as is evidenced by the volume of pictorial and textual materials which appear to surround its development in the poet's personal notebooks. The figurative equation between volcanic activity and nuclear war is unsurprising given Harrison's instinct for

connection-making, and the stimulus is frequently visual: postcard pictures of Vesuvius after eruption and of the obliteration of Hiroshima litter the pages which accompany the early drafts of the poem whose original title seems at different moments to have been both 'Goethe at Pompeii' and 'Satyrs of Vesuvio' (In Poetry Notebooks, Book 11, pp.172-3). The finished poem imagines a conversation between Goethe and his portraitist Tischbein about the relationship between destruction and creativity, and it finds an accommodation in the mythical image of Satyrs dancing on the hot 'coals' of solidifying lava flows. The figurative re-birth made materially explicit as a consequence of volcanic eruption - the creation, for example, of new islands like Santorini - also engenders vigorous organic growth. Harrison, through Goethe, identifies the phenomenon of that potent symbol of life's affirming spirit - wine - as emerging from the vines which ironically thrive amongst lava's leavings:

*That force that belches forth its molten mass  
has poured this tinkling gold in my raised glass.  
Devastation, Tischbein, ancient waste  
gives this Vesuvial vintage its fine taste.  
While we're drinking let's remember hope's  
what goes with hoe in hand to smoking slopes,  
ploughs blistering cinders into ashy fields  
knowing the fine vines cooled lava yields.*  
(CP, p.422).

Harrison's much rehearsed preoccupation with finding a symbiosis of meaning here seeks encapsulation in the idea of immanence: a finding of life's celebrant in this instance amongst ash and destruction. The wine remains resonant of the ancient eruption giving, the narrator notes, 'an old extinction in its strange bouquet' (CP, p.426). The poem, as some of the above extract indicates, is simply badly written in places, but the point at which the narrator goes beyond the happy compromise of the volcano both succouring and correcting Dionysian impulses, to considerations of manmade firestorms and nuclear holocausts, requires an unsustainable leap of the metaphorical imagination. The moving from Goethe's world to the twentieth century occasions a structural slippage in the poem, and to some degree weakens meaning. Harrison's 'connection' for the purposes of giving the poem modern currency shifts focus from Cretan wines still 'flavoured' with the resonance of ancient volcanic activity to the fire bombings of central Germany in 1945.

The implication for German wines of the Main region - Goethe's evident favourite - of these bombings is couched rhetorically, and in an unconvincingly contrived narrative cobbled together with ill-constructed syntax:

How does the *vino* here compare to wine  
you're said to have drunk so much of from the Main.  
Not under the volcano the vines there  
but in '45 our fire rained from the air.  
Not volcanic wine but since we bombed it flat  
disaster goes with grapes into the vat.  
(CP, p.426).

But an evaluation of the poetic construction of this, the narrator's address to the ghosts of Goethe and Tischbein, is secondary to my argument here which is that Harrison is finally asserting the 'ascendancy' of resigned hopelessness. His revisitation of an historically significant event, explored extensively in the earlier poem 'The Mother of the Muses', dissolves into apocalyptic ambiguity in the final stanza of 'The Grilling' but his vision clearly invests the image of ash with a sense of finality. Such finality in the end precludes the possibility of growth and survival, and for once the narrator/Harrison places himself at the heart of the image, in an act of self-annihilation. Retrieving a sketch of himself by Tischbein, the narrator is suddenly engulfed :

I picked it up but in one blinding flash  
it erupted into flame and turned to ash.  
On one frail flake the outline of an eye  
went floating on the heat into the sky.  
(CP, p.427).

The process of decentring, which Antony Rowland identifies as an acute reaction to grief in some of Harrison's family sonnets, is evident here but for entirely different reasons (2001, p.165). The sudden burst of annihilatory nihilism in 'The Grilling' responds to increasing hopelessness rather than to grief, and it is rendered not in fragmented metre but in an unexpected narrative *volte face* which terminates further speculation as quickly as fire is reduced to cold, dead clinker. The 'frail flake' floating away is a metaphor for abandonment and the act allows the possibility of an escape to oblivion, so that an echo of the much earlier poem 'Ghosts : Some Words before Breakfast' is yielded in the latter's image of a 'stranger', or flap of ash, floating above a grate (CP, p.75).

The film/poem *Prometheus*, produced as recently as 1998, would appear to contradict the tenor of my argument in this chapter in the sense that it is about fire, and images of fire are ubiquitous across the narrative. But the figure of the Old Man, with whom I engaged at length in Chapter Four, and whose defiant stand against cultural change and industrial evolution is Promethean in breadth, is ultimately subsumed like the statue of the Titan. The Old Man is burnt in a disused cinema as Prometheus is melted down in a furnace, but the process of 'unification' is specious: both amalgamations may only suffice as particular metaphors for the negative alchemy of cataclysmic human destruction foretold in the poem 'Following Pine' – '[...] all of us/ are merged in the molten mess made of Mankind' (CP, p.255). This waking vision of melting, of burning and boiling down, may mirror a deeper compulsion. Paraphrasing Milner, Norman O. Brown notes the frequency of images of 'blending' in patients undergoing psychoanalysis, and of seeking to express the idea of obliteration of boundaries (Brown, 1959, p.176). Both figures in Harrison's film are rendered down, reduced to redundancy much like the post-industrial landscapes of Romania and South Yorkshire. 'Mortality', as the critic Joseph Brooker notes of a consuming Harrison tendency, 'thus leaks into deindustrialisation' like toxic effluent into an already poisoned river (Brooker, 2010, p.81). The consuming fires are themselves burned out leaving a pan-European landscape which is as grimly sterile as Hiroshima after the nuclear attack. As early as 1961, Harrison could recognise a connection between the individual and her landscape in the form of crematory and industrial detritus: his observation is taken from an early notebook – 'The leavings of industry, ash, the leavings of life, ash' (Poetry Notebooks, P.13, page not numbered). The 'dereliction' (P, p.71), in Hermes's own word, of the modern post-industrial landscape is the end-product of, and conclusion to, the creative venture of industrialization which has always provoked observers to outrage or resignation at the corollary cultural-topographical scarring. As Paul Ginestier noted in his now, by definition, dated examination of the impact of the machine age on poetry, early twentieth-century writers on the subject were inclined to infer the wretched, the tragic and the infernal in a society which conducted its processes of mass production as though sacrificing its soul to Moloch (Ginestier, 1961, p.24). Quoting Charles Dornier's poem 'Aube Sanglante', Ginestier's assessment in a sense presupposes the irreparable social and geographical disfigurement of parts of north

eastern France and, by industrial association, the South Yorkshire landscape of

*Prometheus*:

It's a black country drilled with coal pits, smoking  
From its ponderous blast furnaces, from its big coal towns,  
Its trains whose whistles puncture the fog  
And crack the low sky tainted by coal smoke  
(Ginestier, 1961, p.24).

Ginestier's metaphor is apt: Dornier personifies the infernal, subterranean world of mines as an all-consuming monstrous figure whose product, coal, feeds the fires which turn the wheels of industry and degrades the lives of those who dig and burn it. The Old Man's act of Promethean defiance in Harrison's film is partly an elegy for loss, and there is some irony in his lament for an industrial culture which provoked the precise opposite emotion in commentators as socio-culturally diverse as Matthew Arnold and D.H. Lawrence, and which scarred landscape and lung. His resigned words - 'All our livings have gone up in smoke / or demolition dust-clouds' - are one albeit minor indication of Harrison's own increasing descent towards ennui and disablement (P, p.72). They provide a codicil to Shelley's depressing foresight imagined in the early part of the mass industrial process:

Look ! Where round the wide horizon  
Many a million-peopled city  
Vomits smoke in the bright air.  
Hark the outcry of despair !  
'Tis his mild and gentle ghost  
Wailing for the faith he kindled.  
Look again, the flames almost  
To a glow-worm's lamp have dwindled.  
The survivors round the embers  
Gather in dread.  
(Shelley, 1907, p.163).

The verse is taken from the poem 'Prometheus Unbound', and it is not difficult to infer Harrison's own post-apocalyptic, post-industrial meanderings in Shelley's architecture of sudden despair, where Prometheus as archetype of messianic idealism is sustainable not, ironically, on moral grounds but rather in terms of struggle and necessity.<sup>154</sup>

*Prometheus* may, I contend, be Harrison's final full-scale engagement with fire: its uses, its symbolic authority, and its consequences. Nowhere else in his work has he

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<sup>154</sup> See Carl R. Wasserman for an in-depth reading of Shelley's interchangeable use of myth and religion in the poem. (*Shelley's Prometheus Unbound – A Critical Reading*. 1965. Baltimore : John Hopkins Press).



established a clearer template for fire's material significance to history than in this paradoxically recent film, but there is little of comfort here to countermand the pain of deracination, and the burgeoning sense of finality. It may be, as Edith Hall notes, that Harrison fully intends the film to represent a sense of transcendence, a getting beyond the tragedy of history (Hall, 2002, p.134). But he is himself confounded by an increasingly personal sense of hopelessness; a hopelessness he otherwise seeks to illuminate as a dangerous component of human thinking. His imperative in the Introduction to the film's text again repeats Harrison's claim for continuity through myth and memory:

Poetry rises out of its own ashes and continues its ancient dream in front of fire. Not only the animated flame but also smoking ash and cinders with their bits of bone, rings, a blue glass eye. (P, p.xxix).

These last are the meagre compensations to which Antony Rowland refers in his wider assessment of Harrison's tone and mood, but there seems little doubt that such consolatory scraps have diminished in number over the past decade (Rowland, 2001, p.211). The poet's relentless raking over of the ashes, in this instance a clear allusion to the crematory remains of his parents in the family sonnets of the *School* sequence as much as to the millions of silent dead of history, has lost its power to animate.

## Part Three: Ice and Silence

On the very rare occasions that Harrison has inclined to re-engage with the fire trope in recent years, his reflections have sometimes made 'end-time' finality out of legend:

The sagas say that fire-giant Surt's the one who plays  
this lyre strung with light, this veil of purple rays,  
the strings that sparkle in the flames of Muspelheim  
that represent to Vikings the end of human time.  
The fire-giant Surt plays his luminescent lyre  
to serenade the world's end in the final fire.  
(F, p.23).

The connection-making process, here exemplified in the play *Fram*, is typical, but what is uncharacteristic is Harrison's own exacerbated sense of the end. It is possible to infer this sense even through the double camouflage of a third-party voice and use of the saliently apocalyptic details of a Norse Saga. The backdrop is the Arctic and the protagonists two early twentieth-century Norwegian explorers, and even if the real character of Nansen was given to philosophical speculation, it seems likely that Harrison's counterpointing of fire and ice is intended to colour a narrative with shades of the world's end. The lines crackle sibilantly as though embodying Surt's insouciant nihilism, but the final point, which increasingly shadows Harrison's work, seems to foreclose on hope, even if it is conceived through Nansen's imagination. Harrison/Nansen's view does not relent. Unable, by dint of the temporal space he occupies, to presuppose a nuclear holocaust, the rationalist Nansen concludes his speculation as to the end of the world in terms of cold empirical possibility, and unfortunately in the kind of pallid, prosaic and forced words which did little to endear the play to theatre critics: 'But as a modern scientific Viking I know the cooling sun/will make the world's finale a far more frozen one' (F, p.24).<sup>155</sup> And even if a

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<sup>155</sup> One, Susannah Clapp of the *Observer*, identified an over-arching need in the playwright to invest every line with aggrandised meaning: 'Having lit on a figure (Nansen) who embodies Art, action and social conscience, Harrison continually spells out significance: no incident or image is allowed to stand on its own' (*Observer Theatre Review*, 20 April, 2008).

nuclear conflagration does hasten the end of humankind, Nansen correctly assumes that when the sun finally burns out, the earth will become a frozen desert, and that the very end will be of ice, not fire. Any choice here, and I take the view that Nansen's moribund tone is Harrison's own, is limited to two variations of extinction without redress, as though ice and fire were indivisible guarantors of deaths both existential and temporal. There is little in the way of hope in *Fram*, and any distance which separates Harrison from the possibility of human survival is exacerbated by his own choice of background landscape. The Arctic acts as a symbol of existential isolation as much as it is also a geographically remote location. It reinforces a sense of inescapable hopelessness by limiting human perception to immediate concerns and appearing to erase any evidence of human engagement. The forbidding harshness of the Arctic forces introspective reflection, and the rangy dialogue between Nansen and Johansen is conditioned, in existential terms, by the symbol as much as the reality of this sparse landscape. Harrison chooses to establish a narrative about death and extinction in the frozen waste itself, much as he chose to define final-stage dementia against the backdrop of a Canadian blizzard in the poem 'The Mother of the Muses'. Both narratives exert the metaphorical authority of ice and snow to occlude or erase common human locators, to undermine recognition and to ultimately echo the notion of extinction.

Any structural and linguistic limitations in the play, and there are many, seem secondary in the context of my argument to Harrison's change of tone in recent years. From the nearly constant application of inherently counterbalanced oppositional discourses, he moves to a fatalistic resignation embodied in the figure of ice, and punctuated only rarely by splashes of colour which are 'flame-bound' in the metaphorical straitjacket of myth. The symbol of blood in such a landscape takes on the figurative proportion of fire, but only in the sense of colour and organic resonance. When the angst-conflicted Johansen shoots himself, the fact of his 'self-extinction' overwhelms the dramatic symbol of humanity in the form of blood on the pristine white of the ice. The front cover of the paperback text focuses on this tension in vivid colour and detail, but Harrison's meaning is death as surely as if the red ice were a bloodied white sheet in a cancer ward. The image is as potent a symbol of prescient death as that which conflates

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fire and blood in the much earlier poem 'Manica'. Here, the Nazi rage for *Lebensraum* leads, if not to the ravine at Babi Yar, then to some other holocaust of Harrison's imagination: 'Burst corpuscles and blood cells spray / the dark with fire and die away' (CP, p. 36). In *Fram*, it is the isolation of Johansen's condition which precipitates his demise. The frozen waste occasions as well as reflects his death, and his immediate reappearance as a kind of ghostly philosophical alter-ego/guide to Nansen underlines his new presence as symbol. That he gives meagre comfort to Nansen through the stimulation of existential dialogue - in one sense his suicide counterpoints the notion of Action with Nansen's pessimistic theorising - appears to clarify Harrison's own typically dualistic equivocation. When Johansen rounds on Nansen's Hamlet-like prevarication with 'I put into practice what you scarcely dared to think', it is not difficult to imagine Harrison's own embracing of an action which is decisive and at the same time abandoned (F, p.34). And such decisiveness, at this stage in his career, seems to narrow the philosophical gap between writer and a 'voice' which would earlier have been distanced to enable the deliberate expression of oppositional tension. In other words, the intimate engagement with the minutiae of death looks to reflect Harrison's personal awareness of approaching mortality.

Blood, of course, approximates to the colour of fire, though in the context of *Fram* it also represents a process of life's ebbing; any additional figurative connection with fire must therefore reside in the notion of fire's own ebbing, in the form of dying embers. The Russian Symbolist poet Alexander Blok who was writing at the time of the Revolution shares little contextual ground with Harrison but his use of grand metaphors, especially in the poem 'The Twelve', shows a verisimilitude with the landscape of *Fram*. Exploring the journey of a band of a dozen young Bolshevik soldiers wandering across an unspecified but ice-bound Russian plain, the poem successfully conveys the freshness of an ideology which was new at the time of writing, but also the hope, anxiety, brutality and death immanent within its process of germination. Conceived against the uniform white of the landscape, the Red Flag, fires, red flags as fire, and blood figure as symbols of the contradictory vitality of the new regime. The shifting, and vigorously mobile metrical arrangement of the poem, along with the jaunty vocal confidence of the soldiers, are suddenly and deliberately ironized by the random, 'out of order' shooting of a young

country girl. Making allowances for the vagaries of this translation by Alex Miller, it is clear that Blok's audience is intended to recognise through the red of the girl's blood, a metonym for the dangers of anarchy. With hindsight, Blok's words look prescient: the anarchies of 1917 and 1918 became lethal and murderous tyrannies not very many years later. My point here is to compare the heavy symbolisms of colour which define the extremities of human behaviour in both *Fram* and 'The Twelve'. In Blok, the Bolshevik red flag 'riding/Through the snowflake-flurried air' (Silkin, 1973, p.214) takes on the patina of fire, as fire itself symbolizes the new revolutionary spirit. The unspecified fires which illuminate the frozen plains – 'Fires all round them flaming, flaming [...]' (p.206) - undermine and ironize the figurative power of the revolutionary impulse: 'When we set the world on fire/ World on fire with flames of blood' (p.208). The flames of blood, in fact, prepare the reader for the death of the girl, whose demise – 'Shot right through the bleeding head' (p.209) – stands metonymically for the failure of that impulse to contain its own anarchically violent tendencies. One death figures for the subsequent many giving Blok's poem an unanticipated supra-textual relevance. 'The Twelve' provokes a clear apostolic inference: in a sense the soldiers believe they are disseminating news of an entirely new and secular 'Gospel' amongst the Russian peasantry. The final vision of an imagined messiah 'stepping through the blizzard' (p.215) is therefore a figure of besieged hope: he stands to some degree for the power of the Cross in a society whose governing bodies would soon, paradoxically, be proscribing the Russian Orthodox Church in favour of secularism. This Christ is the white of the plains over which he steps, the white of purity. Symbolic counterweights are weakened by an attrition of hope in Harrison's play, a process which is figuratively compounded by the enervating cold of the Arctic ice. Nor is there room for God in the cold speculative science of this defining section of the play's narrative. The range of Nansen's philosophical introspections is, in Harrison's imagining of him, kaleidoscopically crippling. The selfless philanthropy which underpins his plans, for example, for what later became a League of Nations is undermined by audience hindsight of the cataclysmically destructive world events which have occurred since Nansen's utopian teleology was formulated. Nansen, of course, couldn't have known any of this and Harrison only inadequately resolves the play's consequent structural difficulties by investing his main protagonist with the power of partial foresight, and thereby rendering

his rambling soliloquies 'significant' in the over-arching and unconstructive way identified by Susannah Clapp in the footnote above. Johansen's blood on the ice, then, pulls Nansen up short, just as the girl's blood throws the trigger-happy soldier in Blok's poem into a temporary guilt-hiatus. The symbolism of fire and organic life in the livid red of the spilled blood, however, is insufficient to countermand the encroaching ice which will eventually subsume the metaphor, along ultimately with meaning. Or so the tone of Harrison's play increasingly suggests. The forced nature of Nansen's insights – his knowledge of the future and preternaturally acute awareness of the contemporary world's affairs – are, I feel, one symptom of Harrison's own declining powers of expression.<sup>156</sup> That the scene in the Arctic is 'mirrored' by several dramatic sub-plots, including a lengthy dialogue between the tragedians Gilbert Murray and Sybil Thorndike, complicates, rather than otherwise, the currency of the twentieth-century moment with too heavy a tragic relevance. The connection is clear but radically overused, so that the accumulation of conflated words and ideas begin to look colourless, begin to infuse the narrative with the irony of inarticulate hopelessness. This cannot be deliberate, but it may be a by-product of Harrison's own age and declining powers. Ice fields, as Dante found, are a serviceable metaphor for the end of hope. When Nansen reflects on the scientific certainty of solar extinction – 'one day the sun will die' - the significance of his words may transcend even authorial intention (F, p.27). The words are repeated in slightly different guise on more than one other occasion in the narrative, and the repetition's concision serves to overwhelm any sense of faint mitigation vouchsafed, for example, by the luminescence of *aurora borealis* as a metaphor for hope (F, p.23), or the sharing of sleeping bags as a figure for human survival (F, pp.27 & 94).

The much earlier poem '*Isla de la Juventud*', from the series generically entitled 'Sentences', gives an instructive reminder of Harrison's change in tone over four decades, and coincidentally echoes Blok's use of symbolisms of fire/colour and ice whilst adding the further dimension of geographical counterpoint. From the standpoint of a drive-in movie theatre in Sante Fe, Harrison takes a broad imagistic sweep over the mental terrains of the

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<sup>156</sup> One minor example of Nansen's astonishing and unconvincing acuity is his knowledge of the early twentieth century British Press, especially Lord Beaverbrook's portion of it. The breadth of the explorer's knowledge persuades the reader simultaneously of the efficacy of Harrison's research, and of its inappropriate application. (F, pp.49-50).

Cuban 'Isle of Youth' to the icy plains west of Moscow during Napoleon's doomed Russian campaign, using the connecting metaphor of fireflies to suggest both the phosphorescent 'after-glow' of human life and sexuality, and the brilliant red of the blood of death against the background of snow. If Harrison's 'flight' of imagination struggles to develop a convincing landscape of association between the two ideas, his intention is sincere. The battlefield dead, as depicted in the filmic version of *War & Peace* which the narrator is watching, are foregrounded in the open auditorium by fireflies which accumulate before the screen's light, and give an additional luminous lustre to the multitudinous corpses lying about in the snow. Harrison wants the connection to appear symbiotic; an accommodation of life in death, expressed in the colour of fire. The fireflies –

here seem to carry  
through the beam where they cluster  
a brief phosphorescence  
from each stiff corpse  
on the battlefields that look  
like the blown-up towel  
of a careless barber.  
(CP, p.108).

It is surprising that '*Isla de la Juventud*' has attracted little critical interest. The poem is representative of the more or less coterminous *Loiners* sequence to the extent that it shares some preoccupation with imageries of sex and death, in the Freudian sense. But hindsight now arms the critic with the almost unmitigated negativities of 'The Mother of the Muses' and more especially the terminally depressing *Fram*. There is hope in this poem. Harrison's detached and aerial eye roves over existential possibilities as it is led over the cinematic battlefield, creating a sense of movement. And the continuity is effectively served by the truncated metrical arrangement and complete lack of punctuation except for those commas which delineate and reinforce the capacious inventory of nouns. The narrator's/Harrison's mind's eye moves, first with the camera, then to an imagined ground level where he envisions the ubiquitous<sup>157</sup> lines of dead stretching over the snow towards the warmer climes of Eastern Europe, and seems there to seek something akin to unity in the association between the firefly, the resonant glow

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<sup>157</sup> The actual battle of Krasnoe of November 1812 resulted in several thousands of, particularly French, deaths.

of that which serves to secure remembrance, and the potency of colour, fire and ice as symbols. If you were to follow the line of the dead, the narrator intones –

you would enter an air  
as warm as the blankets  
just left by a lover,  
yours, if you have one,  
an air full of fireflies,  
bright after-images,  
and scuffed Krasnoe snow  
like unmeltable stars. (CP, p.108).

Ambiguous as these lines undoubtedly are, there remains a kernel of the pristine, the inviolable, amongst the random cataloguing of destruction, the ‘corpses, / cannons and fetlocks’ of history, and it is forged in the relationship between death and death’s necessary obverse. The obverse condition of humanity is described in the fecundity and life-affirmation of Cuba’s *Oriente* which is where Harrison’s narrative of fireflies begins. The concluding four lines of the eight shown above animate narrative interpretation still further, and draw any association of echoes between Harrison’s poem and that of Blok a little closer. The ‘after-images’ may also be intended to figure for the countless millions of Russians who died on the same soil in the twentieth century. The word *Krasnoe*, other than being a place name, is also Russian for the colour red, a coincidence which would certainly appeal to Harrison’s connective imagination, and in several probable ways. The red flag of the Soviet state was a defining symbolic image for the best part of a century, and it may of itself embody the colour of revolution, the fires of vigour and hope. But it also serves as a metaphor for the kinds of destruction which hindsight has vouchsafed: the blood and the death, the blood against the contrasting and pristine white of the snow with which Russian winters are indelibly associated, possibly to the point of cliché.

The blood on the snow in the Arctic of *Fram* serves as a momentary hiatus in a narrative of mostly unrelieved despair. Its symbolism remains but the resonance is diluted by the presence throughout the narrative of documented trans-historical instances of death, of genocide and of destruction. The ghost of Johansen uses the potency of symbolism, the contrast of fiery red and ice, to inscribe the act of suicide to memory, but his sanguine alliterative defiance sounds like a misplaced Euripidean invocation, and will be a disappearing echo in the Arctic darkness:



a bloodflag with the blazon of my brain-sick blackened soul.  
That bloodflag of my suicide should be planted to be seen  
by all who reach the wilderness of 86 14.  
(F, p.34).

Harrison's effusion of words and ideas in *Fram* amounts, in fact, to a confusion. The concatenation of images of defiance and of despair, which are probably more numerous here than anywhere else in his oeuvre, seems subordinate, in spite of its best hyperbolic efforts, to the supervening symbol of the dying sun. As several colours blended on a palette will inevitably produce brown, the 'rabblement' and density of Harrison's lexis is ultimately choked by his own fatalism, his words rendered bland and inarticulate by the failure of hope.<sup>158</sup> And set against what his audience knows of subsequent twentieth-century history, the symbol of blood in Harrison's play looks, in a sense, if not like an open historical wound, then at least like a form of landscape poisoning. The artist Anselm Keifer's visions of a sterile post war German landscape empower a similar symbolism of self-destruction. His pictorial representations 'Winter Landscape' and 'Ice and Blood' render failure and toxicity against the visceral horrors of the Holocaust; his barren, ash-coloured plains are, in the words of Andrea Lauterwein, a figure for 'the contamination of the landscape by the ideology of "blood and soil"' (Lauterwein, 2007, p.134).

The oppositional contradictions which appear everywhere to have characterised Harrison's work, yet which have counterbalanced hope through love and continuity with a recognition of the horrors of the human condition, are present in *Fram*, but the tension is destabilised by an overwhelming sense of fatalistic ennui. For all that Harrison may not have intended the degree of decisive negativity which the tone of the play in any case exudes, the clouded gap between authorial intention and a dialogue entirely of the imagination is becoming transparent by the time Gilbert Murray begins to speculate about the point of it all. Here, the early twentieth-century classicist is struggling to find meaning even in the figure of Hecuba. His translation, and adaptation for the stage of *Trojan Women*, coincidentally symmetrical with Harrison's own preoccupations, fails to provide

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<sup>158</sup> 'Rabblement', a word Harrison uses very effectively in the poem *v.*, seems ironically to encapsulate the dense confusion and presentation of ideas which threaten to overwhelm *Fram*. Used in *v.* to indicate the porridge of bone and organo-geological detritus which accumulates over millennia beneath all our feet, the term is a fitting means of describing a loss of hope, as much as a testament to temporal continuity. (see CP, p.264).

the comfort even of stoical survival. And the defining image once more proves to be solar extinction; the end –

A world, when the sun cools, a world that will be free  
of Evolution's greatest failure, us, Humanity. (F, p.77).

Murray is reiterating Nansen, who in turn appears to be echoing the author's own growing sense of hopelessness. Aside from suggesting the erosion of life's meaning in the face of extinction, Harrison's use of repetition here serves as an unambiguous illustration of his own declining fire fixation; the death of the sun is occasioned by the depletion of its gases, and the final snuffing out of its flames. The icy landscape, and even icier philosophical speculations of *Fram*, may in one sense be seen as metaphors for the likely end of Harrison's engagement with that other versatile metaphor which has seduced him more or less consistently for forty five years.

It is ironic that with *Fram* in particular, Harrison should move towards an implicit contradiction of Antony Rowland's central critical argument respecting his (Harrison's) work. Using Theodor Adorno's much disputed and misinterpreted aphorism that all poetry in the wake of Auschwitz must, *de facto*, be barbaric, Rowland's study of Harrison and the holocaust claims a generally positive evaluation of his work on grounds of an emotional commitment which necessarily mitigates his sometimes brutal use of language. Rowland finds an energy in Harrison's ambiguous dialectics which, he believes, counters Adorno's pessimism in the very nature of its sincerity. The seeking of answers to unanswerable questions justifies the continuation of Art's mandate, in spite of the overwhelmingly dark spectre of genocide. Adorno's own position is characterised by apparent contradiction. The aphorism paraphrased above appears not to have included a denunciation of the point of Art, though that Art may forever have been degraded by the holocaust:

The abundance of real suffering [...] demands the continued existence of art (even as) it prohibits it. It is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it. (Adorno, 1982, p.313).

Several references to Adorno in Harrison's personal notebooks indicate some knowledge of his work, and certainly a synoptic reading of Harrison's preoccupations, at least until the middle nineteen nineties, suggests a concordance with the general philosophical arc

of human consolation enabled by the creation of Art. Similarly, Harrison's interpretation of the tragic muse consistently describes the sense of besieged hope which may be obtained through the articulation of suffering. But the poet's recent peregrinations abandon the fires of consolation and hope for an icy and fatalistic certainty, thereby denuding his work of the energy and commitment upon which Rowland's evaluation rests. The Arctic in *Fram* is an unintended metaphorical symptom of that enervation, and its pervasiveness as an idea seems, tangentially anyway, to corroborate the direction, or misdirection of his poetry in the intervening years. Writing in the period up until the publication of his own book in 2001, Rowland couldn't have anticipated the change in Harrison's tone from one of hope to resignation. Noting Harrison's apparent comment in a *South Bank Show* interview to the effect that after Auschwitz there is room for little else *except* poetry, Rowland corroborated his own position at the time (Rowland, 2001, p.253). But the critic could not know of the poet's subsequent *volte face* in appropriating Adorno's contentious axiom for the very purpose of describing the failure of art to make any sense of the human landscape post-Auschwitz:

Aeschylus trucked out corpses on the ekkyklema.  
We've seen the world one corpse-piled ekkyklema,  
the corpses of Auschwitz, Dresden, Hiroshima.  
A German said, and I'm beginning to agree,  
the horrors of Auschwitz silenced poetry.  
(F, p.77).

The Aeschylean allusion draws tragedy into a circle of despair with the modern condition so that *it also* fails to provide any consolation. That the speaker is Gilbert Murray does not distance Harrison from a sense of emotional complicity. The relationship between tragedy and the concerns of the twentieth century, the relevance of one to the other, are Harrison's own preoccupations and have been rehearsed and re-rehearsed throughout his poetics. The narrator here is mostly Harrison himself and the only divorce is not one of author from the character of the narrator, but of poet from his characteristic sense of purpose. Adorno's ambiguous and no doubt misunderstood statement brings further irony to Harrison's new position regarding hope, or the lack of it. Aeschylus's use of the

*ekkyklema*<sup>159</sup> for purposes of dramatic representation may also be seen as a particular figure for the universal resonance of the piled dead at Auschwitz or Belsen, to which Harrison was a vicarious spectator at post-war cinema newsreels. But a morbid spectator only: the unnaturally bright artificial light of the cinema is itself a metaphor for the artificiality of the juvenile Harrison's experience at this point. He cannot *be* Primo Levi. The use of poetry to make a 'difference', upon which subject Harrison has always been ambivalent and in fact has frequently articulated his reservations in the poems themselves, seems finally to have taken on the pallor of a negative rhetorical question. When, in an earlier chapter, I noted that *Fram* has a valedictory feel to it, I was thinking principally of the character of Murray's, words. Harrison himself, I contend, is beginning to concur with one interpretation of Adorno's assessment, and if poetry, which is this poet's expressed tool, cannot give consolation, then the world is turned from fire to ice, its frozen landscape peopled with the disarticulated dead as in the final circle of Dante's Hell. It is more than coincidental that Harrison's choice of an Arctic landscape should mirror such a Hell, a Dante invented Hell which, for many post-war writers - Primo Levi and George Steiner among them - was made 'immanent' in twentieth-century history following Auschwitz. Levi, in particular and with a judgment shaped by personal experience of victimhood in Auschwitz, arrived at his own image of a meaningless cosmos, and articulated it, uncharacteristically, in verse:

The universe – blind, violent and strange – assails us.  
The sky is strewn with horrible dead suns;  
The skies perpetually revolve in vain.  
(in Riordan, 2000, p.19).

Levi's crushing symbols are devoid of fire and light like Dante's Hell, and they are echoed by the depressing emptiness of Harrison's 'scaleless zodiac'. He was a chemist, a scientist, and he was drawn, like Nansen in Harrison's imagining, to a final image of universal darkness, his visions rendered the more meaningful because he was an authentic witness to horror. His suspected suicide in 1987 underscores the symbolic efficacy of Dante's vision of Hell and the inscription on its gate – 'abandon hope all ye who enter here'. The

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<sup>159</sup> The *ekkyklema* was a wheeled platform often containing the 'dead', which could be rolled out onto the stage in Athenian amphitheatres in order to convey the consequences of dramatic actions taking place offstage. The dead were thus made visible to the audience, not unlike the images vouchsafed to cinemagoers of the Allied liberation of the Concentration Camps.

'Hell' of Auschwitz condemned Levi to death long before he fell down a Turin stairwell. Where Harrison's 'experience' of such horrors is mentally absorbed through post-war newsreels, he nonetheless arrives at the same symbolic platform as the poet Paul Celan, who, like Levi, was incarcerated in a Labour Camp. The 'blackened' sun of the VJ Day poem 'The Morning After II' (CP, p.197), whose colour is repeated several times to maximum guttural effect, finds some consonance with Celan's 'darkened suns' in the poem 'Black Flakes' (Celan, 2001, p.14). While Harrison's metaphor points a dualistic accusatory finger at both Japanese atrocities and the US dropping of the atomic bomb, Celan's symbol calls into question the barbarism of the holocaust and German militarism. Both writers, in the process of writing, are paradoxically asserting the remnants of an aesthetic compulsion against the notion of extermination. But the smoke clouds over the crematoria and the mushroom cloud over Hiroshima weaken the sun's rays and irrevocably besmirch the human condition. And both, significantly, are infused with the idea of human finitude.

In Harrison's early *Eloquence* sonnet, 'The Ode Not Taken', it is cold medical science, again not unlike Nansen's, which best diagnoses the horror of grinding poverty and premature death amongst the working classes of the early years of industrialisation. The poet's recognition of vigorous, but coincidental, iambic phrasing in the surgeon, Thackrah's, treatises, both supports and refutes poetry's *raison d'être*:

But there are pentameters in Thackrah's tract,  
the found iambics no prose can destroy,  
which want to stop the heart with simple fact:

*we do not find old men in this employ.*  
(CP, p.132).

'Supports', because there is 'poetic' rhythm in everyday prose, and 'refutes', because the 'ode', otherwise the prosaic career 'road' taken by Thackrah looks, in Harrison's more negative moments, like a more serviceable skill than poetry, getting to grips as it does with the momentum for social revolution in practical terms.<sup>160</sup> But thirty some years later, as one line from *Fram* accedes to the possibility of the failure of Art, and sets that idea of

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<sup>160</sup> Thackrah, the City Surgeon for Leeds from 1817 onwards, ironically trained with Keats in London and was himself well-versed in the Arts, but chose, through the good offices of inspecting workers' faeces, to investigate social conditions in the late-Georgian period on the basis of medical evidence.

failure against the backdrop of a frozen waste, Harrison looks to some degree to have abandoned his impulse to engage meaningfully with a dialogue of continuity. Nowhere in the play is there a clearer indication of Harrison's fears than in this prognosis of forthcoming universal silence: 'Civilization as we know it seems destined to collapse / and the tragic masks of Europe will only shut their traps' (F, p.74). That these words emerge from the mouth of Nansen, does little to camouflage the insinuation of authorial tone; instead they revisit, in entirely negative terms, Harrison's characteristic terms of reference. The shut trap, the closed mouth of the tragic mask, perhaps behove the end of purpose.

The consolations of love, particularly, though by no means exclusively, sexual love, are articulated almost as a default mechanism of comfort-retreat in Harrison's poetry. This phenomenon has been noted by several commentators and it seems fitting, apropos of my general argument, that when it fails to give consolation, that failure is described in chilling metaphors. The poem 'Suspension', whose title hints at a grey, dystopian area of myopic indecision between lives, and is viewed against the backdrop of a bridge over the Tyne, retails an infidelity. The syntax of Harrison's description is as apt to ambiguity as the emotional conflict it seeks to define, so that even when the narrator retires to bed, the reader would find it difficult to dissociate wife from lover were it not for an earlier admission of indiscretion couched in terms of an attempt to remove the lover's smell from his clothing. The poet breaks the verse into reflective fragments:

The rushing night air makes my body chill.  
My life's one taut suspension, one blind arc !

My semen in your body's not yet dried.  
My wife sleeps warm and naked by my side.

My bones, cold girders cast across the dark.  
(CP p.376).

Infidelity compounds the narrator's pre-existent ennui here, and it is tempting to read Harrison's own declining sense of hope into the narrative of this relatively recent poem. The final line's winter chill echoes the existential resignation of the second line shown above. Frozen into inertia, the narrator's gaze is bovine and powerless; the cocooned and sleeping wife is a thin resonance of the much needed 'she' who infuses many earlier

poems with the warmth of love and continuity. The 'consummation' he seeks - that inclusive metaphor which Northrop Frye, talking of Blake, describes as containing the possibility of both the fires of apocalypse and of engulfed abandonment to love - is denied him here, except as a bitter counterpoint to the present (Frye, 1962, p.196). The narrator's consciousness is unable - and here I re-interpret Antony Rowland's words for the purposes of a reverse deduction - to 'subsume itself in the loved object's', which is its frequent and natural recourse (Rowland, 2001, p.127). The narrator's 'woman', who is geographically distanced in a much warmer clime in the poem 'Facing North', similarly fails to countermand his darker speculations which find a metaphorical outlet in the stark furniture of the narrative. The final lines of a poem which swings between poles of uncertainty, between a loss of existential grip to the sudden regaining of 'focus on an Earth that still has men' (CP, p.219), do little to confirm Sandie Byrne's inference of an 'affectionate' tone (Byrne, 1998, p.177). Harrison's wind-rattled writing room near the Northumbrian coast deliberately resembles, in its austerity, the 'cell' of a mediaeval Anchorite on the same coast, to whom he makes explicit reference in the poem 'Initial Illumination'. Theological speculation is replaced by images of planets hurled off their courses and the death of the universe. The room is, to paraphrase Ted Hughes's poem 'Wind' - 'far out at sea all night'; its integrity barely holds in this cold and draughty place locked between two other 'cold poles' (Hughes, 1972, p.24). Love's warmth is detached both geographically and metaphorically as Harrison's philosophical gaze is fixed to the North and to darkness; the North he is compulsively drawn to as 'home' and 'hearth' - *Heimat* in the German - is the begetter also of inertia and silence. The wind's ingress is inexorable, the poet is cleaving towards the blankness of the Arctic, his fire extinguished:

and starts the light bulb swinging to and fro,  
and keeps it swinging , switched off, back and forth,  
I feel the writing room I'm leaving grow  
dark, and then darker with the whole view North.  
(CP, p.219).

Thirty years separate 'Facing North' from a holiday the poet took in Donegal in 1959, but here also the night sky foretold impending doom and universal extinction:

I lay in that wet grass on that beautiful clear night and counted about ten  
stars dying out and falling from the sky.  
(Journals and Commonplace Books, Box 1, Book 2).

The trigger for such ennui – Harrison was a mere twenty two in August 1959 – seems secondary to the fact of its sustained influence and re-rehearsal. Making much later reference to Byron’s poem ‘Darkness’ in his Introduction to the play *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*, Harrison only confirms the mirroring of his own depressing premonition in one of Byron’s bleaker moments. ‘Darkness’ was conceived in the aftermath of a volcanic eruption in 1816 in the Pacific, whose long-range after-effects plunged parts of Europe into a kind of twilight for some time. In the following lines, Byron clearly recognised a vision of sky-darkened Armageddon:

I had a dream, which was not all a dream.  
The bright sun was extinguish’d, and the stars  
Did wander darkling in the eternal space.  
(Byron in TO, p.vii).

The association is corroborative and probably consolatory for Harrison in the sense of identifying the kind of fellow-feeling which spans history. The image of ‘darkling’ stars unconsciously presupposes the nuclear winter which appears to inform Harrison’s most negative visions, even if he does not refer to the possibility explicitly. There can be little doubt that the ‘archerless zilch’ of the poem ‘The Morning After’ marks the continued presence of moods of sudden despair. The sense of approaching ice and silence which pervades *Fram* looks like an inevitable conclusion to a poetics of fire. And the unrelieved insubstantiality of Harrison’s poetry since roughly the turn of the millennium is an ironic personal testimony to the general fear he expressed in his Presidential address to the Classical Association of 12 April, 1988, that ‘It’s not our lateness in history but the dark catastrophes of our century that undermine creativity’ (Harrison, 1991 (1), p.435). The Promethean gift of technology which, as Joe Kelleher notes, enabled the identification of the movements of the stars and planets, has destroyed our means of recognition in its own final conflagration, leaving the possibility of ice and silence in its aftermath (Kelleher, 1996, p.45). Harrison’s vision is more predominantly Byron’s of ‘Darkness’ than R. S. Thomas’s in the poem ‘Via Negativa’, where the latter senses the consolatory presence of god in an apparently empty universe:

He keeps the interstices  
In our knowledge, the darkness  
Between stars. (Thomas, 1993, p.220).



The interstices are seemingly devoid of light in Harrison's cosmos, and there is a sense in which his moments of fireside reverie, both of childhood and of adulthood, have come ultimately to shape his current fatalism. The reveries which precipitated the early psycho-geographical animations of 'Newcastle is Peru' and of several other poems, also brought into being the darker preoccupations which now seem to have overwhelmed his imagination. Such a continuum reinforces the view of Gaston Bachelard, with whom I commenced this thesis, that we are to some degree psychically created by our reverie, that reverie 'delineates the furthest limits of our mind' (Bachelard, 1964, p.110).

## Conclusion

The one subject which this thesis has not sought to disentangle is that of Harrison's motivation. It is much easier to examine and interpret the broader meaning of fire as a preoccupation than to define the cause of its ubiquitous employment. Symptoms of his compulsion are evident throughout the poet's oeuvre and it is possible, from the frequency of their presence, to make inferences as to cause even where they may only ever be speculative. I have noted Harrison's tendency to repetition several times in this thesis: the banging of consonantal hammers, the unequivocally full rhyming and mostly regular rhythms.<sup>161</sup> Images of fire are similarly 'hammered' home so that they almost come collectively to resemble the uncontrollable, personified rapacity of Louis MacNeice's poem 'Brother Fire' which I explored at length in Chapter Four. It is entirely possible, as Jeffrey Wainwright notes, that Harrison is engaged in a struggle to make some framework of identity and belief in his work (Wainwright, 1991, p.415). The rehearsal and re-rehearsal of imageries such as fire, in repetitive formal modes, underlines a need which may be existential, a need to be noticed. That Harrison finds a connection between the theoretical analyses of writers of the calibre of Bakhtin and Adorno and his own linguistic and thematic registers, indicates the desire also for corroboration. The many references to both in the poet's notebooks glow in the glory of indirect approval. The notebooks suggest that Harrison is flattered by the inferences of others about *him*, especially where he is perceived somehow as an *étranger*. In an interview with the poet, conducted for *Journal* magazine on 1 July, 1975, John Mortimer noted that 'Harrison surrounds himself with that sense of loneliness which seems peculiar to certain poets' (*Palladas* Notebook 2, page not numbered). That Harrison underlined this in red ink affirms a sense of self-regarding creative isolation, and a similar inference obtains from an anecdote provided by the poet himself relating to his brief school teaching career in the Dewsbury of the

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<sup>161</sup> For Antony Rowland the process is compulsive: '[...] repetition in his work functions as an ethical necessity rather than vacuous padding' (Rowland, 2001, p.42).

nineteen sixties. A perceptive young pupil asked him, rhetorically, 'You don't really belong with us, do you sir? You belong to the olden times' (Journals and Commonplace Books, Box 1, Book 2, page not numbered). It seems likely that the poet was pleased with this insight, and it may corroborate, at least tangentially, Sean O'Brien's intuition that some of the family sonnets of the *School* sequence '[...] feel as cold as a room with an underfed fire' (1998, p.58). If the meaning of O'Brien's apt simile runs against the critical grain – the sonnets are mostly perceived as warmly elegiac – it is entirely possible that the spirit of the 'outsider' would remain coolly detached, in spite of his best efforts to restore connections.

Harrison - the 'Son of a hill farmer's daughter and melancholic baker' and acknowledged considerer of suicide - is evidently aware of his own drive for self-definition (Poetry Notebooks, P.2 , p.51). The poet's leaning towards mental illness - his son, Max, has suffered from well-documented problems - has been noted by Joseph Francis Doerr as a plausible cause of his compulsion to shape form and meaning (Doerr, 2003, p.131). In a fascinating account of manic depression amongst literary figures, Kay Redfield Jamison notes that manias in writers are often characterised by the use of fire imageries (Jamison, 1997, p.33), whilst advising caution as to the ascription of such mental disorders to a subject with whom biographers (and Ph.D. researchers !) may be counter-productively over-familiar (p.57). Luke Spencer identifies Harrison's strict adherence to form as one of the means by which the poet staves off madness (Spencer, 1994, p.16), and it could be that his monomaniacal use of fire is a similar way of giving form and meaning to existence. Harrison's over-earnest lines from 'The Labourers of Herakles' seem to affirm a kind of righteous certainty which is the poet's own in spite of the adaptation:

They come  
to meet here at Delphi for the next millennium,  
and their bodies torched red-raw by torturing remorse,  
quench their scalded skin in the one and only source  
that could ever cool it, the Kastalia Spring,  
where the scarred soul of Europe may learn again to sing.  
(P3, p.149).

It is possible, when he wrote these lines, that Harrison was thinking of his own earlier visit to the Kastalia Spring whilst making preparations for the production of his play *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* at Delphi. In a not entirely flattering anecdote related by the

actor Jack Shepherd, the cast and crew of the play were asked by Harrison, as their coach passed the spring, to partake of the waters of poetic inspiration. The poet's characteristically earnest tone unfortunately ran counter to the ribald mood of the others, at which display of 'irreverence' Harrison somewhat petulantly cancelled the visit until the following morning when '[...] you're all in a better frame of mind' (Shepherd, 1991, p.428). The anecdote seems to me to illustrate Harrison's apparent inability to separate local from universal aims: the waters of the Kastalian Spring are seen here to perform the same solemn 'cleansing' ministry as that which cools the 'scalded skin' and 'scarred soul' of Europe in the extract from *The Labourers of Herakles*. If Harrison's preoccupation does not lead him to believe literally in the healing powers of the waters, then his faith in the symbolisms of fire and water, and of Greek *Mythos*, indicate a seriousness of tone which is obsessive and occasionally misplaced. This poet's approach is, of itself, 'Promethean' by the standards of Denis Donoghue's definition in his book *Thieves of Fire*, upon which I expanded in Chapter Four. Donoghue identifies this attitude in Blake, Lawrence and Milton, where each writer's use of overarching language invests his text with an hyperbole which overstates the 'reality' of meaning (Donoghue, 1974, p.20).

In an article about George Steiner, John Carey writes: 'All great art and literature he (Steiner) declares, "is touched by the fire and the ice of God"' (Carey, 1992, p.90). This symbolism, for Carey, is how Steiner justifies his anti-mass cultural, elitist prejudices: by invoking the ultimate arbiter. His invocation is an attempt, above all, to clarify his own belief using the paradox of a grand abstraction. And these symbols, especially fire and recently ice, feed and define Harrison's own compulsion to explain so that they almost amount to a paradigm. He imbues them with a species of declamatory finality, as though Fire and Ice *are* the actual embodiment of Art, of 'good' Art, of Art's power, and in the latter instance, of Art's finitude. And this, it seems to me, is a central problem in his work: an inability to disentangle the metaphor from the reality in a medium in which they may in any case be inseparable. Towards the end of his own seminal examination of the phenomenon of fire, Bachelard remained similarly equivocal: 'the core of the problem lies in the *contact* of the metaphor and the reality: is the fire which will set the world ablaze, at the Last Judgment, in the fire of hell, the same or not the same as terrestrial fire?'

(Bachelard, 1964, p.102). Is fire, after all, too intractable a medium to support the urge for clarification which so profoundly animates Harrison's poetry ?

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