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Tony Harrison: The Making of a Poet

I

After receiving the Cohen Prize in 2015, Tony Harrison expressed his delight that the award 'was for the whole body of [his] work'. In an interview with Pete Mitchell of the Book Trust published shortly afterwards he went on to explain that: 'I often feel people don't approach you with that in mind. Everything I do is poetry.'[1] This articulation of the all-inclusive, all-absorbing nature of poetry and the attendant sense of his being seen primarily as a poet did not come as a surprise to anyone who has read his work and his interviews from the last fifty years, but rather as confirmation, the latest strong iteration of his very particular sense of poetic vocation. In an interview at the start of his career in 1958 with journalists from the University of Newcastle's student newspaper *Palatinate*, Harrison offered the following response when asked how long he had been writing poems: "I started when I was 7; gave it up at 10; then took it up again at the age of 17 and I've been trying to give it up ever since. It is a sort of obsession – I can't do without it now."[2] These two statements from opposite ends of a long career are in their different ways symptomatic of Harrison's attentiveness to the existential fact of being a poet. In one expression, we have a confident sense of the integrated unity of purpose informing his literary output; in the other, a playful admission not so much of his claims to poetic achievement as of poetry's claim on him. In the youthful articulation of his 'obsession', Harrison reveals something of the ambivalent force of poetry in his life. Similarly, in his well-known 'Author Statement' for the Contemporary Writers website in 1987 (which subsequently appeared as the first item in Neil Astley's 1991 critical anthology *Tony Harrison*) he affirms:

> Poetry is all I write, whether for books, or readings, or for the National Theatre or for the opera house and concert hall, or even for TV. All these activities are part of the same quest for a public poetry, though in that word "public" I would never want to exclude inwardness. [3]

In this essay I wish not only to focus on the inclusiveness and unity of purpose in Harrison's conception of his work as a poet which is so evident in these examples from interviews, but also to recognize the particular force in that last caveat of refusing to exclude 'inwardness' from the equation. The importance of Harrison's conception of 'inwardness' is particularly evident, as we shall see, in his early

ruminations on being a poet, but it is worth attending to across his whole career as it has been underplayed in extant accounts of him as a writer.

While Harrison is a poet whose work has understandably engendered critical attention which has focused on the political and ideological matrix from which it draws its creative inspiration – the oppositions of class, war, and extinctions – some of his critics have also been properly attentive to the way his poetry negotiates between public and private.[4] Attention has been paid, in particular, to the way Harrison exploits different voices or personae – not just in theatre works but also in the quasi-autobiographical poems which make up a significant element of *Continuous*.[5] But in the main these are analyses of rhetorical and lexical strategies rather than attempts to define the nature of his particular kind of 'inwardness'. In his study of the materiality of language in Harrison's poetry, Joseph Francis Doerr is unusual amongst Harrison's critics in offering a very brief, but shrewd insight into how the immaterial continues to inform the poet's creativity. Doerr recognizes in the poetry 'a kind of spiritual dimension to labor which even Harrison's avowed atheism cannot obscure' and he suggests that Harrison 'may not be averse to embracing the symbols of a traditional past if they can serve him in inciting a "moral [and] spiritual reconstruction of human sensibility"'.[6] In his journals and correspondence from the late 1950s Harrison engages with just such an ambitious project to re-imagine 'inwardness' – and one which takes on in its extraordinarily focused ambition the moral and civic responsibilities of poetry's epic traditions.

In the much-quoted epigraph/poem at the start of *The School of Eloquence*, 'Heredity', Harrison makes play with the origins of this vocation:

> *How you became a poet's a mystery!*
> *Wherever did you get your talent from?*
> I say: *I had two uncles, Joe and Harry –*
> *one was a stammerer, the other dumb.*
> [*CP* 120]

This has rightly been read as a forcefully de-mystifying socio-political rejoinder: the militant working-class poet offering a suitably barbed and disconcerting reply to his middle-class questioners or doubters.[7] A refinement of this interpretation is that it turns the ineffable mystery of poetry – poetry's hidden creative process – into a question of materiality. Social injustice derived from the inequalities of the English class system provides the spur to Harrison's eloquence. The two uncles, in the larger context of the volume, are likely to be read as the silenced victims of the class war and Harrison's achievement seen to stand as the triumphant overcoming of 'lousy leasehold poetry' by the freedom-fighting poet who has successfully managed to get behind the lines of the literary establishment. But while offering these social correctives and despite its force as a witty, paradoxical put-down, 'Heredity' also serves on another level to reinforce the mystery not by answering the query, but by displacing it. It might be argued that 'Heredity' puts the question of poetic creativity

back into the anthropological or the psychological domain of unexplained genius – or in classical terms – the Orphic. On one level, it can be said to re-inscribe the potent myth of the maimed poet/prophet. At another, it confirms Harrison's strong sense of poetry's hold on him. Its affiliation is with a condition akin to an affliction: a necessary or even inescapable mode of being rather than a separable and containable form of artistic activity.

In what follows, I wish to examine how Tony Harrison imagines and fashions this view of himself as a poet and also to explore the significance of his powerful sense of vocation. This will necessitate – as in this last instance of 'Heredity' – a consideration of his reworking and revising of the metaphysical, spiritual, and moral paradigms of the figure of the poet in the late 1950s. This challenges the extant view of him as a poet working in a dominantly materialist and humanist context.[8] The making of Tony Harrison as a poet – as we might expect – requires a deep-seated engagement with the dominant mores of English society in the mid-twentieth century. In order to make himself the poet he became by the 1980s, Harrison had to work through the matrix of his social and educational backgrounds, engaging with and significantly reworking the metaphysical and even theological domains within which the figure of the poet was historically situated.

II

Tony Harrison's journal for 1958 is blazoned with the following injunction typed in capital letters on a label and glued to the front cover: 'ON ON ON ON ON'.[9] Within the pages of the journal itself, alongside notes and fragments, there is a diaristic narrative in which the twenty-one-year-old poet urges himself on to poetic achievement. He does so in terms reminiscent of a Protestant autobiography in which the work ethic is manifestly spiritual. His repeated calls to 'labour' and 'discipline' even occasionally climax in a dramatic dialogue of the soul, as in this entry for December 1958:

> I feel again restless, now that I have returned. I need some really significant action, preferably some poems. I must be industrious. There is no satisfaction except through labour. Let labour begin! I find myself wondering if quiet madness would not bring rest. I know it would not, but it disturbs me to find myself thinking this. I must recover some integrity, some innocence even. My desire to leave Leeds behind was probably no more than the wish to postpone work. But the correct work

> will not present itself. Find it then! I would undertake any labour, provided I knew my direction. [10]

This excerpt from the journal is typical not only in its registering of the disturbance caused by Harrison's deep-seated desire to be a poet, but also in the way it brings the whole self into the equation. Being a poet in this instance involves the moral condition of the person. The excerpt is also typical of the way Harrison's journal begins to articulate the self between different voices.

The same kind of anxious disturbance and drama within the self is evident some months later when Harrison deploys his journal as an exhortation to finish poems which he has begun. Here he invokes the admonitory example of Ulrike Brendel, the former tutor of Johannes Rosmer, the protagonist of Ibsen's play *Rosmersholm* (1886), whose characteristic is to have imagined numerous fine poems but not to have committed them to writing. And, as he does elsewhere at this time, Harrison sees himself facing the same challenge as Dedalus and Icarus. Egging himself on to achieve 'significance', he must learn to complete if he is to fulfil what he sees as his inherent nature as an 'artifex':

> The problem of <u>finishing</u> poems disturbs me. I look upon my present work, little as it is, as a preparation for greater work, for the right work. But I shall not be artist enough to complete it, since the artist is he who can <u>finish</u> properly what has been started from the materials of accumulated thought and feeling.
> […] When I have the strength, if ever I have, the ideas will not serve. This has happened many times with poems put aside. Is it not worth the fall to attempt the flight? If I never try to exceed my grasp I shall never lengthen my reach.
> Remember Ulrich Brendel and work hard. The 'artifex' in you is made, and the artist made to finish. If the poem appears to be a failure from the start, narrow its circumference until it has a frontier adjusted to its powers. Only work hard, finish, and do not complain. The failures that you make, at least are <u>made</u>, and belong to you. Discipline! [11]

Underlying the feelings of insecurity and his sense of disturbance is a commitment to work and discipline which is not just moral, but spiritual. The agony of labour as described in such entries in the journal is that Harrison must find 'the right work' and finish it.

It is no surprise in the context of this urgent self-dialogue that Harrison refers to his dedication to poetry as a 'calling' which 'requires complete solitude of soul' and that he describes the need to write poetry as his 'inmost necessity'.[12] The vocabulary is determinedly religious and metaphysical even as he recounts having spent the

weekend 'completely in the habitation of my poems'.[13] The internal drama of this impulse is captured in the following moment of self-awareness:

> … I have never been more conscious of the quiet determination to dedicate myself to my innermost impulse and to make the necessary sacrifices. I asked myself how it would be if I did not begin this labour and I answered firmly that I could not live. I expect no reward, no publication even. To expect this would be to start on the wrong foot. I only know simply that it is necessary.[14]

Repeatedly castigating himself for failing to meet the challenge of the 'right work', but feeling the full force of its necessity, the journal recounts Harrison's battle to find time and space for poetry while studying for a postgraduate degree and attempting to build relationships within and beyond the family. At this very early stage of his career as a poet the narrative is understandably dominated by his repeated sense of failure and worthlessness, his inadequacy in matching the deeply-felt compulsive necessity within with any outward visible sign of his labours, though the measure of poetic success is not simply to be found in the writing of poems and certainly not just in the publishing of them. For Harrison, poetry's spiritual aspect is imagined as an expansion of the self. At one point in the journal he writes: 'I set myself this golden motto for the study, reading, and understanding of an author: "totamque infusa per artus/ mens agitat molem it magno se corpore/ Miscet"(AENEID vi 726-7)' [one primal Mind,/Immingled with the vast and general frame,/Fills every part and stirs the mighty whole. [Vergil,*Aeneid* VI, ll.725/7].[15] Understandably, this Vergilian idea of a commingling of the soul or spirit leads on to the notion of poetry's providing a higher level of self-awareness and self-knowledge. In what appears to be something of a virtuous circle, poetry is seen to provide a higher level of consciousness which guides Harrison to significant poetic achievement: 'It is in me to make activities significant and significant activities keep me aware. It is a function of poetry to make me aware and to guide this virtue of awareness to its proper end'.[16] Characteristically, for a poet and classical scholar, this ontological imperative is expressed through a linguistic analogy in which the self is imaged as a verb: 'if only our lives bore the same relation to our *accidentia* as the verb bears to its sentence, our being would expand in intense activity of spirit'.[17] The same circularity is evident in his dictum in a nearby journal entry that: 'A good poem is one which forces one to expand to meet it'.[18] Even in the mid 1970s, Harrison writes of 'loving poems more than ever' on the basis that they are 'especially useful' in staving off his tendency to 'withdrawal and depression', a reflection which leads him to the more exuberant declaration that 'Work is what matters, and knowing how to endure…'.[19]

This conscientious wrestling with the necessitous vocation of being a poet is a major feature of Harrison's correspondence with fellow poet and close friend James

Simmons, especially in the late 1950s when both men were attempting to make their way in the poetry world. Just as the journal clearly allows Harrison ample opportunity for self-reflection and self-motivation – even if very often in the anguished form of self-chastening rebukes – the correspondence with Simmons allows him to test out his ideas and his sense of his own progress, even to the point of sharing with him a recommendation for adopting the habit of writing a journal:

> Have you tried recently the habit of keeping a journal? I bought a new one. It is a very helpful discipline. It serves for clarification, as a latrine, and later as a source book. I suppose as you indicate the best way is to find out where one's real heart lies and work on this until it is exhausted and ready for a significant change. Some kind of obsession is necessary, which changes and advances with the time.[20]

Discipline is once again to the fore, but with the word 'latrine' Harrison also allows for a cathartic – or, one might suggest – hygienic function to the process. So, too, the idea of an 'obsession' is broached, interestingly in this instance not as 'the' obsession, but 'some kind of obsession' – and one which is subject to change. There is here a sense that 'obsession' carries with it a form of commitment and an energy which is helpfully propulsive.

The 'obsession' at the time of this letter and its surrounding correspondence in 1958 and 1959, a period when Harrison was teaching in a Secondary Modern School in Dewsbury and simultaneously working on a postgraduate dissertation at the University of Leeds, was in part determined by his subject of study: classical heroism. Unsurprisingly, though this academic work considered by Harrison at the time to be a mere stop-gap to allow him to pursue his work as a poet and to afford him, he thinks, something of the discipline required to structure a literary work, it also feeds into his debate about the poetic vocation and mixes with the Christian/moral discourse we have witnessed at work in the journal. In his letters from this period to Simmons, classical heroism is a major feature of their excited and sometimes disputatious attempts to work out the role of the poet in their contemporary society.

These arguments simultaneously engage with religion and the possibility of heroism in the modern world. In another of his letters to Simmons, Harrison explicitly takes on 'the Church' and its failure to deal with the realities of life and death – here expressed as a pilgrimage of the soul. Despite his opposition to what the Church has to offer, his concern is still determinedly spiritual in its focus: that established religion in its current form 'provides an inadequate framework or perimeter for the individual to make his own pilgrimage'. His vehement response to the failings of established religion is registered as follows: 'I refuse to conform'; and his rebellion is once again resolutely articulated in the language of religion: 'My duty is to save my

soul'.[21] What at one point Harrison refers to as his 'Captaincy of soul'[22] moves very deliberately across theological and aesthetic domains.

At one point in the correspondence the linkage becomes explicit in his reference to Aristotle. When considering his developing sense of his worth as a poet and, more particularly, the 'happiness' produced by his literary labours, Harrison deploys Aristotle's definition of happiness of spirit to suit his own terminology of 'soul' and styles himself as a latter-day Hercules who wishes the muses would send him 'significant labours'.[23] 'Significant' is one of the key words in his discourse, as in the following passage where he contemplates the impossibility of the heroic in the contemporary world and where Milton's Christian epic helpfully comes to the fore as a nexus between the figure of the poet and our fallen human condition:

> The Hero moves in a world of constant pressure from the significant and real. That is his life is always that which ours is at its critical turns. His action will always bear direct consequence for himself. In its most plastic manifestation the heroic is the battle-field, where the pressure is concentrated, another choice between life and death at every turn, the operation of the choice and the consequence of survival or death. The hero in this case is brought most crudely to confront the basic realities of our human existence. This is the most obvious activity of the hero in the battles of epic poetry, of Homer and Vergil. Paradise Lost xxxxxx [sic] is truly heroic, but it is an inversal of the physical hero although as much in his trafition [sic]. Behind every act of physical devotion there is implied the spiritual heroic of Milton. This pressure of significant reality is however at most times lacking in our lives. The existence of a future state, of heaven and hell would make us xxxxx heros [sic]. Some natural course of internal justice would afford our acts their consequence. That these do not exist is enough to make action insignificant, a gesture, defeated from the start. The heroic world assumes this significance, so I suppose does the poem which creates its own world wherein 'poetic justice ' is dispensed. [24]

That military epic might be one of the routes through which Harrison understands the role of the poet comes as no great surprise for a writer whose work is so haunted by the apocalyptic fires of World War II and whose repeated conjuring of the 'radiant light of eternity' brings together Percy's Shelley's image of Romantic creativity – 'the violet in the crucible' – and the threat of annihilating twentieth-century holocausts. But the spiritual/moral implication here is perhaps more surprising given extant views of Harrison's poetic: the possibility which is mooted here on behalf of poetry – that it can within itself be heroic, even godlike, and that its workings constitute an alternative form of justice that stands in for that which has operated historically within the standard religious frame. Among his reflections on

the nature of the heroic in 1959 Harrison writes as follows about the contrasting category of the absurd: 'The absurd has always been for me those actions or activities which had no relationship to a divine element and so to the progress of the spirit'.[25] For our purpose of charting the nature of Harrison's 'inwardness' and its changing position in relation to orthodox Christianity, it is significant that above 'divine' in this statement a later, older hand of Harrison's has written 'no not the right word'.

In another letter to Simmons, Harrison makes even more explicit the fallen nature of our humanity and how the poet/author stands in relation to that incapacity. His statements here go some considerable way to explaining the origins of his humanism and how this humanism comes out of a concerted grappling across Classical and Christian traditions. In the first half of the letter he contemplates the scarcity of poetic epiphanies and draws attention to the disjunction between heroic and ordinary human experience. The purpose of the heroic is to offer 'discipline' in the awareness of the discrepancy – that same 'awareness' which we have seen Harrison repeatedly allude to in his journal. 'Significance' and 'discipline' – as we have also seen – are the two watchwords of his early sense of poetic vocation and here their meaning is made explicit. Describing his commentary as his 'last word on the heroic fallacy', he argues that '[f]or a man who is not a poetic hero xxxxxxx (i.e. myself) moments of epiphany are few and far between, the trivialities and distractions triumphant.' He goes on to suggest that the 'discrepancy between ourselves and the epic hero' is apparent in the fact that 'our epiphanies are not continuous and consecutive'. The function of the epic poem is therefore to make this discrepancy apparent and to 'direct us towards some discipline by which the gap may be narrowed'. 'For Christians,' Harrison suggests, this discipline consists in 'the following of Christ'; and in this respect, he argues, Thomas a Kempis's *Imitation of Christ* performs the 'same function as the Aeneid', and he quotes approvingly Dryden's statement from the foreword to his translation of Vergil's poem: 'The design of it […] is to form the mind to heroic virtue by example'.[26]

In the second part of the letter and in response to a poem of his own which he has sent to Simmons, Harrison pushes this idea of our fallen and common nature – our non-heroic nature – into Keatsian territory when he suggests that the measure of our humanity is to be found by calibrating our suffering and disease alongside our heroic imaginings. Defending his use of the 'common cold' as the subject matter of the poem he has sent to his friend James Simmons, Harrison declares that 'to be human is to be limited' and that this limitation comprises the ailments and diseases to which we are subject:

> Colds, fevers, plagues, measles, bubos, syphilis, diarrhoea, puerperal fever, acne, are normal. They are not unhappy additions to a clean slate, but are part of the organism. We are not humans plus death and disease,

> or in another realm plus malice, envy, greed, sloth, jealousy etc. The word human means these things.[27]

It is salutary to see this early expression of Harrison's forceful humanism and even more revealing that it develops out of his engagement with classical and Christian epic. One can witness the emergence here of that more general tenet of his work – his sense of mortality's counter-point which he articulates most memorably in the line in 'A Kumquat for John Keats' which proclaims that 'life has a skin of death that keeps its zest' [*CP* 221]. This 'zest' is the substance of Harrison's frequent riposte to claims that he is a pessimistic poet.[28]

To attend to Harrison's writing in these letters in the late 1950s is to see a poet in the making, one still unsure of his processes of writing and of his poems, but one whose sense of vocation engages with the dominant cultural forms of his society – both aesthetic and religious – in the immediate post-War period. His sense of himself as a poet is fashioned out of a deep and earnest moral enquiry derived from his inherited Christian tradition and from his education in the Classics. He presents this debate in different forms: to himself in his journal and to his fellow poet and friend James Simmons as well as himself in his letters. One can also start to see at the end of the 1950s the beginnings of a migration in this figuring of the poet: one in which the language of Christianity is increasingly put at a distance and one in which the heroic has been used to point up our common humanity as Harrison briefly speculates on the heroic – even godlike – position of the creative artist only to move towards a profound acceptance of the incorporation of our limit as he begins to enunciate a more recognizable ethics of endurance.

III

Having the privilege of looking at a poet in the making – as we have done in part in this essay with the case of Tony Harrison in the late 1950s – provides a valuable opportunity to think more generally about the poets who came to maturity in the immediate post-War period in a more nuanced and historically contextualized way. Harrison's case allows us to extrapolate in two key areas in particular: the significance of an emergence from the prevailing dominant Christian belief-system and the key role played in the making of these writers by their paradigm of the figure of the poet.

Critics have underplayed the significance of Christian belief systems in their accounts of post-War British poetry. At least, they seem to have undervalued the

degree to which poets of the post-Butler Education Act generation who came to adulthood in the 1950s defined themselves as poets through their engagement with and opposition to the prevailing socially dominant religion of the period. In Harrison's case, there is clearly a migration from an agonized wrestling with the dominant orthodox Christian belief system in English society in the late 1950s to a fairly explicit and confident humanism, certainly by the 1970s. His introduction to his translation of the late Latin poet Palladas, a pagan poet writing in despair at the dawn of the Christian era, undertaken while on a fellowship at Gregynog Hall in the early 1970s,[29] marks an interesting staging-post for the later more ebullient humanist statements of the 1980s which include, most famously, his television poem *The Blasphemer's Banquet* (1989).

In 'Something to Believe In' – his short but richly provocative contribution to Astley's influential compendium of Harrison materials – Jeffrey Wainwright touches on an important territory akin to that I am outlining here about the experience of being a poet. Following the philosopher Charles Taylor, the question for Wainwright is about the framework within which we are able to 'make sense of our lives spiritually' (*Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, 1989). For Wainwright, Harrison's 'deployment of dramatic and lyric genres' is unified by an 'effort' to make sense of a situation characterized by anxiety induced by what the poet feels as 'the desuetude of several believable frameworks' – 'masculinity, family, and class'. [Astley 407-08]. I would want to add poetry itself – or rather the poet – to that triumvirate. It is clear form Harrison's archive that his sense of himself as an aspirant poet is profoundly engaged with his awareness of his spirituality – both in his dissatisfaction with his Christian inheritance and his scholarly excitement at his education in the ancient Classics.

Harrison's notebooks, journals, and correspondence provide different kinds of evidence of what it was like to undertake the risky commitment to be a poet in England in the second half of the twentieth century, particularly as a working-class Grammar School boy. Harrison expressed this forcibly in interview with John Haffenden: 'I wanted to make poetry a real job and that's a question of hazarding the whole of your life on what you do; for more than fifteen years I've done nothing but write verse for a living. I wanted my job to be the whole enterprize, the whole risk'.[30] Evidence from the archive materials also provides a challenge to the way we have traditionally conceived of the identity of a poet – particularly in terms of selfhood and the process of creativity. In Harrison's case, the creative process is firmly defined as a form of 'labour' and is inscribed with a spiritual force. Poetry, for him, is clearly part of his deep-seated and at times anguished engagement with his own soul and with the limitations and frustrations of social mores in 1950s Leeds. The evidence here, therefore, is not simply of a poet defined through his or her poems, but a poet riskily and ambitiously forging an identity by mobilizing and committing

to their idea of a poet. This is something different from what we often attend to in literary criticism.

Faced with the difficulty of accounting for poetry in this period through descriptions of national identity, Edward Larrissy suggests that, instead, it would be 'better to pay heed to the many-faceted and constantly evolving contexts constituted by publishers, readers, reviewers, workshops, universities, performance venues and arts-funding bodies'. He is attentive to the roles played by universities in this history – both in their provision of creative writing classes and 'on the fringes' in their more informal patronage of poetry activities. Similarly, in the same volume, Jon Glover offers a history of poetry's 'outward forms', its 'institutional and public infrastructures' in agencies and universities as well as its various manifestations in networks, magazines, and workshops. These material histories, as Larrissy and Glover recognize, have a deep effect on the character, form, and technique of our contemporary poetry. I would wish to add that in attending to such histories we should not miss the opportunity to explore the psychological manoeuvres of poets in response to these different conditions – the changes these different economies of creative labour make to their sense of being a poet.[31]

Watching the complex and pressured context in which Harrison commits to becoming a poet – or to refer back to the time when he was, to use his own term, 'forming myself'[32] – is to witness a number of such manoeuvres and challenges in response to his developing conception of himself as a poet; and these in turn help to illuminate the nature of the poems.

From the evidence of the Harrison archive, 'being a poet' is certainly not a given and certainly not a single stable thing. On that same evidence, though, it is the thing which defines and serves to motivate him, even in what is for the most part a period characterized by – as he sees it – a lamentable absence of poems. Part of the process here is clearly one of self-motivation – even self-mythologization. More generally in this context, we are witness to a regime of work in which poetry enjoys a privileged and idealized aspect of the writer's life, but is constantly challenged and put under pressure to the extent that one needs to think about it in terms of a distinctive economy of labour: one which applies specifically to the genesis of poems and distinct from the writing of them. This pressured and constantly threatened economy of creative labour in turn generates very specific forms of selfhood and ontological activity which even in today's generally assumed terms of the death of the author we still might do well to attend to. Roy Fisher offers a tantalizingly brief example of this in his essay on the 'nature of neglect' which is appended to his recent collection *Slakki*. Reflecting on his own very particular, often marginalized, place within the recent body of English poetry, Fisher refers in typically self-deprecating style to his own 'technical shortcoming':

> my poems lacked a stable self: the character who was writing the poem and responsible for it and to it. My everyday self – a quite presentable, penurious and apparently unambitious young man – created no problems, but the self that should have been present or implicit in what I wrote was something of a weak ankle. Required to bear weight it would shift stance and not be answerable. A series of vestigial stock figures stood in, no more than grammatical fictions.[33]

What is important here is not Fisher's apparent regret for the absence of a stable self, but his powerful articulation of the need for a separation between two 'selves' which allows poetry to be created. His distinction between an everyday self and 'the self who should have been present' in the poems as opposed to the mere 'grammatical fictions', is, I suspect, not an unusual distinction among poets as they seek a workable *modus vivendi*. In Fisher's example, there is also a powerful correlation between the formal requirement of poetry – literally the requirement of its form placed upon the poet – and the demand for a change in the constitution of the self. To judge by Tony Harrison's archive and those of Ken Smith and Jon Silkin which are also held in the Brotherton Library at Leeds , this is most likely a fairly common strategic manoeuvre among poets as they find themselves in need of creating separations within themselves in order to function creatively. In Harrison's case, we can see this taking different linguistic forms: in his journal with the manifestation of a dialogue within the self as the young poet writes imperatives to himself; and in the letters to James Simmons where he can present hypotheses and try out versions of himself to the audience of an individual friend who responds by creating his own version of Harrison, sometimes for example in comparison with the wounded Shakespearean hero Coriolanus.

One gets some sense of the importance of these self-fabricating and self-authenticating fictions for a poet from Harrison's public utterances about his vocation. In addition to the all-consuming poetic identity of his literary output, he has described himself as throwing himself 'into becoming a poet' while admitting that his commitment 'to the identity of the poet' exacerbated his relationship with his father.[34] Given Harrison's exactness, the idea of committing not simply to 'poetry' or to being a poet, but 'to the identity of the poet', is significant. More surprising perhaps – at least in terms of its priorities – is his description of *Continuous* as his 'way of testing how I feel about the identity of poet in this culture' [228].[35] That his most celebrated and abiding poetic work should be conceived of not simply as an expanding sequence of poems in their own right, but as a kind of cultural barometer for the 'identity of the poet' reveals how powerful the figure of the poet is in Harrison's thinking and how deeply it continues to inform his creative process.

[1] In an interview with Pete Mitchell posted online in March 2015 with the title '"Everything I do is poetry": an interview with Tony Harrison', Harrison explained: 'I've never liked saying poet dash playwright, or poet dash that. It's poet: that includes everything. I have almost constantly being trying to find some of the range and ambition and public dimension of dramatic poetry from the Greeks through Shakespeare and the Jacobeans, Moliere, Racine, Goethe; Yeats, Brecht. Almost all poets not only wrote for the theatre but also worked as directors or actors . . . I'm sure if they were alive today, they would also have worked in television.' [**http://www.booktrust.org.uk/news-and-blogs/blogs/booktrust/842**: [Accessed December 2016]

[2] The cutting from the newspaper was collected by Harrison himself and inserted in his journal. See: University of Leeds Special Collections: Brotherton Collection, BC MS 20C Harrison 02/01 *Palatinate* 'Poets on the Campus: Interview by Lena Jayyusi and Hadyn Adams.

[3] 'Interview with Tony Harrison', *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies I: Tony Harrison*, p.9.

[4] Rick Rylance posed the challenge of accounting for Harrison's formal dexterity and the 'primary' emotional impact of his poems in his essay 'On Not Being Milton' (*Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies: I Tony Harrison,* pp. 114-28). Sandie Byrne argues that 'Harrison's poetry acknowledges that the self is constructed by forces extrinsic to its notion of itself – is in negotiation – yet it retains the notion of an integrated, autonomous personality which can reflect upon those forces. Though the voice of the Harrison "I" produces and is produced by many discourses, one remains dominant'; while admitting that 'the poetry could be taken to invite a form of cultural materialism which replaces such individualism' (*H, v. & O: the Poetry of Tony Harrison* (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 1998), p.231). On the inter-relationship between subjectivity and both class and race in Harrison's poetry, see: Colin Nicholson, 'Reciprocal Recognitions': Race, Class, and Subjectivity in Tony Harrison's *The Loiners'*, *Race & Class* 04/2010. For a recent account of the liminal nature of Harrison's poetry in relation to his deployment of working-class speech see: Agata G. Handley 'On (Not) Being Milton: Tony Harrison's Liminal Voice' *Text Matters* vol.6 November 2016 276-90. For a recent account of Harrison's poetry and identity in terms of Adorno's negative dialectics see: Mark Libin, '"Prick-tease of the soul: Negative Dialectics and the Politics of Tony Harrison's *v.*' November 2016 *Textual Practice* DOI.10.1080/0950236X.2016.1238006. Libin writes: '[it is]the simultaneous movement of the poem to enunciate a secure and knowable identity and to relentlessly subvert that identity that Adorno's concept of negative dialectics presents itself as a methodology that articulates the politics and poetics of *v.*' ('"Prick-tease of the Soul: Negative Dialectics and the Politics of Tony Harrison's *v.*', p.6.)

[5] See: Sandie Byrne, 'Poetry and Class', in *The Cambridge Companion to British Poetry, 1945-2010*, ed. by Edward Larrissy (CUP: Cambridge, 2016), pp.119-21; Sandie Byrne, *H, v. & O: the Poetry of Tony Harrison* (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 1998), p.231; Romana Huk, 'Poetry of the Committed Individual' in Contemporary British Poetry: Essays in Theory and Criticism, ed, by James Acheson and Romana Huk (State University of New York Press: Albany1996), pp.175-219, esp. pp.198-211.

[6] Joseph F. Doerr, 'The Making of the English Working-Class Poet: Historical Perspectives of Class, Art, and Culture in the Shaping of five Poets from Leeds: Geoffrey Hill, Jon Silkin, Ken Smith, and Jeffrey Wainwright', a Dissertation presented to the Graduate A School of the University of Notre Dame, June 2003, pp. 144, 149.

[7] Carol Rutter offers the following commentary on the poem: 'This deceptively mild little statement manages to radiate social rage even as it contains it. It lays out Harrison's recurrent theme, the repression of working-class speech' (*Permanently Bard: Selected Poetry* ed. by Carol Rutter (Bloodaxe: Newcastle, 1995), p.17).

[8] This predominant view of Harrison as a materialist, Marxist humanist, republican poet is replicated and confirmed in Christine Regan's recent study, *The Rimbaud of Leeds: The Political Character of Tony Harrison's Poetry* (Cambria Press: Amherst, 2016). In her account of Harrison's relationship to John Milton, Regan asserts that: 'Harrison's allusions to Milton are always to the republican revolutionary. He shows little interest in Milton's religion' (p.167); and when illuminating his relationship with Rimbaud, even in her analysis of Harrison's poem 'Ghosts', she sticks resolutely – like most previous commentators – to the material, rather than considering the immaterial and Harrison's rewriting of 'spirit'. (See: *The Rimbaud of Leeds*, pp.166-172 and 123-42.)

[9] University of Leeds, Special Collections: BSMS 20c, Harrison, Journals & Commonplace Books, Box 2/02, Box 2, 'Notes and Fragments', 'Journal', front cover; hereafter Cited as 'Journal'.
[10] 'Journal', pp. 9-10.
[11] University of Leeds, Special Collections: BSMS 20c, Harrison, Correspondence with James Simmons, letter dated 'Monday 29 September'.
[12] 'Journal', p. 14.
[13] 'Journal', p. 17.
[14] 'Journal', p. 13, dated 10 January 1959.
[15] 'Journal', p. 59, dated 29 September 1959.
[16] 'Journal', pp. 38-39.
[17] 'Journal', p. 67.
[18] 'Journal', p. 78.
[19] University of Leeds, Special Collections: BSMS 20c, Harrison, Correspondence with James Simmons, letter dated 21 September 1976.
[20] University of Leeds, Special Collections: BSMS 20c, Harrison, Correspondence with James Simmons, letter dated Monday 2 January, presumably 1959.
[21] University of Leeds, Special Collections: BSMS 20c, Harrison, Correspondence with James Simmons, letter dated 'Saturday', presumably 1958/59.
[22] University of Leeds, Special Collections: BSMS 20c, Harrison, Correspondence with James Simmons, letter dated December 8 1958.
[23] University of Leeds, Special Collections: BSMS 20c, Harrison, Correspondence with James Simmons, letter dated December 8 1958.
[24] University of Leeds, Special Collections: BSMS 20c, Harrison, Correspondence with James Simmons, letter dated June 24 1959.

[25] 'Journal', p.38, dated 12 April 1959.
[26] University of Leeds, Special Collections: BSMS 20c, Harrison, Correspondence with James Simmons, letter dated 21 June 1959.
[27] University of Leeds, Special Collections: BSMS 20c, Harrison, Correspondence with James Simmons, letter dated 21 June 1959.
[28] See, for example, his interview with John Haffenden, in which Harrison describes himself as 'deeply pessimistic if I regard only my intelligence. But my heart and my sensuality are committed to survival and celebration' ('Interview with Tony Harrison', *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies: I, Tony Harrison*, p.235). For more detailed analysis of 'A Kumquat for John Keats' see: Juan Christian Pellicer, '"And doubly sweet a brotherhood in song": Allusion and Imitation in Tony Harrison's "A Kumquat for John Keats', *English (*March 2008/Spring2008, Vol. 57 Issue 217, pp.84-97; and John Whale, 'John Keats and Tony Harrison: The Burden of History', in *The Monstrous Debt: Modalities of Romantic Influence in Twentieth-Century Literature*, ed. by Damian Walford Davies and Richard Marggraf Turley (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006), pp. 163–80.
[29] *Palladas: Poems, A Selection in Versions by Tony Harrison* was published by Anvil Press in association with Rex Collings in 1975. The 'Preface' is dated 'Gregynog, March 1974'.
[30] 'John Haffenden: Interview with Tony Harrison', *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies: I, Tony Harrison*, p. 246.

[31] See: Edward Larrissy, 'Introduction', *The Cambridge Companion to British Poetry, 1945-2010*, ed. by Edward Larrissy (CUP: Cambridge, 2016), pp. 6-7; and Jon Glover, 'Poetry's Outward Forms: Groups, Workshops, Readings, Publishers' in *The Cambridge Companion to British Poetry, 1945-2010*, ed. by Edward Larrissy (CUP: Cambridge, 2016), pp.240-258. For two earlier considerations of this subject of the identity of the poet in relation to the changing role of poetry and the emergence of creative writing programmes in universities see: Kathleen Raine, *The Inner Journey of the Poet and Other Papers* (George Allen & Unwin: London, 1982), particularly 'The Inner Journey of the Poet', pp.25-39; and Robin Skelton, *The Poet's Calling* (Heinemann: London, 1975). At one point in his study, Skelton quotes Kathleen Raine remembering the French Nobel Laureate Alexis Leger saying that 'one must never forget that being a poet is a way of life and that it is a total way of life' (p.193).

[32] Harrison used the phrase in an interview with Andrew Brown of *The Independent* in January 1993 in relation to the problem of reading literature in his own voice at Leeds Grammar School: 'At one time, when I was forming myself, these things were things I had to combat. I had to struggle with them in order to find my own voice. Now they concern me less, perhaps, than they did, because some of my preoccupations are different. But I still have that attitude to art and culture.' See: http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/harrison-forward-andrew-brown-meets-tony-harrison-whose-poetry-goes-straight-to-the-heart-and-to-the-1480287.html [accessed December 2016]

[33] Roy Fisher, 'Roy Fisher on the Nature of Neglect', in *Slakki: New and Selected Poems*, (Bloodaxe: Newcastle, 2016), p. 73.

[34] In a 1983 interview with John Haffenden, Harrison says that he 'learned many languages, obsessively, and also threw myself into becoming a poet, which is for me a supreme and ceremonious mode of articulation'. A little late in the same interview he explains that: 'The understanding of my feelings about the relationship with my father – probably exacerbated because I committed myself to the identity of the poet'. 'Interview with Tony Harrison', *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies: I, Tony Harrison*, pp.228, 230.

[35] Speaking of *Continuous*, Harrison explains: 'It's my way of testing how I feel about the identity of poet in this culture: it's a continual enterprise' ('Interview with Tony Harrison', *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies: I, Tony Harrison*, p.228).