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Tony Harrison
International Man of Letters

Introduction

It is well-known that Tony Harrison, one of the most celebrated modern British poets, was born and bred in Leeds. Considering this, perhaps it is no coincidence that we, too, are living in or near Leeds, along with some of the other contributors in this issue. Readers of Harrison know that many scholars have focused in detail on the conflict between Harrison's working class background and his grammar school education to elucidate his poetics and works. However, his writing has not often been investigated in relation to the diverse international contexts in which he has worked. In April 2017, poets, directors, academics and publishers came together in to celebrate Harrison's eightieth birthday at a British Academy conference organised by Edith Hall, one of the contributors to this special issue. The range of tributes was impressive: from Lee Hall's moving account of how the screenplay for *Billy Elliot* would not have been written without Harrison's influence, to personal testimonies from Harrison's collaborators, including Peter Symes, with whom Harrison made some of his most striking films; Giovanni Greco and Cécile Marshall, who translated Harrison's work in Italy and France, respectively; Oliver Taplin, who worked with Harrison on *Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*, based on a Greek play by Sophocles, staged in Delphi; and Hall herself, who edited Harrison's most recent book, *The Inky Digit of Defiance*. Even this handful of examples gives us a sense of the international scope of Harrison's work, whose source languages span millennia and insist on crossing national and linguistic borders.

Early in 2016, we called for papers that would acknowledge the significance of this international range of Harrison's work. By international we meant to highlight the significance of transnational literary relations as well as thinking about the multiple roles of geography, languages and modes of literary composition in his work. Such an understanding, we suggested, had been missing from recent conversations about Harrison's poetry, and was essential to understanding the diverse aesthetic, cultural and political aspects of his *oeuvre*. Contributors responded with enthusiasm to our call, sharing their specialist knowledge about the different languages, fields and periods in which Harrison has worked in order to produce fresh readings of his published work and poetic practice. As a result, this special issue

provides a glimpse of the startling range of mediums, languages and cultures across which Harrison has worked; from his early translation of the *Lysistrata* in Northern Nigeria to his later work as a war poet for newspapers in Bosnia and Iraq; from translations of Molière's *Misanthrope* and Racine's *Phaedra Britannica* to his familiarity with Virgil and Martial. This special issue therefore aims to re-situate Harrison's work in its international contexts and to provide a starting point for future work. The special issue also aims to restore those aspects of Harrison's work that have been eclipsed by existing criticism, which remains dominated by the tension between his working-class background and Grammar School education. What emerges, then, through the essays in this special issue, are three main principles, or perhaps creative processes, which are central to Harrison's work: **translation**, **transnational collaboration** and **critical humanism**. This special issue opens up avenues for new research in these directions, and is therefore part of an ongoing project that seeks to look beyond national borders and class conflict in reading the work of this outstanding poet. We are convinced of the need to shift the current predominant practice of studying national writers within single national traditions to use a wider international framework, recognising the inequality of power relations in literary fields, described by scholars like Pierre Bourdieu, Pascale Casanova, Franco Moretti, and others, without turning away from literary practice and craft. This is all the more the case when dealing with a consummately international poet like Harrison who himself has inveighed against colonialism in all its forms.

The sheer breadth of Harrison's work required us to look beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries, and we therefore sought contributions from scholars from a range of disciplines, including Classics, Modern Languages, Translation Studies, English and Theatre Studies. There is, as we might expect, no uniformity of response in the essays collected in this special issue, but all of the essays are centrally concerned with the ways in which Harrison's work engages with multiple languages, histories, geographies and cultures. Perhaps one of the most striking things about the essays in this special issue is the use of largely unexplored **archival materials**, recently acquired by the Brotherton Library at the University of Leeds. The recent availability of archival materials, including Harrison's notebooks, letters, draft-manuscripts and photographs offers significant new ways of understanding Harrison's work, whether on the page, stage or screen, and this has allowed several of the contributors to provide new perspectives on Harrison's work.

John Whale, for instance, draws on a rich variety of archival documents, including Harrison's letters to the Irish poet, Simmons, with whom Harrison was friends at Leeds, and with whom he would later translate Aristophanes. Whale shows that 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 precarious working-class Grammar School boy. His essay asks how the accumulation, handling, and presentation of the archive by Harrison himself has contributed to and has reflected his sense of himself as a poet, and therefore offers a new perspective on his creative processes.

Hannah Copley also pivots away from the class tensions or class 'wars' that have shaped British society and Harrison's poetry, and draws on his personal notebooks and photo albums from his time as a correspondent for *The Guardian* during the Bosnian and Gulf Wars. These notebooks not only allow new insights into Harrison's creative practices, but also demand a re-evaluation of Harrison's published poetry, emphasising the insistently **transnational nature of his poetic gaze**. Copley looks at drafts of several works, particularly *US Martial*, and her essay re-positions Harrison as an international, contemporary war poet, combining close reading of the poems with a fascinating insight into some of the archival materials.

Rachel Bower re-examines Harrison's early work by examining his notebooks in the Leeds archives composed at Ahmadu Bello University in Northern Nigeria, where he was a lecturer from 1962-66. These notebooks reflect Harrison's interest in languages and traditions of the region, including Hausa, Yorùbá, Igbo Igala, Igbirra; mask traditions; bow songs and European sermons. Harrison was already fascinated with questions of spoken language, dialect, slang and swearing at this time, and collected widely to prepare for his teaching, including lists of onomatopoeic words in the above languages. Bower also examines the manuscripts and rehearsal scripts of *Aikin Mata*, Harrison and James Simmons' collaborative translation of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*. Her essay suggests that these early experiments did not only shape Harrison's early writing, but were formative for his subsequent literary practice, both as a poet and dramatist, a point that is developed in depth by Jacob Blakesley in his examination of Harrison's commitment to the single unique theatrical performance. Both Blakesley and Bower essay show how this early work in Nigeria is therefore crucial to understanding the poetics and politics of Harrison's later work, moving away from the established binaries of current literary scholarship on this poet.

Bower's paper, and those of Blakesley, Copley, and Hall, reveal how **translation** is central to these creative processes. Indeed one of the most significant points to emerge in this special issue is the importance of understanding Harrison as a translator, as well as a poet, playwright and director. This perhaps should not come as a surprise: Harrison has received many prestigious awards for his translations, including the European Poetry Translation Prize for his 1981 version of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. And yet, as Blakesley notes, there have been no sustained critical accounts of Harrison's work which have foregrounded the role of translation in his work, which include not merely comedies, tragedies, and lyric poetry, but intersemiotic translations like *Prometheus*, and interlingual translations like *The Mysteries*. Blakesley shows how translation sparked Harrison's poetic career: how it was through translating that he 'learnt all the metres'. His essay also shows how Harrison's approach as a translator is distinct from most contemporary English-language poets, because he works collaboratively with directors, translates directly from the source languages, and brings a forceful poetics of his own to bear upon the text. This is connected to Harrison's commitment to developing texts for **single, unique performances**. As Harrison has provocatively said, 'I like that theatre should perish. Just as mortality is the seasoning of our relish for life, so ephemerality is a stimulus to seize the experience of the moment'.¹ Translation then is explored by several contributors to this issue, but there still remains much more work to be done in this direction.

Hall's essay on statues and classicism is determinedly international in scope, but is anchored in the analysis of Harrison's creative experiments with statues in a specific, determinedly located collection: *The Loiners*, set in post-war Leeds. Hall offers the readers of Harrison's work who do not read ancient Greek a rare opportunity to engage with aspects of his poetry that would otherwise be inaccessible. Her essay allows us, for example, to appreciate the extent to which Harrison has absorbed key features of the epigrammatic genre and reproduced many of these qualities in his colloquial English, creating an utterly **distinctive poetic voice and soundscape**.

Hallie Marshall also offers an expert insight into Harrison's work, in her examination of the place of Latin in his writing. Marshall shows how Latin literature provides the foundational

¹ Maya Jaggi, 'Beats of the heart', *Guardian* 31 March 2007: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/mar/31/poetry.tonyharrison>.

underpinnings of his engagement with the Classics, especially the poetry of Virgil. Although Harrison began a PhD at the University of Leeds on English translations of Virgil's *Aeneid*, Marshall shows how little has been written about Harrison's debt to Latin poetry, in part because its influence more often exerts itself as an absence rather than a presence in his work. As she notes, we see in Harrison's poetry 'a refutation of Virgilian values, and those of the ruling elite, and an articulation of an opposing set of values. And it is this opposing set of values that sets Harrison's agenda for the entirety of his poetic output from the late 1970s onward. There may be no explicit allusions to Virgil's poetry, but its influence is everywhere' (Marshall p?). This account of Harrison and Latin is currently missing in existing scholarship on his work, and Marshall's essay provides a welcome intervention and springboard for future work in this area.

Lastly, one of the most consistent concerns raised in the essays in this special issue is the question of **humanism** in Harrison's work, and, by extension, the possibility of pursuing a sustained humanist commitment in our times of ongoing wars, refugee crises coupled with xenophobia, and neocapitalist hegemony leading to widespread poverty in many countries. Copley discusses the 'poetic humanism' that Harrison pursues on the front-line, a discussion which inevitably raises the question of the limits of humanism, particularly in relation to a situation in which a white, classically-educated British man is commissioned to write war poems in a different country and culture. Harrison's own awareness of these limitations, and his ability to draw parallels between different forms of oppression, as seen in Bower's discussion of his identification of the similarities between class oppression and the racial inequality he witnessed in Nigeria, contribute to the complexity of his work, as well as its enduring power. Nevertheless, this special issue raises difficult questions, some of which remain rightly unresolved.

For Whale, the focus on the psychological manoeuvre of poets and their inner lives offers an alternative perspective to the humanist one. Nevertheless, humanism remains a central concern in his essay, where he observes how Harrison's introduction to his translation of the late Greek poet Palladas undertaken while on a fellowship at Gregynog Hall in the early 1970s, '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).' (Whale p?).

Hall perhaps captures the simple commitment underpinning all of this complexity in her concise description of Harrison's work, claiming that, 'for all his bitterness, the fundamental outlook of Harrison's poetry is humane and benevolent' (Hall p?). Hall examines Harrison's 'fascination with Nietzsche's statement that tragic poetry, like the tragic mask, or Perseus' mirror, allows humans to look at intolerable suffering entailed by the human predicament *without* being turned into stone' (Hall p?). Like many of the speakers at the British Academy conference, Hall describes the way in which Harrison's poetry is **unflinching in the wake of violence and human suffering**: how he rejects the instinct to turn away and insists that we keep looking. Blakesley too highlights this by recalling Harrison's statement, 'After atrocity, poetry is the only adequate response' (Blakesley p?). And as most of the essays in this special issue show, Harrison's work often confronts us with that which is almost unbearable, whether on our doorsteps or at the other side of the world, and insists that we overcome the desire to turn away, to keep quiet, to talk about something else.

Of course, Harrison will always remain important as an advocate for Leeds, for ordinary speech, for the working class, the common tongue. He has rightly been celebrated for his championing of dialect, of the stories of ordinary folk, for refusing the allures of the establishment. But this special issue shows that it is no longer enough to experience his poetry solely in these terms, and that we must look beyond Leeds, beyond Britain, beyond English, in order to fully understand the significance of his work. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that we must begin to recognise the extent to which the local is tangled with the international in Harrison's work in order to understand the way that he calls us to respond to oppression in all its forms.

Harrison's has always been resolutely committed to justice and equality, and above all, to highlighting the way that culture is inextricable from barbarism: he is the poet of Marsyas, flayed alive by the powerful Apollo who still, as Harrison recently pointed out, adorns most of the opera houses across Western Europe (Tony Harrison's 80th Birthday Reading, 30 April, Salts Mill, Saltaire). As Harrison wrote, 'Wherever in the world there is torture and pain / the powerful are playing the Marsyas refrain' (Harrison, *Trackers*, p?). This special issue takes Harrison's lead in pursuing the messy histories, cultures and processes that inform his work, from the Classics to modern forms of Nigerian Pidgin; from Northern England to Bosnia, Iraq, and Italy; from ancient Greece to present day conflicts. And as Harrison's iambs

continue to beat in the blood, so we too are challenged to face the intertwined global atrocities of our age with the same unremitting gaze.

Rachel Bower and Jacob Blakesley

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