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Them versus Us: the Theme of Social Alienation in Tony Harrison's *v*.

Tony Harrison is one of the most radically committed poets in Britain today. His writing represents a constant challenge to received notions about the relationship between poetry and politics, class and social conflict, ideology and the function of literature. Indeed, in his long career as a writer he has always confounded any attempt to pigeonhole him either as a poet, classicist, dramatist, translator, filmmaker or journalist. The very range of Harrison's creative work almost defies definition, something that is reflected in the differing critical responses to his poetry. As Rosemary Burton writes in her introduction to the *Bloodaxe* collection of critical writings on him: "Tony Harrison is a figure of astonishing stature and versatility – a contemporary poet who has *done* more than any other" (Burton 1991: 14). Nevertheless, in almost everything Harrison has written, there is a sense of representativity, that his poetry has significance beyond the mere personal. Blake Morrison writes for instance that Harrison is "the first genuine working-class poet England has produced this century" (Morrison 1991: 216). In contrast, Joe Kelleher refers to Harrison as the classic "translator scholar" (Kelleher 1996: 34). More ambiguously, Terry Eagleton situates Harrison at a crossroads "between angry proletarian and bruised metaphysician" (Eagleton 1991: 350). Other critics are also clearly not in agreement about the literary status of the writer himself. Grey Gowrie for instance characterises Harrison as "the most English poet working today" (Gowrie 1997: v), while Francis Gilbert calls him the "Poet laureate of the hard left" (Gilbert 99: 18). However, either as the voice of the nation or as a spokesman for his class, Harrison has always been seen as a public poet, whose work articulates the concerns of the collective rather than the individual.

This is certainly the case in one of Harrison's most famous and controversial longer poems – *v*. – that caused such a furore when it was first broadcast on Channel Four Television on 4 November 1987. The public outrage concerned mainly Harrison's recurring use of four-letter words, rather than the subject matter of the poem itself – a dialogue in a Leeds cemetery between the poet and a skinhead. More discernible critics defended the poem, however, seeing it as a key work in Harrison's *oeuvre*. Set at the time of the great miners' strike of 1984, the poem was for example hailed by John Lucas as giving "painful, decisive utterance" to the underlying Condition of England questions of the day (Lucas 1991: 351). Melvyn Bragg saw it as "a great poem" which "requires, and will most likely get, a book to unravel it" (Bragg 1997: 50-1). Jonathan Barker also considered it

"masterly" and "one of the great public poems of our times" (Barker 1991: 52). In a personal interview, Tony Harrison himself described it as the "most significant" of his works to date (Quoted in Garofalakis 1991: 202). There seems therefore to be several good reasons for looking more closely at some of the issues raised in this long, complex and much debated poem.

One such point, which I want to explore more fully here, is the theme of social alienation – the sense of estrangement or displacement that runs through the poem as a personal and political leitmotif. It seems at first that this is particularly the case with regards to the skinhead, who voices the sense of frustration and exclusion of his whole lost postindustrial generation. My argument here however, is that the most profound feelings of social alienation are centred instead on the poet himself and that this is the key to understanding the debate about class, art and indeed life in the poem. In this context, I also want to discuss the poem against the tradition of the working-class pastoral, a genre first noticed critically by William Empson in his groundbreaking study – *Some Versions of Pastoral* – from 1935. The questions at stake here relate to the stereotyped images of the lower class and the traditional pastoral idea of a personal encounter in which an apparently more sophisticated city dweller is taught some profound lessons about life. Empson saw that this pastoral trope was often used in later working-class literature for ideological purposes: "My reason for dragging this old-fashioned form into the discussion is that I think good proletarian art is usually Covert Pastoral" (Empson 1950: 6). The dialogue between the skinhead and the poet can, I would claim, also be fruitfully discussed in this pastoral context.

It is clear that Tony Harrison is in part writing back at the pastoral tradition in his poem *v*. Not only is the work very much a modern version of Thomas Gray's classic Romantic poem, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751), not least in the way Harrison reproduces Gray's original rhymed verse form of heroic quatrains. The graveyard setting is also a shared point of departure, as are the poetic musings on life and death, art and immortality and the fate of the common man. Harrison even drops names associated with the Romantic tradition in literature – Wordsworth and Byron – although in Harrison's working-class version these are not poets by trade, but builders and tanners. However, one of the main ideological thrusts of Harrison's poem is against the underlying political quietism of Gray's elegy as well as its patronising note of condescension in trying to speak for the anonymous peasantry whose lives were worthy but went unnoticed. The key reference here in Gray is the following famous stanza:

Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,
Their homely joys and destiny obscure;
Nor Grandeur hear, with a disdainful smile,
The short and simple annals of the poor.

In Harrison's poem, the skinhead not only rails against the whole idea of "useful toil" and "destiny obscure", he is also very much allowed to speak up for himself and tell the poet, as well as the reader, some uncomfortable home truths about the "simple annals of the poor". In this way, it is possible to characterise *v.* as a consciously anti-pastoral poem, as defined by Terry Gifford in his recent study of the genre. In this anti-pastoral tradition, "the natural world can no longer be constructed as 'a land of dreams', but is in fact a bleak battle for survival without divine purpose" (Gifford 1999: 120). Thus, not only does Harrison seek to explode the pastoral myth of social cohesion by shifting the focus back to the real struggle going on in the big cities. He also clearly subverts Gray's image of the anonymous poor who are expected to suffer and be still. Elsewhere, Harrison has said that "t/he dumb go down in history and disappear" (Quoted in Rutter 1995: 15). It is therefore up to the poet to try and redress this cultural and rhetorical imbalance. In *v.* the voice to be reckoned with in this context is that of the skinhead.

It is not the first time Harrison has directed his poetic attention to skinheads. The poem "Divisions" from the 1978 collection *The School of Eloquence* represents an early attempt to come to terms with the "teenage dole-wallah", all fired up with beer-fuelled anger and nowhere to go. Moreover, as in *v.*, the element of involuntary identification between skinhead and poet is already hinted at:

All aggro in tight clothes and skinhead crops
they think that like themselves I'm on the dole.
Once in the baths that mask of 'manhood' drops.
Their decorated skins lay bare a soul.¹

This image of unemployed working-class youth, whose only means of expression is through boozing, football hooliganism and graffiti is one that has returned to haunt Harrison's poetic conscience over the years, a subject which receives its fullest treatment in *v.* It is as though Harrison himself experiences a recurring need to reconnect with his own working-class childhood and youth, reflecting on the cultural debt that he feels he still owes to those who, unlike himself, were unable to escape from their under-privileged surroundings. This psychological tension also provides the basis for the theme of social alienation in the poem, as well as the poet's troubled personal relationship with the skinhead.

In *v.* the dialogue between the poet and skinhead covers a whole range of profoundly existential topics, yet the most strikingly provocative aspect of the poem is the use of obscene language. When the poem was first broadcast on television in 1987, it was this particular volatile combination

¹ All Harrison's poems are quoted from Harrison, Tony. 1987. *Selected Poems*. London: Penguin.

of the poetic and the profane that caused such a moral outcry, not least in the press. Sensational newspaper headlines such as "Four-Letter TV Fury" (*Daily Mail* 12.10.87), "Battle To Ban Shock TV Poem" (*The Sun* 12.10.87) and "V Are Not Amused" (*Sunday Telegraph* 8.10.87), reflected the unique yet controversial impact of the poem in the media.² Although many prominent journalists and critics, such as Auberon Waugh of the *Telegraph* and Bernard Levin of the *Times*, defended the poem against those who demanded it should be banned, it was Mary Whitehouse, President of the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association who in a letter to the *Times* (26.10.87) expressed what many people obviously felt about the poem's offensive language: "...obscene four letter words, piled up at a speed and with a force that magnifies their brutality" (Quoted in Harrison 1989: 59). Thus, almost overnight Harrison achieved artistic notoriety with the broadcast, reaching out to new audiences with his poem and creating a heated public debate about the function of literature, censorship and the use of the vernacular. It is a pity that very little of what was said in the ensuing press coverage seemed to focus on the real issues raised by the poem itself. There was however a certain poetic logic in the fact that the work caused such a controversy, since it was itself a piece of writing born out of the conflicts and tensions of its time.

Faced with a general state of bitterly divisive "versuses of life", not least the ongoing miners' strike, the narrator of the poem begins by musing on the meaning of the obscene graffiti sprayed on gravestones, in particular that on his own parents' headstone:

What is it that these crude words are revealing?
What is it that this aggro act implies?
Giving the dead their xenophobic feeling
or just a *cri-de-coeur* because man dies?

It is these questions, the product of the poet's troubled social conscience, that immediately produce the first of several explosive verbal reactions from the skinhead who, while returning the accusation of language abuse, attacks the poet himself for writing irrelevant rubbish which no one – not least among the poet's own working-class family members – would appreciate. This is also the first indication that the skinhead has an intimate knowledge of the poet's personal background and a surprisingly profound insight in his dilemma as an artist. Almost at once the image of social alienation, which would seem more naturally connected with the unemployed skinhead, shifts to that of a socially rootless and linguistically ambivalent poet:

² Several of these newspaper articles are reprinted in Harrison, Tony. 1989. *v.* Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books.

*So what's a cri-de-coeur, cunt? Can't you speak
the language that yer mam spoke. Think of 'er!
Can yer only get yer tongue round fucking Greek?
Go and fuck yerself with cri-de-coeur!*

*'She didn't talk like you do for a start!
I shouted, turning where I thought the voice had been.
She didn't understand yer fucking 'art'!
She thought yer fucking poetry obscene!*

Thus, rather surprisingly, the issue of social exclusion through lack of work, raised at the start of the poem, quickly fades and is replaced instead by an abrasive and extended exchange between the two antagonists on the function of poetic writing itself. Here, as throughout the poem, it is the skinhead – and not the poet – who comes across, not only as the most verbally fluent, but also as the most morally persuasive. It is the skinhead who is given the best punch lines. Significantly also, the poet himself quickly reverts to a similar use of obscene expletives as the skinhead, in a mixture of high and low styles of language that nevertheless falls flat in the face of the skinhead's unequivocal rejection of the written word:

*'Listen, cunt! I said, 'before you start your jeering
the reason why I want this in a book
's to give ungrateful cunts like you a hearing!
A book, yer stupid cunt, 's not worth a fuck!*

*'The only reason why I write this poem at all
on jobs like you who do the dirt on death
's to give some higher meaning to your scrawl.'
Don't fucking bother, cunt! Don't waste your breath!*

Despite the shocking brutality of expression, this heated polemic touches on another of the central concerns of the poem: who speaks for whom? Tony Harrison has himself constantly struggled with the question of his own class allegiances and how to reach out through his poetry to the people who once nurtured him. This in part explains why he consistently writes for television and the cinema, both visual media that have a potentially big working-class audience who otherwise would very rarely come into contact with poetry. A further aspect of this striving for greater poetic accessibility is the use of rhymed verse, a more traditional form of writing that many ordinary people would associate with 'real poetry'. Yet even this concern for broader communication returns us to the central theme of personal and poetic alienation that runs throughout Harrison's work. In this context, language can be seen as both connecting but also separating, thus questioning the status of the poet as both outsider as well as spokesman for those who are silenced by an elitist culture. The skinhead challenges of course all of these notions – in the bitter conflicts that are tearing society apart, the ambitions to bridge such deep social divisions with poetry appear hopelessly utopian. As the skinhead says himself: "*it's not poetry we need in this class war*".

There is nevertheless throughout the poem a growing sense of a personal link between the poet and the skinhead, as an alter ego or Other with whom the poet tries to identify, as if reaching out to the youth that he himself might have been had he not become a classically educated poet: "the skin and poet united fucking Rimbaud but the *autre* that *je est* is fucking you". This link is always an uneasy one, however, and the lasting impression of the poet is that of a politically rather ineffectual intellectual who tries to maintain his ties with his class when these have clearly become both tenuous and strained. The fact that the skinhead mentions things about the poet's family background that only the poet himself would know nevertheless gives this troubled relationship a certain existential poignancy, despite the harsh words that are exchanged. In particular the detail about the poet's mother not understanding her son's work is clearly a source of pain and regret. Once again we can find this recurring image in other autobiographical poems by Harrison. "Bringing Up" for instance, written after his mother's death, rehearses this same theme of personal and poetic estrangement within the family: "But I still see you weeping, your hurt looks: *You weren't brought up to write such mucky books!*"

Harrison has also commented on this sense of social rootlessness and his attempt to utilise the feeling as a source of inspiration in his poetry – a way to exorcise in part the trauma of separation: how the working-class scholarship boy experiences his own journey of class migration both as a voyage of discovery and one of profound loss. The inbetweenness of his contradictory status as poet from the working class, trying to write for the people he loves and still identifies with, gives a poem like *v.* its particular emotional power and profound social pathos. In an interview given before he wrote the poem Harrison admitted that poetry came as a break with his "rooted upbringing":

I don't feel happy in the world of "literature", and nor do I feel happy – with my education and my identity as a poet – in my old working-class background: I'm in a way alienated from both, and I have to do justice to that alienation in the poem. (Quoted in Haffenden 1991: 234)

The poem that Harrison is referring to here is "The Rhubarbarians", which plays on the stereotyped image of the anonymous speech of ordinary people, who are relegated to mumbling some obscure "rhubarb-rhubarb" in the background. It is this incoherent noise, the collective lack of real voice that Harrison has sought to give a very precise and eloquent expression to in his own poetry. As he says himself, once again bringing the task down to a very familiar level in the same poem: "I'd like to be the poet my father reads!"

The poet's father is also given a minor role in *v.* in a touching vignette of old age and loneliness that parallels the theme of alienation in the rest of the poem. Despite the skinhead being more likely associated with problems

of racism, this aspect of his persona is never in fact mentioned in the poem, since it might impinge upon his more radical alter ego the poet. Instead it is the poet's father who is shown feeling a growing sense of defamiliarisation with the working-class environment where he lives – streets and shops that are gradually being occupied by “coloured chaps” as he calls them. The poet's sense of alienation is thus duplicated in his father's lack of recognition of the “foreign food and faces, when he smelt curry in the shop where he'd bought beer”. Even more significant however, is the father's growing inability to communicate with other people in his surroundings – a further parallel to the dilemma of the working-class poet, struggling with the problems of speech and silence, language and his own class allegiances:

But when he bought his cigs he'd have a chat,
his week's one conversation, truth to tell,
but time also came and put a stop to that
when old Watsy got bought out by M. Patel.

One of the ways in which the poem nevertheless tries to overcome what seems to be a series of irreconcilable versuses is through the disalienating power of love. When all else fails, when society seems irreparably broken into warring binaries – “Black/White ... Communist v. Fascist, Left v. Right, class v. class” – the poet falls finally back on the pastoral solipsism of love as a haven beyond the reaches of the cruel hard world outside, a sentiment that echoes the same sort of romantic contrast one finds in Arnold's famous nuptial poem *Dover Beach*. In Harrison's own version of domestic bliss, however, the comforts of home seem even capable of bridging the social gaps of life outside:

Home, home to my woman, where the fire's lit
these still chilly mid-May evenings, home to you,

Turning to love, and sleep's oblivion, I know
what the UNITED that the skin sprayed *has* to mean.

This trope of marital harmony is suggested on several occasions throughout the poem in connection with the blossom that falls every time the gang of young boys hit a tree with their football, at which they shout out The Wedding March. Initially, this comes at a pivotal point in the poem when the skin “aerosolled his name. And it was mine”. It is a traumatic moment of fatal self-realisation on the part of the poet, the burden of which is however immediately lessoned in the next stanza by the metaphor of marriage, life and death:

The boy footballers bawl *Here Comes the Bride*
and drifting blossoms fall onto my head.
One half of me's alive but one half died
when the skin half sprayed my name among the dead.

Some critics like Luke Spencer have pointed to the “dreams of reconciliation” and “insufficiency of Harrison's liberal perspective”, in particular as the poem “shifts from the larger public arena towards a concern with family loyalty and class betrayal” (Spencer 1994: 95-6). Terry Eagleton also suggests that the skinhead needs to “harangue his author a little further, reminding him that the solace and unity v. finally seeks in sexual relationship isn't abstractable from the destiny of nations” (Eagleton 1991: 350). This seems however a somewhat simplistic ideological reading of the poem in its demand for a more unequivocally radical sharpening of its political message. Harrison, I would claim, is more dialectical than the above critical comments might suggest and creates no illusions about the escapist solutions of a happy union. Indeed, earlier on in the poem he gives a clear indication that such intimate binaries are not so easily breached:

These Vs are all the versuses of life

and (as I've known to my cost) man v. wife

The poem is therefore more of an affirmation of the complex relationship between the personal and the political and that in the final analysis everything is threatened with collapse – literally with the gradual sinking of the graves themselves into the black hole of old pit workings. Moreover, when the poet himself waxes too romantically in a tribute to “the bride, the bride”, the mocking intrusive voice of the skinhead shatters what is clearly only a piece of pastoral wishful thinking, an imaginary solution to irresolvable social contradictions. Thus once again, the alienated Other breaks through the silence like a return of the repressed and the gnawing sense of estrangement returns:

I feel united to, *my* bride is coming
into the bedroom, naked, to my side.

The ones we choose to love become our anchor
when the hawser of the blood-tie's hacked, or frays.
But a voice that scorns chorales is yelling: *Wanker!*
It's the aerosolling skin I met today's.

Romana Huk has pointed to the “hearth/heart of the divided poet” (Huk 1996: 210), a critical observation also echoed by Peter Childs in his comment that the poem analyses “rivalries, hostilities and divisions” (Childs 1999: 154). Despite his allusions to the power of love, Harrison gives the reader no lasting comfort about the possibility of healing some of these deep-set divides within the body politic. The real reflection of this

public predicament is moreover in the profound existential unease of the poet himself. Thus, the theme of alienation in the poem is always recentred on the poet, trying to find some kind of deeper understanding through a dialogue with himself in the shape of his skinhead double. As he writes in the penultimate stanza:

If, having come this far, somebody reads
these verses, and he/she wants to understand,
face this grave on Beeston Hill, your back to Leeds,
and read the chiselled epitaph I've planned:

This epitaph itself is followed by yet another down-to-earth disclaimer about the lasting social significance of poetry, showing just how much the poet has in fact learned from the scepticism of the skinhead:

Poetry supporter, if you're here to find
how poems can grow from (beat you to it!) SHIT

It is nevertheless here that one of the more positive images in Harrison's poem appears – the idea that poetry can emerge from where it is least likely to occur. This is a typical Harrison move and one that reflects his life-long ambition to challenge the cultural stereotypes and give a voice to those who are traditionally viewed as either incoherent or illiterate. Moreover, the prime disalienating thrust of the poem lies in the power of language and it is the skinhead who personifies this subverting carnivalesque force. The motto of the poem, which refers to Arthur Scargill's father who "*reads the dictionary every day*" because "*your life depends on your power to master words*", contains therefore not only a more sympathetically personal image of the militant miners' leader who struggled himself against a politically hostile mass media. It has also a much broader meaning about the oral culture of the working class and the way this culture is marginalised in the dominant discourse today. In the poem, it is the voice of the skinhead in the poem, obscenely eloquent and unrepentantly nihilist, classically informed and full of existential bile that represents a defiant challenge to this discourse of power:

*Ah've `eard all that from old farts past their prime.
'ow now yer live wi' all yer once detested...
Old farts with not much left'll give me time.
Fuckers like that get folks like me arrested.*

*Covet not thy neighbour's wife, thy neighbour's riches.
Vicar and cop who say, to save our souls,
Get thee beHind me, Satan, drop their breeches
and get the Devil's dick right up their `oles!*

It is a language full of life and obstreperous revolt, embodying the underlying

message of the poem about the need to speak the truth, even if it is sometimes uncomfortable to hear. This is perhaps partly why many critics tended to remain focussed on the swearwords rather than the political issues raised in the poem itself. Of course, there is another question involved here, relating not only to whom is speaking – but also who is listening. The fact that Harrison chooses very often to turn his writing into television and film poems is, as has been noted, a conscious political choice about what sort of audience he wants to reach out to. Poetry has traditionally been an elitist preoccupation and Harrison has consistently attempted to break down a number of cultural barriers by broadcasting his poems on TV. The possibility of gaining a new and more working-class audience is a central concern here, although it is hard to measure how successful he has been in this. As a writer, Harrison nevertheless merges two very Romantic notions: as one of Shelley's poetic "prophets" and as a poet who follows Wordsworth's call to write in a "language really used by men". There is moreover a strong element of cultural subversion in this latter aspect of Harrison's work, as John Lucas has pointed out: " /T/he poem was dangerous just because it could reach so many people" (Lucas 1991: 353). Harrison is writing back, not only against the middle-class hegemony that dominates British culture, but also towards his own working-class family roots, trying to maintain the link, the dialogue that continues to provide him with the deepest resonance in his own poetic preoccupations.

v. remains without doubt one of the most remarkable achievements in 20th century British poetry, both in terms of its broad social and political scope, but also in the innovative and challenging mixture of elaborately poetic and powerful working-class vernacular. It represents a decisive point in Harrison's own development, bringing together some of the central themes that recur throughout his work – language, class, conflict, identity. Harrison continues himself to refuse to be marginalised or bracketed as a Northern working-class writer, his writing seeks instead to grab centre stage and form a vital body of work that has become a literary reference point to which one must always return. His poetry provides therefore a living illustration of Ezra Pound's claim that "Literature is news that STAYS news" (Pound 1979: 29). When it first appeared on television, v. literally hit the headlines. Its power to hold our attention has not diminished.

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