

Classic Poetry Series

Tony Harrison
- poems -

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Tony Harrison(1937 -)

Harrison was born in Leeds and educated at Leeds Grammar School and the University of Leeds, where he read Classics and took a diploma in Linguistics. For some years he has lived in Gosforth, Newcastle upon Tyne.

The material of much of his poetry is provided by the memories of his working-class childhood. His poems and translations show a powerful command of rhyme and an expert adaptation of colloquial speech. His best known collections are *The Loiners* (1970) and *The School of Eloquence*.

Cited from Professor Rick Rylance's analysis, focusing on "Book Ends" and "V", as well as the themes of political and personal division. "Tony Harrison is deservedly known as the poet of a distinctive kind of post-war experience. The son of a baker, raised in working-class Leeds, his work dramatises aspects of growing up in that life and the tension between it and the very different culture he entered through his educational success as a star pupil, first at Leeds Grammar School and then at university. Though often highly personal, his poetry explores themes representative of his generation's experience of increasing social mobility through education that was a feature of post-war life. Typically, this takes the form of meditations on exclusion, like that of Harrison's own family whose origins did not permit much cultural mobility."

His best-known work is the long poem *V.* (1985), written during the miners' strike of 1984-85, and describing a trip to see his parents' grave in a Leeds cemetery "now littered with beer cans and vandalised by obscene graffiti". The title has several possible interpretations: victory, versus, verse etc. Proposals to screen a filmed version of *V.* by Channel 4 in October 1987 drew howls of outrage from the tabloid press, some broadsheet journalists, and MPs, apparently concerned about the effects its "torrents of obscene language" and "streams of four-letter filth" would have on the nation's youth. Indeed, an Early Day Motion entitled "Television Obscenity" was proposed on the 27th October 1987 by a group of Conservative MPs, who condemned Channel 4 and the Independent Broadcasting Authority. The motion was opposed by a single MP, Mr. Norman Buchan, who suggested that MPs had either failed to read or failed to understand (*V.*). The broadcast went ahead, and the brouhaha settled quickly after enough column inches had been written about the broadcast and reaction to the broadcast. Gerald Howarth said that Harrison was "Probably another bolshie poet wishing to impose his frustrations on the rest of us". When told of this, Harrison retorted that Howarth was "Probably another idiot MP wishing to impose his intellectual limitations on the rest of us".

His adaptation, *The Mysteries*, of the English Medieval Mystery plays, based on the York and Wakefield Mystery cycles, were first performed at the Royal National Theatre in 1985; in a promenade production in the Cottesloe Theatre. They were revived the following year, in the much larger space of the Lyceum Ballroom.

In 1998, he wrote and directed a film, *Prometheus*, based on his poem of the same name, which links the myth of Prometheus - chained on a rock to have his liver eaten by the vulture Ethon as a punishment for the theft of fire - with the enchainment of workers in the Promethian industries - the closed coal mines of Yorkshire; the present day effects of heavy industry in Copşa Mică in Romania; to the gas ovens of Auschwitz, to Dresden and to Bomber Harris. The film involved driving a thirty foot golden statue of Prometheus from the industrial north of England to Greece, via Germany and a number of eastern European countries.

His translation of *Hecuba* (2005), which emphasised the relevance of Euripides' drama to the Iraq War, was poorly received.

His play *Fram* debuted in 2008 at the Royal National Theatre in London.

Heredity

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.

Submitted by Scott Dagostino

Tony Harrison

Long Distance I

Your bed's got two wrong sides. You life's all grouse.
I let your phone-call take its dismal course:

Ah can't stand it no more, this empty house!

Carrots choke us wi'out your mam's white sauce!

Them sweets you brought me, you can have 'em back.
Ah'm diabetic now. Got all the facts.
(The diabetes comes hard on the track
of two coronaries and cataracts.)

Ah've allus liked things sweet! But now ah push
food down mi throat! Ah'd sooner do wi'out.
And t'only reason now for beer 's to flush
(so t'dietician said) mi kidneys out.

When I come round, they'll be laid out, the sweets,
Lifesavers, my father's New World treats,
still in the big brown bag, and only bought
rushing through JFK as a last thought.

Tony Harrison

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.

You couldn't just drop in. You had to phone.
He'd put you off an hour to give him time
to clear away her things and look alone
as though his still raw love were such a crime.

He couldn't risk my blight of disbelief
though sure that very soon he'd hear her key
scrape in the rusted lock and end his grief.
He knew she'd just popped out to get the tea.

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.

Submitted by Scott Dagostino

Tony Harrison

Marked With D.

When the chilled dough of his flesh went in an oven
not unlike those he 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.

Tony Harrison

National Trust

Bottomless pits. There's on in Castleton,
and stout upholders of our law and order
one day thought its depth worth wagering on
and borrowed a convict hush-hush from his warder
and winched him down; and back, flayed, grey, mad, dumb.

Not even a good flogging made him holler!

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.

The dumb go down in history and disappear
and not one gentleman's been brough to book:

Mes den hep tavas a-gollas y dyr

(Cornish-)

'the tongueless man gets his land took.'

Tony Harrison

Turns

I thought it made me look more 'working class'
(as if a bit of chequered cloth could bridge that gap!)
I did a turn in it before the glass.
My mother said: It suits you, your dad's cap.
(She preferred me to wear suits and part my hair:
You're every bit as good as that lot are!)

All the pension queue came out to stare.
Dad was sprawled beside the postbox (still VR) ,
his cap turned inside up beside his head,
smudged H A H in purple Indian ink
and Brylcreem slicks displayed so folks migh think
he wanted charity for dropping dead.

He never begged. For nowt! Death's reticence
crowns his life, 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.

Tony Harrison