

Harrison, Tony (2017), *The Inky Digit of Defiance: Selected Prose 1966-2016*. Edited by Edith Hall. London: Faber & Faber. ISBN 978-0-571-32503-0. 534 pages

Harrison, Tony. *Collected Poems*. London: Penguin Books, 2016. ISBN 978-0-241-97435-3. 453 pages

Now in his early 80s, Tony Harrison is still not one for looking back at his literary achievements: “I don’t like going over my past work. I’d rather forget about it once it’s done. I prefer to think of every stage in my life as creative, I’d rather be doing something new”.¹ At the same time, his octogenarianism has inevitably invited a range of retrospective celebrations of his work, culminating in the three-day conference held at the British Academy in 2017 entitled “New Light on Tony Harrison” in which he was declared “one of Britain’s greatest living poets”.² This characterization is not least based on the incredible versatility of Harrison’s career – from working-class scholarship boy to classic scholar of ancient Greek, international poet, playwright and public figure – a list of roles that Harrison himself tends to despise: “I hate being called a poet/dramatist/translator/director. Poet covers it all for me”.³

In recent years there has nevertheless been a move by publishers to start collecting the work that Harrison has produced in all of these different areas, starting with his film poetry and all of his plays. It is this context that these two most recent volumes should be seen. First of all Harrison’s long awaited *Collected Poems*, which contains his iconic collections of early work, including *The Loiners*, through his more intimate poems about his working-class childhood in *The School of Eloquence*, to his most controversial poem about language and class, *v*. In this moving latter-day elegy in a country churchyard, the poet encounters his unemployed skinhead alter ego, allowing Harrison to explore issues of class loyalties and antagonisms as well as the uses and abuses of literacy. The poem has become a classic in Harrison’s oeuvre, not only because of the insertion of so-called four-letter words that caused such a public uproar when it was first read aloud on television, but also because it represents a poignant return to Harrison’s own personal tensions between his parents and himself, faced with their incomprehension at the sometimes vulgar way he wrote poetry:

¹ Interview published in *The Yorkshire Post*, “Tony Harrison – the Yorkshire poet with an ear for the heartbeat of language”. www.theyorkshirepost.co.uk 20 April 2017.

² Ibid. The contributions to this conference have been published by Bloomsbury Academic as a book, *New Light on Tony Harrison*, edited by Edith Hall, in November 2018.

³ “Tony Harrison: still open for business”. Interview with Stephen Moss in *The Guardian*. www.theguardian.com 26 February 2015.

*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 yourself 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!

Included are also Harrison's most famous anti-war poems from Irak and Bosnia, which he wrote directly from the front line as a war correspondent for *The Guardian* and which were printed on the first page of that newspaper. A unique example of poetry literally making headline news. Finally, there is his recent and most strident support for republican democracy, *Laureate's block*, in which he categorically rejects any suggestion that he would accept a nomination as royal poet laureate, declaring "I'd sooner be a free man":

free not to have to puff some prince's wedding,
free to say up yours to Tony Blair,
to write an ode on Charles I's beheading
and regret the restoration of his heir.

This radical engagement has always lain at the heart of Harrison's work, something that has made him a thorn in the side of the powers that be, whoever they are. An unrepentant critical stance that has also resulted in him being often ostracized by the mainstream media, as he himself has noted: "I just think I'm not in fashion or not wanted. People are frightened of the verse. After Laureate's block the cultural establishment didn't care for me".⁴ This has expressed itself for example in a refusal by the BBC of his latest proposal to do a television film about the Scarborough-born poet Edith Sitwell and her outspokenly pacifist response to the First World War. A subject one would think particularly relevant to today's centenary remembrance of the war that was supposed to end all wars.

⁴ "Tony Harrison: still open for business". *The Guardian*. www.theguardian.com 26 February 2015.

This volume of collected poems is therefore an absolute must for any reader of contemporary verse in English, containing as it does Harrison's political but also profoundly personal reflections on life, death, love, war, sex, culture and class, written over the past fifty years. Throughout this rich and varied anthology, Harrison comes across as both a readily accessible as well as deeply erudite poet, a master of language and literary forms, witty and provocative, tender and transgressive. He is the sort of popular poet that offers hope about the potential of poetry to address some of the most pressing existential questions about our human condition today.

Harrison's other, most recent, collection of writings, *The Inky Digit of Defiance*, is without doubt a more challenging read, comprising as it does a mixture of personal prose pieces and more historically informed introductions to his plays and films. Its literary significance is nevertheless undoubtable, as his editor Edith Hall makes clear in her introduction: “/Harrison/ has published, in comparison, little prose. This makes this volume unique and indispensable to understanding the man”.⁵ Here, he also explains the relevance of the book's title, which refers to those courageous women in Afghanistan who, defying the intimidation of the Taliban, nevertheless voted in the elections, afterwards proudly holding up their fingers stained with ink. Several of these essays provide a fascinating if somewhat dauntingly detailed background to Harrison's theatre works. Harrison's profound poetic familiarity with both past and present is evident in the way he brilliantly translates and transforms ancient Greek plays, adapting them for the stage with modern themes, such as his magnificent trilogy of anti-war plays, *The Common Chorus*, that was inspired by the women peace activists at Greenham Common. Interwoven within these historical introductions are the biographical connections he makes to his own working-class background, which give a deeper resonance to his whole re-engagement with the classics. In one such reflection, “Facing Up to the Muses”, which is about his reworking of Sophocles' satyr play, *Ichneutae*, Harrison reveals the whole aesthetic rationale of his life-long attempt to bridge the devastating cultural gap between local, regional and international, between class and human culture:

The tensions in that schism made me into the kind of poet who uses an immensely formal classical prosody against colloquial diction and against the working-class speech of Leeds and even the language of street aggro and graffiti, as in my much-reviled (and, I'm glad to say, much championed!) poem v., where the language of the Beeston graveyard ranges from Latin and biblical to obscene graffiti and four-letter words. And the same tensions between my background and my education, between my awareness of the inarticulate on the one hand and being presented with the models of eloquence from the ancient world on the other, at a time of my maximum need to discover utterance, also made me into the kind of translator I am. (172-3)

A classically educated, working-class polyglot and people's poet who has been described as Britain's finest theatrical translator might sound like a contradiction in

⁵ Edith Hall. Forward to *The Inky Digit of Defiance*. p. 7.

terms. Yet, if one were still to doubt the possibility of such a wide-ranging combination of linguistic and literary talents, one need only turn to these two new collections. Without doubt Tony Harrison has given poetry back its political motivation, moral purpose and integrity. He continues to challenge us to rediscover the profound impact it can still have on our lives.

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