

## **A Contemporary Poet and his Identity: The Landscape of Leeds in Tony Harrison's Poetry.**

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Tony Harrison takes in his poetry a non-metropolitan perspective, speaks in the name of the province, gives priority to the periphery. His poetry is rooted in the experience of a man who came out of the working class of Leeds and who, avowedly, became a poet and a stranger to his own community.

The aim of this paper is to show that the urban landscape of Leeds is not merely a parochial midpoint of reference for Harrison's poetic work. It is the very real material from which he re-envisages and reinvents his sense of identity. Harrison's poetic memory and lexicon are deeply rooted in the geographical and social topography of Leeds. Consequently, the poet's imagined geography of Leeds reflects both the private and the public histories that Harrison the poet, chooses to remember. The paper will highlight the poet's affiliation with the urban landscape of the English north and to present the impact it makes on his poetic choices.

The moment we start reading Harrison's "V" we realize this is poetry preoccupied with language. The point suggested already in the poem's epigraph: a quotation from Arthur Scargill, the defeated leader of the NUM in the miners' strike of 1984: "My father still reads the dictionary every day. He says your life depends on your power to master words" (Scargill quoted in Harrison 1987, 235). By quoting Scargill, Harrison highlights the "continuity of commitment from one generation to the next" (Spencer 1994, 92) and expresses his passionate and persistent interest in language. Luke Spencer suggests that "the power" that is referred to in the quotation is the mastery of language as such (Spencer 1994, 91), yet the figure of the speaker, links it with the mining community resistance and to Ian Macgregor's programme of pit closures (Spencer 1994, 91). Words are an integral part of the class struggle (Hargreaves 1995, 235) but also the poet's medium of communication with the world. Critics describe words in Harrison's poetry as "imbedded in power, assertive, combative, prescriptive, liberating" (Hargreaves 1995, 235). They are also rooted in his experience of a man who came out of the working class of Leeds and became a poet and a stranger to his own community. But Leeds is always present in his poetic memory and returns in his writing. Harrison's imagery and lexicon are deeply rooted in geographical and social topography of Leeds. And it is the landscape of Leeds that reflects both private and public histories the poet chooses to remember.

One of the most widely acclaimed of Harrison's poems, "V" is set in the Beeston Cemetery which overlooks the vista of Leeds (Kelleher 1996, 48). The author first visited the site when he was seven, as he accompanied his dad, who told him that "the graves tilted towards the city . . . because they were undermined by a worked-out pit" (Bragg 1997, 51). He recalled his father's words in 1984, when he returned to look after his family tombstone and, as he himself admits, that was the moment that inspired him to write the poem.

Harrison begins "V" by recognizing his affiliation with the dead artisans of his family and class. He establishes his own origins. On one hand, he asserts his connection with the baker and the butcher, and on the other with Byron and Wordsworth. Reading further, we are reminded that art and craft are two sides of the same coin since Byron was a tanner and Wordsworth an organ builder. Harrison's future grave-neighbours are local tradesmen, the namesakes of Romantic poets – "the aristocratic rebel, radical and exile, and his . . .

compatriot, the youthful revolutionary who came home in the end of Toryism” (O’Brien 1998, 62). Now Byron and Wordsworth are part of the landscape as their ashes mix with the coal dust of the old worked-out pit above which the cemetery stands.

At this point it is worth recalling the poem’s famous model: Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (Gray 1993, 2458). This intertextual link reveals how in “V” the “tradition of equality and similarity in death is raised to ironical consideration (O’Brien 1998, 62). Where Gray writes: “Each in his narrow cell forever laid,/The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep” (Gray 1993, 15-16) creating an impression of harmony and eternal order, Harrison unearths the foundations of the Beeston Hill Cemetery:

And we’ll all be thrown together if the pit,  
Whose galleries once ran beneath this plot,  
Causes the distinguished dead to drop  
Into the rabblement of bone and rot,  
Shored slack, crushed shale, smashed prop. (Harrison V.<sup>1</sup> 1987, 8-12)

Harrison replaces an image of neat and clean cells with a disturbing image of a massive grave where the equality of the forefathers is assured by the process of decay. The subsidence of the worked-out seam causes the distinguished dead to lose their dignity but also their individuality. They become impossible to distinguish as they fall into a rabblement of bone and rot, losing their place in the hierarchy of the buried dead. Sean O’Brien in *The Deregulated Muse* highlights the double meaning of the word “rabblement” used in the third line of the stanza under discussion. According to *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, “rabblement” is encountered in 1545, meaning “rabble . . . in various senses” but also, from 1590, “riotous conduct”. The second meaning is especially interesting in the context of the place Harrison is writing about. Beeston Hill Cemetery stands on the old worked-out pit of a coalmine – a symbol of social unrest in the history of the industrial North. The bodies of the distinguished forefathers merge with the bodies of the “pit’s lost casualties” (O’Brien 1998, 62) – whose lot was linked with the lot of the mine since they once belonged to the working class of Leeds.

The image of the worked-out seam stands for the destructive power of geological force which operates beneath the graveyard and the power of history which undermines and influences the present condition of the city. The riotous conduct is suggestive of the personification of the bone and rot which fits well when we consider that the decomposition of human tissue once belonged to the living bodies of the miners rising against the oppression of more privileged classes.

This image of Beeston Hill Cemetery with the underlying mine introduces two important themes of the poem, recognized by several critics (Spencer, Byrne): “how poetry can find its place in the solid world” (Bragg 1997, 51) and how the immediate physical setting can influence and stimulate poetry. In the opening of the poem Harrison makes a distinctive use of spatial imagery. Luke Spencer claims that:

“V” opens with images of vertical and horizontal ancestry. On the vertical axis are the occupants of the cemetery poised above the empty galleries of a long-disused pit. The narrator is positioned horizontally in relation to the community of decent people whose graves lie around him. Both planes converge in the

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<sup>1</sup> Abbreviations used in this paper: V. for “V”, A. for “Allotments”, N. for “Newcastle is Peru”.

image of the hypothetical ultimate levelling down that will collapse the graveyard into the 'lowest worked-out seam' of the mine (Spencer 1994, 93)

The place provokes the reflection of a universal issue: the nature of mortality and reveals a thread of Harrison's personal history influenced by the socio-linguistic context of northern Britain

George Bernard Shaw wrote at the beginning of the XXth century that "It was impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman despise him" (Shaw quoted in Andersen 1988, 236). Almost one hundred years later, the comment may seem radical but it is not irrelevant. In the 80s when Harrison first published "V", "so called Received Pronunciation or 'Queens English', associated with establishments such as Oxford or BBC, continued to be seen as a top of the accent pyramid and as a textbook norm" (Andersen 1988, 236). Those who noticeably diverged from the norm remain outside the dominant social groups. Shaw makes it clear that people in Great Britain are "automatically slot into class pigeon holes" (Andersen 1988, 236) on the basis of the way they speak. Language plays an important role in distribution of power within the society and sustains class divisions (Andersen 1988, 236). By entering grammar school and later university, Harrison moved away from the working class of Leeds into the intellectual middle class. Crossing the border line between the classes caused "a linguistic schism" in his life. This gave him, as Helga Geyer-Ryan calls it, "differential identity" (Geyer-Ryan 1988, 207) and a skill to fuse in his poetry different linguistic discourses. But at a high cost. The conflict between his roots and his new-found erudition resulted in a feeling of alienation from the place where he grew up and from his family.

In "V" the poet comes back to Leeds as a visitor, with a status of an outsider, estranged from his native town by his knowledge of Latin and Greek. This estrangement is made distinctively clear when the skinhead interlocutor enters the scene. He belongs to a Leeds social reality into which Harrison doesn't fit. Harrison's knowledge of Greek is featured as a stigma that determines his exclusion. The skin directs his anger against poet's sophisticated lexicon, treating it as a rejection of social and linguistic solidarity. And out of the outflow of aggression emerges the question of family loyalty and class betrayal:

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

*.....  
Don't talk to me of fucking representing  
the class yer were born to any more.  
Yer going to get 'urt and start resenting  
it's not poetry we need in this class war. (Harrison V. 1987, 167-70, 265-68)*

The difference between the learned language and the Loiner is marked in the poem by the use of italics. This method, according to Hargreaves, creates the impression that "the language of dominance provides a context for words spoken by those who have gone under or are at the bottom of the social pile" (Hargreaves 1995, 240). But the skinhead is not simply a proletariat-underdog, he is, as Spencer calls him, a class-warrior and a voice of "Harrison's liberal conscience" (Spencer 1994, 95). Looking at the poet versus the skin we catch a glimpse of who Harrison is and who he might have been, if he had chosen to stay. We hear current voice of the poet and the voice he left behind. The skin speaks with the language of

working-class Leeds, and this language, inextricably linked with the place it originates from, collides in the poem with Latin and Greek. Harrison looks back at Leeds from the angle of his own experience and reinvents it with his poetic voice. He superimposes Latin and Greek expressions onto the topography of the language determined by the social and political realities of the northern city.

The language of the skin is inscribed into the landscape of the graveyard in the form of sprayed obscenities that cover the religious references and names of the dead generations:

This graveyard stands above the worked-out pit  
Subsidence makes the obelisks all list  
One leaning left's marked FUCK, one right's marked  
SHIT  
Sprayed by some peeved supporter who was pissed. (Harrison, V. 1987, 29-32)

The football supporter is angry not only because of his team's defeat mentioned in the preceding lines. The subsiding landscape of the graveyard mirrors the declining condition of Leeds working-class which lacks the solid basis for future existence. The "V" sprayed on the tombstones stands for "versus" expressing rivalry between football teams but also for numerous strains in Leeds society and culture that constantly clash leading to the disruption and deconstruction of the place. "V" reflects also the forces operating in Harrison's life and the situation he finds himself in, being a foreigner in his native city.

These Vs are all the verses of life  
From LEEDS v. DERBY, Black/White  
And (as I've known to my cost) man v. wife,  
Communist v. Fascist, Left v. Right,

Class v. class as bitter as before  
The unending violence of US and THEM  
Personified in 1984  
By Coal Board MacGregor and the NUM (Harrison, V. 1987: 65-72)

The "V" sign can be also associated with affirmation in solidarity in victory, and the sense of national unity embodied in war time by Winston Churchill but also with Biblical and general literary abbreviation for 'verse' (O'Brien 1998, 60). According to O'Brien, the fact that "so many significant social features and conflicts should congregate under the one-letter sign provides . . . an example of the polysemantic scope of language "(O'Brien 1998, 60) and creates a conception of universal interdependence. This contradiction of diversity in unity is made explicit in the the twenty first stanza, when suddenly the poet spots "UNITED" graffitied on his parents' stone. He chooses not to wipe it out but to fit it with additional dimension, which as he admits was definitely not intended by the author of the graffiti:

Though I don't believe in afterlife at all  
. . . It's hard not to make  
A sort of prayer from the skin's scrawl  
. . .

An accident of meaning to redeem  
An act intended as mere desecration

And make the thoughtless spraying of his team  
Apply to higher things, and to the nation. (Harrison, V. 1987, 125-32)

There is an aspect of the unity, which sends us back to the poem's setting. "The skinhead and Harrison are united in being equally subject to geological forces" (Spencer 1994, 98) just as the tombstones with the Latin verses and graffitied versus are being subjected to gradual subsidence of the cemetery's land. Harrison takes a broader perspective and puts Beeston Hill cemetery in the context of geomorphologic history. Three million years ago "the primeval forests were converted into the coal seams that lie beneath the graves" (Spencer 1994, 98). Harrison makes us understand that ultimately he-the poet and his skinhead interlocutor will enjoy the same processes once they are dead. The skin's UNITED graffitied on the gravestone will fade in time but the "unifying destiny" (Spencer 1994, 98) that lies in wait underneath the graveyard is permanent. "The only final victory" as Spencer writes" belongs to vast, slow, coal creating forces" (Spencer 1994, 98). According to Sandie Byrne:

"V" should be read as an extended epitaph (a community's as well as an individual's). It's subject is past time, it's form 'the historical epitaph', the meditation over vanished past which has the same relation to the ruin [or the worked-out mine] that the individual epitaph has to the gravestone. The inscribing of such an epitaph is a declaration of the death of working industrial England, and, in its way, a political act. (Byrne 1998, 146)

In "V", Harrison sets off to leave Leeds with a plan not to return until the moment of his death, when he will make his last journey through the rose-roots, to join his buried parents, but as we read other poems of Harrison we realize that Leeds is not only a place on a map which he leaves and to which he returns. It may seem it functions as a fixed mark, a place he grew out of and to which he will finally return when his life makes a full circle, but it is something more. It's an imprint on his identity engraved by the force of experience a bit like an epitaph embossed on the backside of a young girl in the poem "Allotments" (Harrison 1987, 18). The poem takes the reader to the scenery of first sexual encounters, first explorations that take place in the landscape of the graveyard which is "hardly a love-nest" (Kelleher 1996, 3) but it has to do. The "landscape lexicon" (Kelleher 1996, 3) is imprinted on the lovers' bodies:

Through clammy mackintosh and winter vest  
And rumpled jumper for a touch of breast  
Stroked nylon crackled over groin and bum  
...  
And after love we'd find some epitaph  
Embossed backwards on your arse and laugh. (Harrison A. 1987, 13-18)

This embossment, just like the graffiti on the tombstones are a part of a dialect, which constitutes a part of Harrison's poetic voice in which he describes the graveyard scene. The scene of forbidden sexuality develops with the sudden arrival of the old Pole who "catches the kids at it, and who gives them a brief lecture on how the local abattoir chimneys . . . (resemble) those other chimneys of Auschwitz and Buchenwald" (Kelleher 1996, 4). The industrial landscape of Leeds is superimposed on a different landscape removed in time and space and presses upon the boy the knowledge that comes back to him in his dreams mixing

sexual longing with fear and establishing the sex-death connection: "I smelt/ Lust on myself, then smoke, and then I felt/Street bonfires blazing for the end of war/ . . . /and I cried/ For the family still pent up in my balls, /for my corned beef sandwich, and for genocide"(Harrison A.1987, 37-44).

Characteristically for Harrison, "remote and intimate are brought together" (Spencer 1994, 35) when the image of Auschwitz cuts into the scene of secretive love making and history pervades personal experience. In 1983, in an interview with John Hoffender, Harrison admitted that he saw the two closely related. He suggested that "the intimacies of the private life are a kind of earthing area for the lightning of history and of political struggles" (Harrison quoted in Byrne 1998, 131). In this respect the poem "Allotments" resembles "V" where Harrison foregrounds the personal (Byrne 1998, 132) connected with concrete time and place, recalling his own experience and family history. Just as in Gray's "Elegy", it is a specific location in Harrison's poems that provokes the reflection on more general issues (Spencer 1994, 93). Harrison substitutes an urban cemetery for Gray's rural one (Spencer 1994, 93) and thus takes a step beyond immediate physical setting into the context of social conflicts characteristic for the English North.

According to Joe Kelleher, the city of Leeds remains imprinted "if not on the bum then at least in the mind's eye" (Kelleher 1996, 4) and becomes a part of topography of Harrison's poetry. Although he leaves Leeds, separated from the city's cultural and industrial landscape, through his education and his books, Leeds never really leaves his poetic imagination.

"Newcastle is Peru" tells the story of the poet's return to England after living in Nigeria and Prague, and as N.S. Thompson suggests his disorientation at the event (Thompson 1997, 123). After drinking nine or ten pints of local Newcastle Brown Ale, the poetic "I" takes the reader for a spinning ride through memorable episodes from Harrison's past, exotic and local spots and scattered images remote in time and place. An attempt to light the fire with a Sunday newspaper "begins a process of regrouping impetus, memory, persona... from out of delirium into deliberate poetry"(Kelleher 1996,14). This is an attempt to shed some light on individual experience and the social context Harrison encompasses in his poetry. As "the fire sucks in the first cold air" (Harrison, N.1987:25), the reader manages to catch a glimpse of war and death, when the burning newspaper shows "lobbed mortar bombs" (Harrison, N. 1987: 23) smashing the houses of Ontisha. The social and historical pervades the intimate experience of returning home, just like in the "Allotments" where the image of Auschwitz cuts into the scene of secretive love making, but the picture in the newspaper is consumed by the flame before any comment can be made and replaced with other images which float and disappear, as if life was moving in front of the poet's eyes in quick motion: "I lay down dizzy, drunk, alone,/life circling life like Eddystone/dark sea, but lighting nothing; sense/ nor centre, nor circumference"(Harrison, N. 1987, 29-32 ) And suddenly "remote and the intimate are brought together" (Spencer 1994: 35) with the image of Leeds that enters the context of other places like Newcastle and Prague that appear in the poem consecutively but create a strange effect of simultaneity:

The Blackpool Pleasure Beach Big Wheel.  
...  
Leeds purposeful in its affairs.  
Mercator; miles, school chapel glass  
transparencies to blood and brass.  
...  
That spiral stair

up St Vitus's Cathedral; there  
golden cockerel and great Prague  
before us like a catalogue. (Harrison, N. 1987, 38-70)

Leeds ceases to be a fixed mark in Harrison's experience and becomes a shifting point, with boundaries that cannot be easily outlined as "all the known Leeds landmarks blur/ to something dark and circular" (Harrison, N. 1987, 47-8). In 1968, while introducing the poem, Harrison explained that the circles in the poet's mind seem to be concentric, a figure he relates to the figure of confusion, the labyrinth (Harrison quoted in Thompson 1997, 124). Images of concentric circles and spirals come back at different stages of the poem: in the staircase in St. Vitus's in Prague, whorls of a finger and its print, circular hand of a lover moving over another's body. It seems that the movement of the poetic "I" is not a simple narrative but it has a form of a spin, up and down a spiral. The poet comes back again and again to the same point but at a different level of his journey. "Newcastle is Peru", like "V", is a poem about a return to the place inhabited before, but it is also a poem about the impossibility of the recognition of this place. Previously familiar, "known" landmarks of Leeds blur to something dark and become misleading. The perception of the poet, altered by nine or ten Newcastle Brown Ales, defamiliarizes the scenery. The method echoes the concept of defamiliarization developed by Victor Shklovski, who believed that "habituation can devour work, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war" (Habib 2008, 604) and claimed that "the technique of art is to make objects unfamiliar and . . . to recover the sensation of life" (Habib 2008, 604). The estrangement the poet experiences is not entirely pessimistic since it offers a possibility of a new discovery. The poem alludes to the conceit of John Cleveland: "Correct you maps: Newcastle is Peru" (Cleveland quoted in Myers 2004)) and suggests that a familiar place can be rediscovered as foreign and unknown (Barker 2001, 72). Harrison widens the field of exploration and brings together Newcastle, Peru, Prague and Leeds. Anywhere becomes anywhere else and one place bears the features of another. Perhaps the poet looks at Newcastle and Leeds through the prism of his experience in Nigeria and Prague and does not recognize the scenery he carried under his eyelids through the whole journey. The imprint in the mind's eye does not match the reality and has to alter when the poet "reaches out to map" (Kelleher 1996, 15) the topography of the revisited landscape. N.S. Thompson suggests that Harrison records his own move to Newcastle as discovering a new world and setting a new empire. (Thompson 1997, 127). That idea is reinforced by the breaking of the octosyllabic course in the word New/castle which becomes a stronghold, a landmark on the poet's route. "New castle" can be also read as an allusion to "embattled fortress" - Harrison built his home as we learn, "against the world's bold cannonade/ of loveless warfare and cold trade" (Harrison, N. 1987, 125-6).

Domestic images are followed by another depiction of an unknown landscape, the landscape of a lover's body that offers itself to discovery. The exploration brings back the idea of circular motion. It is suggested by the movements of the lover's hands and the woman's body compared to an endless maze that can be travelled through again and again with undiminished fascination. Home in Newcastle, the stronghold of love, is mirrored by another home, the partitioned flat in Leeds the poet shared with his wife. The circular movement of hands is reflected in the spinning movement of the Chair-o-plane that gave the poet "the illusion of free floating liberation" (Spencer 1994, 35) in childhood. The Newcastle love scene seems to be rooted in the context of Leeds, where the poet touched a woman's body for the first time during the annual Hunslet Feast, a local fair held on August Bank Holiday.

Leeds topography brings around the stories of first explorations of the poet that later become a part of larger developed themes in his poetry with Prague and Nigeria, sexual desire and a need for domestic security. It seems that all the stories that happened in Leeds, imprinted or embossed in the poet's eye, undergo constant development, living and pulsating, inscribed into the main stream of Harrison's writing. Numerous imprints of topography on the bodies and thoughts of Harrison's poetic personas constitute the lexicon of the landscape and the lexicon in Harrison's writing. He himself admits that the imprints soak deep into his identity like coal on his fingerprints which touches his soul with cold shudders. I believe that coal, the geological element of the landscape and the symbol of political conflicts, stands for Harrison's historical and personal inheritance which marks his existence. It stains the fingers and pervades the soul to assume the shape of the poet's fingerprints which he leaves on everything he touches. Whether Harrison wants it or not, the landscape, with all the histories inscribed in it, filters through his imagination and influences the poetry he creates:

My fingerprints still lined with coal  
send cold shudders through my soul.  
Each whorl, my love-, my long life-line,  
mine, inalienably mine,  
lead off my body as they press  
onwards into nothingness.  
I see my grimy fingers smudge  
everything they feel or touch. (Harrison, N. 1987, 153-160)

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