

Barbarian Masquerade
A Reading of the Poetry of Tony
Harrison and Simon Armitage

Christian James Taylor

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others

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Abstract

This thesis investigates Simon Armitage's claim that his poetry inherits from Tony Harrison's work an interest in the politics of form and language, and argues that both poets, although rarely compared, produce work which is conceptually and ideologically interrelated: principally by their adoption of an 'un-poetic', deliberately antagonistic language which is used to invade historically validated and culturally prestigious lyric forms as part of a critique of canons of taste and normative concepts of poetic register which I call *barbarian masquerade*.

Harrison's first collection *The Loiners* is analysed alongside Armitage's debut *Zoom!* in order to demonstrate a shared antipathy towards traditional form and language, and this poetics of dissent is traced across a range of collections, showing that although Harrison's writing is more obviously class-conscious or Marxist than Armitage's ludic and ironic output, both poets' deployment of masquerade reveals a range of shared aesthetic, poetic and political concerns.

The final chapters of the thesis demonstrate the complexity of the two poets' barbarian poetics by analysing Harrison's militant secularism and Armitage's denunciations of state violence, hate crime and social exclusion, and by showing that their masquerade writing transcends simple renegotiations of language, structure and style in its search for a public poetry defined by its engagement with, rather than withdrawal from, social, moral and political debate.

The thesis ends by suggesting that Harrison's influence on Armitage might apply to other New Generation poets and to more recent writers, whose work is invoked in order to suggest a continuity of politicised, barbaric writing.

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List of abbreviations used in this thesis

Tyrannosaurus Rex - Simon Armitage, *Tyrannosaurus Rex versus The Corduroy Kid* (London: Faber, 2006)

Matches – Simon Armitage, *Book of Matches* (London: Faber, 1993)

Roses - Simon Armitage, *Black Roses: The Killing of Sophie Lancaster* (Pomona: 2012)

Gawain – Simon Armitage, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (London: Faber, 2007)

SP – *Selected Poems* (Tony Harrison)

Bloodaxe I - *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies I: Tony Harrison*, ed. by Neil Astley (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1991)

Gorgon - Tony Harrison, *The Gaze of the Gorgon*, in *Collected Film Poetry* (London: Faber, 2007)

Shadow - Tony Harrison, *The Shadow of Hiroshima* in *Collected Film Poetry*

Banquet – Tony Harrison, *The Blasphemers' Banquet*, in *Bloodaxe I*, pp. 395-406

‘Barbarian Masquerade: A Reading of the Poetry of Tony Harrison and Simon Armitage’

‘There are words that give power, others that make us all the more derelict, and to this latter category belong the vulgar words of the simple, to whom the Lord has not granted the boon of self-expression in the universal tongue of knowledge and power’ – Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*

Chapter One

Critical Contexts

This thesis aims to demonstrate the existence of an inherited tradition of subversive, anti-authoritarian writing which links the work of Tony Harrison and Simon Armitage, and proposes an interrelatedness of purpose in the two poets’ work: driven primarily by a ‘barbaric’, sub-literary idiom which is used to invade culturally sanctified lyric forms, and which results in a hybridised poetic style which I call *masquerade* - defined by its adherence to basic principles of poetic form and language on the one hand, and by a simultaneous drive to subvert lyric proprieties and use them as the basis for a politicised, antagonistic form of poetic composition on the other. Arguing from the outset that traditional conceptions of poetic influence, such as those of Bloom and Eliot, are not

acceptable models for analysis of Harrison and Armitage's problematic poetics, I propose a model based on inheritance and trans-generational dialogue, with Armitage's work looking back to Harrison's and extending its debate with literary tradition, traditional conceptions of lyric or poetic speech, and its preoccupation with the public role of poetry: poetry envisioned as public utterance and moral intervention, rather than as a page-bound medium or the site of literary Oedipal contests between poets and precursors, individual talents and literary tradition. I begin by considering Armitage's own definition of the commerce between his work and Harrison's.

In a 2010 *Leeds Guide* interview, Armitage discusses those poets whose influence has been central to his development as a writer. His comments are revealing:

Tony Harrison and Ted Hughes, they're huge figures. They kind of made it possible for me to be a poet. Tony Harrison took on a lot of political arguments in his work about if and how it's possible to write in a native tongue or dialect. Hughes as well, digging in to the geology and archaeology of the region, trying to define what these atmospheres are. I see myself absolutely as an inheritor of those traditions, even if my work might not be like theirs necessarily.¹

¹ Simon Armitage in Paul Whitehead interview, *Leeds Guide*, Wednesday 12th May 2010, <http://www.leedsguide.co.uk/review/interview/simon-armitage/14700> [accessed May 2010].

Showing a particular sensitivity to the concept of 'inheritance', Armitage claims that Tony Harrison and Ted Hughes' poetry has enabled or facilitated his own work by virtue of its engagement with a range of linguistic, political, and environmental concerns. He also posits the existence of a definable tradition of socio-political verse to which Harrison and Hughes have contributed, and suggests that his own work intersects with this tradition and extends it. There is no mention here of influence, either in the sense of conscious modelling, homage, parody, or in the Bloomian sense of the 'shadow cast by the precursor'; rather, the emphasis is placed upon individual voice and expression, the use of setting or geographical space, and a pronounced interest in the integration of the 'non-standard' or demotic tongue within mainstream poetry.²

Despite his claim of an inherited tradition, however, few critics place Armitage and Harrison within the same conceptual, thematic or linguistic territory. Critical opinion tends to dismiss efforts to compare them, seeing them as belonging to two separate strands of post-War British poetry and, despite Armitage's claim that Harrison has provided a powerful model for his poetry, few contemporary critics see any correlation of style or thematic concern in their work. Ian Gregson questions the idea that Armitage's 'New Generation' poetry and its various socio-literary concerns (depthlessness and 'the loss of historical consciousness') could interact meaningfully with the poetry produced by Harrison, and suggests that 'all of the New Generation poets are more in sympathy with television and cinema and contemporary music than older

² Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: OUP, 1997), p. 11.

contemporaries such as Seamus Heaney [and] Tony Harrison'.³ This view seems warranted given the unique stylistic approaches and thematic concerns which animate Armitage's work and is also convincing insofar as Harrison's poetry seems more combative and pragmatic than Armitage's frequently playful compositions. Both poets are very different, operating within differing social and literary environments and representing, to a degree, two very different strands of post-War British poetry, with Harrison most frequently held to be a Marxist and working-class writer, or, at the very least, a poet for whom matters of social class and the interplay between social power and literary representation are of greater urgency. Armitage is most often placed alongside contemporaries such as Carol Ann Duffy and Glyn Maxwell, whose work shares some of his parodic and playful self-awareness,⁴ and critical opinion certainly seems to have positioned the two poets at opposite ends of the spectrum, inasmuch as they are rarely represented as sharing any stylistic, thematic, or linguistic concerns, although several commentators draw attention to their 'geographical' status as northern writers. Jamie McKendrick, for example, has brought attention to the 'swaggering Northern exoticism'⁵ of Armitage's poetry and Don Paterson, in his *New British Poetry* suggests, importantly, that Armitage's 'unsettlingly un sentimental poems which address the working-class experience' mean that 'he seems to have inherited the older Tony Harrison's mantle as unofficial laureate of the North.'⁶ It is not immediately apparent what these designations (laureate,

³ Ian Gregson, *Simon Armitage* (London: Salt, 2011), p. 13.

⁴ See Sarah Broom, *Contemporary British and Irish Poetry: An Introduction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 86.

⁵ See Jamie McKendrick, 'Contemporary Poetries in English, c. 1980 to the present 2' - in *The Cambridge History of English Poetry*, ed. by Michael O'Neill (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), p. 994.

⁶ Don Paterson, in *New British Poetry*, ed. by Don Paterson & Charles Simic (Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2004), p. 8.

Northern, exoticism) will mean, but there are, *prima facie*, at least some critics who are sympathetic to the claim that the two poets' work may well interrelate in meaningful, and mutually creative, ways.

Held to be pre-eminently a poet of class, Harrison is most often viewed as 'a tough-minded class warrior',⁷ 'cosmopolitan and wide-ranging, yet inalienably urban Yorkshire',⁸ and his work interpreted as politically and socially motivated, albeit frequently self-parodic and humorous. Armitage, contrastingly, seems to most critics to be a more mercurial figure, earning him a range of sobriquets such as 'Northern poet'⁹ (an ontologically unstable term), 'regional poet',¹⁰ and 'ecopoet',¹¹ with others such as Sarah Broom and Sean O'Brien insisting on his status as a regional writer: 'the Huddersfield poet [who] is doing much to fortify the Northern poetry scene.'¹² Peter Forbes, addressing Harrison and Armitage's poetry, suggests that Harrison 'has few obvious followers [...] he may well be a complete one-off', and decides that although Armitage's poems might display some of the 'New Plain Style' of Harrison's verse, the link is 'highly debatable.'¹³ Although some allowance needs to be made for Forbes' somewhat prescriptive assumption, especially the fact that Armitage had published relatively few collections at the time he made his observations, it still seems as though critical debate generally tends towards a polarisation of Harrison and

⁷ Luke Spencer, *The Poetry of Tony Harrison* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 95.

⁸ Sandie Byrne, *H, v. & O* (MUP, 1998), p. 2.

⁹ Interestingly, Katie Wales calls Armitage a 'South Pennines poet'; Wales, *Northern English: A Social and Cultural History* (New York: CUP, 2006), p. 161.

¹⁰ Gregson, p. 86.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹² Broom, p. 77. Cf. O'Brien's comment that 'there is something I recognise as Northern about Armitage' in Sean O'Brien, 'Simon Armitage and Glyn Maxwell: *Now then, Lads*', in *The Deregulated Muse* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1998), p. 244.

¹³ Peter Forbes, 'In the Canon's Mouth', in Byrne, ed., *Tony Harrison - Loiner* (Oxford: OUP, 1997), p. 198.

Armitage and their respective ‘generations’. Sean O’Brien clearly has this bifurcation in mind when he argues that the Armitage, Maxwell, Hofmann and Shapcott generation are different to the ‘major figures’ of ‘Larkin, Hughes, Hill and Harrison’.¹⁴ As he suggests, ‘Armitage never seems to have felt much need to engage with [...] the painful dramatisation of linguistic and class prejudice’ which figures so prominently in Harrison’s poetry;¹⁵ a position which recalls Ian Hamilton’s similarly emphatic assertion that ‘the problems of linguistic status and deracination which vex [Harrison] do not figure largely’ in Armitage’s work.¹⁶

This critical survey, although brief, is revealing. Considering Harrison first, one is struck by the deterministic circumscription of the Yorkshire or northern tag and its potentially limiting influence on the reader’s view of him as a major post-War British poet. The implication seems to be that he is defined by his regionalist status or else by his incorporation of northern locales and characters in his poetry, to the extent that his poetry becomes a form of caricatured response to life in the north, rather than a rich *assemblage* of internationalist, as well as provincial or local, influences. Many critics seem to view Harrison through the prism of his social background, with Sandie Byrne referring to him as ‘the local poet who uses Leeds and other northern locations’¹⁷ and ‘the working-class Yorkshireman with the Anglo-Saxon sense of impending night,

¹⁴ O’Brien, p. 241.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 244. Note though that O’Brien does see ‘some similarity with Harrison’ in Armitage’s Laycock homage ‘The Two of Us’; O’Brien, p. 245.

¹⁶ Ian Hamilton, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry in English* (Oxford: OUP, 2002), p. 16.

¹⁷ Byrne, *H, v. & O*, p. 9.

winter, death, and anonymous, unrecalled oblivion'¹⁸ whilst Sean O'Brien commends his 'commonsense Yorkshire materialism',¹⁹ without perhaps considering how best to define these terms or what political connotations they might hold. One might ask, for example, whether Harrison's use of northern idiom or setting is merely one-dimensional and deployed to produce 'local colour' or whether his invocation of northern or non-standard poetic language is more barbed and political, perhaps serving a subtle political agenda rather than being merely ornamental? As in the case of the Cynics, Harrison's predilection for 'parrhêsia', or freedom of speech, might be interpreted as part of a didactic project in his poetry and, seen in this way, his 'licence to speak frankly and brazenly', itself 'derived from the licence of the outsider', would suggest a determination on his part to expose elitist social institutions and critique bourgeois mores.²⁰ Luke Spencer's description of Harrison as a 'class warrior' evokes the figure of the Cynic whilst picking up on Byrne's comment about him as an urban poet, and both positions seem to presuppose a Marxist engagement with poverty and social issues, perhaps at the expense of investigating more traditional poetic themes such as love and family life. Armitage emerges as the more 'postmodern' figure – almost a caricature of sorts, defined as much by his geographical origins as by his vernacular and parodic voice, and it becomes clear that few critics think of Armitage and Harrison as occupying a related theoretical or artistic territory. Indeed, notwithstanding observations about northern 'roots', it is clear that most critics think of the two as representatives of conflicting, or

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁹ O'Brien, 'Tony Harrison: *Showing the Working*', in *The Deregulated Muse* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1998), p. 61.

²⁰ Robert Dobbin, *The Cynic Philosophers: from Diogenes to Julian*, introduction (London: Penguin, 2012), p. xvii.

non-overlapping, generations defined by differing social concerns, approaches to poetry and ideological commitments, and given this critical consensus, Armitage's claim that he has inherited a 'tradition' of writing from the older generation of post-War poets might seem difficult to substantiate or defend.

Notwithstanding the critical opinions outlined above, and acknowledging caveats concerning style and voice, I will now go on to show that Armitage's claim of an inherited tradition of writing is nonetheless accurate. Rejecting Bloom's influence-anxiety model and Eliot's insistence on the respectful interrelation of poet and literary tradition in favour of Armitage's own concept of literary inheritance, I aim to demonstrate the many points of contact which exist between his work and Harrison's, and to offer a reading of their poetry which accentuates its linguistic, stylistic, structural and thematic similarities – moving away from Bloom's 'horror of contamination'²¹ and his conception of writers and their literary precursors locked in an Oedipal struggle for self-identity, towards a more nuanced reading of Harrison and Armitage's work as aesthetically and conceptually linked by its contribution to a tradition of post-War poetry which I call 'barbaric': a politically-committed poetics defined by its incorporation of working-class speech, taboo language and other non-standard registers within traditional lyric forms. In response to those critics who view Harrison and Armitage as writers defined, and thereby limited, by their historical background or by differences of style or personal politics, I wish to show that such surface readings of their work are superficial, and that they fail to connect with a range of concerns which link their writing: from their shared interest in

²¹ Bloom, p. xxiv. Further references in text.

the politics of poetic form to their interrogation of narratives of power and their conception of poetry as public art capable of intervention into contemporary moral debate.

In rejecting Bloom's model as a conceptual or interpretative framework for the analysis of Harrison and Armitage's poetry, I am not suggesting that theoretical positions such as his 'anguish of contamination' (xi) or his belief in the essentially 'agonistic basis of all imaginative literature' (xxiv) are to be abandoned or modified: instead, my position focuses more on the inapplicability of the agonistic in relation to Harrison and Armitage's work, or, for that matter, to Armitage's interactions with other poets. Bloom's reading of the Western Canon, and the struggle for individuation which he sees as its animating principle, is predicated upon a powerfully Freudian view of 'strong poets, major figures with the persistence to wrestle with their strong precursors, even to the death' (5), whereas Armitage's relation to Harrison and others has less to do with filial revolt or a need to purge 'immense anxieties of indebtedness' (5) and much more to do with the inheritance, and extension, of a definite tradition of politically committed poetry. Bloom frequently invokes Freud in *The Anxiety of Influence*, and refers to his 'family romance' as an apt metaphor for poets and precursors locked in combat, fighting 'to the end to have their initial chance alone' (8) whilst avoiding 'the dread of threatened autonomy' (26), but this combative vision of poetic influence is at odds with Armitage's proposed concept of inheritance and tradition – a model of interdependence and shared sensibility which allows us to propose a whole network of linguistic and thematic links between his work and Harrison's.

Some critics do, however, see evidence of a Bloomian anxiety within Armitage's poetry and, in particular, in its relation to the work of precursor poets such as Philip Larkin and W. H. Auden. Commenting on an alleged correspondence of style between poems by Larkin and others by Armitage from the early 1990s, Ian Sansom contends that 'Armitage has become possessed with a sudden desire to struggle with his literary precursors',²² suggesting a battle for autonomy and a wariness concerning Larkin's powerful individual voice, and, more broadly, a desire to respond to the influence of other writers whose style Armitage may have found particularly powerful or somehow threatening. Similarly, Ian Gregson, analysing Armitage's poem 'Look, Stranger'²³ and its relation to Auden's 'On This Island',²⁴ envisions Armitage 'fighting to establish his own poetic selfhood in the face of the oppressive dominance of a powerful predecessor':²⁵ readings of Armitage's work which I find over-simplified and limiting, especially given the ironic self-advertisement of poems like 'Look, Stranger', which, rather than providing evidence of Bloom's theory of *clinamen*²⁶ or 'swerving' away from the precursor poem, actually call attention to their proximity to the original text and its themes and ideas - in this case by adapting the opening line from Auden's poem and using it as a title in its own right. It seems to me that Armitage's *homage* to Auden has been motivated by a recognition of the older poet's use of 'thoroughly uncommonplace vocabulary'

²² Ian Sansom, 'Cliche!: the poetry of Simon Armitage', *Thumbscrew* No 3, Autumn/Winter 1995 (Oxford), <http://www.poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/record.asp?id=12255>.

²³ Simon Armitage, 'Look, Stranger', *Kid* (London: Faber, 1992), p. 36.

²⁴ W. H. Auden, 'On This Island', *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1976), pp. 112-3.

²⁵ Gregson, p. 76.

²⁶ See Bloom's 'Six Revisionary Ratios' in Bloom, p. 14.

and by his interest in Auden's 'erudite, quirky, and often donnishly eccentric'²⁷ style: a distinctively 'unpoetic' idiom which subtly subverts the composure of the lyric forms invoked by Auden in his work. Less evident is Bloom's *kenosis*, or 'discontinuity with the precursor',²⁸ or, for that matter, any real sense of agon or conflict. Rather, Armitage's interest in Auden's poem centers on the older poet's use of a distinctively non-standard idiom and on the unsettling effects this can generate within an otherwise meditative lyric piece - Auden's 'far off like floating seeds the ships/diverge on urgent voluntary errands' echoed in Armitage's 'skimmed into the sea of the century/you went well but fell short of the far shore.' Rather than compete with Auden, or allow his voice to subsume his own, Armitage therefore mimics his fondness for memorable phrases and arresting images, and develops these features within the framework of his own distinctive voice. It is worth noting, of course, that Gregson's Bloomian reading of Armitage's poetry focuses not on his relationship with Harrison, but on his responses to Auden, such that, even if there were a pronounced mood of Oedipal revolt at work in his 'Audenesque' writing, it does not follow that any such sentiment would inform his responses to Harrison. But the question of Armitage's response to Auden is still important, as I view him as an important 'barbaric' precursor, whose work informs Armitage's own poetry in a variety of important ways, and my discussion of the post-War barbaric voice later in this chapter makes the important point that Armitage seems to have inherited from Auden a love of the comical, the bizarre and the 'improper': all features of the barbaric idiom which will resurface in his work and Harrison's. Just as

²⁷ Anthony Thwaite, *Poetry Today: 1960-1973* (Harlow: Longman, 1973), p. 15.

²⁸ Bloom, p. 14.

Armitage's interaction with Auden's work is defined by commerce rather than combat, and just as he inherits from him a desire to insinuate a powerfully non-poetic idiom within traditional forms, so his dialogue with Harrison focuses on a shared interest in language and the politics of form as part of an interrogation of traditional concepts of poetic speech and theme.

It is in his responses to nineteenth-century dialect poet Samuel Laycock that Armitage might be said to come closest to producing 'Bloomian' poetry marked by a sense of the agonistic or combative, although, once again, this reading of his Laycockian poetry can easily fail to grasp the subtle interplay of poetic voice, non-standard registers and 'barbaric' idiom which unite their work. Although certainly writing *back* to Laycock, and addressing his presence as a motive force in his own work, Armitage seems to ironise any real sense of agon, and invokes Laycock more as a fellow poet and producer of dialect verse than as a tyrannical figure whose influence must be rejected, or transcended, as part of the process of self-individuation – recalling, as I will demonstrate, the way in which Armitage views Harrison as a fellow barbarian and a facilitator of an ongoing debate with the canon and literary traditions.

Laycock, Marsden-born 'child of toil'²⁹ described as 'no literary dandy' and as a man who 'assumed no airs',³⁰ was one of a group of prominent dialect writers of the late Victorian period whose work 'engaged first-hand with the dislocations

²⁹ Dave Russell, *Looking North: Northern England and the National Imagination* (Manchester: MUP, 2004), p. 120, citing P. Joyce, *Visions of the People, Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1840-1914* (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), p. 258.

³⁰ W. E. Clegg, *Warblin's Fro' an Owd Songster* (Oldham, 1894), 'Supplementary Sketch of the Author' by James Middleton, p. xiii.

of the nineteenth century'³¹ such as the Cotton Famine and other periods of abject poverty in his life. His work was popular with a broad cross-section of the literary public and tends to centre on issues of the home and hearth. In his mainly non-fiction collection *All Points North*, Armitage acknowledges Laycock's stature as a writer of Pennine dialect who 'sold thousands of copies of his poems, more than most poets manage to shift [...] in a lifetime' but this praise is mixed with a suggestion of mild competitiveness or, perhaps, resignation: 'there's only room for one poet in a village the size of Marsden' Armitage observes, 'which makes Laycock somebody to move past or knock over.'³²

Here, Armitage acknowledges Laycock's influence whilst suggesting that it threatens, to a degree, his own identity as a poet – recalling Bloom's *kenosis*, but also his *askesis* or 'movement of self-purgation',³³ as part of which the younger poet directly rejects the power of the precursor and separates himself from their influence. Although Armitage's comments are clearly comical (*All Points North* is not an autobiographical or confessional text in any strong sense) this does not lessen the impression that, as a young poet trying to define himself beyond the limits of the local, parochial Huddersfield or Marsden poetry scenes, Armitage might well have felt the need to respond to Laycock's presence, and to view him as a rival for imitation or parody; 'evidence', perhaps, of Bloom's concept of the 'irresistible anxiety' informing the relationship of poet and precursor.³⁴ To do this, he decides that 'the best way to get at him is to take his poems and translate them from whatever version of English he wrote in to whatever version of

³¹ Russell, p. 122.

³² Simon Armitage, *All Points North* (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 4.

³³ Bloom, p. 14.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xviii.

English you practise yourself'³⁵ and this Armitage does in his poems 'To Poverty'³⁶ and 'The Two of Us',³⁷ both written 'after Laycock'.

Rather than signalling a surrender to Bloomian anxiety however, the 'after' designation seems to signal a desire on Armitage's part to enter into a form of trans-generational dialogue with his Marsden forebear, and his selection of these two particular Laycock poems is significant given their broad dialectal inflection, their celebration of the Lancashire voice, and the incorporation of this style of composition within the lyric model – a form traditionally associated with 'refined' poetic expression and genteel subject matter. Armitage's use of, and interaction with, Laycock's work may be seen, therefore, as an acknowledgement of a shared linguistic and formal 'inheritance', rather than as part of a struggle for self-actualisation and the grounding of his own poetic persona in a post-Laycockian *askesis* which has attained selfhood after a violent purgation of the influence of the ancestor.

Laycock's original poem 'To Poverty'³⁸ is a late-nineteenth-century dialect poem which takes the form of a warm-hearted but ultimately melancholic address to Poverty, personified in the poem as an 'owd chum' who has plagued the poet throughout his life. Laycock seems here to be writing *in propria persona*, gently mocking his actual financial situation whilst striking also an ironic, or playful, note despite asseverations of discontent. The poem, a fireside chat between poet and Penury, contains many examples of candid, forthright

³⁵ Armitage, *All Points North*, p 4.

³⁶ Armitage, *Book of Matches* (London: Faber, 1993), p. 38.

³⁷ Simon Armitage, *The Dead Sea Poems* (London: Faber, 1995), p. 32.

³⁸ Clegg, p. 25.

expression such as ‘What con a body do ‘at’s poor?/Aw cried a bit, but newt no moor’, pragmatic and understated humour (‘Aw conno say awm fond o’ thee’) and a pronounced informality which eschews the niceties of ‘poetic’ speech: ‘Well, poo thi cheer up - warm thi shanks’. Armitage’s poem ‘To Poverty, *after Laycock*’ sets out both to modernise the original poem whilst acknowledging its author’s status as a local poet. His ‘translation’ of the original jettisons its broad dialect vocabulary in favour of more neutral English but the general mood or feel of the poem is strikingly similar. For one thing, the apostrophe to Poverty is maintained, resulting in such lines as ‘Pull up a chair’, ‘Well, be my guest’ and ‘I’ve tried too long to see the back of you’, which create an immediate sense of intimacy and familiarity. ‘To Poverty’ displays Armitage’s preference for down-to-earth colloquialism with ‘squeeze the mason or the manager’ and ‘find a novelist at least/to bother with, to bleed, to leech’ and a sense of pragmatic resignation (‘On second thoughts, stay put’), and this establishes a dialogue between Armitage and Laycock which carries on into the second poem, ‘The Two of Us’.

Also written ‘*after Laycock*’ and echoing its namesake’s indictment of class-based poverty, ‘The Two of Us’ is inscribed with a pronounced sense of proletarian anger, which surfaces in blunt invective and taboo language, and which recalls the Harrisonian preference for the demotic and aggressive turn of phrase over so-called ‘elevated’ diction or poetic cliché. Whilst Laycock’s original, entitled ‘Thee an’ Me’, is a restrained and hail-fellow survey of the differences between the narrator - ‘poor, an’ gettin’ owd’³⁹ - and a decadent

³⁹ Clegg, p. 9.

neighbour called Mister Jones living in ‘thi country seat,/Among o th’ gents an’ nobs’, Armitage’s poem is more aggressive; employing a modern and urban vernacular. Laycock’s grudging narrator observes that ‘These fields an’ lones aw’m ramblin throo -/They o belong to thee’, whilst he has ‘only just a yard or two/To ceawer in when aw dee’, whilst Armitage’s persona is far more outspoken. ‘You’ve got the lot, the full set:/chopper, Roller, horse-drawn carriage [...] I’m all for saying that you’re fucking loaded, you.’ This invective also punctuates the poem’s closing lines, where the *Hamlet*-esque or philosophical observation ‘but deawn i’ th’ grave [...] th’ worms ‘ll have hard work to sort/Thy pampered clay from mine’ by Laycock, becomes the harsher, more abrasive ‘they’ll know that you were something really fucking fine [whilst] the worm won’t know your make of bone from mine’ by Armitage. The ‘translation’, as Armitage puts it, of Laycockian dialect into his own poetic idiom also incorporates social commentary which anchors the poem in a working-class reality akin to Laycock’s asides about mending ‘mi stockin’s’, peeling potatoes and ‘wesh[ing] mi shurts miself!’’, although one which is even more drab and squalid: ‘me darnin socks, me lodging at the gate,/me stewing turnips, beet, one spud [...] brewing tea from sawdust mashed in cuckoo spit’.

Although Armitage’s use of the original poem might seem to have been motivated by a desire to address Laycock’s influence in his formative years and, by acknowledging this influence, to move through it into the assumption of a mature poetic voice, allowing him to speak ‘a language free of the one wrought by his precursors’,⁴⁰ this is entirely conjectural and just as much evidence

⁴⁰ Bloom, p. 24.

suggests that Armitage wished, in these modernised dialectal poems, to achieve something quite different: something not connected to the anxiety of Laycock's influence but, instead, to do with the reclamation of certain poetic registers and styles of language which might otherwise disappear from 'mainstream' verse. As Armitage has argued, '...you know, dialect poems are things that are usually frowned on and make you local and insignificant and it's been very interesting for me, as somebody from this part of the world, to try and find a way of representing some of the noises people make around here [Yorkshire] because, you know, in the phonetic alphabet they don't really exist.'⁴¹ In this sense, Armitage's reclamation of, and dialogue with, Laycock seems to be less concerned with influence and more with inheritance: tracing the dialect tradition in lyric verse to its nineteenth-century roots and developing this non-standard voice in his own poetry. As will be seen, this form of linguistic and formal inheritance also underpins Armitage's interaction with the Harrison oeuvre and helps to explain the conceptual, linguistic and political themes which underpin the two poets' work. The titles of Armitage's *homages* are certainly significant, both composed 'after' Laycock and suggesting a form of translation or reclamation: an impulse underpinning later projects such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Homer's Odyssey*, where Armitage has spoken of his desire to modernise and preserve a particular text for a modern audience. At the very least it is safe to assert that little evidence of 'anxiety' informs our reading of Armitage's Laycockian poetry and that his interaction with Laycock's work is primarily focused on language and the aesthetico-political repercussions of

⁴¹ Simon Armitage, Poetry Archive interview, <<http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singleInterview.do?interviewId=1419>> [accessed Jan 28th 2014] (para 3).

incorporating dialect within traditional lyric modes, whilst a further political motive might also be ascribed to his decision to modernise dialect poems themselves, especially given the lowly status of dialect verse within mainstream anthologies.

To reprise a point made earlier, even if there *were* evidence of ‘anxiety’ within his responses to Laycock’s writing, it does not follow that Armitage’s responses to Harrison would be similarly ‘contaminated’ by the fear of the precursor, and the more important point seems to be that, once again, what Armitage inherits from Laycock, as from Auden, is a tradition of non-standard, demotic expression which is used to interrogate traditional lyric proprieties: meaning that Auden, Laycock and Harrison form a trio of barbaric precursors whose powerful and adversarial voices have inspired Armitage’s poetry, and whose ambivalence towards genteel expression and poetic convention has served as an exemplar for his writing in the barbaric mode.

Another model of poetic inheritance worth considering in relation to Harrison and Armitage’s work is outlined in T. S. Eliot’s seminal essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’,⁴² in which Eliot explores the relationship between the modern poet and his forbears, or between the conception of the poetic self as an autonomous creative force, and the Tradition which stands behind, and precedes, it. Eliot’s argument is, essentially, that all poets ‘who would continue to be a poet beyond [their] twenty-fifth year’ (2171) must cultivate a sense ‘not only of

⁴² T. S. Eliot, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, in Abrams, M. H., and others, eds, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 2 vols, 6th edn, II (New York: Norton, 1993), p. 2170. Further references in text.

the pastness of the past, but of its presence'; that is, a poetic sensibility informed by a sense of the historical continuum of the Western literary tradition, or a 'feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order' (2171).

Perhaps Eliot's most crucial argument, certainly in light of Armitage's claim of inherited traditions, is his assertion that 'not only the best, but the most individual parts of [a poet's] work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously', and likewise his belief that

no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead (2171).

What this seems to mean is that all poetry, in Eliot's view, is informed by an historical sensibility, and that no poet can struggle free of the influence of his or her forbears: a situation which recalls Bloom's struggle with the precursor, with the difference that, for Eliot, there is no such struggle. Instead, the poet's surrender to tradition and the extinction of his [sic] personality are prerequisites for the creation of mature poetry. What Eliot is therefore suggesting is that an awareness of European literary tradition is not simply inherited but *channelled* or actively cultivated by the poet, which amounts to saying that the individual talent, if he is to produce a work of art, must allow his predecessors to speak

through his poetry and inform his own work. This conformism of poet to tradition is not one-sided, of course, but is mirrored in the poet's precursors accommodating him into the pantheon of new art: 'the existing monuments' (2171) of the canon altered to allow for the individual talent.

In terms of Armitage's interaction, and dialogue, with Harrison's poetry, Eliot's proposed model seems, at first glance, valid – especially given Armitage's claim of a definite tradition inherited from Hughes and Harrison, to which he contributes. On this reading, Armitage writes with precognition of not only Harrison, but of the whole literary canon before him, and aligns his work within a roll-call of powerful literary antecedents, anxious to extinguish his own personality in the pursuit of art: subsumed, to a degree, by the totalising framework of the western canon and its pre-existing order. And yet neither the Bloomian model of poet and precursor locked in filial combat, nor Eliot's concept of the artist respectfully communing with the established literary canon are wholly accurate analogies for the inheritance outlined by Armitage.

For one thing, Harrison and Armitage's relationship with the traditional literary canon is defined by a deep sense of ambivalence regarding its totemic status as a western cultural signifier, and by their belief that the canon itself is a fit target for their poetics of dissent and subversion: meaning that they view Eliot's great tradition as a totalising construct which must be *answered*, rather than as an inherited cultural narrative which defines their work and predetermines their responses to it. Their desire to undermine the canon and insinuate non-standard and proletarian voices within a range of canonical forms results in a pronounced

sense of *agon* – but not as in Bloom’s model, where poet and precursor clash for supremacy. Instead, the *agon* which animates their work centers on the ongoing dialogue carried on between their writing and the canonical forms on which it draws, leading to a tension between formal conservatism and linguistic or thematic licence which is explored at length in what follows. A more accurate analogue of Armitage’s theory of inheritance is, therefore, a blend of Bloomian angst and Eliotean tradition, with Harrison and Armitage contributing to a shared poetics of formal subversion (similar to Bloom’s *agon* theory, only focusing on literary form rather than precursor), whilst sustaining a trans-generational dialogue between poets which recalls Eliot’s conception of an ongoing debate between poet and tradition. In short, the inheritance alluded to by Armitage above is a composite and complex manifestation of a part-Bloomian, part-Eliotean impulse which aligns his work with Harrison’s, and which is defined by *agon* not between poets but between *poets and tradition*, and which is simultaneously characterised by a deep-seated respect for the precursor, whose work is invoked as a model rather than as an object of anxiety.

This view of Harrison as a ‘non-Oedipal’ precursor is supported by a variety of comments that Armitage has made about the older poet’s role in the development of his mature poetry – comments which suggest an obvious respect for Harrison’s writing, and a desire to tap into, and extend, his experiments with language, politics and form, and, to be sure, none of his public references to Harrison’s poetry evoke any sense of anxiety, or uneasiness about his influence. In a 2015 BBC Four television interview, recalling the impact of the televised version of *v.* in 1987, Armitage makes clear his indebtedness to Harrison when

he asserts that ‘here was a poet opening up a path: giving me permission to speak with my own voice’ – suggesting at once the centrality of voice to both poets’ work and the idea of poetry as vocation: a tradition of public speech defined by vernacular or non-standard usage (Armitage’s ‘own voice’ the Yorkshire dialect and northern idiom of his upbringing), and deployed as part of a developmental poetics of political commitment – ideas taken up in chapters four and five, below.⁴³ The metaphor of the path is particularly resonant here, as it suggests a continuum or confluence of style and purpose, rather than an agonistic relationship based on conflicting or wholly distinct conceptions of selfhood, identity and poetic voice.

Harrison’s preoccupation with language and accent informs another of Armitage’s comments, this time made in a *Guardian* interview in 2000, in which he remarks that Harrison ‘has allowed my generation to do our own thing without having to worry too much about where we come from and what accents we’ve got. Trying to write in a way that’s representative of our voices was a pitched battle for him’⁴⁴ – suggesting not simply a commonality of purpose or a shared voice linking his work and Harrison’s, but, more profoundly, evoking an image of inter-generational dialogue which reinforces the idea of inherited tradition outlined above. Armitage’s use of such terms as ‘permission’ and ‘allow’ certainly seems to indicate his belief that many modern poets have Harrison to thank for tackling issues of voice, accent and register in his poetry – allowing the New Generation poets to draw upon their own regional voices as

⁴³ ‘Simon Armitage in Conversation with Tony Harrison’, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06hhgxm> [accessed 21st November 2015].

⁴⁴ Simon Armitage, in Nicholas Wroe, ‘Man of Mysteries’ <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/apr/01/poetry.theatre> [accessed 1st December 2014].

they made their entrée into British poetry, and clearing the ground for the democratic, anti-hieratic idiom which would define the work of moderns such as Armitage, Duffy, Maxwell, Paterson and others.

In a *New Statesman* article in 1997, Armitage makes other, more suggestive comments about the nature of his relationship with Harrison's work, and two statements in particular are helpful in synthesising his definition of inheritance and tradition. Describing his responses to Harrison's work and its powerfully confrontational style, Armitage suggests that a crucial factor in his decision to become a poet was a desire to follow the example set by Harrison, and an admiration for his poetry. As he explains:

It's a theory of mine that the more you admire a person, the less likely you are to imitate them, mainly because you know the tricks of their trade so well that blood rushes into your cheeks when you find yourself passing them off as your own.⁴⁵

Immediately striking here is Armitage's determination to avoid direct imitation of Harrison's style: an obviously successful decision, given the paucity of critical commentary comparing his work to Harrison's. Equally important, however, is the sense that Armitage views Harrison as a figure of respect and admiration, rather than as a threat to his development as a poet during his formative years. Unlike his determination to 'move past or knock over' Samuel Laycock, with its

⁴⁵ Simon Armitage, 'Tony Harrison is Sixty: Simon Armitage salutes the master', *New Statesman*, 25 April 1997. Vol. 126, No. 4331. <https://www.questia.com/article/1G1-19997735/tony-harrison-is-sixty-simon-armitage-salutes-the> [accessed April 2010].

suggestion of impatient competitiveness, Armitage's admiration of Harrison's example seems to articulate a definite sense of creative purpose, and a wish to emulate the power of Harrison's verse, rather than merely ape its style. Later in the article, Armitage writes that 'most writers can identify a few moments in their early life that somehow pushed them into picking up a pen,' and says that, for him, hearing Harrison's recital of the 'family sonnets' from *The School of Eloquence* was one such seminal moment: the beginning of his vocation as a poet, and inspired by Harrison's ability to create a poetic idiom culled from the cadences of Northern vernacular, or what Armitage calls 'a sort of acceptable presentation of West Yorkshire utterance that stops short of dialect poetry.' Harrison's ability to write socially relevant poetry in this 'deviant' register inspired Armitage and established the foundations of the inheritance outlined at the start of this chapter, as part of which Armitage extends Harrison's exploration of Northern and non-standard registers in his own work.

Armitage also refers directly in his article to influence, but proposes a model of interaction which goes beyond simple stylistic or thematic homage. Again, the emphasis is placed on commerce and continuity, rather than on competition or contamination, with Harrison's poetry envisaged as a repository of certain important values or ideas:

The most genuine form of influence, I think, is a lesson in attitude or disposition, and in that sense, I have taken certain things from him [such as] his opinion that the poet should be a poet first, last and always.

Although addressing ‘influence’ here, Armitage is emphatically not deploying the term as a Bloomian marker. Instead, the word is being used to describe the theoretical or critical interaction between the two poets, with Harrison’s view of poetry as a vocation taken up by Armitage and developed in his own work. The words ‘attitude’ and ‘disposition’ certainly suggest an inherited outlook, or a specific view of the social purpose of poetry, and it is clear from this comment and those above that Armitage inherits from Harrison a desire to write a socially relevant public poetry based on, and extending, the older poet’s bold experiments with language, articulation and form: evoking a celebratory image of trans-generational dialogue, rather than a model of agon or conflict.

An early draft of the *New Statesman* article now forms part of the Armitage archive at the Brotherton library at the University of Leeds, and one section of the original proofs contains two suggestive details which were elided from the final, published text. The first describes an encounter between Armitage and Harrison in a local bar, where Harrison ‘was drinking this time, rather than filming.’ Armitage greets Harrison and records a brief conversation about his latest project:

I told him I was making a film about Leeds in verse. He pulled a peculiar expression; I think it meant Good luck, [sic] you’ll need it, but it could just as easily have been Watch it, lad, that’s my patch⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Simon Armitage, excerpt from notebook held in Brotherton Special Collections; draft of *New Statesman* ‘Tony Harrison is Sixty’ article.

Although clearly jocular, and written in the same deadpan, deflationary idiom used in *All Points North*, there is an unsettling edge to Armitage's description of this fleeting snatch of dialogue, and a suggestion of very mild competition – evoked mainly by the image of Harrison's inscrutable facial expression, but also by Armitage's colorful (mis)interpretation of it. The 'patch' alluded to above could either be Leeds itself as particularly Harrisonian territory (a nod, perhaps, to *The Loiners* and the specificity of its title), or else film-poetry as a medium pioneered by Harrison in such projects as *The Big H* (1984) and *The Blasphemers' Banquet* (1989), and this would seem to suggest that Armitage might have seen his own film-poetry as an act of symbolic trespass: straying into a field dominated by the older poet, and more commonly associated with him. Similarly, although the playful tag 'lad' might at one level evoke a sense of gentle masculine *badinage*, it also conveys a sense of Harrison's claim to eminence or respect: the 'patch' therefore not only a territorial designation, but also an indication of Harrison's seniority and pedigree as a poet. One might also speculate as to why Armitage decided to remove details of this exchange from his finished article, and what this erasure might signify: an attempt to downplay anxiety concerning Harrison's influence, perhaps, or evidence of his attempt to preserve, or promote, a particular view of Harrison given that the article itself was a celebration of the older poet's sixtieth birthday. My own view is that this deleted, or edited, excerpt is less evidence of anxiety or wariness about influence, and more of a laudatory anecdote: presenting Harrison as a poetic model for emulation, rather than as a Laycockian emblem of sublimated filial rage. To be sure, it is just as likely that Harrison's 'peculiar expression' was encouraging and essentially supportive as that it indicated opprobrium or a genuine sense of

grievance or animosity, and one cannot deduce anything concrete from its removal from the published article.

The second, more cryptic, fragment in the notebooks seems to be an early allusion to what would become *Mister Heracles: After Euripides*, first published in 2000 and produced at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds. Armitage's note simply reads: 'MISTER HERACLES – did TH do Heracles?' and it is interesting to speculate whether his concern about Harrisonian archetypes here might have delayed his composition of his own version of the Euripidean myth, or whether his concern was motivated merely by curiosity. What does seem certain is that Armitage felt Harrison's influence when working on his film poem, and also during the composition of his play, although, once again, it is my view that in both cases, his concern was not so much with direct competition and a desire to wrestle with Harrison's influence, but rather with the invocation of Harrison's work as a model, and a desire to align his own writing with its major concerns: Leeds, poetry, the North, film, myth, and drama.

It is by now clear that the majority of Armitage's references to Harrison as precursor are affirmations of his powerful and inimitable poetic voice (one which makes 'cry-babies out of the blokes in the boozers'),⁴⁷ and demonstrations of Armitage's desire to extend his debate with traditional idioms and his experiments with form. Rather than revolt and agon, we see admiration and

⁴⁷ Simon Armitage, excerpt from notebook held in Brotherton Special Collections; draft of *New Statesman* 'Tony Harrison is Sixty' article.

respect, and this sense of the interconnectedness of the two poets' work can be traced across the major collections.

* * *

Having established the nature of Armitage's conception of literary influence, I will argue from this point that, just as Armitage inherits an interest in the status of dialect and the demotic tongue from Laycock and Auden, so he inherits from Harrison an interest in the politicisation of poetic voice and in the wilful subversion of stable lyric forms - both features of what I call literary 'masquerade', which targets traditional lyric forms such as the sonnet and dramatic monologue, which are invaded by a 'barbarian' vernacular language composed of non-standard expression, dialect, taboo and comical wordplay. As I will show, this interrogation of form and language is part of a wider poetics of dissent, or an emancipatory poetics, defined by new configurations of poetic language, the expansion of the creative potential of the lyric poem, and by a corresponding thematic licence which challenges mainstream conceptions of subject matter, voice and language: key ideas which are more fully developed in succeeding chapters. Although masquerade takes many forms and is used in a variety of ways by the two poets, I will highlight a range of overlapping concerns and stylistic tropes which may be said to align Harrison and Armitage as poets, without circumscribing or limiting their work and its unique concerns. The thesis is programmatic, or developmental: mirroring Harrison and Armitage's own evolution of the masquerade mode, and showing its various phases.

I begin by addressing the nature of barbaric language and by attempting to explore some of its key features, before moving into an analysis of the formal subversion brought about by the inclusion of this barbaric idiom within such forms as the love lyric and sonnet. Having established the political and aesthetic impact of barbaric language in relation to the sonnet tradition, I go on to explore the structural and thematic features of masquerade, before suggesting, in chapters four and five, that barbarian masquerade itself is best envisaged as a multifaceted and deliberately subversive methodology of composition which seeks to de-solemnify traditional poetic forms and deny them their status as symbols of canonical or cultural power, as well as being a politically committed art form which seeks a public platform for poetry and poets: part of a Shelleyan conception of poetry as a vehicle of moral and spiritual re-awakening. First, however, we must analyse the barbaric idiom alluded to above, and trace its origins in the canon of post-War British verse. As I will show, Armitage inherits a tradition of barbaric language from Harrison which can be traced back to the Modernist crisis of language and Auden's 'polyglot impurity [and] verbal promiscuity',⁴⁸ and which forms an important strand of post-War poetics. We begin by tracing the development of the barbaric tongue, and by defining its key features.

Barbarian Language

The barbarian voice in British poetry is typified by the use of a politicised non-standard idiolect which celebrates 'deviant' diction, taboo language, humour,

⁴⁸ Stan Smith, *W.H. Auden* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), p. 100.

and a range of dialectal or regional accents. This voice was not, of course, created *ex nihilo* but seems instead to be a gradual evolution, or extension, of the Modernist ‘crisis of language’ in poetry which gave rise to ‘a sense of the inadequacy of established poetic idiom’ and a corresponding ‘need to develop fresh means of harnessing the resources of language.’⁴⁹ This search for new modes of expression, resulting in what might be loosely called the Modernist voice, necessitated ‘the abandonment of an order whose language was poetically amenable, whose structures were total and capacious, and whose forms were impressive in their apparent permanence and rootedness’,⁵⁰ and which in its turn led to what Graham Hough has called ‘the poetry of a wanderer [...] a poetry of unorthodox celebrations and chance epiphanies.’⁵¹ Hough’s designation suggests an alienation from traditional poetic diction and a movement towards experimentation and innovation, anticipating language and imagery ‘not confined to the traditionally sanctioned sources’ but, instead, composed of a medley of competing styles: ‘in the same poem slangy, obscene, elaborately learned and conventionally poetic’ (314). This experimental Modernist poetics, with its ‘startling changes of mood and style’ (320) is the idiom inherited by Auden and the generation which succeeded him, who were collectively the early developers of the barbaric voice, which is then taken up by the Mersey Sound poets of the 1970s. Present also in the work of Peter Reading, Tom Leonard and Harrison, the barbaric voice surfaces next in Armitage’s poetry which was first published in the late 1980s. A detailed overview of the genesis and

⁴⁹ Richard Sheppard, ‘The Crisis of Language’, in *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930*, ed. by Malcolm Bradbury and James MacFarlane (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 323.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 325.

⁵¹ Graham Hough, ‘The Modernist Lyric’, in Bradbury and MacFarlane, p. 314. Further references in text.

characteristics of the barbaric voice enables Harrison and Armitage, ostensibly writing within two totally distinct poetic contexts, to be seen as barbarian writers participating in a shared tradition of linguistic and formal debate with literary convention and canonical forms, and also as writers whose work seeks to extend the creative potential and thematic range of the ‘mainstream’ lyric poem.

The barbaric voice in post-War (or post-1930s) British poetry may be said to originate with Auden, whose gift for ‘memorable speech’, conveyed in colloquial English, inaugurated a generational paradigm shift in the practice and theory of poetry; a fact borne out by Auden’s countless imitators. Important for the later voices adopted by Harrison and his generation was the Audenesque tone of detached irony and its down-to-earth, although always complex, frankness, heard in such lines as ‘the dogs go on with their doggy life’ (‘Musée des Beaux Arts’) or ‘round the rampant rugged rocks/rude and ragged rascals run’ (‘Jumbled in the common box’). Stan Smith notes how Auden’s distinctive voice inspired many *homages* and also led to a decentering of poetic voice from the 1930s onward, with the Modernist emphasis on abstraction and the impersonal replaced by comical language play and the demotic mode:

Auden’s poetry, modified in the guts of innumerable successors, has certainly made happen innumerable [sic] later poems, by writers as diverse as [...] Paul Muldoon or Yorkshire’s Simon Armitage, for [...] whom Auden’s verbal ‘polymorphous perversity’ has been exemplary.⁵²

⁵² Stan Smith, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), p. 4.

This comment is instructive for its specificity concerning Armitage's regional status (Muldoon, for example, is not described as 'Northern Ireland's Paul Muldoon') and also for the way in which it suggests that apparently distinct poetic voices can share key features without the poetry itself having any direct thematic congruence, although Armitage does cite Muldoon as an influence on his work. Interestingly, other critics also see a definite Auden-Muldoon-Armitage connection, with Sarah Broom suggesting that 'the trademark Armitage 'voice', bearing the influence of Auden, Larkin and Muldoon, is cool and clever.'⁵³ The vital point to be made here is that Auden's revolutionary approach to poetic language led to a sense of greater freedom and playfulness in succeeding decades of writing. Peter Porter has noted Auden's 'riddling locutions, the sense that Auden is taking a scalpel to language itself'⁵⁴ and also the way in which Auden 'made verse interesting and restored to language its birthright of play and puzzle';⁵⁵ a trend which was to carry through into the Movement's deflationary anti-rhetoric and into Larkin's evocative wordscapes.

By the time of the Mersey Sound era, the Movement had bequeathed to the 1960s generation its 'anti-phoney' and 'anti-wet; skeptical, robust, ironic' edge, which it had, in turn, partially inherited from the Auden generation.⁵⁶

McGough, Henri and Patten's verse was the working-class complement to the lower-middle-class tenor of the Movement and its focus on the lives of Mr. Bleaney figures rather than those of the 'cut-price crowd'.⁵⁷ McGough's voice

⁵³ Sarah Broom, p. 77.

⁵⁴ Peter Porter, 'Auden's English: language and style', in Smith, p. 126.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁵⁶ J. D. Scott in *The Spectator*, 1st October 1954, in Blake Morrison, *The Movement: English Poetry and Fiction of the 1950s* (Oxford: OUP, 1980), p. 2.

⁵⁷ Philip Larkin, 'Here', *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1990), l. 17, p. 136.

in particular is interesting in terms of the influence it had, perhaps indirectly, on Armitage's verse. Awash with puns ('put the carp before the horse';⁵⁸ 'now I've only the act to grind')⁵⁹ and grounded in an urban reality recalling, or prefiguring, Armitage's *Xanadu*, McGough's poems take playfulness with language to extremes of allusion, form and hybridity. Phil Bowen, surveying the Mersey Sound from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century, sees 'a shared aversion for the concept of poetry as a specialized interest'⁶⁰ and finds the McGough-Henri-Patten trio 'irreverent' and 'sardonic' [...] innovative in both style and form'.⁶¹ Suggesting the iconoclastic, anti-traditionalist inheritance which later poets would use and develop in their own work, Bowen rightly asserts that modern poets 'owe some debt to the Mersey Poets [...] for opening doors and creating space for them to fill'; certainly true of Harrison, whose *The Loiners* appeared in 1970, and Armitage, whose early poems (especially those in *Zoom!*) share the sardonic and demotic candor of McGough's. Although Harrison's verse is quite different to the work of the Mersey Sound group, being more aggressively political, and despite obvious differences between McGough's poetry and Armitage's, there is a sense in which neither poet could have gained acceptance as an artist without the influence of McGough and Patten, whose work found, and sustained, a large, appreciative audience drawn primarily from outside academia. Sean O'Brien concurs insofar as he feels that

⁵⁸ Roger McGough, 'Vandal', in *Blazing Fruit: Selected Poems 1967-1987* (London: Penguin, 1989), p. 80.

⁵⁹ McGough, 'The Act of Love', p. 73.

⁶⁰ Phil Bowen, *A Gallery to Play To: The Story of the Mersey Poets* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), p. 2.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

Armitage ‘occupies the place once held by the Liverpool poets, though his work is much more complex than theirs.’⁶²

Whereas Harrison certainly writes with foreknowledge of the Auden and Movement generations, and uses language which relies heavily upon the colloquial and idiomatic (a factor inviting comparison with McGough), his overall poetic voice is far more aggressive and politically engaged than any of his immediate forebears. Because of this, Harrison occupies a literary niche shared by figures such as Peter Reading and Tom Leonard, whose work is similarly antipathetic to narratives of tradition, middle-class concepts of selfhood, and clichéd poetic language. Harrison’s proximity to Reading has been the subject of critical attention and, despite the darker, more nihilistic tone of Reading’s poems, he shares with Harrison such obvious stylistic traits as a ‘pragmatic no-nonsense outlook’,⁶³ delivered through poems founded upon ‘deviant syntax’ (36) and incorporating ‘forceful social realism’ (129). Echoing Harrison’s observations about the function of art in society, and its necessarily political or combative role, Reading in interviews has argued that ‘if you want art to be like Oualtine then clearly some artists are not for you’; a pugnacious stance in an age of conformism and politically correct decorum, and one which brings to mind Harrison’s many comments about deliberately affronting his readers and denying his audiences sentimentalised or saccharine ‘closure’.⁶⁴

⁶² Sean O’Brien, ‘Simon Armitage and Glyn Maxwell: *Now then, Lads*’, in *The Deregulated Muse* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1998), p. 243.

⁶³ Isabel Martin, *Reading Peter Reading* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 2000), p. 34. Further references in text.

⁶⁴ Peter Reading, in Martin, (Alan Jenkins, ‘Peter Reading’ in *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Poets of Great Britain and Ireland Since 1960*, vol. 40, part 2: M-Z, ed. Vincent B. Sherry (Detroit/Michigan: DLB, 1985) 1985, p. 7); p. 113 in Martin.

Tom Leonard's poetry is inscribed with a similarly forceful social realism which denies bourgeois sentimentalism. Ronald K. S. Macaulay, analysing Leonard's use of the demotic (or 'the "debased dialect" of Glasgow'),⁶⁵ highlights many features of Leonard's work which invite comparison with Harrison's, such as his use of a 'stigmatized form of speech' (74) (Glaswegian dialect) and his concern for - even love of - the "'language of the gutter"' (77). Leonard's own views on the subject of art again overlap with Reading and Harrison's positions, with Leonard arguing against 'the inevitable assertion that the language of [the] economically superior classes is aesthetically superior' whereas 'the regional and the working-class languages [...] aren't capable, the shoddy little things, of great Art' (78). Broom also notes Leonard's 'effort to retrieve poetry from behind the bastions of privilege, from its reification as an aesthetic object which can be categorised, explained and thus possessed' and this common urge within the work of Harrison, Reading and Leonard can be seen as a Marxist antiauthoritarian stance made necessary by decades of institutionalised propaganda concerning the rituals of poetic voice and the concept of the relative inferiority of the 'non-Standard'.⁶⁶

Leonard's 'Six Glasgow Poems' exemplify the barbaric voice in their refusal to conform to standard orthography and in their unmediated approach to presenting character. Unlike Harrison's personæ, who are frequently presented to the reader by an intervening narrative voice, Leonard's Glaswegian characters seem

⁶⁵ Ronald K. S. Macaulay, 'Urbanity in an Urban Dialect', in *Standards and Variations in Urban Speech: Examples from Lowland Scots* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1997), p. 74. Further references in text.

⁶⁶ Broom, p. 24.

to address an absent speaker, almost in the manner of an overheard conversation: ‘heh jimmy’; ‘ma right insane yirwanny us jimmy.’⁶⁷ The unsettling effect achieved here, combined with the non-standard Scottish dialect, creates a barbaric voice different to Harrison’s but close to its sense of antagonism and refusal to convey simple meaning. In other poems where canonical forms or traditional themes are interrogated, Leonard again seems close to Harrison’s own style of undermining and attacking formal conservatism although, again, the language used in this deconstruction is quite different. ‘Jist ti Let Yi No’, based on Carlos Williams’ poem, uses broad Glaswegian to parody the language of the original text and undermine its status as a cultural artefact (‘ahv drank/thi speshlz’, the poem’s speaker declares; ‘they wur great/thaht strong/thaht cawld’)⁶⁸ and, in ‘A Love Poem’, Leonard subverts the traditional register of love poetry by invoking a non-standard, proletarian, voice: ‘ma idea a wummin/wuz screwed up fray birth.’⁶⁹

Peter Reading’s barbaric voice is close to Harrison’s in its use of taboo language and in its refusal to conform to the reader’s expectations of poetic form but, like Leonard’s, is unique. Evoking a mood of scepticism and nihilism, Reading’s narrators frequently mix registers, incorporate demotic utterances and comment sardonically on the false consolations of language (typically religious solace). The late collection *Vendange Tardive*, written one year before Reading’s death, powerfully combines the standard and non-standard modes in ways similar to Harrison’s personæ but with a greater focus on decay and mortality, heard in

⁶⁷ Tom Leonard, *Intimate Voices: Selected Work 1965-1983* (London: Vintage, 1984), p. 9.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁶⁹ Leonard, *Intimate Voices*, p. 133.

lines such as ‘parents soon die, it is their nature’⁷⁰ or ‘63, eh? Hmmm.../Vendange Tardive, and all that. Nearly combine time.’⁷¹ Taboo is a constant presence within the poems and mainly serves as an expression of Reading’s misanthropy: ‘Amazon rainforest fucked,/S & N Poles ditto’,⁷² although an Harrisonian style is captured in poems such as ‘A Shropshire Lad’ which, like Leonard’s parodies and Harrison’s *v.*, incorporates working-class expression in order to undermine the cultural status of anthology pieces and question their use as canonical texts:

‘Well, look at the fuckin fucker,
the fuckin fucker’s fuckin fucked.’
(He was a great lad, Tony,
for his use of the metaphor.)’⁷³

Harrison’s defiantly class-conscious and trenchantly political position in the canon of post-War British poetry is therefore shared, in varying ways, by both Reading and Leonard. The resulting poetry has facilitated debate about the function of art in general, and poetry in particular, and has brought attention to non-standard speech, working-class values and supposedly subservient dialects. Without this committed and aggressive stance, by both the poets and their publishers (Bloodaxe, for instance, fighting the hegemony of Faber), it seems difficult to imagine the ‘New Poets’ finding an audience. As Broom argues, ‘Tony Harrison [...] will be probably remembered as the poet who, in the

⁷⁰ Peter Reading, ‘Funerary’, *Vendange Tardive* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2010), p. 12.

⁷¹ Reading, ‘27.VII.09’, *Vendange Tardive*, p. 40.

⁷² Reading, ‘[Untitled]’, *Vendange Tardive*, p. 44.

⁷³ Reading, ‘A Shropshire Lad’, *Vendange Tardive*, p. 49.

twentieth century, did the most to break down the elitism and class-bound nature of poetry in Britain' and this helps to elucidate the way in which Armitage was able to write in his trademark, deadpan and conversational way from his first collection in 1989; enabled also by McGough and Patten's breaking of poetic taboos and the comical characters and events which make up much of their work.⁷⁴

Harrison's Barbaric Language

The barbarian epithet outlined above embodies assumptions about intelligence, social class, and access to cultural capital, wherein the barbarian is envisaged as a cultural outsider whose presence is detrimental to the *status quo* and wider society.⁷⁵ This bourgeois conception of culture, recalling Arnold's poles of 'sweetness and light' versus anarchy, leaves no room for working-class voices or their representation, and this has implications for the reading of Harrison's verse, which frequently 'transgresses' social norms in its exploration of working-class life. Harrison's own 'definition' of the barbarian is given its most emphatic expression in the 'Them & [uz]' sonnets; poems which trade on the value judgements outlined above.⁷⁶ In the first sonnet, the tragic wail is rendered in Greek characters to give 'αἰᾶ' before the barbarian deflation of 'ay, ay!'. Here, H. D. F. Kitto's Greek-Other dialectic is played out within the Meredithian form

⁷⁴ Broom, p. 43.

⁷⁵ Cf. 'Early in Greek history we encounter the dichotomy of the human race into Hellenes and *barbaroi* - strictly, Greeks and non-Greeks'; G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient World* (London: Duckworth, 1981), p. 416.

⁷⁶ *SP*, pp. 122-3.

and the resulting dissonance recalls his observation regarding the barbarian as non-Greek:

the Greek word ‘barbaros’ does not mean ‘barbarian’ in the modern sense; it is not a term of loathing or contempt [...] It means simply people who make noises like ‘bar bar’ instead of talking Greek. If you did not speak Greek you were a barbarian.⁷⁷

In the poem, the elder Harrison who *is able* to write verse in Greek recalls his younger self who could not and whose working-class vernacular was anathema to the English master at Leeds Grammar School. A barbarian, in Harrison’s poem, is therefore someone who cannot de-code ‘the tongue our leaders use to cast their spell’⁷⁸ and who is as a result essentially mute - ideas which will resurface in such poems as *v.* and ‘On Not Being Milton’, with their implicit criticism of Gray’s ‘mute ingloriousness’.⁷⁹

The first sonnet reinforces the sense of barbaric incongruity with its framing of the classical orator Demosthenes alongside the phrase ‘gob full of pebbles’; and this deliberate playfulness with boundaries leads to the altercation recorded in the second stanza, where Keats’s ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ is rendered in the broad Yorkshire accent Harrison spoke at school. It should be noted that the master’s designation of Harrison as a barbarian, with the assertion ‘can’t have our glorious heritage done to death!’, is based on the sound of Harrison’s accent and

⁷⁷ D. F. Kitto, *The Greeks* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 7.

⁷⁸ ‘Classics Society’, *SP*, p. 120.

⁷⁹ ‘On Not Being Milton’, *SP*, p. 122.

not on his 'lack' of literary knowledge. This recalls Kitto's comments about the sound made by the non-Greek speaker, whose language jarred on the finely tuned Hellenic ear, and further entrenches the idea of barbarism as a form of cultural ignorance. This is seen in Harrison's assertion 'I played the drunken porter in *Macbeth*', which shows that his demotion to minor Shakespearean roles was based on his teacher's crude (and incorrect) assumption that accent equates to intelligence, or, more crudely still, that a non-RP accent somehow negates the potential of the speaker for refined or articulate self-expression.

For Harrison, RP is the modern version of ancient Greek; a prestige dialect intended for use by civilised people but also serving as a civilising agent in its own right. RP therefore becomes not simply a cultural marker, but a shibboleth which allows for identification of the barbarian Other. In this sense, the non-RP speaker and the non-Greek are one and the same: both victims of linguistic chauvinism and unable to access cultural artefacts because of their barbaric accents. A dichotomy exists in the poem between the master - '*he* was nicely spoken' - and the unfortunate Leeds schoolboy who is given 'the comic bits' from Shakespeare (it should be noted that 'Shakespearean English' is itself often invoked, alongside the 'King's' or 'Queen's' English, as a cultural signifier). 'Them & [uz]' I therefore suggests that the barbarian is someone 'without' culture, in the sense of standing outside the precincts of refined articulation and whose language determines this exclusion. 'Barbarisms', Robert Burchfield notes, 'words formed in an unorthodox way - were anathema to the Greeks' and

the non-RP demotic of Harrison's schoolboy expression is similarly reviled by the establishment figure in the poem.⁸⁰

Harrison's barbarism is defined in response to the Standard English of the establishment figure of the teacher and, as suggested above, the sonnets juxtapose refined and 'depraved' expression in revealing ways. Alongside the master's 'speech of kings' Harrison places lines such as 'that shut my trap' with its staccato 'consonantal crag splinters'⁸¹ offsetting the master's eloquent denunciation of the young pupil's '*mi 'art aches*'. The verbs 'stuffed', 'hawk' and 'spit' are then situated within a string of monosyllables which precede the master's barked '*E-nun-ci-ate!*' and this constant shifting from register to register, RP to dialect, refined to demotic, allows Harrison to undermine the assumptions made by the bourgeois elite personified by the master in the first sonnet. Indeed, this is an overtly Marxist poem in its exploration of the exploitation of class and power, and language becomes the most potent tool in the transmission of, and resistance to, this exploitation.

The second sonnet adopts a far more aggressive, proletarian voice, with Harrison declaring 'so right, yer buggers, then!' and calling for the 'occupation' of poetry itself. This amounts to a form of revolutionary warfare waged against, but also through, language, and the rest of the poem is littered with fragments of dialect and non-standard constructions which counterpoise the RP of the master in the first poem. Words such as 'lousy', 'chewed', 'Littererchewer' (creatively

⁸⁰ Robert Burchfield, *The English Language* (OUP: Opus, 1986), p. 112.

⁸¹ Cf. Harrison, Introduction to *The Oresteia* in *Plays 4* (London: Faber, 2002), p. 9.

combining reference to the master's canon of 'glorious' literature and the phonic transcription of a northern prole voice), and the refrain '[uz] [uz] [uz]' all demonstrate Harrison's barbarian style, combined as they are with references to Wordsworth, the phonetician Daniel Jones and the *Times*. It can be seen then, that the term 'barbaric', as applied to Harrison's language in these sonnets, generally consists of the juxtaposition of RP or elevated language and formal dialectal or vernacular constructions in a conspicuously ironic way; calling attention to the incongruity of neighbouring words and the 'inferior' status of those words which recall northern idiom, the non-RP accent of the northern speaker or the cultural connotations which surround such words. Harrison's mention of the *Times*, and that newspaper's somewhat arrogant rendering of Tony as Anthony underlines Harrison's point about the barbaric as called into being by its relation to a linguistic Other, and this helps to capture the nature of the barbarian in Harrison's work wherein any word which, etymologically or otherwise, is non-standard is deemed deviant, and where 'standard' comes to signify RP or the various metalanguages (the divine Logos, canon or civil law, the language of 'refined' or canonical poetry) historically invoked by the bourgeoisie to validate its position at the expense of inferiors.

In Harrison's poetry, the presence of dialect always signals a move towards combative and politically engaged speech and this is seen in the first of the 'Bonebard Ballads'; '*The Ballad of Babelabour*'.⁸² Here, language is the site of open class warfare, with the 'Sprache' of the masters defined in opposition, and as superior, to 'the hang-cur ur-grunt of the weak.' The whole premise of the

⁸² 'The Bonebard Ballads', *SP*, p. 102ff.

poem is the same as that explored in the ‘Them & [uz]’ sonnets: the divisiveness of class distinctions built on the ownership of language and its deployment as a tool of power. Nimrod, for instance, traditionally held to have been involved in the construction of the Tower of Babel, appears as a figure of linguistic tyranny in the poem. Whilst the workers speak ‘ur ur ur’ and the ‘unrecorded urs of gobless workers’ (recalling the ironic ‘mute ingloriousness’ of ‘On Not Being Milton’ and the ‘tongueless man’ of ‘National Trust’),⁸³ the masters, nabobs and rulers of the poem see their words made (nearly) flesh in ‘a palace for the great Pharaoh’. Harrison’s blending of dialect and taboo in this poem (‘t’master’s Sprache’; ‘sailing t’ship and t’shit’), alongside standard English and the technical term ‘ur-Sprache’, forces a rapprochement between prole-speech and the ‘nicely spoken’, so that the workers who ‘labour eat and shit/with only grunts not proper words’ [sic] co-exist, however transiently, alongside Nimrod, nabob and Pharaoh. Such ‘poetic’ and composed stanzas as the one beginning ‘Nimrod’s nabobs like their bards/to laud the state’s achievements’ are juxtaposed with ‘ur-grunt’ such as ‘ur-crappers’, ‘tongueless bardless nerks’ and ‘the world’s all been turned into *merde*’ in order to highlight the class divide between ruler and ruled and the way in which language itself is part of this process. The poem concludes with ‘bards and labour left for dead’ as a result, partly, of access to ‘the shitship’s one class: Sprache’ - a ship ‘no labour can embark’, which recalls the feeling of alienation suffered by Harrison when first experiencing the poetry of Keats and Shakespeare as a grammar school pupil. This sense of exclusion illustrates Tom Leonard’s point concerning ‘the historic connection between slave and proletariat embodied in [owned] language’, which

⁸³ *SP*; p. 112 and 121 respectively.

results in ‘derisive laughter at working-class speech and accent’ and, as in the Harrison poems, ‘the vehemence with which a child will be told to alter his or her language when addressing a superior’.⁸⁴

Complementing the dialogue between the Greek language and RP in ‘Them & [uz]’, Harrison’s sonnet ‘Classics Society’⁸⁵ interrogates the power of Latin within the context of the British public school system: a critique of the links between Latin and cultural hegemony which is seen throughout the Harrison *oeuvre* and which is taken up in Harrison’s attacks on the ‘*pro rege and lege* schools’ in ‘The Rhubarbarians I’⁸⁶ and in later works such as *The Big H*. The barbarian in the poem is the child whose translation of Burke or other English authors is rendered in ‘delinquent Latin’ and whose own expression is tainted by pollution in the mercantile world of Leeds; in the midst of which the grammar school stands as a beacon of establishment values and colonial authority (the reader notes the translation of ‘British Empire into SPQR’, which relates the language-power dialectic of the Roman empire to the British colonial project). The barbarian in this poem is also northern dialect itself, whose incorporation into the body of the poem would constitute a violation of the ‘good Ciceronian’ which, in the ‘Them & [uz]’ sonnets, can be equated to RP and the ‘speech of kings’. Harrison pointedly remarks that his work must ‘*not* [use] the English that I speak at home’, which would have been the broad dialect of West Yorkshire working-class speech and the vernacular of Harrison’s Loiners. Although Loiner-speech (another manifestation of the barbarian in Harrison’s

⁸⁴ Tom Leonard, *Reports From the Present: Selected Work 1982-94* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), pp. 55-6.

⁸⁵ *SP*, p. 120.

⁸⁶ *SP*, p. 113.

Eloquence sonnets), appears in ‘Next Door’, where Harrison’s father declares ‘*it won’t be long before Ah’m t’only white!*’⁸⁷ or ‘Me Tarzan’ where Harrison himself, again contending with ‘Cissy-bleeding’ro’ and his ‘*De Bello Gallico*’, uses such dialectal expressions as ‘*off laikin*’ and ‘*off tartin*’, there is a deliberate exclusion of vernacular from ‘Classics Society’ which, by virtue of its absence, recalls its presence elsewhere.⁸⁸ Conspicuous in the poem are the Greek grades gamma and alpha, which again suggest the power of the standard tongue to judge linguistic performance, as well as the seemingly colloquial word ‘lad’: something of a dialectal *faux ami* given that ‘lad’, as Harrison would have known from Divinity classes, is actually the word for a young boy employed in the Authorised Version of the Bible. The string of monosyllables in line four of the sonnet stand as an indictment of the absent northern tongue which is certainly presented as ‘rude’, ‘gross’, ‘base’ and ‘vile’ in ‘Them & [uz] I’.

The non-standard, or northern-as-barbarian is also the theme of ‘On Not Being Milton’ and ‘The Rhubarbarians’; poems which can be read as companion pieces on the subject of language and power. In the former, Harrison focuses on the phonic qualities of the Leeds accent and, as in ‘Them & [uz] I’, on its glottals and ‘Ludding morphemes’. Unlike ‘Classics Society’, this sonnet relies for its effect upon northern accentual and dialectal features such as the rhymes ‘class’ and ‘mass’, which must be read with the short vowel sound common to northern speakers. Envisioning ‘the looms of *owned* language smashed apart’,⁸⁹ and the process by which this might be achieved (self-expression in a native tongue or

⁸⁷ ‘Next Door I’, *SP*, p. 129.

⁸⁸ ‘Me Tarzan’, *SP*, p. 116.

⁸⁹ Italics mine.

dialect), Harrison is clearly equating the northern voice with the idea of barbarism but also with revolutionary potential: a fact signalled by the incorporation of the proletarian voice within the Meredithian sonnet. Almost totally excluded from ‘Them & [uz] I’ and suppressed immediately where it does appear, the barbarian voice here takes centre stage, with a Luddite voice ending the sonnet rather than the voice of an English master or other authority figure. ‘The Rhubarbarians I’ sustains the deliberate blending of standard and barbaric forms begun in ‘On Not Being Milton’ and returns to its themes of barbarian language as a rebellious or revolutionary agent in the war against authority. ‘Glottals glugged like poured pop’, bringing to mind the ‘consonantal crag splinters’ and defined alliterative edge of Harrison’s other barbarian sonnets, combine with references to ‘gaffers’, ‘t’mob’ and ‘the bugger’ William Horsfall of Marsden within a poem which celebrates a Luddite mill attack. The ‘wiseowl Leeds’ schools, among them Harrison’s own grammar school, are dismissed along with their ‘drills and chanting’ in favour of the ‘mute ingloriousness’ celebrated in the preceding sonnet. The barbaric voice in both these sonnets is once again northern and vernacular and, within the highly canonical Meredithian form, becomes a deliberately unsettling agent.

Harrison’s identification of the non-standard and, specifically, the northern or dialectal as barbarian, is supported by a large body of evidence which points to an inherent historical bias towards the accent of the south of England and its standardised dialect. Harrison’s exploration of the cadences and phonic qualities of northern idiom therefore constitutes a form of rebellion against, or interrogation of, these cultural suppositions concerning language and power.

Katie Wales, in her *Northern English*, supports this view of the North-as-Other, asserting that ‘the perceived centre of national gravity, so to speak, whether culturally, politically or economically, is ‘Down South’, particularly London and its ‘Home’ Counties’, such that ‘hierarchies of influence and prestige’⁹⁰ are created; ‘a polarity negatively weighted towards the North’.⁹¹ Tom Leonard, whose work, like Harrison’s, is inscribed with a spirit of pronounced Marxist critique concerning narratives of power, observes that

in Britain the dominant literary tradition still "taught" in educational institutions has been established by clearing the streets [of the Other]. A dominant value-system has been allowed to marginalise that which does not correspond to it, declaring it deviant and therefore invalid. It has been able to do so by the method of making the mode of expression of these dominant values literally synonymous with "objectivity".⁹²

Leonard views this ‘inequality of status of diction’⁹³ as a form of ‘linguistic chauvinism’⁹⁴ which can be explained as the belief that one version of English is ‘superior’ to another by virtue of its cultural associations, ‘the softness of its vowel-enunciation’ and its positive cultural connotations.⁹⁵ This is the attitude of the English master in ‘Them & [uz] I’, who views the non-standard as transgressive because it is not language ‘fit for verse’, or what Harrison calls a ‘pseudo-cultural voice that everybody [thinks] poetry should be read in, and that

⁹⁰ Wales, p. 2.

⁹¹ Wales, p. 10.

⁹² Tom Leonard, *Reports From the Present*, p. 36.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁹⁴ Tom Leonard, *Intimate Voices: Selected Work 1965-1983* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 95.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

everybody [thinks] Shakespeare should be played in' and which 'still lingers in English theatre.'⁹⁶

Others critics of the barbaric voice associate the acquisition of standard forms with moral rectitude and, contrastingly, dialects and the non-standard as automatically deviant; linking 'Standard English with 'good behaviour' [and requiring] its implementation in order to help remedy degeneration in both language and morals.'⁹⁷ This attitude is satirised by Harrison in 'Them & [uz]' where language itself becomes the site of warring ideologies and competing value-systems, with the demotic, playful and self-parodying locked into combat with the 'voice of Received Pronunciation'⁹⁸ or what Orwell called the 'inflated bombastic style' and 'bloodless dia-lect [sic] of government spokesmen.'⁹⁹

Within this formulation, those outside the sphere of cultural power reinforced by 'genteel' expression become 'barbarians'; those who speak 'coarse speech' with 'a rough, slovenly, tuneless voice' and who lead 'coarse, ugly lives.'¹⁰⁰ It becomes clear then that it is 'the collision of dialect with Standard English'¹⁰¹ in Harrison's sonnets which constitutes one element of the barbaric in his work, especially given that, historically, 'literature written in 'deviant' dialect spellings has generally been received by readers and reviewers outside the region with

⁹⁶ John Tusa, Interview with Tony Harrison, BBC Radio 3, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/johntusainterview/harrison_transcript.shtml#top> [accessed 24th March 2012].

⁹⁷ Robert Penhallurick and Adrian Willmott, 'Dialect: England's dreaming' in *Debating Dialect: Essays on the Philosophy of Dialect Study*, ed. by Robert Penhallurick (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), p. 12.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁹⁹ George Orwell, 'Propaganda and Demotic Speech', in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, vol. 3 *As I Please: 1943-1945* ed. by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (London: Penguin, 1968), p. 162.

¹⁰⁰ Ronald Ridout, *English Today* (London: Ginn & Company, 1947), pp. 111-2.

¹⁰¹ Russell, p. 113.

either distrust or disgust. It is dismissed as unintelligible, and its authors as uneducated.’¹⁰² As an incongruous and unsettling presence within the sonnets, northern dialect is a key element in Harrison’s project to make traditional and ideologically dominant modes of bourgeois self-affirmation confront the excluded and marginalised voices of working-class culture, and this tactic of confrontation is intensely political in the way that it highlights the artificiality of all narratives of power, resulting in a pronounced mood of linguistic dissonance.

Another element vital in the creation of Harrison’s barbaric voice is the use of taboo language, profanity, and puns. Although seemingly distinct, swearing and paronomasia stand proximately on the continuum of language and power; challenging the autocratic voice of standardised, Latinate English and establishing a further layer of proletarian idiom within the various traditional forms upon which Harrison draws: the short lyric, the Meredithian sonnet, the elegy, and the classical translation. Harrison’s insistence on representing the dispossessed voices of working class subjects within formally conservative models engenders a tension between form and language which results in the distinctively combative features of his barbarian idiolect; driven by his knowledge that ‘most efforts to get a working-class voice into literature are compromised because “literature” is produced outside the working class, even when that class is the subject.’¹⁰³ Harrison attacks this near-total erasure of working-class voices from the traditional canon, and, along with it, the fallacy that ‘there is a single ‘normal’ language, a common currency shared equally by

¹⁰² Wales, p. 8.

¹⁰³ Rick Rylance, ‘On Not Being Milton’, in *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies I: Tony Harrison*, ed. by Neil Astley (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1991), p. 118.

all members of society'¹⁰⁴ which enables access to an Arnoldian realm of sweetness and light represented by works by Shakespeare, Milton and Pope. His use of taboo and punning is therefore part of a wider poetics of disaffection which signals a move towards a democratic and representative canon: one in which Clare and Burns are joined by a range of dialect and working-class writers whose barbarian voices conflict with the hieratic style of the 'cultured' mainstream.

Even from early poems such as 'Peanuts Joe',¹⁰⁵ Harrison's verse has drawn on the comic potential of the pun or *double entendre*; both deliberately antic figures of speech which facilitate his aggressively politicised poetics. In 'Peanuts', the pun itself is explained (perhaps unnecessarily) on the first line but a secondary play on the word 'nuts', in the context of a poem which references '*eja-/ulatio*' and other phallic imagery, is of interest. In 'The Death of the PWD Man'¹⁰⁶ the *double entendre* is mixed with blasphemous invective to give '*Whatsoever Thy Hand Findeth To Do, Do It With/Thy Might*' as a masturbatory euphemism, and death is personified as 'Julius Seizure'. The 'Rhubarbarians' mixes comical neologism with puns on the Leeds 'tusky' speakers who are envisioned in the poem as rhubarb-chanting barbarians, recalling the younger Harrison in 'Them & [uz] I'. 'Wordlists III'¹⁰⁷ includes the inventive 'speech combers' to describe lexicographer James Murray and his assistants scouring the written record for a 'thesaurus trove of trashes' whilst 'National Trust' places language - as *lingua* -

¹⁰⁴ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), p. 5.

¹⁰⁵ *SP*, pp. 16-7.

¹⁰⁶ *SP*, pp. 45-9.

¹⁰⁷ *SP*, p. 119.

centre-stage in its declaration that the ‘tongueless’ man gets ‘his land took’.¹⁰⁸ The ‘Illuminations’¹⁰⁹ sonnets offer multiple plays on words given the famous Blackpool ‘illuminations’ brought to mind by the seaside setting of ‘Blackpool’s Central Pier’ in the first poem and the epiphanies experienced by Harrison as he composes the poems themselves: ‘the penny dropped in time! Wish you were here!’. As Blake Morrison has shown, the title of the sonnets suggests both the tourist kitsch of Blackpool’s promenade and deeper, more reflective, moments: ‘the title,’ he argues, ‘in typically punning Harrison fashion, links the famous Blackpool lights with spiritual insights.’¹¹⁰ The final line of the first sonnet actually contains two additional puns: ‘in time’ referring to the passage of Harrison’s memory in time before his ‘illumination’ was complete, and the ironic picture-postcard cliché doubling as Harrison’s semi-stoic wish to see his dead father once again.

The elegiac tone of ‘Marked With D.’¹¹¹ is offset by a series of puns which centre on Harrison’s father’s job as a baker: ‘the chilled dough of his flesh went in an oven/not unlike those he fuelled all his life’, preceding references to ‘daily bread’ (as Harrison rejects any possibility of consolatory afterlife) and ‘the baker’s man that no one will see rise.’ Morrison again sees multiple layers of meaning embedded in the rich seam of these puns, arguing that

Harrison is a punning poet, and the puns go close to the bone (*bone/bone up on* being a pun he uses elsewhere): *cataracts* (heavenly waterfalls/an eye

¹⁰⁸ ‘National Trust’, *SP*, p. 121.

¹⁰⁹ *SP*, pp. 146-7.

¹¹⁰ Blake Morrison, ‘The Filial Art’, in *Bloodaxe I*, p. 54.

¹¹¹ *SP*, p. 155.

defect), *daily bread* (food/intellectual sustenance), and *rise*, which is what bread does, but what (so the atheistic son believes) the soul fails to after death, and what his father failed to do in life, too.¹¹²

Recalling his mother's disapproval of his '*mucky books*' in 'Bringing Up'¹¹³ Harrison jokes that his mother might like to read his *Loiners* poems after death, resulting in a further satirical pun on the (for Harrison) futile belief in heaven: 'maybe you see them in a better light!' The 'Divisions'¹¹⁴ sonnets are more scathing pieces, hinting, in their titles, at both the class divisions which create the 'teenage dole-wallah piss-up' and '*Brown Ale* and boys' bravado' mentioned in the first poem but also suggesting the football (tribal) divisions which will result in the 'aerosoled aggro' of *v.* (sonnet I and II become, here, 'Divisions One and Two'). *v.* itself takes the pun in Harrison's work to new heights of allusive potential, with the title's multiple meanings forcing the reader to engage with the poem on several simultaneous levels: 'poetry *versus* history. Poetry verses history. Poetry voices history. The last of these excavations from the punning title of Tony Harrison's *v.* is no doubt far-fetched, but perhaps worth the carriage',¹¹⁵ as Damian Grant comments, and *v.* also suggests 'all the *versuses* of life' explored by Harrison in the poem.¹¹⁶

¹¹² Morrison 'The Filial Art', in *Bloodaxe I*, p. 59.

¹¹³ *SP*, p. 166.

¹¹⁴ *SP*, pp. 173-4.

¹¹⁵ Damian Grant, 'Poetry Versus History: Voices off in the poetry of Tony Harrison', in *Bloodaxe I*, p. 104.

¹¹⁶ *v.*, *SP*, p. 238.

Harrison's dramatic output is similarly littered with puns and comedic material, from the title of the Greenham Common piece, *The Common Chorus*,¹¹⁷ to such ludic neologism as the *Oresteia*'s 'Shaggermemnon'¹¹⁸ and Kinesias' quip in *Chorus* that 'the womb service is slow.'¹¹⁹ *Chorus* also contains the phallic wisecrack 'no hard feelings'¹²⁰ spoken by one of the guards begging Lysistrata's resolute women for sexual gratification, whilst *Trackers* seems composed *mainly* of puns in places, which are strewn throughout the text like the myriad manuscript fragments sifted by Grenfell and Hunt in the opening scenes. Some of these puns are so obvious as to induce a degree of embarrassment in the reader or audience, as with Apollo's injunction to Hunt that he should 'Hunt! [...] Hunt out more fragments and find me the rest. Hunt!','¹²¹ whilst others are more subtle, as in the case of the satyrs complaining that 'Caryatids carry' without any undue physical effort, while they are 'shoved into *supporting* roles' (55). There is something apposite about Harrison's satyrs using the greater part of the humorous and 'foul' language in the play, given their status as agents of disorder and sexual licence, whilst their constant wordplay and libidinous asides also bring to mind Freud's 'liberated nonsense' and exemplify his belief that humour 'sets pleasure free by removing inhibitions' - allowing us to see their role in the play as both comedic and subversive; undermining the serious and the sacred and deflating the rhetorical effects of other characters' language.¹²² Satyr 4's lament that 'when Dionysos started giving wine away/the horse part of the

¹¹⁷ Cf. Harrison's collection *U.S. Martial*, with its similarly punning title - and, indeed, *v.*

¹¹⁸ *The Oresteia, Plays 4* (London: Faber, 2002), p. 88.

¹¹⁹ *The Common Chorus*, in *Plays 4* (London: Faber, 2002), p. 264.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

¹²¹ *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus, Plays 5* (London: Faber, 2004), p. 43. Further references in text.

¹²² Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. Joyce Crick (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 131.

satyr never said *neigh*' (69) might be said to link his irreverent humour to the subconscious urge to reject the control of the ego and super ego, and this becomes a fruitful metaphor for Satyr 2's debasing of the 'theatrical' language of Kyllene in other scenes:

KYLLENE

I must advise you ere I do commence,
 should you disclose what I to you disclose,
 there will be severest suffering in store.

SATYR 2

(groaning under weight of stage)

I wish she'd get to t' point. My back's that sore. (57)

Harrison is alive to the possibility of double-edged meaning even when planning his plays, as shown by his notebook 'doodling' during the composition of *Square Rounds*, where he enjoys the incongruous collision of Hiram Maxim's inventions (the machine gun *and* a bronchial inhaler for asthmatics) in the following terms:

He invented an inhaler *hailed* (pun! pun!)
 though never quite as much as was his gun¹²³

¹²³ *Square Rounds*, in *Plays 5* (London: Faber, 2004), p. 159.

whilst, in *The Big H*, Harrison enjoys running pun and anti-theist material together, as in the following exchange between the school boys and their teacher:

BOYS 1-12: Myrrh myrrh myrrh myrrh myrrh myrrh myrrh/ myrrh myrrh myrrh myrrh myrrh myrrh myrrh

TEACHER: (*His anger escalating.*): STOP that myrrhmyrrhring!¹²⁴

The *Laureate's Block*¹²⁵ collection is also dominated by puns, from the paronomasia of 'Fruitility' and 'Fig on the Tyne' to individual lines such as 'are there poets who are monarchists who'll try?/They might well get a Garter for their guts' (15) and 'I'd sooner be a free man with no butts' (16) in the resolutely anti-monarchic title poem. In the second of the 'Four Poems for Jonathan Silver in his Sickness', 'Marie Mastat', (38) Harrison recounts how Mastat 'said that 'given the right breeze'/she still could venture on high Cs' and 'Fruitility' contains the elegant pun on Harrison's breakfast habits with 'this breakfasting's my Zensual ruse' (48). But how is this playfulness with words barbaric in the sense proposed above?

Key to the pun's barbaric potential within Harrison's poetry is its status as a destabilising figure whose presence, within nominally traditional forms, runs

¹²⁴ *The Big H*, in *Theatre Works 1973-1985* (Harmondsworth: King Penguin, 1985), p. 329.

¹²⁵ Penguin, London, 2000. Further references in text.

counter to the ideal of intelligibility and seriousness associated with such poetry. In the lyric, sonnet, elegy and Greek texts, Harrison's puns subvert the high seriousness of form and impart a comical edge to the writing which results in a kind of 'masquerade'; where formal coherence and structural integrity inscribe the texts with superficial stability, whilst the linguistic charlatanism of the pun and dialect undermines this formal coherence. As outlined in the opening section of this chapter, the barbarian preoccupation with language and with the disruption of stable meaning is partly an inheritance from those Modernist poets who felt compelled 'to dismantle the structures of the conventional world and 'explode' language'¹²⁶ in order to express themselves in ways which were responsive to their changed (urban and fragmentary) social situations. 'Rightly or wrongly', Richard Sheppard notes,

many modern writers feel that ordinary discourse is cripplingly deficient. Words get in the way of reality, to such an extent that language, 'the worst of conventions', has to be attacked if it is again to become a lens through which a lost *tiers aspect* may be revealed. (328)

In the more extreme experimental styles of Modernism, such as Dada, 'the noun itself is suspected of being an oppressive dead-weight; ceases to be the fixed and governing centre of language, and becomes simply one among several component parts' (329) and hence Harrison's use of the pun within his work may be seen as a linguistic corollary to the Modernists' interrogation of

¹²⁶ Sheppard, in Bradbury and MacFarlane, p. 328. Further references in text.

language and its claims to transcendental truths, or what Sheppard calls ‘the ‘de-potentialisation’ of an entire language’ (329).

The subversive potential of the pun is in Walter Redfern’s view the main reason for its ubiquity in written and spoken discourse, as it allows its users the ability to unsettle the surface meanings of words and subvert stable definitional certitudes.¹²⁷ He sees the pun as ‘an agent of disorder, a disturbing influence’, given that ‘it breaks the conventions of orthodox speech or writing’:¹²⁸ ideas which echo Sheppard’s analysis of Modernist poetics above. Equally importantly, puns for Redfern ‘are bastards, immigrants, *barbarians*, extra-terrestrials: they intrude, they infiltrate [...] They will not go away’¹²⁹ and these views of the pun are helpful in the context of Harrison’s poems, where anti-authoritarianism and masquerade are mutually reinforcing. Puns also advertise the artificiality and contingency of words themselves and reveal the necessary self-deception practised by any user of language in applying words to the physical world, emotions, or ideas. Harrison is clearly interested in the ‘face value’ of language and its depthlessness; an infinite possibility of meaning to which the pun brings attention. Puns certainly suggest a parodic and ludic element to his language but also multiply meaning at the level of the individual lexeme in order to unsettle ‘straight’ readings of his poems and deny passive consumption of their content, and the resulting tension, creating as it does a further layer of non-conformism within Harrison’s poetry, lies at the heart of his barbarian poetics.

¹²⁷ “‘Lettered and unlettered, all alike, pun away’”; Walter Redfern, *Puns* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 3 - citing Blackmantle.

¹²⁸ Redfern, p. 16.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5; italics mine.

Harrison's playfulness with the 'meaning' of words invites comparison with Friedrich Nietzsche's essay 'On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense',¹³⁰ in which Nietzsche argues that all attempts at objective nomenclature are futile given the epistemological divide between the word and the 'reality' to which it supposedly points. Nietzsche focuses on the arbitrary nature of language and the falsity of human attempts to posit 'truth' given the essential emptiness of anthropogenic discourse and, hence, all truth claims. Humans, 'deeply immersed in illusions and in dream images', (889) invent words in order to render reality intelligible but forget that all resulting discourse is, ultimately, merely metaphor - rendering all claims to objective truth, and even objectivity itself, meaningless. As Nietzsche declares

we believe that we know something about the things in themselves when we speak of trees [etc] and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things - metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities (890-1).

This 'movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms' (891) stands between the human subject and reality but takes on the appearance of reality by dint of constant use and forgetfulness:

truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions; they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins

¹³⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense', 1873, in *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870s*, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (New York: Prometheus Books, 1979), reprinted in *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, eds. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg (Boston, MA: Bedford Books, 1990). Further references in text.

which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins. (891)

Hence language may be seen as a human construct devoid of ultimate meaning, and words as merely ‘the copy in sound of a nerve stimulus’, (890) lacking any objective epistemological value. Nietzsche’s contention regarding the metaphorical qualities of language also informs Lakoff and Johnson’s thesis that ‘the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor’¹³¹, and underpins their contention that ‘human *thought processes* are largely metaphorical’¹³²; an extension of the Nietzschean concept, and one which implies metaphor’s power to shape human consciousness and even action. As Martin Heidegger states, ‘man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man’,¹³³ and Harrison’s constant punning seems to acknowledge, or emphasise, Heidegger’s point, whilst also illustrating Nietzsche’s argument concerning the contingent nature of linguistic ‘meaning’.

Viewed through the prism of Nietzsche’s nihilistic essay, Harrison’s use of puns also takes on a calculating and subversive quality, in the sense that his puns advertise and accentuate the contingency and depthlessness of language, and focus the reader’s attention on the puns’ own artificiality: a move which denies passive consumption of the poems in which they appear. Like Nietzsche’s

¹³¹ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 3.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹³³ Martin Heidegger, ‘Poetically Man Dwells’, in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 215.

‘movable host’ of metaphors, Harrison’s puns call attention to the arbitrary attribution of words to things and the spurious truth claims of all discourse, unsettling ‘straight’ readings of his poems and forcing the reader to decipher meaning in a more active way. By doing this, his punning may be interpreted as an attack on the veridical claims of language to represent an abstract ‘reality’ which can be actualised or actively imagined, and also as a critique of ideological uses of language (religious, literary or political) which assert ‘truth’ through language, and which presuppose the inherent intelligibility of reality. Puns undermine all such claims to truthfulness or intelligibility by their erasure of meaning at the level of the word itself; a denial of signficatory power which exposes the reader to the artifice of language and its reliance upon metaphor and illusion:

that immense framework and planking of concepts to which the needy man [sic] clings his whole life long in order to preserve himself [and which] is nothing but a scaffolding and toy for the most audacious feats of the liberated intellect.¹³⁴

This denuding of the claims of language to ultimate meaning through the invocation of puns and other tropes is also important in that it is used by Harrison as a way of ridiculing the attempts made by the academic and social elites to own language or treat the standardised dialect as inherently superior, based on its supposed power to describe, and define, an objective reality. Harrison’s subversion of the ideological uses of language is therefore Marxist,

¹³⁴ Nietzsche, p. 895.

and is linked to his critique of narratives of power mediated through prestige forms and genteel expression. Carol Rutter, discussing Harrison's use of puns, seems to agree with this Marxist reading, identifying Harrison's use of paronomasia as part of his wider reclamation of 'owned' language and arguing that Harrison's puns 'are acts of *linguistic subversion* [and] more than intellectual teases. In Harrison's repertoire, they make political connections.'¹³⁵ Terry Eagleton also connects control of language and cultural capital, commenting that 'art [...] is for Marxism part of the "super-structure" of society. It is [...] part of a society's ideology - an element in that complex structure of social perception which ensures that the situation in which one social class has power over the others is either seen by most members of the society as "natural", or not seen at all.'¹³⁶ Hence language, as the medium of written art forms, is made to serve the interests of powerful minorities and affirm their world-views just as the canon, as an extension of this linguistic conservatism, becomes 'a powerful and often forbidding system of abstraction, in which the concept of 'literature' becomes actively ideological' and politicised.¹³⁷ Harrison's puns, which at first sight seem to be merely comedic, therefore form an integral part of his barbarian poetics and assist its critique of traditional conceptions of art, language and ideology.

Harrison's poetry also attacks the conception of art as superstructure, and seeks to unsettle traditional poetic forms, through its reliance upon taboo language or

¹³⁵ Carol Rutter, ed, *Permanently Bard: Selected Poetry of Tony Harrison* (Bloodaxe, 1995), p. 23; all italics mine.

¹³⁶ Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (University of California Press, 1976), pp. 5-6.

¹³⁷ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: OUP, 1977), p. 45.

swearing. Like the pun, and the ambivalence created by its presence (signalling a calculated remoteness from emotion within the lyric poems), swearing acts as a barbarian intrusion within conservative poetic forms and reminds the reader of Harrison's 'voices of the dispossessed'; those designated as barbarians and Others by an historically regnant social class whose methodology of exclusion was disseminated by the teaching profession and its presentation of literary 'classics' such as those treated in 'Them & [uz]'. The Fowler brothers, in their *King's English*, are typical of the post-War academic elite in their wish to commodify language and inscribe it with value-laden suppositions about genteel and uncouth expression. The Fowlers assert, for example, that 'the place of slang is in real life and not literature'¹³⁸ and, more, that slang is the speech of the 'lower classes', noting its 'uncouthness' (58). They conclude that 'words of this class fortunately never make their way [...] into literature' (59) and maintain that 'slang is the great corrupting matter [which] infects what is round it'; suggesting that slang here is not merely 'corrupt' or 'broken' English but any non-standard register produced by the barbarian lower classes (61). Although anachronistic, the Fowlers' argument is typical of the era during which Harrison was educated as a schoolboy and it is probable that Harrison's wish to attack these arguments stems from his experience as a working-class scholarship boy being taught the 'great tradition' by teachers whose social class and the civilising mission it conferred resulted in a seething antagonism, on the poet's part, against the establishment. Harrison has claimed, in interviews, that 'my school, Leeds Grammar School, to which I won one of six scholarships for the plebs, seemed

¹³⁸ H. W. & F. G. Fowler, *The King's English* (Oxford: OUP, 1951), p. 57. Further references in text.

to me like a class conspiracy'¹³⁹ and it is probable that his deployment of 'profane' language throughout his poetry is at least partly a form of 'Scholarship Boy's Revenge [sic].'¹⁴⁰

Examples of 'non-poetic' speech are as ubiquitous within the Harrison *oeuvre* as to perhaps lose some of their capacity to unsettle, and yet it is only necessary to compare Harrison's poems to texts by the post-War literary mainstream (Larkin, Dunn, Heaney) in order to appreciate the range of his eclectic-barbaric style. The most powerful, and controversial, example is *v.*; a poem dismissed as 'a torrent of four-letter filth' by a conservative elite as actively opposed to transgressive speech in poetry in the 1980s as were Harrison's English and Greek masters in the 1950s.¹⁴¹ *v.* certainly trades on the dialectical opposition between canonical-traditional formalism and the 'gutter speech' of the 'skin' in the poem, whose brutal epithets (*fuck, shit, cunt, Paki* and *dick*) become barbarian interjections woven into the fabric of a poem whose own dialogue with literary history presupposes familiarity with Thomas Gray and the elegy tradition. The interplay between the poem's stately iambic quatrains and such outbursts as '*don't fucking bother, cunt!*' creates a barbaric incongruence which allows Harrison to investigate notions of gentility and cultured speech, and to show their contingency and ultimate artificiality.¹⁴² The resulting tension between formal stability and linguistic discord is a central element in Harrison's use of masquerade and its playful transgression of boundaries. The 'skin' figure in the poem emerges as not only Harrison's alter ego but also as an ironic

¹³⁹ Tony Harrison, 'The Inkwell of Dr Agrippa', in *Bloodaxe I*, p. 33.

¹⁴⁰ Douglas Dunn, 'Formal Strategies in Tony Harrison's Poetry', in *Bloodaxe I*, p. 130.

¹⁴¹ Daily Mail, Oct 12th 1987, in *v.* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1989), p. 40.

¹⁴² *v.*, in *SP*, p. 242.

spokesman for proletarian speech, encapsulated neatly within Richard Hoggart's observation that

working-class speech and manners in conversation are more abrupt, less provided with emollient phrases than those of other groups [...] Neither the phrasing nor the rhythms of working-class speech have the easing and modified quality which, in varying degrees, is characteristic of other classes.¹⁴³

The skin's expression is certainly 'more abrupt' as he rejects any language which designates him as an ignoramus or outsider ('*go and fuck yerself with cri-de-coeur!*').¹⁴⁴ Rejecting also the civilising project of art in a barbaric sub-dialect composed mainly of northern dialectal monosyllables and aggressively guttural phonemes, the skin identifies the claim to power inherent within bourgeois control of language even as he rejects it: '*so don't speak Greek. Don't treat me like I'm dumb*'¹⁴⁵ and his diatribe ends by reminding Harrison and the reader (ironically) of the futility of enacting change through mere words: '*it's not poetry we need in this class war.*'¹⁴⁶ It seems, therefore, that Harrison's barbaric language, composed mainly of northern or Anglo-Saxon phrases and constructions, is a deliberate response to the mediation and control of literary value through canonical languages such as Latin and Greek, and their modern equivalent, Standard English.

¹⁴³ Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 88.

¹⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 241.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

¹⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p. 244.

The Anglo-Saxon, Germanic or Old English phonology of Harrison's barbaric voice permeates every level of his poetry and is to be found across his entire poetic and dramatic output. Where the etymology of his epithets is not wholly Anglo-Saxon, there is a 'consonantal' quality which relies for its effect on the 'great/lumps to hawk up and spit out' which underpin the dialects of the north of England.¹⁴⁷ As noted above, the effect of this incorporation of the historically non-legitimised northern idiom is disruptive and deliberately contentious, especially in those poems where class and social mobility are under scrutiny. In 'Marked with D.', for instance, a poem in which Harrison strives to come to terms with his anger concerning his father's alienation from education and its offer of release from menial labour, the force of the filial argument is transmitted through the deployment of phonemes such as 'chilled dough', 'dead wife', 'cold tongue' and 'dull oaf' whose short vowels stand out from more (ironically invoked) polysyllables such as 'cataracts ablaze with Heaven' and 'radiant'.¹⁴⁸ *Dough, dead, dull, oaf* and *wife* all derive from Old English and it is their phonic weight, sustained throughout much of the poem, which creates what Keith Sagar has identified as the 'wretched syntax', 'savage consonants' and 'pounding monosyllables' in his reading of Ted Hughes' verse.¹⁴⁹ To be sure, although Hughes and Harrison stand far apart on the broad spectrum of post-War British poetry and seem inassimilable within the same tradition, their poetic register does rely partly for its effects upon a 'concrete, emphatic, terse, yet powerfully, economically, eloquent' language which can be traced through the work of several other writers whose work has appeared since the 1960s.¹⁵⁰ Writing in

¹⁴⁷ 'Them & [uz] I', *SP*, p. 122.

¹⁴⁸ 'Marked With D.', *SP*, p. 155.

¹⁴⁹ Keith Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes* (Cambridge: CUP, 1980), p. 11.

¹⁵⁰ Sagar, p. 7.

1979, Philip Hobsbaum defined what he termed ‘the poetry of barbarism’ in a similar manner, focusing on the phonic and onomatopoeic qualities of barbaric verse, which he saw as being ‘full of muscular movement and packed with interacting consonants’¹⁵¹ which create ‘sensations of pain or labour.’¹⁵²

Neil Roberts, discussing Hughes’ poem ‘View of a Pig’, cites Hughes and Ken Smith on the power of Yorkshire dialect and what its phonic qualities bring to their verse:

the effect is one of dour plain speaking, achieved by the predominantly Anglo-Saxon/Norse lexis, emphatic monosyllabic internal rhyming, consonantal clusters that resist euphony and the solitary, colloquial, unliterary simile. These lines illustrate Hughes’s claim that ‘Whatever other speech you grow into ... your dialect stays alive in a sort of inner freedom’ and that his own West Yorkshire dialect ‘connects you ... to middle English poetry’ - an observation that is paralleled by Ken Smith’s statement that he was drawn to Anglo-Saxon poetry ‘because it’s akin to the dialect of North Yorkshire ... the dialect of my childhood ... I suddenly thought it sounds like, "*Here lad. Go get yon bucket a’ water.*" It has that clipped, guttural sound.’¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ Philip Hobsbaum ‘The Poetry of Barbarism’, in *Tradition and Experiment in English Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 308.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 329.

¹⁵³ Neil Roberts, ‘Poetry and class: Tony Harrison, Peter Reading, Ken Smith, Sean O’Brien’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth Century English Poetry*, ed Neil Corcoran (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), p. 216 - citing Hughes in *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980), p. 202 and Ken Smith in ‘The Godfather of the New Poetry’, interview with Colin Raw in *You Again: Last Poems & Other Words* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2004), p. 140.

Here, ideas such as ‘unliterary’ and non-euphonic seem readily applicable to Harrison’s own voice, especially in poems which derive their momentum from observations of social inequality or Marxist anger directed at middle-class institutions. ‘Fire-eater’, for example, is a commentary on the difficulty experienced by Harrison’s father and uncle as they struggled to express themselves despite impediments such as stammers and ‘bad’ grammar (both of which would have earned the opprobrium of the Leeds Grammar masters). ‘Conjuring’ the sounds made by these men, Harrison uses the phrases ‘silk hankies, scarves’, ‘make me gag’, ‘deep down in their gut’ and ‘hauled’; all of which recall Hughes’ and Smith’s use of the guttural sounds of Yorkshire and, behind this linguistic seam, the Anglo-Saxon from which such words derive.¹⁵⁴

The sonnet ‘Turns’ goes further in its deployment of harsh consonantal phonemes, as Harrison recalls his father’s death as caused in part by the middle class which ‘broke him’ (recalling the line ‘worn out on poor pay’ from ‘Book Ends I’).¹⁵⁵ Picturing the scene of his father’s death (‘all the pension queue came out to stare’), Harrison’s ‘sprawled’, ‘smudged’, ‘stare’ and ‘folk’ (mostly Old English in origin) convey a defiance derived in part from social class and, connected to this, from the language used by that class. ‘He never begged. For nowt!’ Harrison continues, ending this indignant yet poignant poem with a fragmentary medley of consonants which includes ‘busk’ (Germanic), ‘broke’ (from Old English *breccan*), ‘splash’ (from Middle English *plache*) and ‘brackish’ (Low German). The purpose of this barbarian vocabulary is once again to link class to language, and facility with language to a bourgeois

¹⁵⁴ ‘Fire-eater’, *SP*, p. 168.

¹⁵⁵ ‘Book Ends I’, *SP*, p. 126.

conception of social success: arguments and themes which have animated Harrison's entire career as a writer.

This is not to say that barbarian language in Harrison's poetry must either be 'northern' or Anglo-Saxon, or, for that matter, that there is such a thing as a definable northern voice in poetry, with the exception perhaps of the Old English alliterative texts and the nineteenth-century Yorkshire dialect revival.

Harrison's use of northern idiom and working-class speech seems less part of a regionalist agenda in his work and more an attempt to incorporate non-standard voices into verse which has historically resisted assimilation. The resulting idiom, however reliant upon northern voices, is derived from Harrison's familial and social backgrounds which happen to have their roots in the post-War Yorkshire celebrated (and often critiqued) in his poems. Tom Leonard's poetry is similarly rooted in themes of social alienation and the rebuttal of narratives of power and yet the voice upon which he draws is working-class Glaswegian rather than northern English dialect. There is, however, a sense in which the Harrisonian voice – the barbaric voice – results from the collision of specifically northern constructions with the prestigious standardised dialect. Andrew Duncan sees a definable northern voice in modern poetry and, although this should not call into question Harrison's status as a major internationalist and (among other things) post-colonial and post-modern writer, some of the 'evidence' he advances in support of the 'northern school' is applicable – with caveats – to Harrison's poetry.

Duncan first formulates his definition of ‘the northern scene in poetry’ by suggesting the following as defining features:

stress on the physical; predominance of physical limits, such as poverty and violence; lack of grace; closeness to oral forms, such as dialogue and narrative; fondness for dialect and ordinary speech; indifference to high-flown language and to Continental ideas about literature.¹⁵⁶

In response to this, it seems that Harrison poems such as the ‘Divisions’ sonnets conform to Duncan’s definition in their treatment of working-class culture and in their focus on the ‘dole-wallah piss-up’ lifestyle of the football hooligans who inspire the poems.¹⁵⁷ In the first sonnet, the skins are ‘all aggro in tight clothes and skinhead crops’, wearing ‘bovvers’ and daubing walls with their aerosol insults (prefiguring the lone skin in *v.*). Poverty and violence certainly feature here, as the skins finish their graffiti and ‘go get pissed’, knowing that they have no jobs to go to. Harrison’s aside ‘they think that like themselves I’m on the dole’ and his comment ‘but most I hope for jobs for all of you’ suggest at once an intimacy and a distance between poet and subject, privileged onlooker and working class unemployed, and there is an undeniable ‘fondness’ in this poem for ordinary speech.

Duncan’s proposed northern voice also incorporates a ‘domineering and blustering’ mode of writing, which incorporates ‘fixed clusters of associations

¹⁵⁶ Andrew Duncan, *Centre and Periphery in Modern British Poetry* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), p. 79.

¹⁵⁷ ‘Divisions I, II’, *SP*, pp. 173-4.

between grimness, bleakness, ruggedness, [and] sullenness' and this could describe any of the 'family' sonnets from *Eloquence* such as those composing the 'Next Door' suite.¹⁵⁸ In 'Next Door I', Harrison's father's interjection '*it won't be long before Ah'm t'only white!*' is succeeded by Harrison's own, partly ironic, 'or t'Town Hall's thick red line sweeps through t'whole street.'¹⁵⁹ How much of this is 'authentically' northern, as opposed to a comedic northern stereotyping, is debatable, although Harrison, in the same sonnet, does adopt a dialectal, Yorkshire style when commenting 'since mi mam dropped dead mi dad's took fright.' Grimness and bleakness feature in all these poems, especially in their evocation of the changing socio-economic makeup of the north of England ('*All turbans round here now [...] t'Off licence, that's gone Paki in t'same way!*')¹⁶⁰ and in their exploration of domestic violence ('he beat her [...] I heard each blow, each *Cunt! Cunt! Cunt!*').¹⁶¹ Duncan argues that the features delineated in his thesis constitute 'the plain language of the North' and his description of this particular idiom coincides with some of the features of Harrison's own barbaric voice.¹⁶² This is not to say, again, that Harrison's barbaric voice must be read against a supposed north-south polarity, or as a result of a deliberation on Harrison's part to write 'northern' verse. Although many critics do read his work in this way, identifying a 'commonsense Yorkshire materialism' within it,¹⁶³ this could ultimately form one branch of what Dave Russell has called 'northern stereotyping'; or, the reliance on certain

¹⁵⁸ Duncan, p. 133.

¹⁵⁹ 'Next Door I, II, III, IV', *SP*, pp. 129-32.

¹⁶⁰ 'Next Door IV', *SP*, p. 132.

¹⁶¹ 'Next Door II', *SP*, p. 130.

¹⁶² Duncan, p. 119.

¹⁶³ Sean O'Brien, 'Tony Harrison: *Showing the Working*', in *The Deregulated Muse* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1998), p. 61.

conjectural characteristics of the north and northern culture.¹⁶⁴ However, it is also true that Harrison's poetry frequently includes a male, northern, working-class voice which inhabits the earliest poems (even those set in Africa), his sonnets, elegies, and the dramatic productions (*The Mysteries*, for example). The barbaric voice is therefore composed of taboo language, non-standard registers, and word play but also incorporates the cadences of northern speech as part of its confrontation with the traditional, typically southern, mainstream poetic establishment. However much this barbaric voice seems 'typically' northern, often recalling such fixed stereotypes as 'harsh and bleak scenery [and] a harsh language',¹⁶⁵ 'blunt forcefulness' of speech,¹⁶⁶ and the north as 'alien and uncivilised, a mixture of Gothic wildness and wilderness, as if it were a "foreign" country, and hence a region to be feared,' this seems coincidental rather than deliberate.¹⁶⁷ Ultimately, the barbaric register within Harrison's poetry is derived from the poet's own voice; a composite blend of socio-economic history, geographical accident, playful self-mockery, and defiant non-conformism towards the intelligible, refined and genteel modes of the bourgeois value system (including its superstructural features; education and literary tradition).

¹⁶⁴ Russell, p. 33.

¹⁶⁵ Wales, p. 25. cf. also 'granite speech' (*The Guardian*, 10th September 1998) and 'wind-swept-vowels' (*The Times*, 14th October 1995) - in Wales, p. 25.

¹⁶⁶ Mark Hudson, cited in Wales, p. 26.

¹⁶⁷ Wales, p. 26.

Armitage's Barbaric Language

'Muse!, sing the Grotty [scant alternative]' - Peter Reading ^(*Stet*)

Although his barbaric voice is unique and its style inimitable, several other post-War poets share Harrison's predilection for the confrontational and non-standard, and I wish to establish the grounds for seeing Armitage as a natural inheritor of his poetics of dissent. Considering the question of congruence between Harrison and Armitage in the 1990s, we have seen that Peter Forbes has denied any substantial inter-relation of their styles, suggesting that Armitage be placed alongside contemporaries such as Carol Ann Duffy or Wendy Cope. However, this insistence on reading Armitage from within the generation of which he is manifestly a part precludes the possibility that his work looks back to the barbaric generation which precedes it. I would argue that his work in fact extends the tradition of dissent inaugurated by the post-War barbarians, and that many other 'modern' poets have inherited a poetic scene quite different from that experienced by Reading and his peers, or Auden in the 1930s, and one which bears the marks of the Harrison group's bold experiments with language. Muldoon, Armitage, Paterson, Maxwell and Duffy all write in the wake of the older poets' interrogation of linguistic codes and employ their levity in their own writing, which leads to interesting parallels between the younger poets. Muldoon's poetry, for instance, shares with Armitage's work many important features, from 'chatty familiarity [and a] relaxed conversational measure'¹⁶⁸ to

¹⁶⁸ Clair Wills, *Reading Paul Muldoon* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1998), p. 9.

‘ludic patterning’ and a sense of the comical in everyday life.¹⁶⁹ Although Muldoon often writes ‘wilfully inaccessible’ poems, different to Armitage’s generally accessible pieces (those in *Seeing Stars* possible exceptions), he does share with the New Poets and Armitage a love of punning and taboo language.¹⁷⁰ Certainly, Muldoon’s puns are more complex than those of McGough, and more artfully contrived than Harrison’s deliberately ironic *jeux de mots*, although such examples as ‘everyone getting right up everyone else’s noses’¹⁷¹ (a comment about nasally-ingested angel dust) and descriptions of a Cadillac as ‘a transport of joy’ are close to the Armitage tone in their wit and juxtaposition of familiar and cerebral.¹⁷²

As demonstrated above, a continuum of influence unites Auden and the Movement to other post-War barbarians such as Reading, Leonard and Harrison, an influence which then manifests itself in Armitage’s work, especially in the area of language. As I will show, Armitage’s debt to Harrison is therefore linguistic as well as political, in the sense that all barbarian writers have, through their erosion of traditional poetic discourse and renegotiations of form and style, questioned traditional conceptions of lyric poetry and its content. Inheriting a social and literary landscape at home with the comic, bizarre and sexually suggestive, Armitage and his peers have contributed their own versions of the parodic, the ludic and the demotic which make up the ‘democratic voice’

¹⁶⁹ Mark Ford, in Wills, p. 13.

¹⁷⁰ Wills, p. 14.

¹⁷¹ Paul Muldoon, ‘Immram’, in Paul Muldoon, *New Selected Poems 1968-1994* (London: Faber, 1996), p. 60.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 62.

identified by Armitage and Crawford in the late 1990s.¹⁷³ Without Harrison's 'mucky books', poets such as Don Paterson would not enjoy the liberty of describing a 'leaking cock' or a 'ruptured condom',¹⁷⁴ or a 'spat of grey jism';¹⁷⁵ nor, arguably, could Duffy write about lesbianism in such rich post-Sapphic detail.¹⁷⁶ Equally unthinkable would be Glyn Maxwell's marriage of academic, almost metaphysical, metaphor with such digressive dialogue as

'Fucking fairweather friend,' he spat. 'Blue Freak!'

And the mascot giggled and we were up shit creek¹⁷⁷

which brings to mind Armitage's personae in *Seeing Stars*. It can be argued that Armitage's barbaric language is only historically possible because of previous renegotiations of traditional or rarefied poetic discourse taken on by those poets cited above who represent post-War barbaric styles of writing, and hence Armitage inherits a strong tradition of linguistic and formal experimentation which he extends throughout his work. But what distinguishes Armitage's barbaric style from that of his predecessors?

Armitage's barbarian voice is far more parodic, sardonic and ludic than Harrison's, in the sense that his poetry seems to be less concerned with the transmission of political arguments and more focused on a playful interaction

¹⁷³ Introduction to *The Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland since 1945*, ed Armitage and Crawford (Viking, 1998), p. xxi.

¹⁷⁴ Don Paterson, *Nil Nil* (London: Faber, 1993), p. 17. Cf. *Zoom!*, published four years before.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁷⁶ Cf. 'Girlfriends', in *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 85.

¹⁷⁷ Glyn Maxwell, 'Out of the Rain 12', in *One Thousand Nights and Counting* (London: Picador, 2011), p. 45.

with the reader: certainly, his poems often incorporate puns and engage in word play for play's sake, whereas Harrison's poems seem to use a more ironic humour which presupposes a political position or argument. This is not to dismiss the sometimes aggressively proletarian voices heard in Armitage's poems, nor to deny Harrison's frequent deployment of humour and irony: it is simply a recognition that a certain degree of levity may be said to inhabit many of Armitage's texts, which I think has led many critics to assume that his work cannot stand comparison with the more socially and politically engaged poems by Harrison. Stan Smith's comments, linking Armitage to the Auden voice and alluding to Freud's theory of 'polymorphous perversity', suggest a playfulness with language which is self-serving, and there is ample evidence of this waywardness-with-words across several of Armitage's collections.¹⁷⁸ 'I thought I'd write my own obituary' from *Book of Matches*¹⁷⁹ is an early homage to the Auden style, in the form of a faux obituary notice 'for when I'm risen from the dead'. The central octave of the sonnet importunes the reader to 'ignite the flares, connect the phones, wind all the clocks' whilst the quatrain demands: 'unlock the rivers, hoist the dawn and launch the sea.' This deliberately self-conscious reworking of 'Funeral Blues' suggests a fascination with parody, but also a subversive desire to deconstruct the original text and challenge its status as an anthology piece. In the poem, Auden's four-quatrain or Meredithian structure collapses into a quasi-Shakespearean sonnet which begins, rather than ends, with a rhyming couplet whilst Armitage's language deflates the original poem's slightly portentous tone ('replace the bulbs of Jupiter and Mars') whilst

¹⁷⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (Connecticut: Martino, 2011): 'under the influence of seduction children can become polymorphously perverse'; p. 69.

¹⁷⁹ Armitage, *Book of Matches* (London: Faber, 1993), p. 24.

also inverting, or opposing, its calls to ‘stop all the clocks’ and ‘cut off the telephone.’ Although animated by the Audenesque, Armitage’s poem seeks to subvert and re-fashion the original in order to question its canonical status and incorporate ironic humour within it, making the poem one of Armitage’s many barbaric elegies: devoid of the tropes associated with mourning, linguistically unstable, and opposed to the neat closure of the original text.

The 2010 collection *Seeing Stars*,¹⁸⁰ employs a range of spoken voices and colloquial registers which combine to create a patchwork of highly comedic Bakhtinian vignettes. Poems such as ‘Upon Opening the Chest Freezer’¹⁸¹ show a ludic disregard for poetic propriety with their demotic register (‘Damien likes to roll up a ginormous/snowball then store it in the chest freezer’) and candid self-referentiality (‘this brief story-poem is to tell you/I’m leaving. I’m gaffer-taping it to the inside/of the freezer lid’). Along with references to ‘a packet of boneless chicken thighs’, ‘slush puppies/for next door’s kids’ and the bizarre premise of the poem itself (a Damien Hirst figure pranking ‘the/awestruck citizenry’), this seems more ‘anti-poetry’ than poetry: deliberately blurring the line between verse and prose; meaningful and meaningless. As Alan Franks has commented, ‘the poems in *Seeing Stars* don’t look like poems at all but, rather, pieces of prose’¹⁸² - recalling Harrison’s own unsettling subversions of form. Rather than write prose (having published two novels), Armitage instead flouts

¹⁸⁰ Simon Armitage, *Seeing Stars* (London: Faber, 2010).

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p.17.

¹⁸² Alan Franks, ‘Simon Armitage says: ‘They’re poems because I say they are’’, *Times Online*, April 24, 2010, <http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/poetry/article7105170.ece> [accessed 1st May 2011].

the ‘rules’ of poetic form so as to create poems which look poetic but read almost as self-contained comical narratives, such that ‘iambic pentameter would be an alien in this wordscape. There is barely a sign of the te-tumming that, as [Armitage] says, still runs through English poetry.’¹⁸³

‘Upon Unloading the Dishwasher’¹⁸⁴ shares with ‘Chest Freezer’ a sense of internal conflict (another female voice struggling to articulate feelings of dissatisfaction) and an apparent urge to block the reader’s attempts at ‘knowing’ the text: not only blending a variety of registers within the poem but also offering a bizarre, stream-of-consciousness monologue which stretches credibility to its limits -

upon unloading

the dishwasher, I discovered the image of The World’s

Most Wanted Man imprinted on one of my best dinner

plates.

The narrator here, Katy, goes on to concoct a Molly Bloom-esque account of ‘Customer Service Hotline’ call-centers, caricatured policemen and ineffectual

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ *Seeing Stars*, pp. 52-3.

priests ('sitting on the pedal bin with his arms folded'), which leaves the reader perplexed and feeling somewhat unnecessary, in the sense of mediating meaning or participating in its construction. The reader, traditionally having the role of deciphering content and ascribing meaning in poems, is turned, instead, into a passive agent whose job is no longer to 'fathom' the poetic artefact but simply to follow the divagations of the narrative until it reaches its (anti)-climax. Even Katy admits that every word she 'had uttered was complete poppycock' and the poem as a whole seems to be less concerned with the traditional notion of poetry as a vehicle for lyric transmissions of emotion than with the comic potential of language itself; a ludic disposition seen in many other poems, such as 'The Practical Way to Heaven'.¹⁸⁵

'The Practical Way to Heaven' is a deliberately arch look at northern stereotyping and the creation of regional caricatures. After 'the opening of the new exhibition space' at a northern sculpture farm, 'the London people', mainly trustees and benefactors, leave by private coach. Suddenly liberated, having withstood 'skewered Thai prawns' and other 'esoteric' fare, the park staff, led by Jack the manager, dive into 'the most enormous pie', brought into their midst by 'Bernard driving a forklift truck.' An orgy of surreal detail follows: 'Millicent from publicity [...] on all fours' eating 'like a starving dingo'; Bernard bellyflopping 'into the warm mush' of the pie and Preminger (a token 'southern' character) returning to the hall to retrieve his wallet and, seeing the barbaric spectacle before him, looking 'like the smell of a broken/sewer in high summer.' 'You said it was safe in the/north' Preminger complains, before leaving for the

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., pp. 42-4.

metropolis, ‘disgusted and appalled.’ Just as Armitage elsewhere satirises the inhabitants of his native Marsden, so a good deal of the comedic force of this and other poems in *Seeing Stars* is predicated upon an ironically self-aware sense of regional difference and supposed differences between north and south. The poems themselves are self-contained satirical episodes written in a *vers libre* style which approaches the status of prose poetry but, owing to the typographical arrangement of the poem on the page, Armitage seems to be insisting that these poems be read as traditional lyric poetry, even though these texts constitute a form of anti-verse reliant for its effects upon popular reference, mild taboo language and surreal invention. His adoption of the ludic-anarchic style in *Seeing Stars* is clearly different to Harrison’s combative or Marxist approach, but the barbarian ploy of investing a traditional form with demotic and jocular reference results in a similar deflation of the concept of poetry as a stable platform for meaning, and this undermining of meaningfulness includes the use of pun and subversive wordplay.

Armitage’s work, like Harrison’s, relies for much of its comedic potential on the pun, which plays an important part in its transgressive potential. Unlike Harrison’s sometimes acerbic or politically engaged plays on words, however, Armitage’s punning is, as Anthony Thwaite has argued, in ‘various ways *ludic*’¹⁸⁶ and one key aspect to his barbaric voice is its focus on the jocular and seemingly banal; evidence of the poet’s ‘irreverent gusto’.¹⁸⁷ Armitage has long used puns in the service of humour, and his first collection, *Zoom!*, opens with

¹⁸⁶ Anthony Thwaite, *Poetry Today: A Critical Guide to British Poetry 1960-1995* (London: Longman, 1996), p. 160.

¹⁸⁷ Gregson, p. xiii.

his first published pun - the poem 'Snow Joke'¹⁸⁸ - which tells the story of 'the guy from Heaton Mersey' who snubs 'the police warning-light' and is found stranded (or dead) in the middle of a 'moorland blizzard.' The poem's allusive title suggests that although Armitage, like Harrison, may well view the pun as evidence of the arbitrariness of language, he also intends it to act as a subversive trope which destabilises the poem's attempt to record and order reality. Ian Gregson has referred to Armitage's subversion of narrative as 'the idea of storytelling as a game', and it will be seen that the narrative sequence of many Armitage poems is undermined by the presence of puns and other word play.¹⁸⁹ Of course, his puns also serve as verbal interlopers within stable forms such as the sonnet and elegy, where, like Harrison's artful verbal play, they serve to highlight the fragility of the forms themselves and, by extension, their claims to canonical or cultural relevance.

An exhaustive analysis of Armitage's puns and 'fondness for the comic mode'¹⁹⁰ cannot be offered here, but even a brief overview shows the centrality of the pun to his published work. *Zoom!* itself is an important place to start, with its horde of early wisecracks: 'It's gone to seed now' from 'Greenhouse',¹⁹¹ 'when the sun comes up tomorrow/it will dawn on us' from 'Phenomenology' (24) and the brilliantly allusive 'Dykes' (43) with its multiple plays on words: Geography lessons including 'overflow culverts' (recalling literal dykes - the title alluding to lesbianism), fingers touching over 'plans/of coastal reclamation in the

¹⁸⁸ Simon Armitage, *Zoom!* (Bloodaxe, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1989), p. 9.

¹⁸⁹ Ian Gregson, *Contemporary British Poetry and Postmodernism: Dialogue and Estrangement* (London: Macmillan, 1996), p. 251.

¹⁹⁰ Gregson, *Simon Armitage*, p. xv.

¹⁹¹ *Zoom!*, p. 13. Further references in text.

Netherlands’, leading to the comical ‘from there she took the upper *hand*’¹⁹² and the eventual bathos of ‘many of her stories held no water’ (a further aquatic reference which also brings to mind dykes - either those controlling water levels in Holland or those who ‘swapped their sickly sweet secretions/or plugged each other with their fingers’ in the poem.) In *Kid*, Armitage’s punning becomes at once more comical and more cerebral, with the golf-inspired joke in ‘Great Sporting Moments: The Treble’ particularly noteworthy. Two successive puns at the heart of the poem help to establish the witty but also pugnacious persona who narrates events and show also Armitage’s use of paronomasia as a ‘running gag’ technique:

I played the ignoramus to a tee:

the pleb in the gag who asked the viscount

what those eggcup-like things were all about -

‘They’re to rest my balls on when I’m driving.’¹⁹³

Kid also contains one of Armitage’s finest ludocentric excursions in ‘Robinson’s Life Sentence’¹⁹⁴ - a poem about the fictional Weldon Kees character Robinson, his life, and all in one single sentence (twenty-four lines long).

Matches plays on the theme of ignition in its word play, with the second

‘matchbook’ poem commencing ‘strike two’,¹⁹⁵ a later sonnet quipping ‘how a

¹⁹² my italics.

¹⁹³ *Kid* (London: Faber, 1992), p. 57.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹⁹⁵ *Book of Matches* (London: Faber), p. 4. Further references in text.

spark of light/went to his head' (22) and the final poem in the first section also playing with the combustible theme in the image of the poet 'taken with myself' (32) But it is the collection's second section, 'Becoming of Age' (itself a play on words), which contains Armitage's most significant, and extended, use of punning. 'Tale' (40), like 'Robinson's Life Sentence', takes word play to (il)logical extremes by insisting on the literalness of the title itself, so that the poem *tells a tale* but one which is *about* a tale: 'five small dogs for the first time off/the lead. They were drinking beer.' Caught short and needing to urinate,

one amongst them passed

a golden, exponential curve of piss

with the poem's closing lines clinching the phallic potential of the title: 'eye-witnesses insist on looking for a likeness.' Thus it transpires that Armitage is punning not only on the sense of a 'tale' as a yarn, but also the Latin name for tale - *penis* - the poem's 'bottom line' being a tale about a tale. *The Universal Home Doctor*¹⁹⁶ contains the fragment 'Splinter' which, despite its brevity, contains two subtle puns on the 'fragment' of the title:

Was it a fall in pressure or some upward force

that *went to the head* of that spikelet of glass

and drew it through flesh, caused it to *show its face*

so many years to the day after the great crash¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶ Simon Armitage, *The Universal Home Doctor* (London: Faber, 2002).

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 37; my italics.

and puns litter the remaining collections: *Killing Time*¹⁹⁸ with its floral play on the Columbine massacre ('Meanwhile, somewhere in the state of Colorado');¹⁹⁹ *The Dead Sea Poems*²⁰⁰ with 'The Faber Book/of Handy Hints' cheekily alluded to in a poem about a 'Goalkeeper with a Cigarette';²⁰¹ *Seeing Stars*²⁰² with its 'Cheeses of Nazareth'²⁰³ and *Tyrannosaurus Rex versus The Corduroy Kid*²⁰⁴ with the typographical pun of 'Learning by Rote'²⁰⁵ - a poem about a 'backward boy' who had to write his name backwards as punishment for intellectual sluggishness; the pun contained in the fact that the poem is 'wrote' by the 'cack-handed' child backwards on the page. As these examples show, one common feature of Armitage's punning in the barbaric mode is his use of a bon-viveur figure as narrator: a kind of *homo ludens*, whose observations about life and society are delivered in a droll, knowing tone which recalls the delivery of the stand-up comedian. This is quite different to Harrison's barbaric voice, which is created by the use of more aggressive narrators, or even the poet's own voice. As is clear, however, the effect of these various manifestations of the barbaric is similar: particularly in its unsettling of neat divisions between literary and 'un'-literary language.

The 1997 collection *CloudCuckooLand*²⁰⁶ warrants detailed inspection, given its title and the many puns it contains. The inhabitants of Armitage's native West

¹⁹⁸ Simon Armitage, *Killing Time* (London: Faber, 1999).

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 22-4.

²⁰⁰ Simon Armitage, *The Dead Sea Poems* (London: Faber, 1995).

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁰² Simon Armitage, *Seeing Stars* (London: Faber, 2010).

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, pp. 48-9.

²⁰⁴ Simon Armitage, *Tyrannosaurus Rex versus The Corduroy Kid* (London: Faber, 2006).

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

²⁰⁶ Simon Armitage, *CloudCuckooLand* (London: Faber, 1997).

Yorkshire village, Marsden, are known as cuckoos, after the local myth whereby they tried to retain the spring weather by ensnaring a local cuckoo.²⁰⁷ The poems in *CloudCuckooLand* are, mainly, associated with constellations seen in the night sky from Armitage's home and thus the name 'CloudCuckooLand' serves both the Marsdeners and their sobriquet, but also the area of Marsden itself and the view through its clouds at the heavens - a composite, technical image which shows how agile and subtle the trope can be. The collection's '*The Whole of the Sky*' section contains several puns which form miniature ludic constellations of their own: 'Cetus'²⁰⁸ with 'the whale turned tail'; 'Hercules' (30) with the line 'after not walking the dog once all day for crying out loud [literally]'; 'Cephus' (52) with Armitage consulting his astronomy manual to give 'he's down/in my book as *See Cassiopeia, See Andromeda*' and the scatological 'dark matter' from 'Capricornus' (65) - the dark matter in question actually goat stools: 'it ['a shaggy old goat'] opened its arse/and the president counted its turds as a kind of raffle.' In Armitage's 'The Level', (97) multiple images playing on the concept of gradients ('the four-man heavy roller ditched [...] The Land Rover borrowed to drag it back'), being 'on the level' or honest ('owning up'; 'dead straight') and actual spirit levels ('his eye like an air-bubble coming to rest') create a densely packed and allusive poem which requires careful reading in order to spot its many witty asides. The puns in this text also deny the reader's sense of familiarity with words and everyday expressions, such that the poem, albeit in a comical way, attacks the idea of stable boundaries between signifier and signified and forces the reader into a posture of alienation

²⁰⁷ See Armitage, *All Points North* (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 4.

²⁰⁸ *CloudCuckooLand*, p. 29. Further references in text.

which can only be resolved by entering into the ludic *jeu de mots* itself. This is a similar effect to the one explored above in relation to Harrison's writing, and suggests a similar desire to deny passive consumption of the poem, and engender instead a sense of the inherent *unfamiliarity*, or contingency, of language. As Redfern argues, 'in the pun, there are always two or more levels, manifest and latent, in some kind of coexistence, sequence, alternation or tension'²⁰⁹ and this goes some way to explaining the ability of the pun to create such a definite sense of playful linguistic complexity. Puns, then, whilst appearing comical, actually attack the reader's complacent reliance on the supposed 'meanings' of words and point out, instead, their artificiality and lack of conceptual depth: "puns and double meanings emphasise the unstable nature of language, its dynamic qualities which are so difficult to control"²¹⁰.

It is clear, from this brief survey, that the pun is integral to Armitage's poetics and to the distinctive style it creates. Puns enable him to achieve various effects: first, to destabilise the surface meanings of texts (in a Harrisonian manner); next, to create comedy; and finally, to politicise the comical within 'serious' verse. The pun, along with the embedding of comic material at the heart of 'serious' poetry, therefore signals dissent and defiance: of specific conventions of genre and style; of standardised language, and of bourgeois expectations of poetry and its role in supporting an artistic and cultural *status quo* reliant on tradition and order. This is not to say that Harrison's punning is the same qualitatively as Armitage's: indeed, Harrison tends to incorporate puns as part of a wider poetics of dissent and disputation which sees ideological combat with authority as

²⁰⁹ Redfern, p. 26.

²¹⁰ Redfern, p. 16, citing J. Stedmond.

central to working-class self-definition, whereas Armitage seems to employ the pun in a more performative manner: for the ‘pleasure’ alone, or else as an ironic moment of levity in otherwise ‘serious’ poems. What is clear, however, is that punning is a key constituent of Armitage’s barbaric style and one which places him within the same conceptual territory as Harrison, even though the two poets often employ wordplay for differing reasons.

A further feature of Armitage’s barbaric language is its incorporation of dialect or non-standard expression, often alongside the voice of ‘received’ or standard poetic diction. The early collection *Zoom!* foregrounds dialect and demotic utterance in conspicuous ways, perhaps as a way of adulterating the post-Romantic lyric voice with garrulous working-class narrators whose powers of expression, like those of Harrison’s father, the skins or ‘mute inglorious Miltons’, would normally debar them from poetry as reader or persona. ‘Very Simply Topping Up the Brake Fluid’ is a shopfront monologue featuring a male garage owner’s declamations to a supposedly naive female interlocutor: ‘Yes, love, that’s why the warning light comes on.’²¹¹ Although not formally a dialect poem, its colloquial expression and avoidance of poetic *gravitas* achieve similar results to Harrison’s ‘family’ sonnets which trade on the overtly dialectal expression of his father. Undermining the traditional voice of lyric verse, and underscoring Armitage’s indebtedness to the post-War barbarian style outlined above, the poem draws its imagery from the world of the mechanic and the engine bay, with references to ‘a five-eighths screwdriver’, ‘the float-chamber’

²¹¹ ‘Very Simply Topping Up the Brake Fluid’, *Zoom!* (Bloodaxe, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1989), p. 30.

and ‘Swarfega’: references which anchor the text in the workaday world and which recall Harrison’s use of similar imagery in the *School of Eloquence* sonnets describing his father’s bakery. They also, importantly, suggest a desire on Armitage’s part to question the exclusion of the proletarian voice from mainstream verse, and this is seen again in ‘Bus Talk’, with its contrived bus-stop dialogue masquerading as genuine ‘found’ poetry between working-class commuters.²¹² The poem is littered with ‘overheard’ fragments of phatic talk which create genuine comedy: ‘of all the bloody cheek’; ‘he didn’t know goose shit from tapioca’; and ‘my cock’s a kipper’; evidence once again of Armitage’s delight in the provincial and comedic, as opposed to Harrison’s more bittersweet laments for those excluded from the historical record. Ultimately, this poem’s barbarian potential lies in its foregrounding of the working-class wisecrack in a collection of ‘serious’ poetry.

A common Armitage voice is, indeed, that of the unnamed male prole who speaks a medley of verbal styles never far from dialect but, more often, composed of demotic or taboo, and rather different to Harrison’s self-reflexive personae whose speech is more obviously dialectal (the preponderance of dialect in Harrison’s poems perhaps linked to his historical ‘moment’, growing up in a distinct verbal community characterised by insularity and a Hoggartian sense of working-class pride). ‘Brassneck’ from *Kid* typifies the laconic proletarian voice common to several Armitage collections, with a male persona soliloquising on the art of pick pocketing during football matches: ‘down in the

²¹² Ibid., p. 22.

crowds is where the bread is.’²¹³ The euphemisms, combined with aggressive asides and comic patter which recall the verbal stylisations of the stand-up comedian, work against the neat symmetry of the sestets and bring to mind Harrison’s inclusion of ‘barbarisms’ in the Meredithian sonnet: we read, for example, of ‘dog-eared tenners’, fishing in ‘britches’, ‘a smart-looking lass’, ‘loosening fingers’, fleecing punters and ‘doing the right thing’ to unsuspecting spectators. Puns such as ‘we tend to kick off’ (in light of the sporting context of the poem) and ‘a different ball game’ create further layers of meaning, whilst the narrator’s determination that his colleague Carter must keep ‘his cunt-hooks out of my wallet’ adds a final, menacing, even misogynistic, register to a poem which is a composite of verbal styles despite being, essentially, a dramatic monologue (a barbaric monologue, of course, where form and content are productively at odds). Like Harrison, Armitage in this poem and many others tends to employ ‘Anglo-Saxon’ or north of England phonology, with many expressions reliant for their effect upon clipped, guttural sounds, such as those mentioned by Smith in his reading of Hughes’ poem above. In the darkly sadistic ‘Poem’, for instance, Armitage’s unnamed narrator tells how the character in the poem ‘once, for laughing, punched her in the face’,²¹⁴ while the *Matches* poem ‘The Lost Letter of the Late Jud Fry’ contains lines such as ‘wake./And in my head/walk barefoot, naked from the bed’²¹⁵ while ‘Show and Tell’ from *Seeing Stars* deploys informal expression such as “‘well, you’d better not make a pig’s/arise of it.”²¹⁶ When Armitage deploys dialect directly, there is often a comedic aim in mind, as opposed to the defiantly political effects

²¹³ ‘Brassneck’, *Kid* (London: Faber, 1992), pp. 5-8.

²¹⁴ Simon Armitage, *Kid* (London: Faber, 1992), p. 29.

²¹⁵ *Book of Matches* (London: Faber, 1993), p. 36.

²¹⁶ ‘Show and Tell’, *Seeing Stars* (London: Faber, 2010), p. 50.

intended by Harrison. ‘On an Owd Piktcha’ from *The Dead Sea Poems*²¹⁷ illustrates the convergence of ‘high’ art (the picture in question is a Renaissance Madonna and child) and ‘low’, vernacular and phonetically rendered speech, with Jesus envisaged as ‘tChrast Chald sithee, born baht taint’ seated ‘on tVirgin’s knee.’ Christ’s cross is described as ‘pooakin its nooas aht o leaves n tmoss’ and the collision of divine and doggerel here seems particularly subversive - an example of what Stan Smith, discussing Auden’s light and serio-comic verse, calls ‘verbal indecorum’ - but also evidence of Armitage’s habit of using humour to create bathos.²¹⁸

The *CloudCuckooLand* collection furthers the comic-subversive deployment of dialect by using dialect as an ironic leitmotif in poems which draw their lyrical poise from, in the main, Standard English. In ‘The Serpent-Holder’,²¹⁹ dialect intrudes into an anecdote about ‘someone local swiping eggs at night’ when Redfearn (the victim) finally catches the thief in the act of purloining his eggs. A brief snatch of dialogue ensues with Redfearn’s ‘*Got thee, bastard*’ and the egg-thief’s ‘*happen, but tha dunt know who I bastard am*’ before the comical dénouement of ‘ten minutes’ Chinese burn, then pax.’ ‘Pictor’ (83) is similarly split between Latinate expression (‘illustrating particles of atoms/and the cosmos, to the same scale’) before the brusque intrusion of dialect in the second quatrain:

Childer mun have books an’ picturs, bowt

²¹⁷ (London: Faber, 1995), p. 22.

²¹⁸ Stan Smith, ‘Auden’s light and serio-comic verse’, in *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden*, ed Smith (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), p. 99.

²¹⁹ *CloudCuckooLand*, p. 36. Further references in text.

*at t'most expensive shops,
Teliscowps to go star-gazin, michaelscowps
to look at lops*

and 'The Phoenix' (62) abandons Standard English entirely in its exploration of the cuckoo myth associated with Armitage's native Marsden. Detailing the manner in which Marsdeners earned their 'Cuckoo' sobriquet, Armitage writes of 'tvillage cuckoo caught one spring [...] an kept in a tower baht roof', kept there 'to trap tgood weather.' Realising the bird has gone, 'a ladder wer fetched/to bring tbird dahn' but no-one will climb up it: 'trust, tha sees. Tladder maht walk.'

As these examples show, dialect is integral to Armitage's barbaric poetics, and his invocation of dialect and its pragmatic, often demotic expression also suggests an affinity for its phonology and non-standard features; as shown by his 'reclamation' of Samuel Laycock's poetry, and its influence on Armitage's work, discussed above. Dialect is, therefore, a key component of Harrison and Armitage's poetics of dissent, and some poems by Armitage represent aggressive dialect speakers whose expression recalls some of Harrison's personæ. The 'Sympathy' suite from *Tyrannosaurus Rex* blends sympathy-card sestets with demotic, part-dialect monologues spoken by unnamed narrators in a manner reminiscent of Harrison in his *Eloquence* sonnets.²²⁰ Each poem's second section is spoken by a male, proletarian voice and the resulting idiolect

²²⁰ Simon Armitage, *Tyrannosaurus Rex versus The Corduroy Kid* (London: Faber, 2006), pp. 27-31.

forms a rich tapestry of barbarian allusion: ‘I sparks up. and stands with mi
‘ands in mi sleeves, like’ (‘Sympathy I’); ‘E’s sat on ‘is bed doin’ X-Box with
‘is thumbs’ (‘II’); ‘then we wondered if it were summat we’d done wrong’
(‘III’); ‘laid in t’coffin, dead as a statue’ (‘IV’); ‘but bugger me sideways!’ (‘V’).
The juxtaposition of opening sestet, written in Standard English, and the ensuing
idiomatic interjections, have the same effect as the more convoluted blending at
work in Harrison’s texts: seen in the deliberately contrived images of ‘the boy on
the bank, his fish-shaped lips/to the silver balloon’ in the first poem, before the
deflationary image of ‘crustified gunk’ in the second section. Again, and very
much like Harrison’s deliberate ploy of setting register *against* register in the
same poem, the other poems in the suite merge unsettling image against image,
as in the third poem’s references to ‘a port-wine stain splashed over her face’
alongside ‘them nursery kids called ‘er squashed tomato ‘ed’, or the fourth
poem’s ‘racing a black cloud,/outrunning a dark belt of summer rain’ jarring
with the image of ‘flashbulbs poppin’ like fuck’ and ‘furry microphones pushed
in ‘is gob for a quote.’ Just as Harrison interpolates proletarian outburst into
texts which contain Standard English expression or complex polysyllabic lexis,
Armitage in ‘Sympathy’ allows conflicting or contending registers to co-exist in
order to accentuate the resulting verbal chaos; undermining the poems’ claims to
order, and allowing normally distinct voices to appear within one single,
autonomous text. Although different qualitatively to the Harrisonian voice,
Armitage’s barbaric tongue is similar in its deliberate interrogation of
boundaries and stable poetic registers and in its deployment of taboo, comedy
and non-standard expression.

What emerges from these poems and others written in, or incorporating, dialect is a sense of defiance of standardised language and a related need to recount experience in a localised speech which reflects the values and the voice of the people involved; proving Raymond Williams' point that 'verbal [as opposed to 'literary'] language is [...] distinctively human; indeed, *constitutively human*' and, hence, better able to dramatise and reflect upon human experience.²²¹ The incorporation of dialect becomes, therefore, a creative decision linked to notions of class and identity, and this feature of Armitage's barbaric voice is found in a range of poetry written after 1945. Reviewing the post-War scene in the *Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland since 1945*, Armitage and Robert Crawford suggest that 'poets in Britain and Ireland [after 1945] wrote as part of a shift towards post-imperial, pluralist societies and communities. The notion of a hieratic voice of authority (whether that of received pronunciation, the BBC, the Irish Catholic priest, the Oxford don, or the patriarchal male) was rejected, though poets' voices were increasingly part of the public sphere.'²²² Discussing the use of non-standardised English in many writers' work, Crawford and Armitage observe that 'a sense of local accents, dialects, languages attaining their own authority, at the same time as ideas of absolute central authority dissolve, characterizes the poetry of the period and plays a strong part in the evolution of the democratic voice' (xxi). Summarising the use of dialect in particular, they note that 'voicings of dialect [...] may be used as tools of *cultural resistance*' (xxxix).

²²¹ Williams, p. 24. Italics mine.

²²² Introduction to *The Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland since 1945*, ed Armitage and Crawford (Viking, 1998), p. xxi. Further references in text.

Armitage, ‘subverting the solemnities of bourgeois authority with the iconoclasm of humour’ and the provincial, deploys non-standard forms as a barbaric move to deny the primacy and assumed superiority of the middle-class, standardised voice.²²³ As Gary Day argues, echoing comments made by Hulse, Kennedy and Morley in their introduction to *The New Poetry* anthology, poetry is linked to ‘the politics of cultural identity’, such that ‘those on the periphery have to define themselves against a repressive centre. This centre is identified with ‘Standard English’ which cannot render the experience of those on the margin.’²²⁴ Anthony Thwaite has found Armitage’s style particularly ‘difficult’ owing to his ability to ‘mix West Yorkshire idiom with more Parnassian language’;²²⁵ a characteristic he sees as something of a barrier to the reader of his work, while Hulse *et al* see non-standard forms as ‘a critique of bankrupt vocabularies of capitalism’ and, as a result, as part of the broadly Marxist democratisation of poetic language in which Armitage and Harrison have played a central role.²²⁶ It is clear, then, that Armitage’s use of dialect, taboo, comical expression and the non-standard is a tactical decision, tied to notions of hybridity and linguistic range on the one hand, and political or Marxist considerations on the other.

Armitage shows himself to be keenly aware of the centrality of language in the context of a class-conscious British culture which often refracts its values through the prism of the canonical heritage and its overwhelmingly standardised

²²³ Smith, p. 99.

²²⁴ Gary Day, in *British Poetry from the 1950s to the 1990s*, ed Gary Day & Brian Docherty (London: Macmillan, 1997), p. 4.

²²⁵ Anthony Thwaite, *Poetry Today: A Critical Guide to British Poetry 1960-1995*, p. 154.

²²⁶ Hulse, Kennedy and Morley, eds., *The New Poetry* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1996), p. 19.

forms, metre and language. ““In this country,” Armitage says, “the moment you open your mouth you are participating in a political process. The class system is alive and kicking, and that’s reflected in anything you write. Your syntax, your word choice, it’s all there””²²⁷ and this reminds us of Barthes’ assertion, in his *Writing Degree Zero*, that ‘every man is a prisoner of his language: outside his class, the first word he speaks is a sign which places him as a whole and proclaims his whole personal history. The man is put on show and delivered up by his language.’²²⁸

Through his incorporation of dialect, taboo and non-standard forms in his poetry, Armitage is politicising his work and entering into a debate with the mainstream voices of the canon, and this dialogue is not only something he actively seeks to generate (like Harrison) but something he sees as inevitable anyway, given the role of the poet as a politically committed individual:

when you open your mouth, you are nailed. Poets are acutely aware of that. They might not be writing poems that wave flags or shoot bullets, but their use and positioning of a single word can be all about that. Speaking through the page, as an act, whether you like it or not, makes you involved politically.²²⁹

²²⁷ Alan Franks, ‘Simon Armitage says: ‘They’re poems because I say they are’’, Times Online, April 24, 2010, <http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/poetry/article7105170.0> [accessed 1st May 2011].

²²⁸ Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (London: Vintage, 2010), p. 87.

²²⁹ Franks.

These comments reflect Armitage's desire to challenge conventions of style and formal orthodoxy by the expansion of the creative range of his own poetry, and his stance here echoes the sentiments of Hulse *et al*, who view Standard English as 'unequal to the task' of rendering experience in an adequate way, such that the poet is driven in search of different voices and ways of expressing emotion, meaning that 'the choice of a non-standard dialect becomes a political decision.'²³⁰ Commenting on the many 'New poets' whose work is recorded in their anthology, Hulse and his co-editors argue that, throughout their poetry, 'language is treated with a healthy, postmodern disrespect. Indeed, language is itself part of the subject' and this statement also applies to Harrison, whose work is not in the *New Poetry* collection only by virtue of his 'established' (but not 'establishment') status.²³¹

Like Harrison, Armitage's use of non-standard poetic expression seems a calculated, political act; even if his personae seem, superficially, less politically engaged than those who people Harrison's texts. This is not to say, of course, that Armitage's verse lacks a sense of outrage or class anger: this is in fact far from the truth. 'Lines Thought to Have Been Written on the Eve of the Execution of a Warrant for His Arrest', from *Kid*,²³² is a defiant excursion into class and language and one which employs a distinctly Harrisonian tone of defiance and class-based militancy. The formal title of the poem, bringing to mind a text such as 'Tichborne's Elegy' or some other Elizabethan poem-confession, is neatly (and deliberately) undercut by the informality of the

²³⁰ Hulse et al, p. 19.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

²³² Simon Armitage, *Kid* (London: Faber, 1992), pp. 60-1.

opening line: 'Boys, I have a feeling in my water.' The theme of the poem is, broadly speaking, republicanism, and there is an air of modern-day 'Babington Plot' to the narrator's rallying speech to his co-conspirators (recalling the Cato Street Conspiracy in 'On Not Being Milton'). The Queen is not named (recalling the paranoia created by Elizabethan spies such as Sir Francis Walsingham) and is reduced instead to the pronouns *she* and *her*. This depersonalisation signals both the need for secrecy but also the confrontational spirit of 'Them' and 'Uz'. The Queen, it is stated, 'will not lend one button/from her blouse' should any of the general population lose their homes or jobs. In opposition to 'her' we see the collective, third-person pronouns 'our', 'ourselves' and 'we': 'should we lose our houses/and our homes, our jobs'. This pronominal insistence is carried through the whole poem, sometimes yoking together the antithetical 'her' or 'she' as in '*we* will not hear of *her* hitching *her* skirt/or see for *ourselves* that frantic footwork'.²³³ The class-based anger seen in the image of the tank on Birdcage Walk taking aim at the Palace ('her name/cross-threaded in the barrels of our throats') in stanza two segues into the working-class pride of the university graduate in the third octave, who sneers that 'with our letters, our first class honours/and diplomas we are tenfold brighter' than the Royal offspring. There then follow more jibes at the royal household including the neatly subversive quip that the Queen, should the narrator and his men be burning, 'will not pass one drop/of water over us.' Here, the euphemism for the more common 'piss on us if we were burning' makes for a playful joke at the expense of the "Queen's" English - all part of the subversive barbarism of this text.

²³³ My italics.

More working-class anger is discernible in ‘Great Sporting Moments: The Treble’; a poem which is presented as an anecdotal monologue delivered by an anonymous Yorkshire raconteur who holds the rich in obvious contempt: ‘the rich! I love them. Trust them to suppose/the gift of tennis is deep in their bones.’²³⁴ Setting up an early polarity between ‘them’ (twice mentioned) and the supposed ‘us’ of the reader and narrator, the poem details a series of minor ‘skirmishes’ between narrator and victim, the latter being ‘him whose arse I whipped with five choice strokes’ at tennis. The mockery of the middle class tennis players with their ‘gear’ and costly apparel forms the basis here for a kind of class-based *schadenfreude* as the narrator triumphs over his antagonist on the tennis court and, later, the links. Playing ‘the ignoramus to a tee’ (punning *en route*), the speaker passes himself off as ‘the pleb in the gag’ before the affluent golfer loses ‘his rag’ and throws down ‘the gauntlet’, saying:

we’d settle this like men: with gloves on.

I said no, no, no, no, no, no, no. OK, come on then.

The poem ends, therefore, in actual violence and with a symbolic battle between working class and bourgeois personæ, ominously recalling Marx’s warnings of class struggle and ‘the whole superincumbent strata of official society being sprung into the air.’²³⁵

²³⁴ *Kid* (London: Faber, 1992), pp. 57-8.

²³⁵ Karl Marx, ‘The Communist Manifesto’, in *The Communist Manifesto*, ed. by Gareth Stedman Jones (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 232.

In ‘Those bastards in their mansions’, from *Matches*,²³⁶ one sees a similarly antagonistic response to the divisions between rich and poor, or Marx’s ‘two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat.’²³⁷ Here, the tone is far more aggressive and the language less playful. Gone, for example, are puns on ‘driving’ and ‘teeing off’ in favour of terse, direct speech about ‘bastards’, ‘lords and ladies’, eagles and guns. The narrator here (alienated, unnamed and ‘in the shadows’) seems on the verge of some decisive and violent action which will constitute a counterstrike to the privilege and decadence of the rich ‘in their palaces and castles’ who keep the working classes in ‘cuffs and shackles.’ Playing with the Greek myth of Prometheus, the rich are envisioned as sadistic and reactionary, with the narrator their innocent victim (and yet one capable of some form of pre-emptive strike in a bid for self-preservation). The poem ends without any definite resolution but, instead, with the threat of immanent action and deadly force which is also seen in the final lines of Duffy’s ‘Education for Leisure’, where the psychopathic narrator intones, ‘the pavements glitter suddenly: I touch your arm.’²³⁸

Several other poems hint at class struggle and the possibility of violence, such as ‘Punishment’ from *Tyrannosaurus Rex*²³⁹ where this time a middle-class voice issues ominous warnings to a working-class audience, addressed in the poem as ‘one of your good selves.’ Describing the likely domestic provenance of such people (‘darkened, end-stopped/ginnels and ways’) and the affluent estates which co-exist uneasily alongside them (‘our lamp-lit lanes, our metallated

²³⁶ Armitage, *Book of Matches* (London: Faber, 1993), p. 19.

²³⁷ Marx, p. 220.

²³⁸ Carol Ann Duffy, ‘Education for Leisure’, *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 11.

²³⁹ (London: Faber, 2006), p. 52.

streets/with their sleeping policemen’), the narrator warns against any attempts to cross the divide:

the right is reserved to bring

an axe-head down on a trespasser’s wrist.

Showing a paranoid determination to protect private property, the narrator appeals to the superstructural authority of the educational system in order to intimidate their silent audience:

Remember those school desks? The top flips up
and doubles as a chopping board

and these images of axe and chopping board bring to mind Harrison’s *contretemps* with his teacher in ‘Them & [uz]’

‘Learning by Rote’²⁴⁰ is another poem by Armitage which details a pupil-teacher confrontation like the one dramatised in ‘Them & [uz]’. The title of the poem hints at the rote learning associated with ‘traditional’ education but is also a pun in its own ‘write’: the whole poem being a retort to the teacher who made Armitage write his own name ten thousand times - ‘but in reverse’ - as a punishment for writing ‘cack-handedly’. The poem, bar the poet’s name and his father’s note to his teacher, is written backwards in order to represent the ‘sin’ of

²⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 65.

being ‘the backwards boy’ who could not write elegantly (recalling the ‘sin’ of reciting Keats without the class-signifying aspirated ‘h’ in Harrison’s poem).

This typographical pun is evidence both of a ludic disposition within Armitage’s work but also of a seething desire to take revenge on a teacher’s punitive small-mindedness: ‘Forgotten. Buried in the past. Except/this loose-leaf jotter came to light today.’ The poem mocks the teacher’s attempts to instil discipline and his belief that the punishment for writing poorly should ‘fit the crime’; ending in the narrator’s determination to take revenge:

the sudden childish urge to wave
 this wad of mirror-writing in your face.
 And then again, and then again, and then
 again, again, again, again, again.

It can be seen, from the poems analysed above, that Armitage’s barbaric voice is partly comedic and ironic but that it is also derived from personal politics and their application to societal inequalities; making the incorporation of the barbaric working-class narrator itself an act of linguistic defiance. Both Harrison and Armitage certainly seem to view their appropriation of the Latinate and elevated registers of English canonical verse as an act of symbolic revenge taken against an educational establishment which denied the credibility and relevance of their own accents and dialectal expression. Recalling a childhood experience when his teacher set him the task of writing a poem about Christmas, Armitage recounts how

I wrote about how my mum put sixpence in the Christmas pudding - which wasn't true - and he [Armitage's teacher] didn't put it on the wall. I thought he'd rumbled me, but he came up to me later and put his arm round me and said 'By the way, Simon, that was a really good poem', and I thought, 'Well, why didn't you put it on the fucking wall, then?' And I've wondered since then if I've just been pursuing a revenge career. Every time I finish a piece I think, 'Put that on your wall!'²⁴¹

Harrison has also identified a revenge motif in his work, again involving a childhood experience with a teacher:

Much of my writing has been a long slow-burning revenge on the teacher who taught me English when I was eleven or twelve, and full of retrospective aggro [...] I had also some problems with my Classics teachers, one of whom was engaged in a campaign to keep all colloquial language out of the translations his pupils were required to do from Latin and Greek.²⁴²

The clear association between the male English teacher's authority and the repression of young talent is striking in both these anecdotes and is certainly illuminating in the context of Harrison and Armitage's subsequent views on literary authority and traditional forms and language. Discussing Harrison in

²⁴¹ Robert Potts, 'Mean Time', *The Guardian*, Wednesday 15 December 1999 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/1999/dec/15/poetry.artsfeatures>> [accessed 19th July 2012]. See also Caroline Foulkes, 'The Saturday Interview: Simon Armitage - Funny job poetry; Caroline Foulkes suspects that the career of poet Simon Armitage is built on revenge', *Birmingham Post & Mail*, 2003,

<http://www.thefreelibrary.com/The+Saturday+Interview%3A+Simon+Armitage+-+Funny+job+poetry%3B+Caroline...-a0109236460> [accessed 8th August 2012].

²⁴² Tony Harrison, 'Facing Up to the Muses', in *Bloodaxe I*, p. 437.

particular, several critics have argued that his entire output, somewhat like Armitage's, could well be an act of symbolic vengeance against a dominant, bourgeois culture personified by the sneering Leeds Grammar School teacher in 'Them & [uz]'. One critic, for instance, hints at the power of Harrison's childhood experience, given that, as an adult, he was 'still sufficiently hurt to *want* to take revenge on the now probably dead old snob'.²⁴³ Douglas Dunn characterises Harrison's style as 'a Scholarship Boy's Revenge [sic]'²⁴⁴ and Jack Shepherd also recognises Harrison's 'slow burning revenge on all those people who belittled him at school. A school where the [male] teachers were never slow to remind him that he was of common stock and that he spoke badly; and that he would, in consequence, never be able to 'aspire to higher things'. Things like Latin and Greek, poetry and opera.'²⁴⁵ Armitage seems to share Harrison's anger at the premise that 'genteel' speech necessitates an avoidance, or erosion, of working-class speech and he, too, targets the teaching establishment and criticises its tendency to denigrate the non-standard voice in favour of the genteel: a criticism which recalls Al Alvarez' call for 'serious poetry' which is 'immune to the disease so often found in English culture: gentility'²⁴⁶ and which avoids the pretence, common to some post-War British poetry, 'that life, give or take a few social distinctions, is the same as ever [and] that gentility [...] will eventually muddle through.'²⁴⁷

²⁴³ Neil Roberts, 'Tony Harrison: Author and Subject in The School of Eloquence and v.', in *Narrative and Voice in Postwar Poetry* (New York: Longman, 1999), p. 158.

²⁴⁴ Douglas Dunn, 'Formal Strategies in Tony Harrison's Poetry', in *Bloodaxe I*, p. 130.

²⁴⁵ Jack Shepherd, 'The 'Scholar' Me: an actor's view', in *Bloodaxe I*, p. 424.

²⁴⁶ Al Alvarez, introduction to *The New Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p. 32.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-8.

Although Armitage's barbaric style is unique and a composite of many different layers of meaning, reference and biography, its intended *effect* is comparable to Harrison's own subversive written style. Similarly, although Armitage's poems are more ludic and playful than Harrison's, especially in their 'enjoyment of contradiction, discontinuity, randomness and excess', they share Harrison's class-based or politically engaged sensibility, especially where language and power are discussed.²⁴⁸ Exemplifying the inheritance spoken of by Armitage at the start of this chapter, we can see now how both poets use barbarian language not merely as an end in itself but as part of a wider masquerade motif within their work, whereby traditional poetic forms such as the sonnet and lyric are 'invaded' by non-standard, profane or ludic registers, creating in both poets' work a strikingly Bakhtinian sense of riot and non-conformism which recalls the carnivalized literature analysed by Bakhtin in Dostoevsky and Rabelais' writing, and which is analysed in fuller detail in what follows.

²⁴⁸ Hulse et al, pp. 23-4.

Masquerade

The general lexicographical definitions of ‘masquerade’ include ‘disguise, false outward show, pretence’ and ‘a travesty, counterfeit’; suggesting an underlying duplicitousness or protean quality.²⁴⁹ There is also an etymological link between ‘masquerade’ and the Italian *maschera* (mask), suggesting a wilful and deliberate desire to thwart meaning or defy expectation and, finally, there is a speculative link to the Arabic for ‘laughing-stock’ or ‘buffoon’; giving all these various definitions a shared sense of the anarchic, subversive and spontaneous. Masquerade in Harrison and Armitage’s work consists of two main elements: formal or structural subversion and linguistic anti-conservatism. To refine the definition further, it may be stated that masquerade proceeds from the calculated deployment of non-standard and demotic language within a conservative or stable poetic form, and from the deliberate undermining of a poem’s typographical and structural integrity (bringing to mind the idea of disguise and duplicity outlined above). In the case of the sonnet, structural renegotiations are to the fore, whereas in the elegies and translations, the main emphasis is upon the incorporation of demotic and deviant diction. As has been demonstrated, Harrison and Armitage’s barbarian language also invades the lyric in its various manifestations, such as the dramatic monologue and love lyric (Harrison’s ‘Durham’, for instance). Masquerade works then by undermining stable forms whilst preserving a ‘false outward show’ of superficial integrity, and by offsetting regular form against contending, multiple voices and levels of allusion - recalling Bakhtin’s definition of the carnivalesque, with its polyphony, its

²⁴⁹ *OED* (Oxford, 1933) Vol VI, p. 205.

eccentricity, and its desire to question traditional representations of reality. Taking two broadly representative poems by Harrison and Armitage, it is possible to delineate the main features of their masquerade.

Harrison's 'A Good Read' is one of several poems which detail the poet's relationship with his father after the death of Florrie, the poet's mother.²⁵⁰ A sixteen-line Meredithian sonnet (with two 'fractured' half lines), the poem is the site of an ironic convergence of formal conservatism and linguistic dissonance as Harrison trades on the jarring mismatch between the poem's structural and metrical features (with eight lines of full iambic pentameter) and its incorporation of dialectal reference, mild taboo language and poignant references to social class. Opening with references to 'Ibsen, Marx and Gide', the second line of the sonnet describes Harrison's father's 'you-stuck-up-bugger looks'; the opening iambic line immediately undercut by colloquial English which (apparently deliberately) fails to scan. The following two lines of reported speech are written in italics, causing a degree of graphological inconsistency with the opening lines, and summarise the views held by Harrison's father regarding his son's reading habits and intellectualisation as a student at Leeds university: '*ah sometimes think you read too many books.*' Harrison's voice replies from line five of the sonnet ('*Good read! I bet!*') and attacks his father's insular worldview, which is entirely parochial and working-class in reference: '*the only score you'd bother with's your darts,/or fucking football...*' This is actually the fourth voice incorporated into the sonnet, with the 'authorial' voice of the poetic 'I' (line one) set alongside Harrison's father's

²⁵⁰ Tony Harrison, 'A Good Read', *Selected Poems* (London: Faber, 2006), p. 141.

voice and that of Harrison in conversation with his father (but not the reader). The other voice, heard from line eleven, is that of Harrison talking to his now deceased father: ‘these poems about you, dad, should make good reads’ and this interleaving of various voices and personae creates a degree of internal fracturing within the otherwise tightly organised (mainly iambic) lines of the poem. To take what one might call a ‘Bakhtinian’ view of the poem, its multivocality or ‘multi-voicedness’²⁵¹ is integral to its masquerade, and it is as a result of the poem’s ‘plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices’(6) that the masquerade element is enabled.

Other elements within the poem conspire to subvert its structural cohesion, and one such feature is the typographical organisation of the sonnet on the page. The reader immediately notices, for instance, the ‘exploded’ appearance of the poem, with two single lines, a couplet, a section which is actually a sestet and a half line (suggesting Hopkins’ half lines from the curtal sonnets), and a lone tercet. Working against the iambic regularity of some of the lines, and the consistently regular rhyme of the whole poem, the typographical disunity of the text suggests internal conflict and a deliberate destabilisation of poetic regularity, whilst the language deployed by Harrison also blurs the supposedly neat boundary between ‘poetic’ speech and dialectal reference. From Ibsen and Marx, the sonnet ‘descends’, as it were, into a deliberately crafted blend of high-art and proletarian reference which creates a cacophony of irreconcilable voices. Kafka

²⁵¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. 30. Further references in text.

and Lear are set alongside '*fucking football*'; 'the Arts' contrasts with images of Beeston, bus rides and urban Leeds; Gide collides with the compound polysyllable 'you-stuck-up-bugger' and the whole sonnet has an air of misrule, or what Bakhtin calls 'profanation; carnivalistic blasphemies, a whole system of carnivalistic debasings and bringings down to earth' (123).

Harrison's poem does indeed seem to mock pretentiousness and pseudo-intellectualism as much as it attacks the lack of cultural sophistication displayed by Harrison's father and in this sense the poem does indeed serve a deflationary, almost didactic purpose; as if signalling the dangers of solipsism and immersion in purely abstract or metaphysical concepts. It might be noted, therefore, that Harrison's form of masquerade, at least on the evidence of this sonnet, seems to be partly satirical in its blending and juxtaposition of voice, character, narrator and linguistic reference, involving as this does 'multi-toned narration, the mixing of high and low, serious and comic [...] wide use of inserted genres [...] parodies on high genres [...] mixing of prosaic and poetic speech, living dialects and jargons' (108). Bakhtin's survey of carnival literature also highlights the 'leading role [...] played by the double-voiced word'(108), or the pun, and this is another key feature of Harrisonian masquerade, with many poems using puns in order to deracinate words from their meanings and throw whole sections of otherwise structurally precise poems into a confused state of comedic and Babel-like disarray. 'A Good Read' itself ends with Harrison's observation 'once I'm writing I can't put you down!'; punning on the idea of reading (hence the title of the poem) but also invoking the idea of 'putting someone down', denying neat closure to the reader of the poem who must then decide for themselves what

meaning to ascribe to this concluding - but not conclusive - image. The final line of the sonnet is also - significantly - 'failed' trochaic pentameter: the omitted tenth syllable perhaps adverting the reader to the deferral of meaning in the terminal image. It becomes clear, then, that Harrison's masquerade is a composite of contending polarities: structural congruity versus irregularity; standard or 'poetic' diction versus dialect and taboo; and unambiguous signifiers sharing the page with puns and other wordplay.

Armitage's approach to masquerade is similar to Harrison's insofar as it employs a similar *modus operandi*, but different in its rather more ludic, or even surreal, tone. Whereas, for instance, Harrison's sonnets are inscribed with a definite sense of inner *agon* or conflict, Armitage sonnets such as 'Defrosting a Chicken' signal different preoccupations: with language, humour, and the concept of the absurd within poetry.²⁵² If Harrison's masquerade is generally focused on real-world or familial issues, then Armitage's poems seem more focused on playful self-referentiality; calling attention to themselves as artefacts and highlighting their constructedness in what might be called a 'postmodern' way. 'Defrosting a Chicken' is a mock-Shakespearean sonnet comprising three (typographically advertised) quatrains and a rhyming couplet - a formal arrangement used by Armitage in several other poems. Unlike Harrison's sonnet, which blends obviously contending formal and non-standard language in order to create dissonance, Armitage's poem contains language which operates within rather less extreme poles. Intermingled within lines which employ a standard English

²⁵² Simon Armitage, 'Defrosting a Chicken', *Tyrannosaurus Rex versus The Corduroy Kid* (London: Faber, 2006), p. 11.

diction which seems quite traditional ('moon-coloured ships of war'; 'the sun's nail/by dusk'), Armitage employs a more informal register composed of colloquialisms and clichés, and yet, despite this difference in poetic register, it should be noted that the net effect is very similar to that achieved by Harrison; with the non-standard language working against the 'high seriousness' of the sonnet form.

The title of the poem suggests a metaphor of some kind and the poem seems to take inebriation as its theme; the poem's unnamed persona prostrate on a foreign beach and either drunk or otherwise incapacitated. Unlike Harrison's sonnet, therefore, the subject matter is rather more comical and certainly not focused on class aspirations or familial matters although, in both poems, there is a similar conflict between the sonnet's traditional content (explorations of love, subjectivity and human emotion) and the imagery, personae and themes explored. Armitage's persona is 'spark out' while onlookers 'on the prom' swarm 'around shrinkwrapped heaps of the *Daily Mail*.' 'Defrosting' on the beach, the reveller's thoughts focus on flies, donkeys, 'a tingle of nerves' and 'refugees' whilst the last line reads 'for supper he ate the sleep from his eyes.' It seems rather too obvious to point out that traditional sonnets do not take as their theme bibulous personae semi-consciously contemplating life, but it certainly seems important that Armitage's sonnet is far more dream-like and open to the reader's interpretation than Harrison's more obviously antagonistic and class-conscious poem. Moving from images of beach and shoreline, the sonnet suggests some form of metaphysical contemplation ('waves were never the tide') which is utterly unlike Harrison's more concrete imagery and down-to-

earth idiolect; a stylistic trait described by Sandie Byrne as ‘pragmatic materialism’²⁵³ or what Sean O’Brien has called Harrison’s ‘commonsense Yorkshire materialism’.²⁵⁴ This is not to suggest that Harrison is not a humorous poet – this is manifestly not the case – or that Armitage does not elsewhere write poems more grounded in common, everyday realities. But there is a clear difference between each poet’s approach to poetry, style and voice which might best be summarised as, in Harrison’s case, Marxist and politically committed and, in the case of Armitage, postmodern, playful and parodic.

Looking now at the emerging form of masquerade which the above sonnets reveal, it seems that, notwithstanding technical and linguistic differences, both poets are using masquerade in a similar way, and to similar ends. Both arrive at the same final position by different means and perhaps for different reasons. First, it is clear that each poet views the sonnet as a stable and reputable poetic form which connotes certain values and expectations. The precise nature of these details will be analysed below but the general assumption seems to be that the sonnet, in particular, offers both poets the opportunity to question and interrogate literary form and, along with it, the values inherent within that form: tradition, bourgeois sentiment, and ‘normality’. Both the Meredithian and Shakespearean models are canonical forms invested with certain values by generations of readers and critics and Harrison and Armitage seem to wish to interrogate the assumptions that underpin them. One obvious site of contention

²⁵³ Sandie Byrne, ‘On Not Being Milton, Marvell, or Gray’, in *Tony Harrison - Loiner* (Oxford: OUP, 1997), p. 61.

²⁵⁴ O’Brien, ‘Tony Harrison: Showing the Working’, in *The Deregulated Muse* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1998), p. 61. O’Brien does not elaborate further as to what his ‘Yorkshire’ tag means.

is language itself and several critics have noted Harrison's antipathy towards bourgeois concepts of order and beauty. For example, Peter Forbes has spoken of 'the ambivalence towards the traditional canon expressed in [Harrison's] work'²⁵⁵ and Christopher Butler also remarks, of Harrison, that 'his work is oppositional [...] since in "any movement towards liberation, it will be necessary to deny the normative authority of the dominant language or literary tradition."²⁵⁶ This would seem to suggest that Harrison's masquerade is focused on the incorporation of 'inelegant' and 'non-poetic' speech into traditional forms as a way of questioning the formal elegance of these poems and, by extension, the socio-literary assumptions which produced them, and which tend, historically, to be middle-class or bourgeois in origin. Blake Morrison remarks that Harrison's poetry 'bears grudges and (socialist) anger' and this is a key feature of his masquerade.²⁵⁷

In Armitage's case, there seems to be less anxiety about social class although he does share with Harrison a desire to unsettle the reader and make them question their assumptions and expectations. He sees protest as a defining aspect of his poetry to the extent that

all poems are a form of protest art. By definition. The fact that you aren't willing to have a right-hand margin or even go to the bottom of the page is a protest in its own right. Whatever you are, you are not a prose writer.

Stubbornly not. Even though they [poets] might go as far as they dare to

²⁵⁵ Peter Forbes, 'In the Canon's Mouth: Tony Harrison and Twentieth-Century Poetry', in Byrne, ed., *Loiner*, p. 197.

²⁵⁶ Byrne, *Loiner*, p. 108; Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry*, p. 7.

²⁵⁷ Blake Morrison, 'The Filial Art' in *Bloodaxe I*, p. 54.

engage or entertain or whatever, they are a dissenting voice because they know they aren't going to appeal to everybody. And if they do appeal to everybody, then they are not doing their job.²⁵⁸

This stance recalls Harrison's own position on the ideological underpinning of his poetry, when he asserts that

when I'm conscious of satisfying the literate, cultured reader of poetry [...] I know that my next temptation is to take away his satisfaction by evoking the ghosts of the inarticulate, and by quoting them in the scale against poetry. I work to give the reader of poetry maximum gratification, but he has to pay for it.²⁵⁹

For Armitage, therefore, the masquerade mode is a way of interrogating assumptions brought by readers to poems: by denying closure, delaying meaning, undermining the traditional themes of the sonnet, and blending conflicting registers and images, he interrogates ideas of literary stability and critiques traditional certitudes. However divergent Harrison and Armitage's styles, uses of language and poetic voices may be, their use of masquerade suggests a common pursuit: of democratisation, liberation and exploration. Their masquerade writing is therefore key to their emancipatory barbarian poetics and its emphasis on freedom of expressive potential, thematic range and

²⁵⁸ Alan Franks, 'Simon Armitage says: 'They're poems because I say they are'', *Times Online*, April 24, 2010, <http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/poetry/article7105170.ace> [accessed 1st May 2011].

²⁵⁹ Haffenden, *Bloodaxe I*, p. 232.

linguistic experimentation, and the irreverent and purposely combative stance of both poets' masquerade invites comparison with Bakhtin's analysis of the carnivalesque world of Rabelais, whose writing is, among many other things, 'opposed to all that is finished and polished, to all pomposity, to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook.'²⁶⁰ Rabelais' work is also, according to Bakhtin, predicated upon the idea of a 'renunciation of many deeply rooted demands of literary taste' (3) and, significantly, 'hostile to all that [is] immortalized and completed' (10). Given Armitage's position regarding poetry as 'protest', and Harrison's desire to create discomfiture in the reader of his poetry, these comments reveal a Bakhtinian, or Rabelaisian, element at work in both poets' verse and one which can be seen in very early collections such as *The Loiners* and *Zoom!*.

²⁶⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 3. Further references in text.

Chapter Two

Masquerade in *The Loiners* and *Zoom!*

This chapter will argue that, notwithstanding obvious thematic and contextual differences, Harrison's debut collection *The Loiners* and Armitage's first published collection *Zoom!* share many important features, such as their incorporation of barbarian and taboo language within conservative forms, and their promotion of comedic and political material as relevant subjects for popular verse. One vital point of contact between the collections is their multi-vocality and their playful attitude towards poetic voice, and I will show how both poets use the performative aspects of language to interrogate lyric norms and traditional poetic registers as part of their exploration of social class and identity. Separated by nearly twenty years, these two first collections interrelate and talk to one another in a variety of important ways, providing powerful evidence of the inheritance outlined by Armitage in the opening chapter: an inheritance which centres on the wilful (mis)appropriation of poetic form and the celebration of the two poets' trademark sub-literary barbaric idiom. Both collections are therefore important early exemplifications of the masquerade mode, and establish the idiomatic, linguistic, thematic and political reference points of both poets' work: providing a conceptual base from which to trace the gradual development of their masquerade poetics and its sustained interrogation of form, diction, and the idea of a single 'appropriate' idiom for lyric poetry.

The Loiners is a major post-War British poetry collection, awarded the 1972 Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize and placed first in the *Selected Poems*. It outlines the characteristic Harrisonian reference points of class, language, human sexuality and relationships, religion, colonialism, and the English literary heritage, or canon. Although filtered through the dialect of the Loiners themselves and therefore marked by a pronounced (and comedic) Yorkshire idiom or northern dialect, the ideas and arguments which interest Harrison are clearly universal and international, as well as regional or parochial. As Romana Huk argues, *The Loiners* is a ‘complicated, polycentric sequence’, internationalist in scope and inspiration, and fuelled by ‘the internationalist environment at Leeds’ in the 1960s.¹ Harrison’s Loiners, far from being merely northern stereotypes or comically invoked Yorkshire characters, instead articulate his anger regarding ‘the horrors of imperialism’ (whose cultural legacy led to his production of *Aikin Mata* in Nigeria), his celebration of human intimacy in the face of Cold War repression and religious opprobrium, and his belief in the relevance and vitality of language often considered un-literary and uncivilised.² This language, which Harrison ironically brands barbaric (in the ‘Them & [uz]’ sonnets) is used not simply to evoke the ex-pat insouciance of the White Queen and PWD Man or, even less, to create comedy at the expense of northern speakers. Instead, it serves a far more subversive and politically charged purpose, as part of Harrison’s project to integrate ‘non-standard’ or demotic language into historically validated and traditional forms in order to question their cultural prominence and use as bourgeois artefacts, recalling

¹ Romana Huk, ‘Tony Harrison, *The Loiners*, and the ‘Leeds Renaissance’’, in *Bloodaxe I*, p. 80.

² *Ibid.*

Bakhtin's analysis of carnivalized literature and its reliance on subversive and decentring discourse. Harrison's investigation of form is, then, highly political and deliberate, with language used to question literary history and its elision of working-class speakers: key concerns of his masquerade, and a sustained leitmotif across his many collections.

Harrison's first collection is a multifaceted and wide-ranging text which focuses on a range of Loiners: 'citizens of Leeds, expats, nameless travellers [...] internal aliens within insecure communities clotted together by conformity against the threat of outside.'³ Although self-evidently northern characters, these Loiners defy the presumption of many critical commentaries on Harrison by being at once natives of Leeds and Yorkshire, but also colonial subjects, victims of Cold War repression, semi-caricatured sexual *bon-viveurs* and Harrison himself who, in poems such as 'Newcastle is Peru' and 'Durham' records his responses to life in the United Kingdom 'back near to where I started from' after peregrinations in Nigeria and Prague.⁴ Harrison's project in *The Loiners* is clearly internationalist in scope and reflects his own experiences teaching English in Nigeria ('where he had begun work on the poetry to be published as *The Loiners*') before moving to Prague where he taught at Charles University.⁵ The collection is comprised of three phases or movements, with the first five poems focusing on a range of Loiner figures, again including a young Harrison, before the intrusion of the White Queen and PWD man in the second section, and poems in which Harrison speaks mainly *in propria persona* in the third. Looked

³ Sandie Byrne, *H, v. & O* (MUP, 1998), p. 163.

⁴ Tony Harrison, 'Newcastle is Peru' in *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 63.

⁵ Rosemary Burton, 'Tony Harrison: An Introduction', in *Bloodaxe I*, p. 19.

at from a Bakhtinian perspective, the collection is decidedly multivocal and its ‘multi-voicedness’ looks forward to Armitage’s *Zoom!* and its myriad northern, proletarian characters.⁶

‘Ginger’s Friday’ records the sexual awakening of a young man whose confessions of voyeurism to a local priest include details of stolen glimpses of ‘Mrs Daley, all-bare on her knees’, speculative onanism, and experiments with prophylactics.⁷ Written in alternately-rhymed iambic lines, the poem blends quotidian or demotic reference, snatches of broken Latin and formal, Standard English with the opening stanza forming a Meredithian sonnet in its own right, followed by a twelve-line stanza possibly intended as a foreshortened Shakespearean. The poem’s blending of styles and registers is mirrored by its multivocality and shifting use of perspective, with an unnamed persona narrating events in a formal English which draws on liturgical imagery, Ginger’s reported confession (rendered as ‘grateful, anonymous, he catalogued his sin’), the priest’s ‘Remember me to Mrs Kelly, John’ and the intertextual intrusions of ‘Aves’, ‘paternosters’ and ‘peccata’. Alongside the formalised expressiveness of these images and fragments of dialogue, Harrison juxtaposes a series of references to ‘great vats/at *Sunny Sunglow’s*’, ‘shell-/shocked feelers’ and the candid but deliberately infantilised description of Ginger’s sinful self-abuse:

he’d fiddled with his thing until it hurt
and spurted sticky stuff onto the floor.

⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. 30.

⁷ ‘Ginger’s Friday’, *SP*, p. 15.

These colloquial and demotic intrusions serve a subversive function: undermining the formal constraint and linguistic conservatism of the sonnet with the comical alliteration of ‘spurred sticky stuff’ and the juvenile specificity of ‘stolen postcards and allotment peas.’ Indeed, the blending of elevated diction (‘vestments’, ‘catalogued’, ‘intones’) and more pragmatic language (‘his dad’s mauve packet of balloons’) denies the symmetrical poise of the sonnet and suggests an impatience with form and the constraints of traditional poetics, resulting in an ironic, or irreverent, invocation of Meredith’s prototype. The shift in register from Standard English to demotic also reminds the reader of Harrison’s Classics background, and his familiarity with Latin and Greek, but this is not the most vital point, which is that, as a Classical scholar, Harrison is acutely aware of the different status of the non-standard language of the *agora* in the ancient world, and its association with the *dēmos*, or ‘people’ but also the *dēmotēs*, or ‘commoners’. His development of the demotic mode is therefore ironically self-aware and also politically provocative, evoking as it does the language of the commoner or plebeian within the poised form of the extended lyric: the essence of barbarian poetics and masquerade. The resulting patois is developed throughout the rest of the collection, where various, more provocative Loiners extend Harrison’s blending of style and deploy increasingly graphic, demotic and barbaric language - as though Harrison were deliberately invoking those ‘ghosts of the inarticulate’ (later to be heard in the *Eloquence* cycle) whose rebarbative, frequently dialectal and aggressive language seems to oppose the bourgeois conception of art as a quasi-sacred sphere.⁸ The sexual references

⁸ See John Haffenden, ‘Interview with Tony Harrison’, in *Bloodaxe I*, p. 232

relevant to the development of the narrative also anchor the text within the post-War world of these Loiners, whose lives, so potentially tragic, are enriched or made more bearable by the promise of sexual gratification: a theme taken up by ‘Allotments’ with its ‘hot trickles in the knickers’, ‘Doodlebugs’ (‘cunt as coastline’) and ‘Durham’, where sexual contact opposes ‘Church and State’ and other manifestations of ‘the sick,/ sick body politic’. The prevalence of sexual reference in the collection may in fact be seen as a complement to the blending of linguistic registers outlined above, and serves a similarly barbaric purpose: bringing taboo subjects into composed lyric forms. ‘The robust sensuality of the poems bypasses puritan prudery towards sex’,⁹ as Jonathan Barker has commented, and the ejaculatory image described in ‘Ginger’s Friday’ is reprised in the figures of Peanuts Joe (‘the vicar’s bogey against wankers’ doom)¹⁰ and the PWD man, who declares his preference for ‘living to all your Heavens like a woman to a wank.’¹¹

‘The Pocket Wars of Peanuts Joe’ is the third poem in *The Loiners* and the third to feature a Loiner-as-loner.¹² In his exploration and deliberate foregrounding of isolated or extravagant figures, Harrison once again seems to be questioning the erasure of the downtrodden from the historical record (recalling ‘the tongueless man gets his land took’ from ‘National Trust’)¹³ and a similar tendency will be seen in Armitage’s *Zoom!*, where isolated, misfit characters litter the collection and suggest a similar determination to validate the voices of the dispossessed or

⁹ Jonathan Barker, ‘Peru, Leeds, Florida and Keats’ in *Bloodaxe I*, p. 48.

¹⁰ ‘The Pocket Wars of Peanuts Joe’, *SP*, pp. 16-7.

¹¹ ‘The Death of the PWD Man’, *SP*, p. 46.

¹² cf. Sandie Byrne’s comment that ‘as well as ‘loins’, [*Loiners*] suggests ‘loner’, significantly leaving a separate ‘I’ in Byrne, *H, v. & O*, p. 163.

¹³ *SP*, p. 121.

socially maladjusted. Peanuts Joe himself is a tragi-comic social pariah whose exuberant and public masturbation earns him a part-revered, part-reviled reputation. ‘His sad name/was bandied as a dirty backstreet Hess’, although references to ‘poor old sport’ in the poem’s epigraph and ‘poor Penis’ in the poem suggest Joe to be something of a local legend, a notoriety reinforced by the narrator’s reference to ‘the cock/that could gush Hiroshimas’ and the description of Joe’s ‘mitred bishop’ as ‘no kid’s toy’ (an image which recalls Saint Peter’s ‘mitred locks’ in *Lycidas*). Again composed of alternately rhymed lines of iambic pentameter, the poem records Joe’s tragic demise ‘gutted like a fish/on army issue blades’, having incurred the wrath of the local townspeople during a VD Day street party. The poem is an elegy and a eulogy of sorts, defending Joe’s reputation as it explains the opprobrium he generated among the ‘disabled veteran’ and ARP tobacconist (‘two coppers came [...] marched poor Penis off’) and, although the poem goes some way towards immortalising Joe, it does so by avoiding sentimentality or stock elegiac phraseology, instead adopting a hybridised register similar to that employed in ‘Ginger’s Friday’. Intertextual interpolations include references to popular song (‘*The Boers/Have Got My Daddy* and *The Veteran’s Song*’), graffiti (‘YANK GO HOME’) and the national anthem, whilst a range of sexual images are deployed quite out of place in a traditional elegy, but evocative and apposite in a poem which seeks ideological combat at the level of language and theme: ‘Joe’s ack-ack *ejac-/ulatio*’; ‘masturbator’; ‘wankers’ doom’. Like ‘Ginger’s Friday’ then, ‘Peanuts Joe’ is composed of a variety of incongruous and demotic images which evoke the world of post-War Leeds whilst interrogating traditional, canonical forms. This critique of form is also comedic, with the punning title of the poem explained in

the opening line ('the *-nuts* bit really *-nis*') and a series of prurient euphemisms such as 'fluted rifling' and 'mitred bishop' working against the solemnity, gravitas and pathos of the elegy tradition. Marrying contending registers and undermining conservative form with humour, 'Peanuts Joe' recalls the 'carnivalized' literature of Rabelais and Bakhtin's identification of mockery at the heart of carnival: an anti-authoritarian impulse vital also to Harrison's masquerade. As Bakhtin declares: 'carnivalistic laughter [...] is directed toward something higher – toward a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders'¹⁴ and this animus towards authority is encapsulated in the poem's choice of protagonist ('the vicar's bogey') and by its refusal to submit to the expectations of elegiac response - just as 'Ginger's Friday' subverts the sonnet tradition by invading the Meredithian with barbaric language and taboo reference. As will be seen, a similar denial of literary precedent animates Armitage's poems in *Zoom!*, where subverted sonnets and Bakhtinian monologues work against the reader's expectations of linguistic and thematic coherence.

'Doodlebugs' develops the sexual themes explored in the opening poems and proposes a similarly antagonistic response to traditional form. A divided or mutilated Meredithian of two octaves, the poem puns on its own title in its exploration of various schoolboy doodles laden with Freudian and erotic potential whilst also invoking the V1 German rockets used against British targets during the Second World War. Latinate references to a 'doodled prepuce', 'a lop-eared dachshund with a pubis nose' and 'stiff phalluses' in the opening

¹⁴ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 127.

stanza are matched by the more graphic ‘groins’, ‘fannies’ and ‘cunt’ in the second and this blending of elevated and demotic diction, propelled by the ironic iambic metre of the lines, subverts the sonnet and denies formulaic dénouement. In the place of the Meredithian sonnet’s Standard English and romantically charged narrative, ‘Doodlebugs’ explores adolescent sexual prurience through a medley of images which invade the sonnet’s controlled and linguistically conservative space and recall the riot of Bakhtinian carnival. Juxtaposing formal polysyllables such as ‘umbilicus’ ‘mustachios’, and more quotidian references to breasts, bosoms and ‘vaginas [as] psis’, the sonnet blurs the boundary between traditional adherence to formal doctrine (especially formal language) and interrogation of bourgeois archetypes. This proto-anarchy is offset, to a degree, by regular rhyme, line count, and iamb, although one senses that these features are retained solely to heighten the effects created by invoking demotic and taboo reference elsewhere. In much the same way as ‘Ginger’s Friday’ and ‘Peanuts Joe’, ‘Doodlebugs’ seems poised between two contending styles or impulses: anarchic versus reactionary; traditional versus irreverent, and these internal conflicts recall the post-War world of Harrison’s Loiners, their fractured lives, and their ambivalent responses to tradition, authority and social norms.

Extending, and developing, the sexual exploration of the opening poems and also their linguistic *bricolage*, ‘The White Queen’ is the focal text of *The Loiners* and introduces an extravagant, ex-pat ‘grotesque’¹⁵ known only by the eponymous title of the poem and defined largely by a predatory and racist

¹⁵ Byrne, *H, v. & O*, p. 9.

homoeroticism which centers on ‘boys the blackness of a two-day bruise.’¹⁶ The dramatic monologue is broken into various sections and culminates in the mock epigrams of ‘*from The Zeg-Zeg Postcards*’ although the style is consistent throughout, consisting mainly of impassioned self-dramatisation and a sexually charged confessional intimacy (‘begging for pure sex’) which suggests the pathos of the ‘pathetic, half-blind and half-pissed’ pederast cruising for male partners in ‘sub-Saharan scrub.’ Sections one and two (‘*Satyrae*’ and ‘*The Railroad Heroides*’) are composed of incongruous heroic couplets which compete on the linguistic plane with a variegated vernacular incorporating both elevated Greco-Roman reference (Virgil’s homosexual shepherd Corydon is mentioned *en passant*), striking images such as ‘like an oiled (slow motion) racehorse at its peak’, deflationary sexual references to Vaseline or ‘a big, brute/Negro in a tight, white cowboy suit’ and also snatches of local African speech: ‘*One masta want/one boy - one boy for bed*’. The effect of this verbal montage and constant switch from one register or voice to another is similar to that achieved in the opening poems, where a dramatic Bakhtinian charge is delivered by the deliberate blending of images, words and phrases, including fragments of reported speech, allusions to Pascal and the *Pensées*, plus scraps of French, Latin and German (‘*Boris, ich bin frei...und friere*’). As a Loiner, the White Queen’s progress is towards Leeds City Station, a destination reached by the close of section two, where ‘a black man sweeps/cartons and papers into tidy heaps’, but unlike the PWD man who returns to Leeds to die, the Queen’s return heralds further explorations of defiant and comedic homosexual fantasy and section five (‘*from The Zeg-Zeg Postcards*’) is the apotheosis of the Queen as

¹⁶ ‘The White Queen’, *Satyrae, SP*, pp. 21-37.

sexual adventurer: 'let me be the Gambia/in your Senegal.' Throughout the White Queen suite, Harrison's focus is on sexual revelation and linguistic bravura, with shocking and sometimes graphic reference deliberately pitted against the formal constraints of the iambic line and its regular rhyme. This barbaric subversion of traditional form prepares the reader for the 'Curtain Sonnets' towards the end of the collection, where Harrison intensifies the provocative marriage of contending registers and incongruous images in order to interrogate the sonnet form - prefiguring the *Eloquence* cycle and also Armitage's renegotiations of the sonnet's expressive potential in *Matches*.

'*Guava Libre*',¹⁷ addressed to Jane Fonda and composed in Leningrad, 'yokes together images of sex, violence, and disease' in order, ironically, to thank 'the donor for the gift of guavas in rum.'¹⁸ More importantly, the poem constitutes a powerful assault on the sonnet tradition and the Standard English idiom which defines it as it 'yokes together' Latinate polysyllables, Greek mythological reference and a range of allusions - gynaecological, esoteric - to the vagina. Indeed, given the centrality of the sonnet to the canonical tradition, its graceful formal organisation over fourteen lines of iambic feet, and its traditional thematic concerns, Harrison's poem seems as much about subverting the symmetry of the form as about recognizing Fonda's generosity. T. W. H. Crosland, a passionate defender of the sonnet whose *The English Sonnet* defines 'the sonnet law',¹⁹ asserts that 'the true and almost exclusive subject of sonnet

¹⁷ Curtain Sonnets, 'Guava Libre', *SP*, p. 55.

¹⁸ N. S. Thompson, 'Book Ends: Public and Private in Tony Harrison's Poetry', in *Tony Harrison: Loiner*, ed. Sandie Byrne (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 120.

¹⁹ T. W. H. Crosland, *The English Sonnet* (London: Martin Secker Ltd, 1917), reprinted edition (Milton Keynes: Hesperides press, 2008), p. 105. Further references in text.

content is the passion of love' (110) and, importantly for Harrison's poem, Crosland also defines the type of language to be employed in sonnet writing. His brevity is matched only by his prescriptivism: there is to be no language with 'a vulgar, comic or burlesque meaning' (97). Although dated, Crosland's view of the sonnet is indicative of many years of bourgeois control of canonical discourse and this desire to limit or circumscribe the poet's use of inherited form is challenged by Harrison as he negotiates the traditional impedimenta of the sonnet and creatively subverts its theme and language, producing a barbaric text driven by a simultaneous adherence to, and rejection of, normative rules and stylistic precepts. '*Guava libre*' proceeds by analogy, with Harrison suggesting - suggestively - various analogues of the 'guavas soaked in Cuban rum' given to him by Fonda. His first comparison, to 'Gold Coast clitoridectomies', is a violent and unconventional image which evokes Fonda's feminism and her stance against female genital mutilation, whilst also rejecting Crosland's 'poetic' diction, as outlined above. Subsequent images in the opening quatrain, of 'labia minora in formaldehyde', Monroe's mouth, or 'vulva mummified' all defy the traditional thematic concerns of the sonnet and maintain *The Loiners*' focus on the body, extending the collection's pragmatic materialism and its explicit focus on genitalia (Ginger's 'thing', Joe's penis, the PWD Man's preference for 'furry little groins').²⁰

Rather than the commonplace euphemism of traditional sonnetry, Harrison's poem adopts a conversational idiom characterised by direct and unmediated expression, along with moments of extreme levity created by such *double*

²⁰ 'The Songs of the PWD Man', *SP*, p. 42.

entendre as ‘fished up by a dyke’ and ‘Orpheus going down again’. This unorthodox and sexually suggestive punning questions the unified voice of traditional sonnets, whilst also rejecting Crosland’s deterministic view of sonnet composition and his insistence that ‘the subject matter of a sonnet must be emotional or reflective, or both.’²¹ The ejaculatory image generated by ‘the honeyed yoni of Eurydice’ leads to the comical final line, which appears almost as an afterthought and, one might argue, thirteen lines too late: ‘thanks for the guavas soaked in Cuban rum.’ Typographically, the poem cannot be said to adhere to any pre-existing sonnet structure, with two quatrains followed by four single lines and one couplet, whilst the irreverent iambic rhythm heightens the sense of studied anarchy, rather than restoring order or control. ‘*Guava libre*’ therefore fulfils two main functions: simultaneously recording public thanks for a novel gift, and challenging *a priori* expectations about ‘appropriate’ sonnet themes and language. Its demotic, almost sub-literary idiom forces a reconfiguration of sonnet discourse as it demonstrates the comical effects of incorporating seemingly non-poetic elements into an anthologised form, and the sonnet’s position towards the end of the collection suggests a deliberately sustained comedic intent - an important characteristic of Harrison’s verse and one which invites comparison with Armitage’s widespread use of humour, verbal play and anarchic subject matter. It must not be thought, however, that Harrison’s aims are merely comical, as his interrogation of closed form in this sonnet signals a more widespread renegotiation of the politics of form across his work, as part of which humour and wordplay are deployed in order to question traditional or conservative suppositions regarding form and content. In this

²¹ Crosland, p. 93.

sense, the constant dialectical interplay between formal constraint and thematic or linguistic playfulness in his work constitutes a multifaceted critique of the politics of creativity in traditional lyric, and this seems to me the essence of the inheritance invoked by Armitage in the opening chapter.

Armitage's *Zoom!* (1989) is his first collection and, like *The Loiners*, serves as a crucial reference point for his concerns as a poet. As eclectic and multivocal as Harrison's text, *Zoom!* foregrounds language itself as a legitimate subject of poetry, with a variety of spoken voices undermining traditional verse forms and contributing to the playful, parodic qualities of the collection as a whole. That said, and although *Zoom!* is a vast compendium of poetic subject matter and contending voices, there is relatively little formal experimentation in the collection. Apart from some proto-Meredithian sonnets and Duffy-esque dramatic monologues, the central poetic form employed - and undermined - is the lyric, with many poems questioning 'the generic authenticity of lyric or confessional poetry'²² and the supposition that the post-Romantic lyric is defined by 'sincerity, intimacy and the direct expression of emotion and feeling'²³ or 'translucent, intensely felt, individual utterance.'²⁴ The majority of the poems in *Zoom!* may, accordingly, be called invaded or barbaric lyrics, insofar as they recall Harrison's use of linguistic dissonance and the demotic mode in *The Loiners*, and most seem to erase, or supplant, Armitage's own voice in favour of a variety of personae who speak in his place. This emphasis on ambiguous utterance contrasts sharply with Harrison's many personal poems written *in*

²² Ian Gregson, *Simon Armitage* (London: Salt, 2011), pp. 34-5.

²³ Scott Brewster, *Lyric* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 12.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

propria persona in *The Loiners* although ‘The White Queen’ and PWD Man poems offer a comparable model of poetic ventriloquism and playfulness with the lyric mode. ‘Snow Joke’²⁵ subjects the lyric to considerable interrogation, taking the form of an extended narrative joke or piece of comedic *Schadenfreude* as part of which puns, dark humour and the dialogic patter of the stand-up comedian are deployed in order to tell a public house yarn: ‘they fought in the pub over hot toddies/as to who was to take the most credit.’ The poem opens by establishing spatial and topographical boundaries: ‘heard the one about the guy from Heaton Mersey?’, before references to Hyde, Newton-le-Willows and the Werneth prep school in Oldham. The subject, or victim, of the narrative is a man whose snow-bound car is discovered after he

snubbed

the police warning light and tried to finesse

the last six miles of moorland blizzard

only to be ‘stuck within minutes.’ Finally succumbing to the elements, he is found ‘slumped against the steering wheel/with VOLVO printed backwards in his frozen brow’ and later unearthed by Marsden locals who hear the car’s horn moaning ‘like an alarm clock under an eiderdown.’ Sharing Harrison’s predilection for ironic or subversive comedy, Armitage’s poem uses the pun of the title in order to deny elegiac closure, whilst further humour is generated by Armitage’s locals and their petty dispute following the narrative’s macabre

²⁵ *Zoom!* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1989), p. 9.

dénouement. Ian Gregson comments on the ‘bad pun’²⁶ of the title and on the poem’s ‘anti-poetic demeanour’,²⁷ suggesting an impatience with the obviously ludic edge to the writing, although the most striking feature of the poem is surely its deliberate use of demotic, as opposed to transcendental and numinous language, and the implied impatience with the expressive range of traditional lyric response which this signals. Armitage’s barbarian language, like Harrison’s, is therefore used not merely to generate humour and levity but to comment sardonically on the creative limitations implied by traditional, or mainstream, poetics - the source of an important debate within both poets’ work.

In common with Harrison’s *Loiners* poems, many of the poems in *Zoom!* use humour, wordplay, idiomatic expression, dialect and sexual reference in their exploration of character and subversion of poetic form, and Armitage is particularly aware of the unsettling potential of the pun. Like Harrison, he seems to invoke paronomasia in order to extend the reader’s sense of the creative potential of language, often using the double-meaning or protean qualities of particular words and expressions in poems which are otherwise unequivocal and unambiguous, as in ‘Ten Pence Story’, whose title suggests both a narrative about a ten pence piece and a cheap or throwaway narrative worth only a trifling amount. In the poem, Armitage’s puns multiply as the coin tells its life story:

half eclipsed by an oxidized tuppence
which *impressed* me with its green circumference.

²⁶ Gregson, p. 18.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

When they fished me out I *made* a few phone calls,
 [...] I *slotted in* well, but all that vending
 blunted my edges and *did my head in*²⁸

and across the collection scores of puns subvert lyrical solemnity and suggest both an Audenesque love of wordplay and a Harrisonian desire to deny words' ultimate or total signficatory power, as in the brilliantly evocative 'Dykes', which puns on the *double entendre* of the poem's title (the poem *is* a Sapphic evocation of the erotic pull of lesbianism) whilst also evoking irrigation schemes and 'coastal reclamation in the Netherlands.'²⁹ 'Dykes' addresses a range of socio-sexual topics including lesbian sexuality and adolescent relationships, employing a comical register similar to that used by Harrison in his celebration of Peanuts Joe. Attracted to an unnamed female classmate, the poem's male narrator reveals 'our fingers touched near Lelystad':

we were poring over plans
 [...] and from there she *took the upper hand*. Later I discovered
 she was only pointing to an overflow culvert

and here, the pun on 'taking the upper hand' suggests a range of positions: from the shock of sudden intimacy and the narrator's gauche attempts at bravado, to female sexual assertiveness and playful flirtation. The pun also prefigures the

²⁸ Simon Armitage, 'Ten Pence Story', *Zoom!*, pp. 64-5. Italics mine.

²⁹ Simon Armitage, 'Dykes', *Zoom!*, p. 43.

later references to the poem's three lesbians who 'plugged each other with their fingers' and comments ironically on the narrator's admission that 'her stories *held no water*'; itself doubly evocative in its combination of cliché (the pun an idiom for untruthfulness) and metaphor, given the dykes of the title and the frequent references to water, culverts and 'sickly sweet secretions' elsewhere in the poem. 'Dykes' is also significant because of its evocation of geographical and cartographic space; an early indication of Armitage's later 'ecological awareness' in collections such as *Moon Country*, *Xanadu* and *CloudCuckooLand*, and matched by Harrison's evocations of Beeston in *v.* and his precise descriptions of Prague, Durham and Newcastle in *The Loiners*.³⁰

Zoom! also contains a trio of dramatic monologues which blend comical reference, verbal humour, dialect and evocations of northern settings and which are reminiscent of Harrison's *Loiners* poems and later collections such as *Eloquence*. Like Harrison's White Queen and PWD Man, Armitage's narrators are male, unnamed, and speak using what might be termed a pastiche of northern or dialectal English which relies heavily for its effects upon comic timing, idiom and taboo - bringing to mind Harrison's profane personae and their demotic expression. 'All Beer and Skittles'³¹ opens with its narrator declaring 'strictly speaking, the facts are dimmer/than a NAAFI candle', using the narratologically arresting *in media res* technique also used by Harrison to open 'Peanuts Joe' and 'The White Queen'. The story revolves around the narrator's resentment at the ironically named Gideon, son of a builder with 'a hair up his arse/at the best of

³⁰ Gregson, p. xv.

³¹ Simon Armitage, 'All Beer and Skittles', *Zoom!*, pp. 16-18.

times' who entrusts to the narrator the completion of a minor building project involving plumbing a toilet and lagging 'the main tank'. The poem is pseudo-anecdotal and reads like a bar story, with frequent appeals to the audience's attention through the use of verbal discourse markers such as 'anyhow, he was gone that weekend', 'after a bacon sandwich and a squint at the paper', 'the rest is history', and comically invoked cliché and idiom: 'chewing the cud'; 'sodding this for a game of soldiers' (ironic, given the NAAFI reference and the narrator's subsequent 'stint/of National Service'); 'a piece of piss'. The narrator also deploys several clichéd similes such as 'dripping/like a barmaid's apron' and 'as dry as a Wesleyan wedding' and the overall tone of the poem is conversational, idiomatic and dramatic - with the narrator constantly at pains to dramatise himself and gain his audience's approval. In this sense the poem is clearly intended as a parody of the dramatic monologue, with comical asides and anti-rhetorical language such as 'not a full shilling', 'the Twinflush De Luxe' and 'eating shit', and the poem certainly undermines the lyric poise of the monologue by incorporating demotic language, taboo and ludic images such as 'as long as his *arm*', 'a poor *fist* of it' and 'as a *footnote*', all of which contribute to the overall levity of the poem and suggest the narrator's role as debunker of rhetorical seriousness: recurring features of Armitage's masquerade. Although perhaps not intended as a serious critique of capitalism, the poem also reinforces several anti-capitalist stereotypes such as nepotism and the exploitation of underpaid workers, although the poem is ultimately comedic, with the narrator clearly envisioned as a northern caricature in the same mould as the PWD Man, with his similarly striking, deflationary language and bold use of metaphor:

‘Death, piss off, you shaggy dog.’³² This is not to suggest that Armitage’s poem is solely caricature: rather, the poem emerges as an artful deconstruction of the lyric and its pretensions to self-dramatisation, with the narrator’s comical idiolect a rejoinder to the traditional lyric voice and its studied mannerism, and the adoption of the dramatic monologue an interrogation of the idea of the lyric as a vehicle for the unified self, or what Northrop Frye has termed ‘the individual communing with himself [sic].’³³ ‘All Beer and Skittles’ may be interpreted therefore as a critique of the lyric tradition and the post-Romantic association of the lyric self with a speaker who presents this ‘self’ through ‘a unique intensification of literary language *distinct from everyday experience*.’³⁴ Using a non-standard and comical dialect designed to question the linguistic conservatism of the lyric mode, Armitage’s poem invites comparison with Harrison’s monologues, which also enter into debate with the lyric tradition and its normative Standard English voice.

‘Bus Talk’ extends Armitage’s use of barbarian and non-standard language and reinforces the comedy of the collection as a whole. Again opening *in media res*, the poem’s narrator might plausibly be read as identical to the figure in the previous poem, although Armitage seems to be aiming at the (re)presentation of a range of ‘types’ or characters whose earthy and pragmatic style of speech identifies them as working-class narrators whose voices are rarely heard in ‘serious’ verse: again suggesting a shared interest with Harrison, whose ‘ghosts of the inarticulate’ inhabit *The Loiners* as vocal reminders of the speech patterns

³² Tony Harrison, ‘The Death of the PWD Man’, *SP*, p. 48.

³³ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 250, in Brewster, *Lyric*, p. 31.

³⁴ Brewster, p. 6. Italics mine.

and experiential realities of everyday life. As in the previous poem, Armitage's narrator is a natural raconteur with the delivery of a stand-up comedian: 'I said, listen, mate'; 'don't you worry, pal'; 'with my tackle hanging out'. Employing the same non-standard and effectively a-, or un-poetic, vernacular of Harrison's personae, the appositely named 'Mr Argot' (slang, colloquial language) outlines a series of grievances against a fictitious insurance company in the unvarnished language or 'bus talk' of the working-class commuter. The imagery is particularly evocative, including references to 'my tackle hanging out and half the world there watching' and 'like a tent/with half the pegs pulled out', whilst the constant appeals to the narrator's anonymous interlocutor ('how the hell'; 'I said listen, mate'; 'I mean') create a sense of linguistic verisimilitude which recalls Labov's structure of oral narrative: including an abstract summarising the narrative, a plot complication, and a coda: 'if that house hasn't dropped a good two inches.' Once again, it is the language of the poem which is centre-stage, rather than the narrator - however compelling and humorous. Indeed, it seems from the evidence of both these poems that Armitage wishes to subvert the register of the traditional dramatic monologue and that this politicisation of diction and form might well be evidence of the Harrison-Hughes 'inheritance' suggested above.

Completing the suite of subverted monologues is 'Very Simply Topping Up the Brake Fluid', a comic tour-de-force set in a garage, featuring a stock misogynist mechanic and deploying a range of incongruous images drawn from the world of motor engineering: 'universal brake-fluid', 'that bloody alternator', 'clutch reservoir'. Again beginning *in media res* and exploring a sub-poetic vernacular

of subject-specific terminology including screwdrivers and float-chambers, this poem extends the barbarian language of the previous poems and uses an unfiltered dialect to infiltrate, and subvert, the lyric voice. The narrator's 'spoken' English is characteristically unpretentious and captures the energy of the busy garage, without any obvious recourse to metaphor or figurative language: in fact, the poem reads almost as a transcript of verbatim shop talk without any attempt to 'poeticise' the garage owner's sexist commentary: 'if you want/us again we're in the book. Tell your husband.' What unites these three monologues is therefore linguistic irreverence, ironic humour and a Bakhtinian celebration of multi-voicedness - all features of Harrison's masquerade, however different Harrison's personae and their individual contexts and voices.

Two further lyric styles investigated in *Zoom!* are the sonnet and the love lyric, with several poems such as 'November' and 'Home on the Range' featuring couples at various stages of their relationships and dealing with a crisis or epiphany of some sort. 'Bempton', set in the East Riding village of the same name, is typical of Armitage's deconstruction of the traditional motifs of the love poem, written in an archly cynical and deflationary style which incorporates unconventional imagery such as 'dead grass', 'Pooh sticks/and a plastic clipper' and 'a Hillman Imp, a roof rack', whilst the end of the poem is particularly interesting on account of its postmodern self-awareness:

a bridge. A tree
gone septic where we gouged
our initials.

That old chestnut.

Here, the lovers' initials carved lovingly in oak become a form of eco-desecration, with the adjective 'septic' condemning their romantic vandalism, and the pun on 'chestnut' suggesting the commonplace nature of the act itself. Instead of a lyric celebration of young love, Armitage's poem offers deflationary critique, enhanced by the connotations of the poem's title: Bempton is a provincial village known for its sea cliffs and wildlife rather than as an obviously romantic destination. In poems such as 'Phenomenology' and 'Poem', Armitage also targets the sonnet and seeks to renegotiate its range of reference by incorporating taboo language and unorthodox images which unsettle the finely tuned Meredithian form. In the four unrhymed quatrains of 'Phenomenology', Armitage reprises the voice of the angry young man, here addressing a similarly anonymous (presumably female) figure, whilst the poem's title seems deliberately ironic, with the narrator offering a critique of the philosophical enquiry into consciousness and existence by deliberately adopting a confrontational tone composed of concrete and down-to-earth imagery: 'Harold Garfinkel can go fuck himself.' Garfinkel, an American sociology professor, perhaps represents 'ivory tower' academia to the narrator, whose language throughout the sonnet is grounded in the pragmatic and material, as opposed to the esoteric or metaphysical: 'this is a ten pound note'; 'the tyres burst the puddles'; the 'rain spattered quarter-light'. That said, there are moments of existential enquiry captured in such lines as

the lamplight

spills like a moment from the past: only
to settle backwards, become distant and
still further distant in the long darkness

although the references to car journeys, road tunnels and ‘the echo of/the engine’ anchor the poem in a far more quotidian world, composed undoubtedly of angst concerning the nature of phenomenological truth, but focused nonetheless on the mundane comforts of everyday reality. The references to Tom Courtenay and Billy Liar (two ‘versions’ of the same person: one actor, one fictional character), as well as the punning ‘when the sun comes up tomorrow/it will dawn on us’ also suggest that the narrator is far more phenomenologically aware than he might suggest: certainly aware of the importance of language in forming human consciousness and in human responses to phenomena more generally. Overall, therefore, ‘Phenomenology’ blends philosophical enquiry and a somewhat contrived presentation of urban, or even working class, materialism in order to highlight the difference between appearance and reality, whilst the sonnet’s imagery and playful language suggest an interrogation of the supposed inviolability of the sonnet form which is also seen in the O’Hara-inspired ‘Poem’.

‘Poem’ opens intertextually: ‘Frank O’Hara was open on the desk’, and Armitage’s stylistic indebtedness to Americans such as O’Hara, Kees and, to a lesser but notable degree, e. e. cummings, is much in evidence across his various collections; a point addressed further in chapter three. Composed of unrhymed quatrains and narrated by another unnamed male voice, the poem seems to

explore death and grieving in a style which recalls O'Hara's urban ethic of concrete description and emotional neutrality, heard in the narrator's references to the phone directory, his Sony Walkman, Astrud Gilberto and the band Talking Heads. The poem's title is one used frequently by O'Hara and seems partly a homage to the New York School and partly chosen for its lack of descriptive or connotative potential; indeed, nothing in the poem's opening two verses would suggest the impulse underlying its composition or the emotionally charged dénouement reached only in the final four lines:

'I
 was just about to mention the football
 when [Jim] said 'Look, will you help me clear her
 wardrobe out?' I said 'Sure Jim, anything.'

The narrator's laconic, or perhaps empathic, response typifies the O'Haran qualities of the sonnet as a whole: its appeal to intimacy ('Nick was out, Joey was engaged'); its incorporation of the everyday and ephemeral ('it was only half ten but what the hell'); and its blending of demotic and conversational language within the Meredithian form, a technique which may seem merely experimental or comical but which indicates a political stance taken by Armitage in his masquerade writing, and which focuses on the issue of canonical or traditional forms and their ideological status within critical and literary history. Both 'Phenomenology' and 'Poem' certainly seem to be driven by the same impulse to question form rather than accept it without renegotiation or interrogation, and this desire to undermine stable ideological and literary values

suggests a Harrisonian distrust of literary authority. Armitage's sonnets here and elsewhere are clearly different to Harrison's, as is the distinctive quality of his language and allusion, and yet the same animus towards bourgeois affirmations of literary power are strikingly similar, with both poets using barbarian and non-standard registers within culturally sanctified lyric forms in order to expand the range of the form whilst resisting its enclosure within a totalising framework; whether anthology, canon, or standardising language.

To return to the critical judgements adumbrated at the start of the opening chapter, it can be seen that, in Harrison's case, much is made of his status as a northern writer with a working-class Leeds background, with one critic calling Harrison's entire poetic career a scholarship boy's 'revenge'.³⁵ Harrison's poetry unquestionably negotiates an abrupt intersection of the personal and political, private and public, which generates a particular emphasis on the linguistic and structural subversion of literary form through the deployment of comedy, puns, taboo, demotic and sexually explicit content, and this aspect of his work is acknowledged by those critics who respond to his linguistic playfulness and frequently rebarbative idiom, or what Douglas Dunn has called his 'hard, grunting' style.³⁶ In Armitage's case, the critical emphasis seems to focus upon his status as a 'New Generation' poet whose work blends contemporary cultural reference with an ecologically charged postmodernism which suggests an engagement with 'recent developments in cultural history and environmental politics'³⁷ although other critics see Armitage as a classically

³⁵ cf. 'Harrison's [...] Scholarship Boy's Remorse and Revenge', Douglas Dunn, 'Acute accent', *Bloodaxe I*, pp. 213-4.

³⁶ Dunn, p. 213.

³⁷ Gregson, p. 15.

‘northern’ writer whose work evokes a particularly metropolitan sense of both the north and northerness, including what Dave Russell has called ‘limited and limiting images of the region as harsh, industrial [and] grimy.’³⁸ The critical overlap here regarding Harrison and Armitage as nominally ‘northern’ poets certainly implies a metropolitan designation, with region conflated with identity, and poetic voice with social accent or ‘blunt forcefulness’ of speech, although it is equally important to recognise that this correlation of opinion seems to support Armitage’s contention that one inheritance from Harrison has been the ability to write using dialect and non-standard registers rarely heard in mainstream post-War poetry.³⁹

This chapter has demonstrated that, beyond superficial connections derived from social class or ‘northern stereotyping’, Armitage’s poetry does indeed share with Harrison’s work a related desire to interrogate poetic form through the calculated use of a barbarian language which deliberately generates tension between elevated and demotic language, the latter derived in part from the cadences of everyday conversation and vernacular usage.⁴⁰ This barbarian language is then incorporated within historically conservative forms such as the lyric which are more commonly composed in a Standard English dialect associated with the ownership of language: Harrison’s ‘The Queen’s English’ making just this point.⁴¹ The resulting stylistic and linguistic tension generates masquerade: a

³⁸ Dave Russell, *Looking North: Northern England and the National Imagination* (Manchester: MUP, 2004), p. 5.

³⁹ Mark Hudson, cited in Katie Wales, *Northern English: A Social and Cultural History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 26.

⁴⁰ Russell, p. 33.

⁴¹ Harrison, ‘The Queen’s English’, *SP*, p. 136.

politically motivated style of composition underpinning both poets' work, notwithstanding differences of idiom and style.

Although critical opinion emphasises the obvious differences separating Harrison and Armitage, it is on the linguistic and political planes that their work interrelates, and, if one considers Harrison's anti-sonnets in *The Loiners*, plus his attacks on the dramatic monologue and lyric, and then compares these poems with Armitage's ironic monologues, fractured sonnets and failed love lyrics in *Zoom!*, one striking similarity is the *invasion* of the host form by barbaric language, and the resulting formal, structural, thematic and linguistic dissonance constitutes the main point of contact between Harrison's work and Armitage's poetry, suggesting a shared poetics of resentment, as well as scepticism regarding poetic form and a desire to extend the creative potential of lyric poetry. It seems, to be sure, as though both poets were using traditional forms such as the sonnet and lyric in order to ironise them and engender a feeling of defamiliarisation on the part of the reader, who generally reads the poems as part of the literary tradition from which they spring, rather than *against* this tradition. This masquerade element to their writing is not, however, limited only to early collections but is sustained and developed across their work, as part of an emancipatory poetics which seeks to open up a range of forms and styles to barbaric language and its riotous potential. A notable feature of both poets' work is their antagonistic relationship with the sonnet.

Chapter Three

Barbarian Poetics and Literary Form: Renegotiating The Sonnet

We have seen that barbarian masquerade targets canonical forms such as the sonnet in order to test its legitimacy by subverting its status, language and structural coherence. Although there is nothing inherently ‘canonical’ about any literary form or author, specific values may be assigned to texts which are held forth as embodying, variously, ‘value’, ‘greatness’ or other superlative characteristics. ‘The English literary canon achieved its definitive shape during the middle decades of the eighteenth century. The idea of national tradition to which we have given a final burial was born at that time’¹ Jonathan Kramnick points out, adding that it was at this time that ‘a national canon formed on the precedent example of the classical canon took shape’ (4).

A central criterion for inclusion in this new canon was language itself which, as we see in Harrison and Armitage’s poetry, is a highly contested zone of rival and contending ideologies. ‘A quasi-classical language, canonical English stood apart from the language of trade and commerce’ and became an artistic realm separate from the urban squalor of the metropolis (4). Thus the ‘endeavour to establish English Literature as a world unto itself’ was complete and the scene set for the successive waves of reaffirmation of canonical authority which have followed (4). Kramnick summarises his argument about the artifice of the ‘Enlightenment’ canon with the observation that ‘the categorical tapering of

¹ Jonathan Brody Kramnick, *The Making of the English Canon: Print-Capitalism and the Cultural Past, 1700-1770* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), p. 1. Further references in text.

literature [into ‘well-written’ poems, plays and drama] and the placement of it in the hands of the educated middle classes was part of the larger shaping and domination of culture by a bourgeoisie ever eager to find an expression of its values and legitimacy’, and it is this part-appropriation, part-annexation (if not usurpation) of literary discourse by an economically regnant and culturally imperialistic middle-class which is contested by Harrison and by Armitage (9). Whereas Armitage’s approach is less overtly confrontational, and Harrison’s much more so, the target of their combined opprobrium is the post-Classical canon which has dominated literary history since the eighteenth century and which has been the object of repeated ideological incursions over the past sixty years: ‘the influential canons of Eliot and Leavis, canons organized on classical lines and foregrounding a limited set of historically important works by largely dead authors’, as Jan Gorak puts it.² Armitage’s view of the ideological manipulation of the canon by the British social elite informs his assertion that

the appropriation of poetry by the literati can be quite properly compared with the enclosure of common land in England, the Highland Clearances and the hijacking of ancient medicine by Western science. We should never be surprised by the way in which the privileged minorities eventually take control of every valuable commodity, but how much more exciting it would have been if poetry had been commandeered by people who did more than sit at home with their thumbs up their arses.³

² Jan Gorak, *The Making of the Modern Canon: Genesis and Crisis of a Literary Idea* (London: Athlone, 1991), p. 122.

³ Armitage, ‘Re-Writing the Good Book’ (2000), in *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, ed Herbert and Hollis (Trowbridge: Bloodaxe, 2002), p. 254.

Harrison's dissatisfaction is similarly barbed: "so right, yer buggers, then! We'll occupy | your lousy leasehold poetry". Appropriation rather than homage: he takes just what he wants and no more.⁴

This agon with the literary canon must not, however, be accepted without qualification, as some critics see it not simply as an anachronistic elitist construct but, contrastingly, as an inevitable and indeed necessary result of literary dialogue throughout history. Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon* is an impassioned counter-reformative work which argues in favour of the canon and its preservation, whilst attacking what Bloom calls 'the School of Resentment: Feminists, Marxists, Lacanians, New Historicists, Deconstructionists, Semioticians.'⁵ Bloom's thesis is as provocative and ideologically charged as Harrison and Armitage's own oppositional stance, Bloom arguing that 'those who resent all canons suffer from an elitist guilt founded upon the accurate enough realization that canons always do indirectly serve the social and political, and indeed the spiritual, concerns and aims of the wealthier classes of each generation of Western society' (32-3). Bloom, conceding that 'all canons, including our currently fashionable counter-canon, are elitist' (37) suggests that this is an inevitable bi-product of the human disposition towards dialogue with the past and 'the triple question of the agon - more than, less than, equal to?' without which 'there can be no aesthetic value' (24). Bloom suggests that anti-canonizers attack the canon 'in order to advance their supposed (and nonexistent) programs for social change' (4) and resents those new writers

⁴ Peter Forbes, 'In the Canon's Mouth: Tony Harrison and Twentieth-Century Poetry' in Sandie Byrne, ed., *Loiner* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 197.

⁵ Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (Papermac/Macmillan, 1995), p. 527. Further references in text.

incorporated into the modern canon who ‘offer little but the resentment they have developed as part of their sense of identity’; (7) although this latter point has itself been attacked, with Edward Said sardonically suggesting that ‘the appearance in the academic world of women, African-Americans, gays, and Native Americans [is] a *barbaric* threat to ‘Western Civilization’.’⁶

Whether Bloom’s voice is representative of general academic opinion, or a fringe and anachronistic one (making him, in Eagleton’s phrase, one of the ‘custodians of the canon’)⁷ it is certainly clear that Harrison and Armitage view the critical, academic and publishing elites, and hence the canon which they may be said to represent, as totalising forces opposed to the inclusion of minority voices. This leads to the animating paradox which lies at the heart of their work, as, without ‘the’ canon or a range of competing canons against which to write, both Harrison and Armitage’s poetry would lose its oppositional force and cease to exist in its current form; a fact acknowledged by Peter Forbes who suggests that ‘Harrison needs the tradition because no poet can work without one, but he resents it because it is a canon written and selected largely by the southern upper middle class’ - presumably also metropolitan, and represented by major London publishing houses.⁸ Although it could be argued that present literary canons are free from the political imperatives of the past, the pre-existing western canon is still a fertile source of renegotiation and dialogue, with both Harrison and Armitage electing to write using inherited poetic forms which have been invested with ideological and social power by previous generations of writers

⁶ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993), p. 388. Italics mine.

⁷ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory, An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), p. 203.

⁸ Peter Forbes, ‘In the Canon’s Mouth: Tony Harrison and Twentieth-Century Poetry’ in Sandie Byrne, ed., *Loiner* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 197.

and critics. Although *nouveaux* canonical writers themselves, both poets seem to think that constant debate with the older canons of taste is important so as to maintain the evolution towards a democratic and egalitarian canon, and their debate seems justified given the more reactionary counter-arguments of critics such as Bloom, whose views of literary history and tradition are so different. The debate with and about the canon is, in other words, dialogic, and Harrison and Armitage's own contributions to it centre on the dominant forms of the lyric mode, such as the sonnet.

No literary form of any kind can be free from ideological entanglements or 'bourgeois categorization'⁹ and the sonnet is clearly an inherently politicised form: defined by specific ideas about order, symmetry, and intelligibility. As Terry Eagleton in his *Marxism and Literary Criticism* argues:

in selecting a form [...] the writer finds his choice already ideologically circumscribed. He may combine and transmute forms available to him from a literary tradition, but these forms themselves, as well as his permutation of them, are ideologically significant. The languages and devices a writer finds to hand are already *saturated* with certain *ideological modes of perception*, certain codified ways of interpreting reality; and the extent to which he can modify or remake those languages depends on more than his personal genius. It depends on whether at that point in history, 'ideology' is such that they must and can be changed.¹⁰

⁹ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: OUP, 1977), p. 146.

¹⁰ Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 26-7, my italics.

Indeed, generations of critics have commented on the sonnet's elevated cultural position within the western canon, suggesting that it 'has had to bear the weight of tremendous cultural expectation or snobbery'¹¹ such that 'there is a significant body of writers who think of the sonnet form as something sacrosanct, a form that needs protecting against *barbarians* who are out to do it damage.'¹² Recognising 'the sonnet's role as the gold standard of civilized self-discipline',¹³ commentators on the form have identified 'the overly refined cultural overtones the sonnet has gathered around itself'¹⁴ whilst celebrating metrical irreverence and diversifications of structure, reference and language. Encountered in the previous chapter, T. W. H. Crosland is one critic who sees the sonnet as a symbol of immutable poetic beauty, proposing the thesis that it 'belongs essentially to the highest poetry' such that 'when great sonnets cease to be produced, great poetry ceases to be produced.'¹⁵ Asserting furthermore that the sonnet 'is the corner-stone [sic] of English poetry,' (35) Crosland's text takes on the form of an extended *apologia*, overlain with strongly reactionary, even religious, overtones: 'for the Sonnet [...] the legislation is fixed, established, stable and unassailable. The observance of it means perfection; any breaking away from it means imperfection' (56). Crosland's tone here is devout: 'observance' means to worship the form, whereas to question its status or otherwise alter its component parts, is sacrilege. Addressing himself to the

¹¹ A. D. Cousins and Peter Howarth, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to The Sonnet* (Cambridge: CUP, 2011), p. 2.

¹² Jeff Hilson, 'Contemporary poets and the sonnet: a trialogue', Paul Muldoon, Meg Tyler, Jeff Hilson, ed. by Peter Howarth in *The Cambridge Companion to The Sonnet*, p. 9. Italics mine.

¹³ Peter Howarth, 'The modern sonnet', in *The Cambridge Companion to The Sonnet*, p. 235.

¹⁴ Jeff Hilson, 'Contemporary poets and the sonnet: a trialogue', p. 13.

¹⁵ T. W. H. Crosland, *The English Sonnet* (London: Martin Secker Ltd, 1917), p. 35. Further references in text.

structural purity of the sonnet, Crosland believes that ‘*deviation* from the octet rule is absolutely impermissible,’ and ‘deviations from the sestet rule [are] *altogether vicious*’ (47). Writing in the same year that Eliot published *Prufrock and Other Observations* and as Anglo-American Modernism began to assert its influence across the European literary scene, Crosland seems to insist on the formal and metrical coherence of the sonnet as a symbolic bulwark against cultural dislocation and the literary avant-garde. Foreshadowing Fuller’s conservative stance, but much more vocal and impassioned, Crosland’s study culminates in his rhetorically dogmatic assertion that ‘a sonnet consists of fourteen decasyllabic lines, rhymed according to prescription. Any poem of more than fourteen decasyllabic lines, or less than fourteen, is not a sonnet’ (37).

Given the canonical pedigree of the sonnet, with a lineage including Petrarch, Spenser, Sidney, Shakespeare and Drayton, and given also the vehemence with which commentators such as Crosland advance their arguments, it would seem reasonable to expect the weight of historical precedent to have stifled any attempt at radical revisualisation of the form. This, indeed, has long been the accepted critical position as, beyond the ‘standard’ Italian and Shakespearean models there seems to be little technical innovation, apart, importantly, from Meredith’s sixteen-line adaptation and Hopkins’ ‘curtal’ versions. John Fuller, in his essay on the sonnet, argues that ‘variations of the form come into existence through a desire to explore legitimate possibilities and to provide genuine extensions of its capabilities’ and suggests that this has been limited in the main to structural renegotiations and miscellaneous oddities such as the

eleven- or sixteen-line hybrid.¹⁶ One might add here Peter Reading's '10x10x10', in which Donald the hapless narrator ponders 'the/arbitrary nature of the Sonnet - /'One might as well invent any kind of/structure.'¹⁷ Reading has indeed 'proposed', comico-seriously, a '13-line sonnet for unlucky people'¹⁸ and 'a brand new kind of sonnet/where the octave is/a tanka plus a haiku/and the sestet two haikus'¹⁹ but these are isolated experiments and not wholly new forms. The question of what constitutes a sonnet has, however, received a great amount of attention and critical reappraisal in recent years, epitomised by Jeff Hilson's controversial *Reality Street Book of Sonnets*²⁰ which contains a vast number of what Hilson has designated 'linguistically innovative sonnets' which question the fundamental properties (or proprieties) of the sonnet form (8). *Contra* Fuller, Hilson comments that the 'word "legitimate" stalks Fuller's text and it's clear that he is suffering from his very own legitimation crisis"', (10) before going on to call for 'a radical defamiliarisation of the form' (14). This results, in the anthology, in experimental pieces such as Ted Berrigan's intertextually diverse sonnets, Philip Nikolayev's 'Letters from Aldenderry' poems (which appear as prose paragraphs on the page containing bold type face sonnets embedded within them), and David Miller's 'Visual Sonnets' which are formed by fourteen irregular brushstrokes without accompanying text. Berrigan, O'Hara and the New York school have certainly had a profound influence on the development of the modern sonnet and the American influence on Armitage's

¹⁶ John Fuller, *The Sonnet*, Critical Idiom series (London: Methuen, 1972), p. 28.

¹⁷ Peter Reading, '10 x 10 x 10' from *Nothing for Anyone*, in *Collected Poems 1: 1970-1984* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1995), p. 131.

¹⁸ Peter Reading, *C*, in *Collected Poems 1 1970-1984* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1995), p. 288.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 301.

²⁰ *The Reality Street Book of Sonnets*, ed. by Jeff Hilson (Hastings: Reality Street, 2008). Further references in text.

sonnets is taken up below. Taken as a whole, it becomes clear that the importance of Hilson's anthology is not simply its critique of Fuller's 1970's essay but also its distillation of several decades of non-mainstream, experimental sonnet writing which points to a resurgence of interest in the form itself, albeit one tied to a counter-cultural concept of formal and thematic barbarism. As Hilson notes, 'as a form the sonnet is fiercely guarded' (10) and any deliberate contravention of its traditional appearance becomes a political and subversive act. If the collection had any weaknesses, they would be its outré nature and limited appeal to a general readership: an especially regrettable situation given the comparatively conservative sonnets published by Faber and Penguin which reach a far wider audience and influence popular opinion to a far greater degree.

Read against Tim Atkins' 'Petrarch' parodies, the work of moderns such as Don Paterson and Paul Muldoon seems metrically standard, or linguistically conservative. Paterson's Petrarchan *Exeunt*²¹ 'suite' and Muldoon's *The Prince of the Quotidian* pieces²² are written in a demotic and colloquial register but are otherwise clearly situated within a continuum of stylistic and formal regularity whilst, although typographically novel, Glyn Maxwell's 'Out of the Rain' cycle (composed of forty two sonnets of seven *vers libre* couplets each) is, apart from its comic dialect, similarly traditional. Jo Shapcott, a 'New Poet' and near contemporary to Armitage, writes conservative sonnets in traditional verse forms²³ just as the typographically subversive sonnets of e.e. cummings, whilst visually experimental, often contain decidedly traditional, romantic imagery

²¹ Don Paterson, *Nil Nil* (London: Faber, 1993).

²² In Paul Muldoon, *New Selected Poems 1968-1994* (London: Faber, 1996).

²³ See, for example, the title poem of *Of Mutability* (London: Faber, 2010) and also 'Era', 'La Serenissima' and 'The Death of Iris'; all Petrarchan sonnets.

which recalls some of the grandiloquent praise of Petrarchanism.²⁴ This is not to overlook Cummings' vital contribution to the development of the modern sonnet, or to deny the break with the preceding tradition proposed by his work: as Peter Howarth comments, 'Cummings' sonnets [...] stretch the boundaries of the form beyond anything Frost or Stevens, or anyone, had ever tried.'²⁵ That said, Cummings' work seems far more metrically stable and traditional when set alongside avant-garde work such as John Gibbens' 'Underscore' sequence, composed of leaf collages revealing random quotations from a biology textbook. Perhaps the most effective, or at least daring, play with form and language from within the mainstream poetry tradition comes from such figures as Wendy Cope who, although envisioned as a producer of light verse, has unquestionably forced a reconsideration of the claim to canonical authority of not only poetic forms but poets themselves, a tendency which crystallises appositely in her pseudo-Shakespearean parodies 'From Strugnell's Sonnets' which contain such deflationary anti-rhetoric as 'Not only marble, but the plastic toys/From cornflake packets will outlive this rhyme', which pre-empts the tone of many Armitage sonnets in *Matches*.²⁶

Harrison and Armitage's sonnets therefore come to occupy a liminal space between experimental-structural avant-gardism and mainstream canonical conservatism: questioning the authority of the sonnet tradition whilst adhering playfully to some of its ordering principles. In their barbaric 'sonnet cycles',

²⁴ Cf. 'it may not always be so' with its images of 'your lips, which i have loved' and 'if on another's face your sweet hair lay' in *Selected Poems 1923-1958* (London: Faber, 1960), p. 5.

²⁵ Peter Howarth, 'The Modern Sonnet', in *The Cambridge Companion to The Sonnet*, p. 233.

²⁶ Wendy Cope, 'From Strugnell's Sonnets', iv, in *Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis* (London: Faber, 1986), p. 51.

metrical regularity and structural pattern are either thrown into an ironic contrast with sometimes unexpected themes and allusions or else replaced by dissonance, irregularity, demotic voices and thematic deviation from the classic *topoi* of Petrarchanism; reminiscent of Bakhtin's 'violation of the usual and the generally accepted'.²⁷ Unlike the violated and completely subverted sonnets in Hilson's anthology, which very often are not recognisably sonnets at all, Harrison's Meredithians and Armitage's Shakespearean poems *require* the tradition and formal features against which they rebel, with both poets deliberately deploying the iamb, the quatrain and the couplet as ironic leitmotifs to be set aside demotic and deflationary language, thematic irreverence and free play with structure or typography. As noted above, barbarian masquerade depends for its full effect on the paradoxical invocation of stable or canonical literary forms which are then interrogated and subverted, preserving a vestigial resemblance to their archetypes. This formal and linguistic renegotiation serves the obvious purpose of challenging readers' expectations and challenging the influence of literary tradition, but is also used as part of an emancipatory poetics dedicated to expanding the sonnet's creative potential. Barbarian masquerade is therefore not concerned with invasion of form *tout court*, but uses it as part of a broader interrogation of traditional, or mainstream, poetry and the politics of form and theme associated with it. This results in the paradox noted earlier, where traditional form is *necessary* to the novelty of masquerade: meaning Harrison and Armitage are reliant upon traditional models whilst simultaneously subverting them and challenging their orthodoxy.

²⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. 126.

Whereas Harrison the sonneteer is to be found mainly within the *Eloquence* cycle (which itself nods ironically towards the great Elizabethan ‘standards’), Armitage’s sonnet output covers his collections from *Zoom!* (1989) through to *Seeing Stars* (2010). Despite this obvious profusion, his *Matches*, split into three sections, does constitute an abbreviated cycle in line with Harrison’s. Although numbering only thirty sonnets (in various forms), as opposed to the *Selected Poems*’ seventy-nine, *Matches* I deals with many Harrisonian themes such as time, death and family life. Elsewhere, Armitage moves into thematically novel explorations (of lesbianism, suicide and poodles), and this necessarily brief survey indicates his departure from traditional content along with his individual thematic concerns, which often diverge from Harrison’s. Indeed, whilst Harrison is aggressively and overtly political and speaks generally *in propria persona*, Armitage’s masquerade is more restrained, less obviously political and tends to manifest itself through the third person narrator or assumed persona.

Harrison’s ‘Wordlists I’ mixes the ‘elevated’ lexis of Harrison’s schoolteachers and the dialect of his parents as a means of asserting, on the one hand, Harrison’s control of the ‘owned language’ of the Receivers and, on the other, his desire to ‘pollute’ the pure streams of this speech with working class voices and expressions.²⁸ Here and elsewhere, Harrison’s aims are to show that differing registers can co-exist in a prestigious form such as the sonnet but also that, by extension, there is no need for the poet to only use one lexical mode when composing poetry and that, ultimately, words are power: ‘the tongueless

²⁸ *SP*, pp. 117.

man gets his land took'.²⁹ Harrison's use of language is, then, insistently Marxist: serving as a reminder to the middle class reader that words themselves are tokens of deeply embedded ideological ideas about civility and culture and that, for the working class scholarship boy in particular, access to the 'speech of kings' is hard won.³⁰

Harrison's first quatrain in 'Wordlists I' mixes vernacular English ('Good parrots got good marks'), Latinate polysyllables ('Divinity', 'studiously') and comically mispronounced 'new long words' like '*harlót*'. More importantly, the language used is a blend of elevated and demotic; beautiful and barbarian. Alongside 'glossolalia' and 'dulciloquy' are references to 'mi mam', '*there's summat in that drawer*', 'a pinman with no prick' and the Loiner-speak of 'laiking', all of which sit incongruously alongside one another within the poem. Even such standardised nouns as 'venery', 'VD' and 'bawd' are not the words one expects to read in a sonnet, more so given traditional 'anxiety about the sonnet's appropriate content' and allusion.³¹ And yet Harrison's tactic of fusing the lexical reference points of 'high' and 'low' art or of the 'elaborate' and 'restricted' codes is seen throughout the *Eloquence* cycle. In the 'Next Door' sequence, for example, several instances of linguistic barbarism invade the iambic regularity of the Meredithian sonnet, or, as Jamie McKendrick suggests, 'Harrison's sixteen-line Meredithian sonnets [...] often house a *decidedly non-literary diction* within traditional metres and [so] give a voice to the suppressed

²⁹ National Trust, *SP*, p. 121.

³⁰ cf. 'Poetry's the speech of kings', 'Them & [uz]', *SP*, p. 122, my italics.

³¹ A. D. Cousins and Peter Howarth, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to The Sonnet*, p. 3.

and excluded.’³² Like ‘Wordlists I’, ‘Next Door I’ juxtaposes the ‘*Mikado* by the D’Oyly Carte’ and ‘*The Kipling Treasury*’ inscribed in copperplate with ‘mi mam dropped dead and mi dad’s took fright’ and the latter’s outburst of ‘*It won’t be long before Ah’m t’only white!*’. Again, this verbal vandalism is dual-purpose: part of an assault on the idea of ‘appropriate’ language for the ‘serious’ sonnet and also a way of forcing a confrontation between bourgeois and proletarian modes of expression. As I argued in the first chapter, it is important that Harrison’s chosen linguistic medium for this confrontation is Yorkshire dialect, a ‘pariah’, ‘non-standard’ Other which has long been viewed with various degrees of distaste by the bourgeois establishment. As Katie Wales argues, ‘Northern English (and its speakers) since the fifteenth century [have been] perceived very much in relation to an Other, the prestigious Standard English, which is perceived as superior: thus, along with other vernaculars, dismissed not only as “non-standard”, but also therefore as “subordinate.”’³³ Wales also comments, in relation to dialect literature, that ‘literature written in “deviant” dialect spellings has generally been received by readers and reviewers outside the region with either distrust or disgust. It is dismissed as unintelligible, and its authors as uneducated.’³⁴

This sense of dialect as deviant also surfaces in parallel, but culturally distinct, contexts such as in the Caribbean ‘nation’ poetry of Kamau Brathwaite, who comments that even the word *dialect* ‘carries very pejorative overtones. Dialect

³² Jamie McKendrick, ‘Contemporary Poetries in English, c. 1980 to the present 2’ - in *The Cambridge History of English Poetry*, ed. by Michael O’Neill (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), p. 1000; italics mine.

³³ Katie Wales, *Northern English: A Social and Cultural History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 4.

³⁴ Wales, p. 8.

is thought of as ‘bad English’. Dialect is ‘inferior English’. Dialect is the language used when you want to make fun of someone. Caricature speaks in dialect³⁵ and, although speaking of West Indian poets and their struggle with what Brathwaite has termed ‘the imposed language’ of English, this view of dialect as inherently anti-authoritarian (because rejected by the discourses of power and authority) is helpful in showing the way in which so-called prestige modes of speech and literary expression define themselves against an oral literary tradition which must be denigrated and downgraded to the status of Other in order for the imperial mode to attain prominence.³⁶ One sees, therefore, how Harrison’s inclusion of dialect within his sonnets is an important political tactic: the presence of dialect within the sonnet form creating a clash of codes and registers, and engendering a sense of division.

‘All reading of poetry has potentially this kind of division’ Harrison argues, ‘and I’m building that potential division into the actual writing, conscious as I am of what are called the "restricted" and the "elaborate" codes. I play one form of articulation off against the other.’³⁷ This last comment alludes to the work of Basil Bernstein, whose *Class, Codes and Control* defined the ‘restricted’ code as ‘a syntax with few choices’³⁸ and one in which ‘the structural elements are highly predictable’, (108) whereas the ‘elaborated’ code is defined as ‘a syntax which generates a large number of choices’ (231) or ‘a wide range of syntactic alternatives’ (145). Bernstein also suggests that the restricted code is more

³⁵ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (London: New Beacon Books, 1984; reprinted 2011), p. 13.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5. Kamau also calls English ‘the language of the conquistador’; p. 8.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Basil Bernstein, *Class, Codes and Control: Vol. II, Theoretical Studies Towards a Sociology of Language* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 231. Further references in text.

prevalent in working-class families, whereas access to *both* the restricted and elaborated codes is generally limited to the middle-class family or speaker.

‘Next Door II’ exemplifies Harrison’s ‘barbarous stile’³⁹ clearly, mixing ‘yearly programmes for the D’Oyly Carte./’Three Little Maids’’, ‘Tennyson and Milton leather-bound’ and the Sharpes’ overheard ‘*Cunt! Cunt! Cunt!*’; juxtaposing Bernstein’s restricted and elaborated codes and producing a Babel of internal signification, which, in the context of the Meredithian sonnet, serves to underscore the ‘division’ spoken of above and which leads, by ‘Next Door IV’, to the eventual triumph of the prole voice itself. In this final sonnet, Harrison Senior expresses his disgust at the downturn taken by the neighbourhood in recent years whilst it is his *mode* of expression (violent, brash, and racist; a diatribe mixing Yorkshire dialect and working class vernacular) which forecloses the possibility of any redeeming ‘poetic’ diction; ‘*All turbans round here now, forget flat caps! [...] Ay, t’Off Licence, that’s gone Paki in t’same way!*’ However, the sonnets which most self-evidently engage with the divisiveness of both language and poetic form are the ‘Divisions’ sonnets themselves.⁴⁰ Foreshadowing the poet-*alter-ego* confrontation in *v.*, these are poems in which Harrison’s feelings of alienation from his working class background crystallise into critical observations of the football-supporting skinheads he sees drinking in Newcastle. They are ‘all aggro in tight clothes and skinhead crops’, ‘teenage dole-wallahs’ who ‘aerosol the walls, then go get pissed.’ Theirs is a world of tattoos, ‘*Brown Ale* and boys’ bravado’ which,

³⁹ see ‘Classics Society’, *SP*, p. 120.

⁴⁰ *SP*, pp. 173-4.

culturally speaking, is far removed from the world of Harrison *qua* poet, even though, because he too is in a bar drinking, ‘they think that like them I’m on the dole’. The language used by Harrison to describe the young men is startlingly frank and unadorned. It is also playful. Both poems’ titles punningly allude to the class divisions and football (hence tribal) divisions at the heart of English society, but they also reveal how so much of this class and social antagonism is played out in linguistic terms; something akin to Wales’ observation about ‘the schism between [...] dialect and the standard discourse of education and literature.’⁴¹ Like the ‘skin’ in *v.* declaring ‘*who needs/yer fucking poufy words*’⁴² Harrison here is using language as a taunt - a way of forcing recognition of working-class culture from the reader of ‘verse’ who might otherwise never hear the ‘ghosts of the inarticulate’. In the context of the sonnet form, such demotic utterances as ‘*Never Have Another Haemorrhoid*’ or ‘*butch Brown Ale*’ stand out as powerfully evocative but unsettling *aides-memoire* which serve a pointed political purpose: reminding the reader of the exclusivity of the language of poetry and its elision of the proletarian voice from the sonnet. As Sandie Byrne comments, ‘The ‘School of Eloquence’ poems have the sixteen lines of the Meredithian sonnet, and are concerned with love and loss, but few sonnets include references to tattoos, brown ale, and Newcastle United, or to ‘Teenage dole-wallah piss-up’;⁴³ evidence of the ‘non-metropolitan words and sounds’ found in modern sonnets but largely rejected, or suppressed, in traditional poems.’⁴⁴

⁴¹ Wales, p. 147.

⁴² Tony Harrison, *v.* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1989), p. 22.

⁴³ Sandie Byrne, *H, v. & O* (MUP, 1998), p. 7.

⁴⁴ Stephen Burt, ‘The contemporary sonnet’, in *The Cambridge Companion to The Sonnet*, p. 253.

‘Me Tarzan’ is another poem where linguistic registers clash and jostle for supremacy and where access to language or to works from the canonical tradition signal entrée into the middle class and its ideology. The figure in the poem, almost certainly autobiographical, enrolled at LGS and learning to acquire the ‘second language’ of Classical antiquity, sits alone working on a prose translation. As a scholarship boy, immersion in the ‘*De Bello Gallico* and lexicon’ entails not only hard work but also a distancing from members of his own social class; those who now gather outside the window issuing ‘the whistled gang-call’. But Harrison, slowly learning a new mode of (formal, Latinate) expression, is already joining a new group: that of the élite academic institution which will turn him, by degrees, into a cultured, ‘nicely spoken’ scholar.⁴⁵

Wales understands this situation when she observes, echoing Hoggart, that

in changing status school-educated or self-educated Northerners [sic] have had to face the prospect of crossing particular sociolinguistic and also psycholinguistic boundaries in addition to the dialectal in order to meet the expected norms of the ‘Received Standard’ and ‘Received Pronunciation’. In anthropological terms this can be seen as a ‘rite of passage’, a movement from one role or stage of life to another, with not only associated ‘rituals’, but psychological states of tension, anxiety and friction, and a feeling of being in social limbo: also termed generally *liminality*.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Such that he ‘is no longer a full member of the gang which clusters round the lamp-posts in the evenings; [because] there is homework to be done.’ Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 295.

⁴⁶ Wales, pp. 142-3. Note also the observation, about Ted Hughes’ ‘Calder Valley’ upbringing, that ‘against the realities of work and muck and brass, all intellectual or artistic activity is traditionally scorned as effeminate and wasteful. For a child to use an unfamiliar word in the playground is to risk being mocked for having ‘swallowed a dictionary’ in Keith Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes* (Cambridge: CUP, 1980), p. 7.

Wales' comments here invite comparison with Hoggart, who notes, of scholarship boys (but not, tellingly, girls), that 'they are emotionally uprooted from their class, often under the stimulus of a stronger critical intelligence or imagination [sic], qualities which can lead them into an unusual self-consciousness [sic] before their own situation.'⁴⁷ He also notes 'a physical uprooting from their class through the medium of the scholarship system [...] a sense of no longer really belonging to any group [...] Almost every working-class boy who goes through the process of further education by scholarships finds himself chafing against his environment during adolescence. He is at the friction-point of two cultures' and we see this played out in 'Me Tarzan' (292).

The central manifestation of this social dislocation is to be seen on the linguistic plane, and the multivocality of this sonnet proves Hoggart's point that, 'once at the grammar-school, [the scholarship boy] quickly learns to make use of a pair of different accents, perhaps even two different apparent characters and differing standards of value' (296). On the one hand, then, the sonnet foregrounds 'Labienus and his flaming sword', 'pale-face Caesars' and Latin polysyllables and, in stark contrast, '*Off laikin*', *then to t'fish oil*', 'an enraged *shit*' and the heartfelt '*Ah bloody can't ah've gorra Latin prose*', 'all of which still look aggressively subversive in the formal sonnet.'⁴⁸ As in 'Divisions' and 'Next Door', language here is as much about class as about expression but, as before, it is Harrison's inclusion of the demotic within the sonnet itself which constitutes

⁴⁷ Hoggart, *Uses of Literacy*, p. 292. Further references in text.

⁴⁸ N. S. Thompson, 'Book Ends: Public and Private in Tony Harrison's Poetry', in *Loiner*, Byrne, ed., p. 120.

the most forceful political affront. Not only do Caesar and Cicero share the sonnet's lines with Geronimo and Tarzan, they are also forced into an uneasy coexistence with gang-calls, yodels and the masturbatory euphemism of the boy 'whose hand's on his liana'.⁴⁹ Showing again what Bakhtin theorises in terms of intertextuality and multivocality, this sonnet is a further example of the Harrisonian technique of mixing the language of contending cultures so as to create a bastardised sonnet language which blends traditional and classical with lowbrow and popular, helping to break 'the myth of a homogenous language designed to serve the interest of a single social group'.⁵⁰ Indeed, the deliberate undermining of a standardised or prestigious linguistic code by a contending, 'impoverished' dialect, reliant for its subversive effects upon 'profanatory debasings'⁵¹ and 'full of ambivalent laughter, blasphemy, the profanation of everything sacred, full of debasing and obscenities' (130) creates a sense of anarchy and linguistic tension which is at odds with the formal and structural coherence of the Meredithian sonnet. This is the essence of Harrisonian masquerade, with 'the carnival sense of the world' leading to 'a weakening of [...] rhetorical seriousness [and] rationality' such that boundaries between high and low, civilised and barbarian, are dissolved and any sense of order and formal coherence is called into question (107). Key to this subversion of the sonnet as a canonical artefact is language, and Harrison's part-prole, part-bourgeois references interrogate the neat divisions constructed between 'high' and 'low' modes of expression. As Blake Morrison comments, 'these [sonnets] must be

⁴⁹ 'A half-buried phallic image'; Sean O'Brien, 'Tony Harrison: *Showing the Working*', in *The Deregulated Muse* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1998), p.54.

⁵⁰ Mireille Rosello, introduction to Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1995), p. 53.

⁵¹ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 124. Further references in text.

some of the least fluent poems in the language.’ And this is the point. ‘They mean to be’⁵² and Jonathan Barker has also commented that Harrison uses the Meredithian form ‘to outmanoeuvre the enemy’, suggesting that ‘the irony is conscious and deliberate’; further underscoring the idea of Harrison’s masquerade as trenchantly class-conscious and antagonistic.⁵³

Although Armitage’s barbaric sonnets are less overtly political, in the sense of directly addressing class and culture, the same preoccupation with language and the subversion of the sonnet’s structure and themes is evident. As a modern poet, Armitage has clearly inherited the tradition of dissent inaugurated, or extended, by Harrison, and his work also bears the influence of American poets such as Berrigan, Williams and O’Hara, whose use of ‘the uninflated language of conversation’ and structural playfulness inform many of Armitage’s own sonnets.⁵⁴ Armitage’s personæ use less taboo language than Harrison’s characters, with Armitage opting for generically proletarian modes of utterance in the main, and ‘people talk nonsense’, from *Matches* I contains one such voice.⁵⁵ Eschewing the formality of the Roman numeral or even short title of the traditional sonnet sequence, this poem and the others from *Matches* are all introduced by an asterisk: a typographical embodiment of the struck match, during whose slow burning the poem is to be read, but also standing in some regards for the extinguishing of the language of order and symmetry from the poems themselves. Even Harrison uses titles (and, admittedly, so does Armitage

⁵² Cited in *Permanently Bard, Selected Poetry of Tony Harrison*, ed. by Carol Rutter, (Bloodaxe, 1995), p. 16.

⁵³ Barker, ‘Peru, Leeds, Florida, and Keats’, *Bloodaxe I*, p. 51.

⁵⁴ Burt, p. 246.

⁵⁵ Armitage, *Book of Matches* (London: Faber, 1993), p. 9.

in other places) but here there is a ludic-subversive edge to the anonymity of the individual pieces which stands in contrast to Harrison's relative formal conservatism in his adoption of the Meredithian model. The erasure of controlling structural devices from the poem also highlights the emancipatory aspects of barbarian poetics and the sense that Armitage, in his reconfigurations of structure, is trying to create sonnets which are not bound by stylistic conventions or rules, and which demonstrate the creative range possible within established forms.

'People talk nonsense and I put them straight./Call me brassneck, call me hard-faced' Armitage's narrator declares, 'but in this town the people prefer to be steered.' The tone here is vernacular, pugnacious and forthright, recalling Duncan's 'plain language of the North' and Harrison Senior's plain speech in 'Next Door IV' and 'Long Distance I', without quite the same tone or dialectal inflection.⁵⁶ In fact, the language used is also unmistakably masculine, insofar as male genderlect is frequently less elevated or standardised than female speech: 'Put that in your pipe/and light it.' The sonnet's lack of a title and Armitage's avoidance of the iambic foot (which Harrison generally retains), indicates a general critique of the traditional requirements of sonnet structure, which can seem dead weights to modern poets wishing to extend the range of the form: 'an *a-priori* list of requirements to which the poet's skill must bend'⁵⁷ or else 'a kind of metrical extension of feudalism.'⁵⁸ The language completes this

⁵⁶ Andrew Duncan, *Centre and Periphery in Modern British Poetry* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), p. 119.

⁵⁷ 'The modern sonnet', Peter Howarth, in *The Cambridge Companion to The Sonnet*, p. 230.

⁵⁸ Michael R. G. Spiller, *The Development of the Sonnet: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 2.

effect, with such unexpected images as that ‘of a cooling tower, or here, the pylons’ numbering off (as though performing Army foot drill before an absentee RSM), and the pun on the pylons ‘holding the line.’ Armitage’s sonnet also rejects the intimacy of the Elizabethan or Meredithian forms with their air of secret confession or psychological realism. As Spiller notes, the traditional sonnet, ‘because of its brevity, always gives an impression of immediacy, as if it proceeded directly and confessionally and conversationally from the speaker’⁵⁹ but this sense of direct address to the reader as audience or interlocutor is rejected by Armitage’s persona, whose curt ‘I carry no passengers, just/hard freight’ does not invite intimacy or proximity so much as signal a form of self-effacement or denial of autobiography. The statement ‘with this key Shakespeare unlocked his heart’ was countered by ‘if so, the less Shakespeare he’ and Armitage also seems to reject the idea of language as a medium for personal revelation and psychological realism. This last point invites comparison with Harrison in the ‘family’ sonnets of *Eloquence*; texts which frequently draw upon Harrison’s autobiographical and anecdotal sources in their exploration of class and otherness. This obvious difference between the Armitage and Harrison sonnet is, however, less far-reaching than the conceptual parity binding the two poets through their adoption of the masquerade mode.

‘Brung up with swine’ is another poem which foregrounds the voice of an unnamed proletarian male and one which treats themes of class and personal identity in a manner reminiscent of the ‘Them & [uz]’ sonnets.⁶⁰ Minimalist

⁵⁹ Spiller, p. 5.

⁶⁰ Armitage, *Matches*, p. 18.

vers libre, this unrhymed piece is written in a northern patois which details the narrator's slow evolution from member of the lower working class until 'one day [falling in] with a different kind.' The tone is once again aggressive and the speaking voice defensive as the narrator gives a brief autobiographical overview of his life:

Brung up with swine, I was,
 and dogs,
 and raised on a diet of slime and slops
 and pobs.

Concluding that his experience has furnished him with the ability to mix with members of all stations of society (reminiscent of Kipling's walking with kings without losing 'the common touch'),⁶¹ the narrator proposes that he has 'a nose for uncovering truffles, or shite': the semantic opposition of the truffle and the turd conveying in an almost Harrisonian manner the essence of social divisions between 'them' and 'uz'. Taken as a whole, the sonnet represents a near-total implosion of the form, with iambics jettisoned, rhymed lines removed, and any sense of organic progression from quatrain to quatrain or octave to sestet abandoned - and, along with this, any sense of logical movement or cohesion. In place of the well-wrought sonnet of the canonical tradition, three or four word lines and unpredictable enjambment creates a staccato effect, challenging the structural integrity of the whole poem and leaving the reader without any sense

⁶¹Cf. Kipling, 'If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,/Or walk with Kings – nor lose the common touch', *If*, in T. S. Eliot, *A Choice of Kipling's Verse* (London: Faber, 1990), p. 274, ll.25-6.

of a controlling logic at work. ‘Armitage’s soneteering suggests formal desperation rather than form - his sonnets are broken, buckled, and ruinously lived in’ Ian Gregson has noted, finding also that ‘the mauling that Armitage gives the sonnet form suggests profound mistrust of its suave symmetry’ and its bourgeois cultural associations.⁶² This anti-sonnet stance is typified by monosyllables such as ‘slime’, ‘slops’ and ‘shite’ which oppose the mellifluous diction of the Petrarchan or Spenserian models and the bourgeois value systems underpinning them. References to cutting ‘back the hair to find/not skin, but rind’ accentuate the bestial alter-ego of the speaking voice and his potential for violence; a point picked up in the following poem’s ‘Me, I stick to the shadows, carry a gun.’⁶³ Armitage therefore presides over the erasure of the sonnet as a traditional form and offers in its place what Peter Robinson, discussing Paul Muldoon’s poem ‘The Sightseers’, calls a ‘quasi-sonnet’,⁶⁴ or, to adopt Claire Wills’ description of Muldoon’s style, ““destructured” sonnets.”⁶⁵ This is to say that Armitage, like Muldoon and Harrison, seeks to invoke the sonnet as a means of dismissing it; re-making the form and inscribing it with a marked sense of otherness and contingency along the way, resulting in an unstable and unpredictable platform rather than a traditional, conservative one. This again has Bakhtinian parallels, with the carnivalized pitted against the reactionary and time-honoured so as to produce a confusion of styles and contending ideological statements. The resulting

⁶² Ian Gregson, *Contemporary British Poetry and Postmodernism: Dialogue and Estrangement* (London: Macmillan, 1996), p. 253.

⁶³ ‘Those bastards in their mansions’, *Matches*, p. 19.

⁶⁴ Peter Robinson, ‘Muldoon’s Humour’, in *Politics and the Rhetoric of Poetry: Perspectives on Modern Anglo-Irish Poetry*, edited by Tjebbe A. Westendorp and Jane Mallinson (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1995), p. 40.

⁶⁵ Claire Wills, *Reading Paul Muldoon* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1998), p. 216.

carnival-grotesque form exercises the same function: to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world.⁶⁶

In other words, barbarian masquerade, like carnivalized literature, requires a normative tradition and linguistic code against which to pit itself, resulting in a barrage of eclectic voices and linguistic anarchy which deliberately engenders a sense of liberation from conservative formalism - exemplified in this case by the sonnet and its status at the heart of the western canonical tradition.

Although Armitage's language and register in his sonnets differ from Harrison's, in that there is less 'blending' of voices or prestige and demotic forms, the net effect is still consonant with Harrison's wish to shock the cultured reader and thereby force a reevaluation of the sonnet form as a vehicle for stable, 'refined' lexis, imagery and expression. In *Matches*, as in *Eloquence*, no such stable language exists. Instead, the sonnet is slowly undermined by a series of vandal voices who superimpose their doggerel dialect over the canonical respectability of the sonnet form: 'literary culture, in the form of the sonnet tradition, is regarded with suspicion; Luddites are given a voice within a genre of poetry that has tended to ignore them', as Antony Rowland notes.⁶⁷ And yet Harrison and Armitage's masquerade extends beyond merely subverting the sonnet at its most

⁶⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 34.

⁶⁷ Antony Rowland, *Tony Harrison and the Holocaust* (Liverpool: LUP, 2001), p. 270.

sensitive, linguistic level: it also involves calculated attacks on traditional uses of theme and structure.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Cf. 'Let this matchstick' and 'No convictions'; *Matches*, pp. 22, 29.

Masquerade as Thematic Subversion: The Barbarian Sonnet's Themes and Structure

Although there are a number of obviously striking themes and structural recombinations in the language of Harrison and Armitage's sonnets, it is vital to consider just how different these poems are to their canonical counterparts in terms of content, allusion and organisation. Whereas, for example, the 'classical' sonnet foregrounds treatments of love, death, grief and loss in stable, though striking language and in an ordered manner, Harrison and Armitage allow their sonnets to range freely in search of subject matter and then present this heterodox variety in wildly varying (although confidently controlled) stanza formations. Peter Conrad, outlining the sonnet's traditional thematic concerns, comments that 'the most resistant of contents is the experience of love' but his is an overview of sonnets produced by canonical writers such as Shakespeare, Wordsworth or Keats, rather than an analysis of the barbaric model.⁶⁹ Commenting next on the organisational principles of the sonnet, Conrad stresses 'the dissension between octave and sestet, or between three quatrains and a concluding couplet, the articulation of argument by complex rhyme-schemes' and here too, he is perforce dealing with the canonical texts of the Elizabethans, Victorians and Romantics.⁷⁰ Harrison and Armitage's sonnets, as has been seen, refuse to fit these neat descriptive categories and, instead, flout traditional rules concerning topic choice and construction, with each poet retaining a unique tone, register and socio-political focus. Harrison and Armitage obviously reject the

⁶⁹ Peter Conrad, *Cassell's History of English Literature* (London: Cassell, 2003), p. 93.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

premise that the sonnet tradition is ‘a sign of security, a link to prior poetry, a version of home’,⁷¹ finding it a rather restrictive practice which limits creative response rather than enabling individual expression. They therefore reject the ‘genteel cosiness of the sonnet form’⁷² and, in so doing, the tradition which supports it: evidence of the liberatory aspects underpinning their masquerade writing, which are used here to enlarge the creative potential of the sonnet and extend its creative range.

A striking example of Harrison’s structural and thematic undermining of the sonnet is ‘A Close One’ from *Eloquence*,⁷³ in which the subversive potential of barbarian masquerade enables a radical re-visioning of theme and structure to create a powerfully ironic anti-sonnet. The poem takes as its theme Harrison’s childhood recollections of wartime German bombing raids and the poem’s imagery recreates the confusion of war: ‘Hawsers. Dirigibles. Searchlight. *Messerschmitts*.’ These opening images appear fragmented and disjointed, with four nouns (which do not scan) working against the iambic rhythm of the rest of the sonnet, whilst the words themselves and the theme of the air raid seem out of place in the context of the traditional sonnet, however apposite they might be in a war poem. Harrison’s subsequent references to Morecambe Bay, ‘*Kensitas*’, ‘A Victory jig-saw on Fry’s Cocoa tray’ and, later, ‘Snakes & Ladders. Thermos flask’ all subtly undermine the canonical status of the Meredithian model by calling into question its traditional themes of marital relationships, domesticity and love. This is not to claim that canonical sonnets cannot explore

⁷¹ Burt, p. 251.

⁷² Howarth, p. 233.

⁷³ *SP*, p. 160.

extremes of passion and emotion, but that their thematic and ideological conservatism or ‘cultural elevation and formal rigidification’⁷⁴ have generally restrained or discouraged avant-garde expression such that Harrison’s inclusion of the incongruous, ephemeral or proletarian detail compels the reader’s attention and suggests an anarchic, Bakhtinian desire to debunk through the use of ‘profanatory debasings’ and demotic language. Structurally speaking, ‘A Close One’ rejects the formal closure of octave, sestet, couplet and quatrain in favour of fragmentation and typographical disunity. Two opening couplets, a cinquain, a tercet, then four ‘floating’ lines all deny the structural rigidity imposed by the Meredithian prototype and help to convey the idea of a fragmented war-torn experience or the ‘bereavement debris of a blitz’ referenced in the sonnet. Interestingly, this ‘errant’ structural approach is seen throughout the whole *Eloquence* cycle, and not only in those poems dealing with war. As Sandie Byrne comments, sonnets are not ‘usually broken up into 2, 2, 5, 3, 1, 1, 1, 1 in order to ironise and make painfully poignant their title as [in] ‘A Close One’ and this holds true for most of the other sonnets Harrison writes.’⁷⁵

In ‘Book Ends I’ there is further thematic and structural masquerade, even though here the theme is bereavement and Harrison Senior’s response to the death of his wife.⁷⁶ Although many historically validated sonnets deal with loss (Petrarch’s *Canzoniere*) or death (Shakespeare’s sonnet 18), few focus on a ‘last apple pie’ as a metaphor for the grief shared by father and son and combine this with a purposely fragmented stanza organisation which threatens to undermine

⁷⁴ Howarth, p. 226.

⁷⁵ Byrne, *H, v. & O*, p. 7. Cf. e. e. cummings’ sonnets, such as ‘luminous tendril of celestial wish’ for similar fragmentariness; cummings, *Selected Poems 1923-1958* (London; Faber, 1960), p. 80.

⁷⁶ *SP*, p. 126.

the serious emotions investigated in the poem. Although loss is a classic theme in the sonnet tradition, Harrison here also foregrounds the themes of class-based prejudice and the divisive effects of higher education, with his father cast as ‘worn out on poor pay’ and Harrison as the ‘scholar’. The companionable silence of grieving relatives becomes, by the sonnet’s closing tercet, a realisation that ‘what’s still between’s/not the thirty or so years, but books, books, books’ and this Marxist allusion to class divisions and the ideological gulf separating members of the same social group is atypical of most sonnets dealing with human responses to death. As Hoggart reminds us, in working class culture

the respect for the scholar [...] to some extent remains [...] On the other hand, there is often a mistrust of ‘book-learning’. What good does it do you? Are you any better off (i.e. happier) as a clerk? or [sic] as a teacher? Parents who refuse, as a few still do, to allow their children to take up scholarships [do so because of a] vaguely formulated but strong doubt of the value of education.⁷⁷

This is obviously the theme of ‘Book Ends I’, with Harrison’s father unable to converse with the son who ‘betrayed’ the tribe in order to move into academia. It seems, at least, that the poem’s theme is less the traditional one of death the leveller and more the divisions created within the working classes by the scholarship system and formal education; themes which no ‘canonical’ sonnet writers have engaged with given their position *within* the middle classes and the world-view this engenders.

⁷⁷ Hoggart, p. 84.

Structurally, the poem offers a superficial regularity, opening with six consecutive couplets, but then breaks down into a stray utterance ('your life's all shattered into smithereens') and a final tercet. Any sense of formal conformism is therefore lost as the poem, as Byrne puts it, 'exploits its typographical and phonetic obstruction and retardation to reinforce its meaning.'⁷⁸ 'The structure of the poem,' Byrne continues, 'echoes its theme of connection and disconnection, and impels us to make connections retrospectively' and it is certainly true that this poem, like most in *Eloquence*, seems at once to invoke the formal stability of the sixteen-line Meredithian stanza and then to work at deliberately shattering its ability to control and order theme or emotion.⁷⁹

Stephen Spender summarises Harrison's (ab)use of the Meredithian model when he observes that Harrison 'scores against all comers by the mastery with which he puts the sixteen-line sonnet to his uses, *breaking down* the sequential pattern of quatrains, isolating single lines so that they stand alone almost like one-line poems, while yet remaining part of the whole pattern.'⁸⁰ Harrison's motivation for this recurring formal subversion is clearly political and linked to a Marxist awareness of the ideological links between language, tradition and power: to engage with language and form simultaneously is to issue a challenge to the traditional presuppositions surrounding the sonnet and to question its claims to logocentric power. As Jeff Hilson argues, 'to disturb the sonnet's form too radically [...] is not just to disturb the sonnet itself, or the sonnet tradition, but to endanger the foundations of the wider poetic tradition.'⁸¹

⁷⁸ Byrne, *H, v. & O*, p. 15.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁸⁰ Stephen Spender, 'Changeling', *Bloodaxe I*, p. 226; my italics.

⁸¹ Hilson, p. 10.

Harrison's technique of fragmentariness and structural incoherence can also be seen in Armitage's proto-sonnets in *Seeing Stars*, where a similar display of thematic and structural bravura is combined with a Bakhtinian sense of anti-authoritarianism. In 'Poodles',⁸² traditional sonnet language, theme and structure are obliterated as part of a broad critique of traditional poetic form, the poem taking as its theme what appears to be a pet or freakshow with, as centre-piece, a 'horse-dog' described as 'daftest of all' the animals on display. The fact that there *is* no theme to the poem beyond the narrator's somewhat sardonic observations signals Armitage's desire to challenge the idea of the sonnet as a medium for meaningful communication, and the resulting anti-sonnetry undermines the sonnet form and critiques the notion that art can make sense of reality (a quite different political position than that held by Harrison, for whom the sonnet form allows a degree of familial or personal exegesis).

Armitage's poem describes the dog-horse in deadpan demotic, critiquing the traditional poetic diction of the sonnet ('the hair round its feet had been shaved and/fluffed into hooves') as the narrative culminates in the narrator's younger alter-ego telling the animal 'you're not a horse, you're a dog.' A comical interlude follows, with the dog-horse replying "'shut the fuck up, son. Forty-five minutes and down come the dirty bombs'", by which time the reader realises that the poem, although seeming to offer realistic anecdote, is in fact an illogical joke, with the reader as both butt and audience. Trading realism and coherence for a pronounced surrealism, Armitage generates an ironic form of

⁸² Simon Armitage, *Seeing Stars* (London: Faber, 2010), p. 54.

comedy and, as part of the creative focus of his masquerade writing, attacks the sonnet as a vehicle for intelligible meaning. Structurally, the sonnet lacks any form of ordering principle or obvious cohesive methodology. Aside from the lack of any discernible metre (such as the Harrisonian iamb), ‘Poodles’ also sidesteps rhyme, spills over into a fifteenth ‘half’-line and has neither quatrains and couplet nor octave and sestet. In point of fact, given the prosaic and almost ‘unpoetic’ nature of the language, it would seem that any attempt to organise the chaotic assemblage of images would only serve to heighten, rather than order, the pervading sense of riot and disorder. ‘Language is on the loose in these poems, which cut and run across the parterre of poetic decorum’ and this is married to a structural implosion which results in a brilliantly subversive anti-poetry.⁸³

‘To the Bridge’ is another thematically and structurally deviant sonnet.⁸⁴

Punning on the musical connotations of the title, the narrator discusses the relative merits of various twentieth-century musical acts such as ‘the so-called Manic Street Preachers’ and Red Hot Chili Peppers, who, ‘for all their encouraging ingredients, were/actually no warmer than a baby’s bathwater.’ Again written in a pseudo-poetic diction which combines such technical phraseology as ‘hyperventilation and sulphuric aftershave’ with more ‘traditional’ references to ‘the soupy canal’ and its ‘anointing ripple’, the sonnet seems to detail a kind of failed urban epiphany, with the motifs of bridge and canal supplying apposite social realism. The final ‘theme’ of the sonnet is once

⁸³ Armitage, *Seeing Stars*, cover blurb.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

again unclear; the reader wonders if this is a sonnet about lost love or, perhaps, suicide (given the reference to the canal 'below him'), but no closure is offered and no neat categorization is provided. As in 'Poodles', there is no 'point' to the sonnet at all. Even by Harrison's provocative standards, this is a far more truculent and aggressive assault on the sonnet form and one which fits in to the theme of anti-poetry in the collection as a whole. As if underscoring its rejection of form and structure, 'To the Bridge' only has thirteen lines, but then the whole question of how many lines a sonnet 'has' becomes rather academic given the pervasive sense of rebellion at work here. Overall, Armitage's sonnets in *Seeing Stars* seem to be devoid of straightforward meaning, organisationally unruly, and thematically deviant. But there are sonnets by Armitage which adhere to canonical 'unities' whilst simultaneously incorporating antagonistic and barbaric images, themes and characters. Of especial interest are his 'Shakespearean' sonnets, which, somewhat like Harrison's Meredithian poems, strike a balance between formal engagement with the canon and a playful desire to defy literary-critical metanarratives.

Armitage and Shakespeare

Armitage's 'Shakespearean' sonnets appear in several collections. One of his earliest, from *Kid*, is 'Poem'.⁸⁵ 'And if it snowed and snow covered the drive/he took a spade and tossed it to one side' the poem begins; before the unsettling image of the narrator slipping his daughter 'the one time that she lied.' The following stanzas detail humdrum domestic activities such as generous contributions to the housekeeping, praise of good cooking or shows of filial loyalty and yet, throughout, there are references to domestic violence, theft and aggression. Thematically, the poem seems to be exploring a mild form of human psychopathy, as sometimes controversial or taboo topics are treated with an unsettling *sang froid*: 'and once, for laughing, punched her in the face'. These subversive elements are all the more unsettling when set alongside the poem's metrical regularity and its ten syllable lines, which seem to mock the Shakespearean prototype. In fact, twelve of the fourteen lines of the poem scan as iambic pentameter, including 'and twice he lifted ten quid from her purse' and this, in microcosm, illustrates the fusion of formal conservatism and thematic subversion underpinning the masquerade mode. In 'Poem', and other subverted Shakespearean sonnets by Armitage, there is a great deal of tension generated by the deliberate technique of invoking the formal features of the Shakespearean original, such as the clearly demarcated three quatrains and final rhyming couplet, only to offset them against thematic and linguistic irregularities such as the anaphora of the conjunction 'and'. Perhaps a response to the grammatical prescriptivism of the eighteenth century and its various rules derived from Latin

⁸⁵ Simon Armitage, *Kid* (London: Faber, 1992), p. 29.

(a classically bourgeois language and one linked to ‘British Empire [and] SPQR’),⁸⁶ the repetition of ‘and’ throughout ‘Poem’ is one way in which Armitage works to undermine the sanctity of the sonnet form, along with the candid, direct address of the narrator: ‘he tipped up half his wage’; ‘he blubbed when she went from bad to worse.’ Despite, therefore, a superficial structural adherence to the Shakespearean original, even down to an almost uniform use of the iambic foot and regular rhyme, ‘Poem’ still works against the canonical authority of the traditional sonnet by undermining its language, themes and characters, and this is seen in other pseudo-sonnets such as ‘Man with a Golf Ball Heart’ from *The Dead Sea Poems* and ‘The Ornithologists’ from *Kid*.

‘Man with a Golf Ball Heart’⁸⁷ takes as its theme a form of mock anatomical deconstruction of an unnamed individual which recalls the abstract depersonalization of ‘About His Person’⁸⁸ and also the obsession with internal organs of ‘I’ve made out a will’.⁸⁹ The poem’s absurdist premise is in immediate conflict with the formal coherence of the sonnet tradition but this incongruous marriage of form and theme is apropos in a barbarian text which seeks to question the validity of norms altogether. Just as Bakhtin stresses the riot and disorder of carnival literature, the poem merges metrical and structural regularity with forays into surrealism and demotic references drawn from popular culture. The opening line, ‘they set about him with a knife and fork, I heard’ suggests some form of reported event; the dissection of a man with a golf ball for a heart. Far from the traditional subject matter of the sonnet form, the

⁸⁶ Harrison, ‘Classics Society’, *SP*, p. 120.

⁸⁷ ‘Man with a Golf Ball Heart’, *The Dead Sea Poems* (London: Faber, 1995), p. 5.

⁸⁸ *Kid*, p. 88.

⁸⁹ Simon Armitage, *Book of Matches* (London: Faber, 1993), p. 23.

line is metrically interesting given its use of the regular iambic rhythm found in Shakespeare's sonnets. Unlike the Shakespearean model, however, the line is extended by two syllables to give a full span of iambic feet totalling twelve; interpretable either as a wilfully over-extended line of pentameter or else as an ironic Alexandrine. In fact, every line of the sonnet has twelve syllables of fairly regular iambic feet, anchoring the text in a rigid metrical framework which is then subverted by the various images which this superstructure struggles to contain. References to 'Dunlop, dimpled, perfectly hard', 'a leathery,/rubbery, eyelid thing' and 'balm or gloss, like Copydex' all work against the metrical poise of the poem and subvert its attempt to organise its themes rationally, whilst the poem's frequent enjambment serves to elide lines and increase the sense of organisational disunity; recalling Bakhtin's 'joyful relativity of all structure and order.'⁹⁰ The poem's typographical form is unusual in its deployment of a stanza of eleven lines, followed by an isolated concluding (and non-rhyming) tercet, although there is a controlling logic at work, in that, just as the poem is composed of barbaric Alexandrines which subvert the reader's expectation of precisely ordered pentameter lines, so too the final tercet parodies the rhyming couplet of the Shakespearean original which, frequently rhymed and rounding off the syllogistic or tripartite structure of Shakespeare's poems, is jettisoned in favour of a deliberately inconclusive or deflationary terminal image:

that heart had been an apple once, they reckoned. Green.

They had a scheme to plant an apple there again

beginning with a pip, but he rejected it.

⁹⁰ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 124.

‘Man with a Golf Ball Heart’ therefore exemplifies the structural and linguistic features of barbarian masquerade by incorporating demotic or non-standard reference (‘spooned it out’; ‘they slit the skin’) and by undermining the poem’s attempt to cohere structurally. The resulting tension between tradition and playful self-awareness, metrical elegance and linguistic avant-gardism is different to that encountered in Harrison’s barbarian sonnets and yet the principle of interrogating a canonical form and forcing it to accommodate themes and imagery normally beyond its frame of reference is the same; underpinned by a Bakhtinian sense of comedic irreverence and iconoclasm.

‘The Ornithologists’ is ironically titled and, rather than the expected bird watchers, the ‘keen spotters’ of the poem turn out to be rather sadistic malcontents, out to ‘scare off house martins’ with strategically placed ‘strips of plastic’ on the drainpipe.⁹¹ Presumably a suburban married couple, they ‘watch closely for the season starting’ before launching their counter-avian campaign which is conceived so as to avoid the cost of ‘disinfectant,/caustic soda or even sandblasting.’ Thematically, the sonnet brings to mind the turmoil and riot of Bakhtinian carnival, with Armitage’s bizarre personae infiltrating the poised sonnet form and working against its status as a ‘moment’s monument’.

Structurally, the poem seems frozen at a mid-point between Shakespearean familiarity (the poem’s typography again stressing the neat division of quatrain and couplet), and anarchic dissent; knowing that any pretence of regularity serves only to heighten the underlying deviance of the poem as a whole. The

⁹¹ Armitage, *Kid*, p. 44.

language of the poem also signals a departure from the standard register of traditional verse and recalls Harrison's taboo in *Eloquence*. Echoing Sandie Byrne, we might assert that few sonnets contain words such as 'plastic', 'birdbath' or 'drainpipe' and note that even the rhyming couplet, so central to the syllogistic closure of the Shakespearean sonnet, is gently ridiculed here, with the 'doggerel' rhyme of *houses/ours* is providing uncommon comic relief to the 'high seriousness' of the form. Armitage is close here to Harrison in his appropriation of the traditional sonnet form as part of his challenge to normative language and the ideological presuppositions that 'poetic' speech can infer. Rather than modernise their themes and language and then fit these into the Meredithian or Shakespearean moulds, both poets set out to fracture and damage the sanctity of the very form they invoke: a truly liberating form of barbarian masquerade. Jonathan Barker notes that 'Harrison in his formal mastery claims back the hijacked language of poetry to use its forms as an expressive weapon against "Received Pronunciation" and to accommodate in verse the oral world of his origins' and this is just as true of Armitage, who forces the sonnet to confront themes and language otherwise excluded from canonical verse.⁹²

One further example of Armitage's barbaric reinterpretation of the Shakespearean sonnet is 'The Clown Punk' from *Tyrannosaurus Rex* where he sets out to combine structural integrity (the poem again has the three separated quatrains and the final, authoritative rhyming couplet) with vernacular or demotic language in order to create a hybrid form.⁹³ The punk of the title

⁹² Barker, *Bloodaxe I*, p. 51.

⁹³ (London: Faber, 2006), p. 24.

appears to be a vagrant figure of some sort who drifts aimlessly ‘through the shonky side of town’ looking ‘like a basket of washing that got up and walked.’ This realism anchors the poem in the vernacular of Bakhtin’s carnival and recalls Alvarez’ call for evocations of the socially relevant and realistic as opposed to the genteel and cultured and, by way of illustration, the man in the poem is described as ‘towing a dog on a rope’; an unprepossessing image recalling the tethered canine in ‘Man on the Line’ from *Zoom!*. Other references to the man include comments on his ‘pixellated’ skin, ‘deflated face’ and ‘shrunken scalp’, alongside quips about tattoos, ‘high punk’ and ‘windscreen wipers’. Overall, the language of the sonnet seems deliberately prosaic and conversational and so informal as to almost blur the line between ‘verse’ and doggerel.

In point of fact, Armitage’s language in this poem allows one to posit the existence of a vital conceptual continuity between Wordsworth’s ‘plain speech’, the *Mersey Sound* ‘street-cred populism’ of the 1960s, Harrison’s own ‘prole’ voices and Armitage’s sonnets themselves, and this rather truncated timeline echoes Armitage’s comments about having inherited a tradition from Harrison and Hughes who, in their turn, were engaged in a dialogue with such figures as Auden, Larkin and the Movement poets.⁹⁴ Phrases such as ‘he slathers his daft mush’ and ‘daubed with sad tattoos’ certainly bring to mind the candid communication of McGough, Patten or Henri (or, for that matter, Auden), whilst the structural qualities of the sonnet are self-evident: quatrains obediently

⁹⁴ Introduction to *The Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland since 1945*, ed. by Armitage and Crawford (London: Viking, 1998), p. xxx.

arranged (although with internal enjambment and overlap between each stanza), regular rhyme or half rhyme, and a terminal rhymed couplet. But this seeming rigidity is ironic when set aside the thematic irreverence and linguistic informality of the poem as a whole, and this, of course, is the intended effect. Indeed, whenever Armitage uses the sonnet he trades on the cultural *kudos* of the form in order to renegotiate its themes, language and spectrum of reference, and most critics find Harrison's use of the sonnets in *Eloquence* subversive in the same way. Sandie Byrne contends that

though the 'School of Eloquence' poems follow the traditional form and (to an extent) subject-matter of the extended or Meredithian sonnet, their adherence to these conventions highlights their disruption of others. The incorporation of material *conventionally excluded from canonical forms* enables the poet to have it both ways: to use the rhetorical possibilities of the sixteen-line sonnet while implicitly attacking it; to produce a beautifully wrought and moving poem, while refusing to allow the reader acquiescence in the form (in its traditional mode) and the complacent comfort of ignoring the device.⁹⁵

Armitage's approach is similar, although the notion of 'attack' above misses some of the nuances of Armitage's playfulness with language and theme, which are more focused on expanding the creative and linguistic range of the sonnet than with attacking the form as a stable platform for meaning and 'serious'

⁹⁵ Sandie Byrne, 'On Not Being Milton, Marvell, or Gray', in *Loiner*, ed. by Byrne, p. 59; my italics.

themes. A final illustration of this technique is provided by the ‘Reading the Banns’⁹⁶ vignettes from *Matches* which are illustrative of a far more advanced structural dislocation of the sonnet form than any of Harrison’s Meredithians, with six of the poems arranged as seven couplets down the page, recalling Maxwell’s minimalist approach in his ‘Out of the Rain’ pieces. Despite their atomised appearance, these poems insist on their status as proto- or anti-sonnets as a result of their regular couplets and fourteen lines. Beyond this superficiality, however, there is seemingly little thematic, linguistic or structural regularity. ‘This 1950 Rolls-Royce Silver Wraith’ tests the limits of the sonnet form by radically deconstructing the Shakespearean original such that metre, rhyme scheme and structure seem barbarically undermined or completely removed, and yet this is not entirely true, for the first line (and title) of the poem scans as perfect iambic pentameter, whilst the succeeding two lines, although fractured and forced apart, also form one complete line of pentameter:

is twenty quid

above the going rate.⁹⁷

What seems at first sight to be an annihilated sonnet pared to its most fragile core elements becomes momentarily a metrically regular and perhaps less intimidating poem, although this playful use of the sonnet’s key features is a deceitful tactic common to many poems by Armitage: from line four, the barbarian intrusion of ‘Bentley’ and ‘green Mercedes-Benz’ signals the

⁹⁶ *Book of Matches*, pp. 59-70.

⁹⁷ *Book of Matches*, p. 64.

linguistic indecorum of the masquerade mode and the erasure of structural regularity from the rest of the poem. Given that ‘from Milton to Wordsworth to Owen to Berrigan, sonnet writers have had to fight the assumption that the sonnet is a genre with one proper subject and aim’, Armitage’s determination to re-make the Shakespearean sonnet may be interpreted as a contribution to the narrative of refashioning animating the sonnet’s continued existence.⁹⁸ The mention of Berrigan’s poetry is important in this regard as there are many parallels between the New York School, American formal experimentation, and Armitage’s sonnet style which suggests an inherited transatlantic iconoclasm. Armitage’s sonnets are especially close in style, structure and voice to the work of e. e. cummings, Frank O’Hara and Ted Berrigan and this might go some way to explaining the distinctive Armitage style, which differs so markedly from Harrison’s Marxist pragmatism.

⁹⁸ A. D. Cousins and Peter Howarth, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to The Sonnet*, pp. 4-5.

American Influences on the Barbaric Sonnet

The distinctively ludic and ironic voice heard within Armitage's sonnets is partly attributable to the influence of the New York School poets such as Frank O'Hara, whose trademark conversational style animates and informs many of the *Matches* sonnets. In poems such as 'On Rachmaninoff's Birthday',⁹⁹ the O'Haran sense of immediacy and conversational intimacy, exemplified by lines such as 'quick! A last poem before I go/off my rocker' and 'shit/on the soup, let it burn', create an anarchic and irreverent voice found also in such poems as 'I like vivid, true-to-life love scenes' by Armitage,¹⁰⁰ with its similarly (seemingly) extempore compositional style. Just as O'Hara's narrator invites intimacy whilst delaying revelation ('I'm a child again'), so Armitage's persona calls into question the sonnet's historical role as a confessional mode by offering personal commentary undercut by ambiguity and cliché: 'that's/when I like love best - not locked away/but left unsung, unsaid./And then the rest.' 'Strike two',¹⁰¹ from *Matches* shows the same influence, with its invitation to easygoing informality and its playful use of language. In the poem, the pun on 'striking' recalls the matches struck as Armitage's narrator performs his anecdotal 'party piece', whilst the informal tone and comedic imagery ('smiling/like a melon with a slice missing') brings to mind O'Hara's 'exhilaratingly open-ended and fun' approach to writing.¹⁰² Armitage's sonnet nods to the formal prescriptivism of Crosland and the sonnet tradition by incorporating a rhyming couplet, although any

⁹⁹ Frank O'Hara, 'On Rachmaninoff's Birthday' in *Lunch Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1964), p. 7.

¹⁰⁰ Armitage, *Book of Matches*, p. 6.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁰² Ian Gregson, *Simon Armitage* (London: Salt, 2011), p. 11.

regularity thus produced is undercut by the rhyme on ‘mud’ and ‘doing good’, which again brings to mind the O’Hara voice, with its tendency towards deflation and anti-rhetorical openness. O’Hara’s ‘A Step Away From Them’¹⁰³ exemplifies the casual tone of many of the lunch poems and reveals a geographical specificity which is also seen in Armitage’s work from *Zoom!* to *Seeing Stars*. ‘A Step Away’ opens with the perfunctory ‘it’s my lunch hour’ and the precise demarcation of time and place: ‘I go/for a walk among the hum-colored/cabs [...] to Time Square.’ Evoking the Manhattan avenues of his lunch hour, O’Hara stops ‘for a cheeseburger at JULIET’S/CORNER’ before resuming his walk past ‘the Manhattan Storage Warehouse’ and going ‘back to work’. ‘I’m dreaming of that work’ by Armitage takes up O’Hara’s circumlocutory style and circumambulatory progress by evoking the dream world of his home before removing to ‘the observation suite in Emley Moor Mast’, thence observing the ‘skyline from the Appalachians to the Alps’. Armitage’s poem has the same informality of tone as O’Hara’s piece and shares its evocation of the offhand and unplanned remark (‘a thousand miles away perhaps’), whilst its ironically precise rhyming couplet and the iambic pentameter of the final line again suggest O’Hara’s levity of expression and interrogation of lyric familiarity.

As Ian Gregson points out, ‘the context in which Armitage started to write was dominated by a poetic in which figures such as Muldoon and O’Hara were representative’ and this partly explains the distinctly O’Haran qualities of Armitage’s first collection, *Zoom!* and Meredithian sonnets such as ‘Poem’,

¹⁰³ O’Hara, pp. 15-17.

which looks forward to its namesake in *Kid*, three years later.¹⁰⁴ In ‘Poem’, Armitage adopts a strikingly O’Haran voice, going so far as to mimic O’Hara’s intertextual references to other poets by citing O’Hara himself in the poem’s opening lines:

Frank O’Hara was open on the desk
but I went straight for the directory

whilst the casual style, recalling O’Hara in ‘A Step Away’ whose *final* lines mention ‘Poems by Pierre Reverdy’, recalls O’Hara’s celebration of the ephemeral and evanescent: ‘Talking Heads were on the radio. I/was just about to mention the football.’ Similarly, and just as O’Hara, in poems such as ‘Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul’¹⁰⁵ incorporates biographical detail and the conversation of friends within the body of the poem, so Armitage, in ‘Poem’, mimics this spontaneous verbal inclusivity by reporting the speech of his narrators, who appear almost as walk-on parts in a drama script. The similarities with O’Hara’s style in ‘Adieu to Norman’ are striking:

and Allen is back talking about god a lot

and Peter is back not talking very much

and Joe has a cold and is not coming to Kenneth’s

(O’Hara)

¹⁰⁴ Gregson, p. 11.

¹⁰⁵ O’Hara, pp.34-6.

and

Nick was out, Joey was engaged, Jim was
just making coffee and why didn't I

come over

(Armitage)

Although Armitage's sonnet is arranged in a far more typographically circumscribed way, with four non-rhyming quatrains as opposed to the permissive *vers libre* of O'Hara's poem, the same casual and perfunctory style can be seen, as well as a similar facility with language and expression, which is driven in the poem by seemingly haphazard recollections and phatic interpolations such as 'it was only half past ten but what the hell'.

The 1992 collection *Kid* consistently echoes O'Hara's conversational ethic, and this dialogue with the American poet and the New York School tends to be most manifest in the 'Robinson' poems, analysed above. 'Robinson's Life Sentence'¹⁰⁶ is an early extended pun, the poem named after the Kees' character and detailing events from his life - all in one poetic paragraph one sentence long. Besides this obvious structural profanity and ludic style, the poem's detailing of the quotidian and geographically precise recalls O'Hara's Manhattan perambulations and the accretions of image and observation to which they give

¹⁰⁶ *Kid* (London: Faber, 1992), p. 59.

rise. 'Rise early from a double bed', 'browse down the high street' and 'take a drink, eat, talk shop' in Armitage's poem are neatly counterpoised by O'Hara's evocations of New York in poems such as 'The Day Lady Died', where O'Hara writes in a similarly evocative but plain style: 'it is 12:20 in New York a Friday'; 'I walk up the muggy street'; 'I just stroll into the PARK LANE/Liquor Store'.¹⁰⁷ Elsewhere, such as in 'The Twang' from *The Universal Home Doctor*,¹⁰⁸ the New York-O'Haran style is reprised in order to evoke an April day in Manhattan which features a vulgar pageant of nationalistic flag waving. The laconic address of this unrhymed Meredithian is clearly inspired by the O'Haran model, and is heard in 'well it was St George's Day in New York' and 'the mayor on a float on Fifth', which brings to mind 'if I rest for a moment near The Equestrian' and 'they're putting up the Christmas trees on Park/Avenue' in 'Music'.¹⁰⁹ References to the Hudson and 'bulldogs arse-to-mouth in Central Park' complete the voyeuristic vignette and seem to prove Armitage's own point that he was 'a Frank O'phile from an early age'.¹¹⁰ It is important to note, parenthetically, how little Harrison's American poems resemble those written by O'Hara and the New York School poets, with Harrison opting in the main for a style closer to Robert Frost's poetry, captured in titles such as 'Following Pine'¹¹¹ with its evocation of Frost's 'Mending Wall', or 'Cypress & Cedar';¹¹² both poems evoking the spirit of the American pastoral, as opposed to the urban style of O'Hara, and composed in a fairly regular blank verse which seems

¹⁰⁷ O'Hara, *Lunch Poems*, pp. 25-6.

¹⁰⁸ Simon Armitage, 'The Twang', *The Universal Home Doctor* (London: Faber, 2002), p. 17.

¹⁰⁹ O'Hara, *Lunch Poems*, pp. 1-2.

¹¹⁰ Armitage in 'Armitage in America', *Poetry Review*, Spring 1994, p. 11, in Gregson, *Simon Armitage*, p. 16.

¹¹¹ Tony Harrison, 'Following Pine' in *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2006), pp. 220-9.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 230-4.

rather wooden and contrived when set aside O'Hara's verbal ingenuity and Armitage's syllabic rhythms. Only in 'Giving Thanks'¹¹³ does Harrison come anywhere near O'Hara's or Armitage's voice, with his evocations of Thanksgiving Day in New York. Adopting the first-person perspective of O'Hara, Harrison evokes 'last night on 77th', 'the Macy mammoths' and 'the browning trees of Central Park', and the 'I' voice suggests a similarly solipsistic concern for personal experience. That said, the style and expression of the poem are wholly different to the pragmatic indifference of O'Hara and the poem's regular, Meredithian structure is much closer to Armitage's 'The Twang' than any of O'Hara's pieces.

The use of the pun in Armitage's work may have been inspired at least in part by some of O'Hara's poems, where 'verbal indecorum' and playfulness with words are much in evidence. 'Cornkind'¹¹⁴ from the *Lunch Poems* illustrates O'Hara's fondness for verbal play with its double use of 'kind' (German *kinder*) to suggest childbirth or procreation, illustrated in the line 'do I really want a son/to carry on my idiocy past the Horned gates', whilst the blending of high and low cultural reference throughout the poem (Bette Davis, William Morris, Hart Crane) recalls Harrison's postmodern literary *bricolage* and Armitage's fondness for the irreverent juxtaposition of image. Overall, O'Hara's influence on Armitage's poetic aesthetic seems beyond doubt, given Armitage's use of verbal play, ironically merged images and levity of expression which seem modelled, at least in the early collections, on O'Hara. Just as O'Hara and fellow New York School

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 200.

¹¹⁴ O'Hara, *Lunch Poems*, pp. 42-3.

poets interrogated the poise and prestige of the lyric, helping to deflate the post-Romantic conception of lyric verse as ‘a translucent, intensely felt, individual utterance’ concerned with love or powerful emotional states, so Armitage moves the sonnet form (a preeminent lyric model) into novel territory in *Matches* and elsewhere by playfully merging competing registers and formal devices to produce a hybrid, Bakhtinian form which participates in the literary tradition which produced it only insofar as it may be subverted in order to create masquerade.¹¹⁵ In this sense, some of Armitage’s creative renegotiations may be attributed, at least in part, to the influence of the Americans and their playful extensions of lyric voice and style.

Two further American influences on Armitage’s sonnets may be posited here, although neither may be said to have contributed quite as meaningfully to Armitage’s style as O’Hara. e. e. cummings’ use of the sonnet form, alluded to above, results in a strikingly novel departure from the historically validated English and Italian models and their formal elegance. Eschewing punctuation and traditional lyric expression in favour of an eclectic idiom composed of stray reference and conversational rhythms, cummings’ sonnet comes close to Armitage’s informal style even if the appearance of the sonnet on the page seems very different. In his *73 poems*,¹¹⁶ cummings signals a break with the sonnet tradition (surpassed only by Berrigan) which sees traditional layout and expression supplanted by experimental and ironic voices and styles of composition. Meredithians such as sonnet 18 suggest the typographical

¹¹⁵ Scott Brewster, *Lyric* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 31.

¹¹⁶ e.e. cummings, *73 poems* (London: Faber, 1963).

impatience of Harrison's *Continuous* poems and employ a colloquial voice which looks forward to Armitage's work ('superhuman flights/of submoronic fancy'), whilst eleven of the sonnet's lines are fully iambic although undermined by a constant enjambment which denies absolute regularity. Like Armitage, Cummings seems to rely on the sonnet's formal prescriptivism as a means of assaulting the tradition which called it into being, producing his own form of masquerade. Sonnet 32 ('all which isn't singing is mere talking') for instance, uses the 14-line platform of the English sonnet in order to question that form's stability and claims to ubiquity. The poem has the three quatrains and final couplet of the Shakespearean original and uses regular rhymes on the odd lines of the quatrains. This token compliance with the 'rules' of Crosland's sonnet canon then breaks down as Cummings critiques the elegance of the sonnet form by incorporating demotic expressions and digressive conversational references to 'sobs and reasons threats and smiles', whilst also performing a subtle attack on the expected iambs by alternating ten and nine-syllable lines (with the final couplet also having nine-syllable lines). This permissive blending of formal constraint on the one hand, and anarchic divergence on the other, recalls Bakhtin's idea of the everyday or official world turned upside down and sets the scene for Armitage's later revisions and playful parody. Indeed, most of Cummings' sonnets employ a variety of typographical breakdown which is at odds with the expected symmetry of the form, even as they retain such features as the couplet and the iamb as 'token' vestiges of the historical sonnet which precedes them. Sonnet 35, for instance, uses the three-quatrain format of sonnet 32 but breaks the thirteenth line (shall we say guessed?/"we shall" quoth gifted she') so as to deny the closure offered by the couplet - just as Armitage

frequently fractures lines in his sonnets. The language of sonnet 35 is also noteworthy, with a characteristic conversational idiom which subverts Crosland's imprecations against levity of speech and, instead, celebrates the cosmopolitan and ephemeral: 'despite the ultramachinations of/some loveless infraworld'. The sonnet is also composed entirely in iambic pentameter which, alongside idiomatic speech and coinages such as 'morethanme', suggest an American masquerade which would later, through O'Hara, influence Armitage and other British poets. Although Harrison seems far less influenced by this American vernacular of Cummings and O'Hara, it is important to point out briefly the typographical affinities uniting the two poets, with Cummings' sonnet 36 very close to Harrison's 'A Close One' in its deployment of the fractured or floating line. Sonnet 36 is actually a 'traditional' love sonnet (with lines such as 'most mercifully glorying keen star') and is written in an identifiably, if not entirely mainstream, romantic idiom, with references to the 'twilight of winter' and 'a snowstopped silent world'. This regularity and adherence to formal constraints is, however, immediately subverted by the poem's appearance on the page, with three single lines, a couplet, a tercet, a quatrain and a couplet made up of one 'broken' line which splits its iambs across two half lines (with a hyphen acting as caesura), and this playfulness with form extends across *73 poems*.

Although Armitage has never acknowledged Cummings as a direct influence on his work, O'Hara and the New York School were heavily influenced by the avant-garde language and compositional style of such poets as William Carlos Williams and Cummings, and hence Armitage's fondness for O'Hara's unplanned style and use of idiomatic expression presupposes the influence of

cummings. In the case of Ted Berrigan's sonnets, however, even less direct or acknowledged influence may be detected but, once again, there seems to be interesting parallels uniting Armitage and Berrigan's sonneteering. Certainly, Berrigan's sonnets are unlike any other twentieth-century poems, even those by 'fellow' American poets such as cummings, a fact acknowledged by Stephen Burt's assertion that 'Berrigan's volume remains the most important contemporary use of sonnet form, the one that stands farthest apart from what came before'.¹¹⁷ His *Sonnets* take playfulness with form to extreme levels of metrical subversion and irony, with several poems only comprehensible when read as an extended sequence-within-a-sequence. Alice Notley notes 'the disjunctiveness of *The Sonnets*'¹¹⁸ and hints at their impenetrability, commenting that 'these poems are pervaded by instincts learned from using chance methods' (xi) - a comment which invites parallels with cummings' work, at least on the level of experimentation with form and typography. Berrigan, trying 'to break the ages-old logic of the sonnet and sonnetlike poems and to make a new statement about reality' (x) often invokes the organisational logic of the sonnet in order to deconstruct it, as in sonnet XV ('in Joe Brainard's collage its white arrow'),¹¹⁹ which extends over fourteen lines but which must be read from 'outside in' in order to be 'understood'. The resulting collage effect, with line one leading to line fourteen, line two to line thirteen and so on, radically re-vision the sonnet and forces readers to make connections of their own, in order to supply the vacuum left by the poem's own ambivalence to narration and

¹¹⁷ Stephen Burt, 'The contemporary sonnet', in *The Cambridge Companion to The Sonnet*, p. 249.

¹¹⁸ Alice Notley, notes to Ted Berrigan, *The Sonnets* (New York: Penguin, 2000), p. viii. Further references in text.

¹¹⁹ Berrigan, *The Sonnets*, p. 14.

coherence. Although neither Armitage nor Harrison writes in the same style as Berrigan or applies his radical approach to composition, the Berrigan aesthetic of disorder and stylistic dissonance may be seen as a parallel to their ethic of dissent and their use of masquerade, especially given the fact that ‘Berrigan’s poems have been responsible for something of a latter-day sonnet renaissance amongst linguistically innovative poets’.¹²⁰ Whilst Hilson’s comment cannot be taken as proof of any direct correlation of style or deliberate *homage* or influence, it remains a fact that Armitage’s style in particular is marked by an idiomatic and ironic tone which recalls the American intonation of O’Hara, whilst also evincing an experimental approach to structure and typography which lies at the heart of much American poetry. As Geoffrey Moore has suggested, ‘even at their most sophisticated, the Americans are more down-to-earth, less ‘literary’ than the English’¹²¹ and, summarising the American poetic voice which was introduced by the Beats, Ginsberg, the New York School and Williams, Moore suggests ‘harsh, direct, ironical, obtaining its effects by timing, catching the cultural echoes and references which the tang of idiom brings with it’ (35) as defining features: all found abundantly in Armitage’s verse.

In summary, the American influence on Armitage’s sonnets is primarily linguistic and is linked to the ‘anti-poetic’: factual, simple - sometimes banal, un-mellifluous’ voice of many American poets and, in particular, O’Hara and Cummings (27). Armitage’s style of composition is unique and singular but derives some of its easygoing and familiar levity from the speech rhythms of

¹²⁰ Hilson, *The Reality Street Book of Sonnets*, p. 11.

¹²¹ Geoffrey Moore, ed., *The Penguin Book of American Verse* (London: Penguin, 1989), p. 23. Further references in text.

American poetry, which may be said to possess a candour and directness not far removed from the ‘plain speech’ of the north, whilst Harrison’s sonnets derive their conversational style from the patterns of speech of his parents and other Loiners. Like his American precursors, Armitage has struck back against the prescriptivism of the sonnet tradition by introducing linguistic novelty and comedy into the form, and the resulting tension between tradition and innovation sustains the masquerade element in his work.

Barbarian Sonnets: A Conclusion?

Richard Hoggart has observed that ‘one traditional release of working-class people in their dealings with authority is [...] their debunking-art, their putting-a-finger-to-the-nose at authority by deflating it, by guying at it’ and this Bakhtinian motif has been identified as a central animating principle in Harrison and Armitage’s sonnets.¹²² In response to the prescriptivism of critics such as T. W. H. Crosland, who claim the sonnet as a circumscribed bourgeois artefact beyond modification, Harrison invokes the voices of proles and the marginalised, whilst Armitage turns to the wisecrack, the pun, slang, and unrhymed and metrically loose pseudo-sonnets, all of which, as Hoggart notes, debunk and deflate such claims as Crosland’s assertion that ‘humorous or cynical commentary [...] can in no circumstances amount to high poetry’¹²³ or

¹²² Hoggart, *Uses of Literacy*, p. 77.

¹²³ Crosland, p. 94. Further references in text.

his belief that the sonnet must be ‘entirely free from slang, cant, and foreign words and phrases, Americanisms, dialect, Greek, Latin, technical and scientific nomenclature, and names with unpoetic associations’ (95). Believing that ‘people who hold the sonnet lightly are deficient of judgment [sic] and a danger to poetry,’ (245), Crosland is clearly an extreme example of a rather dated critical position, and yet both Harrison and Armitage seem to be motivated by a desire to answer him and conservative critics more generally, especially those who place the sonnet at the centre of a culture war which pits ‘the overly refined cultural overtones the sonnet has gathered around itself’¹²⁴ against barbaric playfulness with form, irony, and ‘gamesmanship or formal reinvention.’¹²⁵ This does not, of course, entail a correlation of style or voice across both poets’ work and nor does it assume a shared aesthetic or self-conscious adoption of Bakhtinian theory on their part. Indeed, and as this chapter has shown, however similar both poets’ use of masquerade, their work does not overlap as though each were writing with precognition of the other’s position, or in response to it. Although there is a similar dialectic at work within their verse and a similar engagement with political, linguistic and formal matters, there is much which separates them as writers, from Harrison’s more trenchant Marxism and aggressively ‘barbarian’ employment of dialect and vernacular, to Armitage’s more ludic and sardonic attacks on the *status quo*.

¹²⁴ Jeff Hilson, in ‘Contemporary poets and the sonnet: a triologue’, Paul Muldoon, Meg Tyler, Jeff Hilson, ed. by Peter Howarth, in A. D. Cousins and Peter Howarth, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to The Sonnet*, p. 13.

¹²⁵ Stephen Burt, ‘The contemporary sonnet’, in *The Cambridge Companion to The Sonnet*, p. 261.

Some of these differences could be accounted for by the different experiences of literacy, social class and education which Harrison's generation underwent; from the Butler Education Act of 1944 (which 'enabled' Harrison's own entrée to academia and the 'establishment'), to the post-War era of economic depression and the class divisions of Thatcher's Britain. Armitage's generation, to be sure, was more literate, socially mobile and educationally privileged than Harrison's, and many of the social barriers to further and higher education no longer existed by the time of Armitage's university education and early career as a poet; perhaps as a result of such determined actors as Harrison and Tom Leonard who, in poetry, battled 'against a class-bound literary establishment'¹²⁶ and took on 'the authoritarianism of the cultural elite and the repression of difference by those in positions of power.'¹²⁷ That said, the differences which exist between Harrison and Armitage are only partly socio-economic and simple appeals to biography cannot account fully for their contending styles either. It seems safe to assert, for example, that Harrison is one of a group of post-War British poets, along with Tom Leonard and Peter Reading, whose interpretations of, and engagement with, the metanarratives of class, power and access to cultural commodities such as education and the canon are highly combative and imbued with a strong flavour of Marxist polemic. Just as Reading's poetry features 'uncomfortable, serious, contemporary themes [treated] with a rare degree of intensity in tenacity and passion', Harrison's poetry fights established literary dogma with a similarly uncompromising candour.¹²⁸ Armitage, participating in

¹²⁶ Sarah Broom, *Contemporary British and Irish Poetry: An Introduction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 10.

¹²⁷ Broom, p. 23.

¹²⁸ Isabel Martin, *Reading Peter Reading* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 2000), p. 82.

the ‘democratisation and pluralisation’¹²⁹ of poetry and society since the 1960s, and assuming a less neo-Marxist or overtly aggressive poetic register, is more easily positioned within the postmodern and its tendency towards playfulness, ‘hostility to hierarchies of value, and alertness to the voices of the marginalised’; although, as ever, these are also concerns found in Harrison’s poems.¹³⁰

It becomes apparent that the key point of contact linking the two poets is their belief that any attempt at the cultural commodification of poetry or, more broadly, literature, is inherently dubious and elitist. Their barbaric sonnets therefore serve the purpose of undermining attempts at bourgeois self-affirmation and self-mythologizing, whilst their integration of working-class and demotic voices within traditionally conservative forms challenges the supposed inviolability of the sonnet as a traditional lyric model. Neil Roberts has spoken of ‘Harrison’s choice of verse form [as] a crucial element in [his] ideological project’¹³¹ and, as Barker notes, ‘Harrison in his formal mastery claims back the hijacked language of poetry to use its forms [such as the sonnet] as an expressive weapon against ‘Received Pronunciation’ and to accommodate in verse the oral world of his origins’ and we have seen precisely the same tactic at work in Armitage’s sonnets.¹³² Knowing that the best way to challenge ideology is from within established forms, Harrison and Armitage have mastered the ‘tradition’ before attacking its fallacies.

¹²⁹ Broom, p. 1.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Neil Roberts, ‘Poetry and Class: Tony Harrison, Peter Reading, Ken Smith, Sean O’Brien’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth Century English Poetry*, ed. by Neil Corcoran (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), p. 217.

¹³² Barker, *Bloodaxe I*, p. 51.

One central fallacy is the idea of canonical ‘authority’ itself and the idea that the sonnet, along with other forms, should be bound by literary theory or tradition. For both poets, the sonnet is one of several possible modes of expression, rather than a rarefied art form unamenable to adaptation or renegotiation. Like Eagleton, Harrison and Armitage therefore believe that

the so-called ‘literary canon’, the unquestioned ‘great tradition’ of the ‘national literature’, has to be recognized as a *construct*, fashioned by particular people for particular reasons at a certain time. There is no such thing as a literary work or tradition which is valuable *in itself*, regardless of what anyone might have said or come to say about it. ‘Value’ is a transitive term: it means whatever is valued by certain people in specific situations, according to particular criteria and in the light of given purposes.¹³³

Seen in this light, their radical reappraisal of the uses, themes and language of the sonnet is clearly a part of their emancipatory project to interrogate middle class conceptions of art and to establish an egalitarian canon, and N. S.

Thompson is one critic who has recognised Harrison’s efforts to use the sonnet form as a catalyst for ideological and literary reconfiguration: ‘in the ‘School of Eloquence’’ he writes, ‘there can be no Horatian *concordia* in his *discors*: the work seeks to remind the reader of the working-class struggle during the centuries of underprivilege which have bred an inarticulacy which has in turn further marginalized the class from the centres of culture and excellence,

¹³³ Eagleton, *Literary Theory, An Introduction*, p. 11, emphases in original.

especially in education.’¹³⁴ By incorporating the lost voices of the proletariat into his poems (the voices of people such as his father, uncles and other ‘tongueless men’), Harrison attacks canonical conservatism and uses a central lyric mode in the creation of a new form of verse which marries contending registers, voices, modes, levels of expression and cultural mythologies. Harrison uses ‘the forms of a genre to resist or subvert its traditional content’ and there is a good deal of revenge involved in this hijacking of canonical forms and language, as one sees in Armitage’s work as well.¹³⁵

Harrison and Armitage therefore develop their literary barbarism in order to undermine the sonnet and question its rules, tradition and themes. Harrison, in ‘challenging the aesthetics of the Petrarchan, Shakespearian and sixteen-line sonnets’ and writing ‘perverted sonnets’ with debased themes, challenges the supposed value of the form, whilst his ‘choice of a “barbaric” sonnet form outside the main tradition’ signals a deeply committed nonconformism.¹³⁶

Armitage, whose sonnets are even less metrically unified than Harrison’s, and whose ‘Reading the Banns’ and *Seeing Stars* pieces seem to be a kind of absurdist challenge to the idea of a stable sonnet form, is just as willing to attack the canon, and, as a younger poet, he has clearly inherited some aspects of Harrison’s barbarism and his reaction to narratives of exclusion, even though his own concerns tend towards the comedic and parodic rather than the overtly political. Both poets’ use of the masquerade mode certainly enables them to write from within the traditional literary canon whilst renegotiating its status and

¹³⁴ N. S. Thompson, ‘Book Ends: Public and Private in Tony Harrison’s Poetry’, *Loiner*, Byrne, ed., p. 119.

¹³⁵ Byrne, *Loiner*, ‘On Not Being Milton, Marvell, or Gray’, p. 64.

¹³⁶ Rowland, p. 271.

attacking its prejudices, and the resulting dissonance recalls the definition of masquerade given above; suggesting its duplicity, playfulness, subversion of order, and counterfeiting of literary proprieties, or what Bakhtin calls the ‘degradation [or] lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract.’¹³⁷ Just as Renaissance carnival ‘took possession of all the genres of high literature and transformed them fundamentally’¹³⁸ so barbarian masquerade allows Harrison and Armitage to repossess the traditional sonnet and force it into combinations of language, theme and reference previously unthinkable: pushing the creative limits of the permissible and insisting on the form’s ability to confront new subject matter(s), linguistic references and levels of meaning. As Terry Eagleton notes of Harrison, he ‘is a natural Bakhtinian, even if he has never read a word of him’¹³⁹ and Armitage’s sonnets also exemplify the debunking and deflationary tendencies of carnival art, even though he has never commented on any Bakhtinian influence on his work. The barbarian sonnet therefore emerges as an unstable, irreverent and polymorphously perverse lyric to be set alongside the barbaric elegies, dramatic monologues and classical translations which Harrison and Armitage have written over the course of their careers.

The next chapter extends the idea of masquerade as an agent of disorder by analysing both poets’ use of comical, satirical and irreverent material, which is frequently deployed as part of their wider oppositional poetics and its focus on subversion. As I will demonstrate, their writing is fuelled as much by thematic licence and playfulness as by interrogations of form and lyric proprieties, with

¹³⁷ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 19.

¹³⁸ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 130.

¹³⁹ Terry Eagleton, ‘Antagonisms: Tony Harrison’s v.’, in *Bloodaxe I*, p. 349.

Harrison's comedy defined by its nihilistic, aggressive and cynical worldview, and Armitage's humour grounded in the parodic, sardonic and ironic.

Ch. 4: Comedy and Masquerade: God, Violence, Play

‘you worship a dead man and tell one another that *this* world is not for us, while the next is all that matters. Only there is no next world.’

- *Julian*, Gore Vidal

As previous chapters have demonstrated, Harrison and Armitage’s writing is characterised by a pronounced sense of antagonism concerning authority, form, language, and theme, and we have seen that their barbaric poetics is animated by a provocative subversion of inherited poetic practice. Although concerned chiefly with linguistic experimentation and the incorporation of non-standard registers within traditional forms, the two poets’ masquerade writing also engages with a range of pressing social, political and ethical concerns not commonly explored in popular verse, and this chapter addresses two key thematic areas which dominate their work: atheism and violence. As I intend to show, masquerade is a multifaceted and complex literary mode exemplified by, but not limited to, linguistic and structural impropriety and barbaric subversions of lyric convention: to be sure, these linguistic manifestations of the barbaric style actually herald a more far-reaching interrogation of poetic norms, as Harrison and Armitage use masquerade to explore a range of subjects rarely present in the mainstream or traditional lyric poem. We begin by considering the status and development of atheistic writing across Harrison’s *oeuvre* before

considering Armitage's playful use of shocking and violent material in his poetry.

'The Death of the PWD Man'¹ is an early manifestation of the irreligious in Harrison's work, and the 'profane' outbursts of this 'articulate Loiner'² indicate an early preoccupation with the conflict between personal liberty, especially in matters of sexual taste, and religious law. The tone adopted by Harrison's garrulous narrator is comical and Bahktinian in its 'lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract'³ but the levity of his style belies the forceful denunciation of the metaphysical which animates his 'song':

Sunset; six; the muezzin starts calling; church bells
 clang,
 swung iron against iron **versus** amplified *Koran*.
 It's bottoms up at sundown at the praying ground and
 bar,
 though I prefer the bottle to the Crescent and the Star,
 the bottle to the Christians' Cross, and, if I may be
 frank,
 living to all your heavens like a woman to a wank⁴

Apart from the subversive effect achieved by insinuating taboo language into the poem's melodic rhyming couplets, this outburst adumbrates the main features of

¹ *SP*, pp. 45-9.

² Sandie Byrne *H, v. & O* (MUP, 1998), p. 163.

³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 19.

⁴ 'The Death of the PWD Man', *SP*, pp. 45-6. Emphasis mine.

Harrison's rejection of religious consolation and suggests a defiantly aggressive secular humanism. The deliberate juxtaposition of 'versus' separating the muezzin's call from the sound of church bells, although perhaps intended to polarise the two contending Abrahamic faiths, actually serves to conflate them and suggest their essential similarities, such as their proselytizing impulse and their use of music to attract the faithful: a gesture wasted on the pragmatic PWD man, who embodies Harrison's comical indifference to the ceremonial aspects of religion. The following image of 'bottoms up' at mosque and bar recalls Bakhtin's profanation theory but goes further, suggesting the futility of prostration and 'submission' before an absent deity, when earthier, tangible pleasures are to be had elsewhere, and without the need to deny one's humanity. This rejection of the divine brings to mind Juvenal's mordant comments in his *Satires* about the folly of supernatural belief, and in particular his mocking of traditional piety, envisioned as a form of self-indulgent infantilism:

that there are such things as spirits of the dead and infernal
regions,
the river Cocytus, and the Styx with inky frogs in its waters,
that so many thousands cross the stream in a single skiff,
not even children believe, unless they're still in the nursery⁵

and one often detects a Juvenalian impulse in Harrison's irreligious writing which suggests an indebtedness to the Roman poet's candid anti-

⁵ Juvenal, 'Satire II', in Niall Rudd, trans., *Juvenal: The Satires* (OUP: New York, 1999), ll. 149-52, p. 14.

supernaturalism. His evocation of Juvenalian humour also prefigures Armitage's blending of comical and macabre reference in his work, and the deadpan, Cynical idiom of his narrators.

The final trio of juxtaposed images setting 'the bottle' against crescent and cross, and sexual liberty against the promise of heaven, reject the promise of post-mortem rewards for a life of abstinence in favour of carnal and physical pleasures in the here and now. The deflationary comparison of heaven to 'living' and 'a woman to a wank', although clearly jocular, constitutes a comprehensive rejection of Islamic and Christian moral teaching and exhortations to live pious lives. For the PWD man, there is only one life of which we can be certain, and it is therefore incumbent upon us to live that life to the full: a position which recalls the pragmatism of Hellenic philosophy more than scriptural injunctions to deny the flesh and pursue a life of celibacy: 'it is good for a man not to touch a woman.'⁶

Other poems from early collections suggest Harrison's rejection of the supernatural realm and the epistemological claims of mainstream religion, whilst others attack acts of religious intolerance, sadism or evil. One such poem is 'The Nuptial Torches',⁷ which focuses on the Inquisition-era court of Phillip of Spain and his young bride Isabella. Actually an affecting dramatic monologue which details the virginal Isabella's fear of Philip's aggressive sexual advances, any pathos thus produced is diminished by the context of the young bride's

⁶ *King James Bible*, I Corinthians 7. 1.

⁷ *SP*, pp. 60-2.

laments: the spectacle of the autos-da-fés and their gruesome conclusion (which explains the poem's macabre title). Although the social context of the autos is well known, their essentially public and dramatic nature is often overlooked, and, to be sure, the essence of the auto was its spectacle:

the condemned were led forward barefoot, wearing the yellow penitential robe, the *sanbenito*, and holding a candle. Guarded by halberdiers, they were preceded by a Dominican in his black robes holding the green cross of the Inquisition and by officers of the Inquisition marching in twos.⁸

Harrison places this theatre of the absurd in the background of his poem, but it forms the backdrop to Isabella's complaints and makes them seem all the more self-pitying and objectionable, more so when one considers that, in Seville alone, 'between 1481 and 1488 at least 700 people were burnt [and] another 5,000 were reconciled and had their goods seized.'⁹ Any pity for Isabella must therefore be tempered by the gruesome facts of Inquisitorial practices, which are the real focus of the poet's opprobrium.

Although Isabella certainly invites the reader's intimacy, her sadistic pleasure derived from watching Carlos de Sessa and other heretics burnt alive focuses attention on the religio-political realities of the Inquisition and the use of Catholicism as a tool of state power: in this case, as part of the subjugation of the Dutch. The poem opens with a petulant Isabella indignant at the loss of

⁸ Toby Green, *Inquisition* (London: Macmillan, 2007), p. 34.

⁹ *Ibid.*

‘Netherlandish lengths’ and obviously bored as ‘flesh [...] falls off the chains’ during a public burning. Her frame of reference is almost entirely sartorial or domestic: flesh is ‘wet linen’, ‘bed-clothes off a lovers’ bed’ or ‘crumpled like a coverlid’; a dog’s skin is ‘puckered round the knees like rumpled hose’ and, later, she will notice Philip’s tights and ‘crusted tunics’, preparatory to the amorous assaults which will define their sexual union. This almost adolescent insouciance is offset by her *ennui*, and indifference to the immolation of heretics, whose fate is described in Harrison’s distinctive barbaric idiolect: de Sessa, we learn, ‘spat like wood’ as he burned, while de la Fuente, burnt in effigy *in absentia*, has skin ‘like a herring in the sun.’ These macabre details also anticipate Armitage’s explorations of violence and sadism in his monologues, and mirror their fascination with acts of inhuman evil.

Isabella emerges as a solipsist: wholly absorbed in her own tribulations as others suffer, even praying to ‘Holy Mother Church’ that the victims of Philip’s torture be kept silent so as not to interrupt the pleasures of her wedding night:

O Holy Mother, Holy Mother, Ho-
 ly Mother Church, whose melodious, low
 Labour-moans go through me as you bear
 These pitch-stained children to the upper air,
 Let them lie still tonight...

Showing a callous disregard for the suffering of the heretics, Isabella, fearful at the thought of Philip’s ‘wiry Spanish hairs [...] crackling like lit tapers in his

tights' and the prospect of a perfunctory defloration, again prays that 'the King be gentle and not loom/like Torquemada in the torture room' - an image which conflates sexual aggression and the brutal persecutions of the Grand Inquisitor of Spain. Turning finally, and ironically, to the Virgin Mary, she asks that her husband be blest 'just this once with gentleness', as Philip, 'cool knuckles on my smoky hair' leads her to the nuptial bed, having determined that 'God *is satisfied.*'

That this poem does not seem to advance an openly atheistic case is attributable to Harrison's decision to speak through Isabella, and to his use of historical verisimilitude: engrossed in the poem as a 'period piece', one might easily overlook the subtle message conveyed by its ironic title and focuses instead on Isabella's personal drama. However, the poem actually offers a thoroughgoing, although restrained, denunciation of Catholicism and its persecution of political and religious enemies, whilst also, by extension, critiquing the use of so-called 'holy' scripture in the prosecution of expansionist colonialism and in the destruction of political rivals. Although written in a more ornamental or elevated style than that used by the PWD man, the point made by the poem is essentially the same: that religion, however socially acceptable and historically validated, can often support state tyranny, colonialism, and barbaric acts of torture. Harrison's atheism in this poem might be presented through the prism of historical specificity, and by the compelling portrait of Isabella as ritualistic victim-participant, but this does not lessen its forcefulness or its truth: whilst the barbaric intrusion of anti-religious satire into an otherwise mellifluous lyric monologue establishes the centrality of the irreligious impulse to Harrisonian

masquerade, as well as suggesting a further interrogation of inherited poetic form.

Whereas the above poems explore religion in the public sphere and suggest its exploitation by powerful social and political groups, many of Harrison's early poems focus on domestic relationships and the role of religious belief in his own upbringing. Several *Eloquence* sonnets detail Harrison's renunciation of his parents' faith and three poems in particular address his reaction to their deaths. These miniature elegies combine the pathos of grief with atheistic meditations, and outline his fundamental eschatological beliefs, summarised most poignantly in the second 'Long Distance' sonnet with its riddling title and moving evocations of Harrison Senior. 'Long Distance II'¹⁰ recounts Harrison's visits to his father's house after the death of his mother, Florrie. 'Though my mother was already two years dead', Harrison writes, 'dad kept her slippers warming by the gas', as well as renewing her bus pass and heating her side of the bed. His father's 'still raw love' and his belief that 'she'd just popped out to get the tea' suggests both melancholia and a deep-seated faith in the reality of the afterlife - threatened by Harrison's own 'blight of disbelief' which, as the verb implies, is cancerous to his father's fragile and pathetic belief in heavenly (or terrestrial) reunification: 'sure that very soon he'd hear her key [...] and end his grief.' The final quatrain summarises Harrison's own view that 'life ends with death, and that is all', although he admits to calling his parents' 'disconnected number', seemingly unable to resist the emotional pull of the Christian concept of heaven. But this reading of the poem's concluding stanza overlooks the adjective

¹⁰ *SP*, p. 134.

‘disconnected’, which suggests not true lovers reunited in heaven but, instead, an eternal disconnection: his parents’ wished-for reunion forever deferred, because possibly untrue - a powerful refutation of the hope of immortality expressed in both the Nicene creed, the gospels, and the articles of faith of the Protestant church. Harrison’s deadpan euphemism ‘you haven’t both gone shopping’ suggests a Stoic response to death which rejects the Christian promise of immortality, and this pragmatic position is explored at greater length in ‘Marked With D.’ and ‘Bringing Up’.

‘Marked With D.’¹¹ is an elegiac fragment about the death of Harrison’s father, a Leeds baker, and his subsequent cremation. Combining allusions to the miracle of the loaves and fishes, as well as to the Last Supper and transubstantiation, the poem deliberately and ironically conflates cremation and the baker’s oven, whilst also commenting sardonically on the ‘daily bread’ passages of the Lord’s prayer: irreverent material absent from most traditional elegy. The poem opens with the ‘chilled dough’ of Harrison’s father’s flesh pushed into an oven ‘not unlike those he fuelled all his life’, prompting the poet to think ‘of his cataracts ablaze with Heaven [and] radiant with the sight of his dead wife’; an allusion to Milton’s poem ‘Methought I Saw My Late Espoused Saint’ in which the elder poet is reunited - fleetingly- with his late wife, who he sees ‘vested all in white, pure as her mind’.¹² This vision of husband and wife reunited in heaven recalls the same theme in ‘Long Distance II’ but results here in a more emotionally charged portrait of ‘light streaming from his mouth to shape her name’ and his

¹¹ *SP*, p. 155.

¹² John Milton, ‘Methought I Saw My Late Espoused Saint’, in Abrams *et al*, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Vol.1 (New York: Norton, 1993), pp. 1473-4.

father's 'cold tongue burst into flame' - Pentecostal images undercut by the intrusion of Harrison's deflationary comment 'but only literally, which makes me sorry [as] there's no Heaven to reach.' 'I get it all from Earth my daily bread' he continues, anchoring the text in the naturalistic and humanistic phenomena of daily existence, rather than in the metaphysical realm of religious devotion. The poem ends by mourning 'the baker's man that no one will see rise', a particularly striking and light-hearted pun, given that such (partially blasphemous) levity is unexpected in elegy, although the line is also shocking because of the apparent joke at Harrison's father's expense - again, not a normal feature of elegiac writing. Although fulfilling some of the formal and stylistic expectations of elegy, such as its memorialising function, 'Marked With D.' seems to be compromised by the intrusion of incongruous images and wordplay, and also by the poet's decision to use the occasion of his parents' deaths as background material for a poem expressing a deep-seated and almost defiant humanism, although one senses that some of this candour might be linked to Harrison's difficult relationship with his father, described in such poems as 'Currants', 'Still' and 'A Good Read'. In 'Bringing Up', Harrison adopts a more deferential tone to describe his relationship with his mother, although the poem proposes the same rejection of Christian theology.

Recalling the first time his mother read a copy of *The Loiners* and quoting her summation of its literary worth ('you weren't brought up to write such mucky books!'), 'Bringing Up'¹³ is a poignant 'family' sonnet which, like its companion poem 'Timer', focuses on cremation, the afterlife, and human

¹³ *SP*, p. 166.

reactions to loss. Just as fire is a central, elemental image in ‘Marked With D.’, so in this poem Harrison returns continually to images of flame and heat:

you’d’ve flung it in the fire in disgust [...]

I thought you could hold my *Loiners*, and both burn! [...]

devoured by one flame

and this emphasis on fire and light does double service, evoking at once hellish torment (perhaps Harrison’s own) and divine effulgence; ‘maybe you see them in a better light!’ The poem constitutes something of an extended *mea culpa* addressed to Florrie, whose ‘hurt looks’ haunt the poet and occasion his sense of guilt, although Harrison avoids sentimentality by attacking what he sees as the illusory nature of heaven and the divine, referring at one point to ‘*your God*’¹⁴ as he considers burning his poetry during his mother’s cremation service – the echo of Faustus’ determination ironic given Harrison’s extensive writing career after his parents’ death. Harrison admits that he resists placing his poems in his mother’s hand only because ‘the undertaker would have thought me odd’, although there is an obvious dark humour at work in the poem which celebrates the idea of the penitent believer entering heaven clutching a work of ‘sordid lust’: a subversive image which looks ahead to many of Armitage’s poems, and their constant melding of playful and unsettling reference. It certainly seems as though Florrie’s objections to *The Loiners* were moral in nature, and centred

¹⁴ Italics mine.

mostly on the book's 'sexual personae' such as the White Queen and PWD man: both committed sexual adventurers. One imagines her prudish objections to such characters and her earnest citation of Old Testament denunciations of sodomy and homosexual sin, although these episodes are not recorded by Harrison, who is far more concerned, by the poem's close, with his mother's weeping and disappointment – emblematic of her shock and betrayal. Despite this, 'Bringing Up' is not an apology, or a renunciation of Harrison's core beliefs: 'insistent on his godlessness', he is unwavering in his refutation of the promise of heaven and the threat of hell.¹⁵

All these sonnets exemplify Harrison's use of atheistic material as part of his poetics of dissent, and indicate the key role played by atheism in his work. Beyond the obvious affront constituted by the incorporation of barbaric language within the tightly controlled and historically validated sonnet form, a second tier, of blasphemous insult, supervenes and reinforces the initial interrogation of the poem's canonical status. A further level of symbolic affront is then entailed by the etymology and history of the term itself, with the Greek *kanōn*, meaning 'rod' or 'law', closely associated with 'clerically sanctioned sacred texts'¹⁶ which form what theologians such as Athanasius have called a *biblia kanonizomena* or 'authorized selection of works that regulate the lives of the faithful' (28). Harrison therefore uses barbaric language and his distinctive 'depraved' diction as a means of insinuating a corrosive anti-bourgeois idiom into individual poetic forms such as the sonnet, whereas his wider political or

¹⁵ Byrne, *H, v. & O*, p. 62.

¹⁶ Jan Gorak, *The Making of the Modern Canon: Genesis and Crisis of a Literary Idea* (London: Athlone, 1991), p. 24. Further references in text.

conceptual project is to introduce barbaric *themes* such as the rejection of religious authoritarianism into the canon: a religio-literary construct designed to include ‘canonical’ material whilst *excluding* material deemed to be low-brow, inferior, or heretical. Harrison’s masquerade is therefore predicated upon a simultaneous rejection of the literary canon, the conservative tradition which supports it, and the divine canon itself:

the inexhaustible, encyclopaedic narrative of a whole people, a narrative that comprehends everything from their required readings and codes of behaviour to their shared assumptions and manifest beliefs (20).

If the sonnets of *Eloquence* reveal Harrison’s atheism indirectly, or as a bi-product of his family reminiscences, his translation of the pagan poet Palladas is a more obviously political project, designed to affront religious sensibilities and reclaim the work of an important classical writer. Harrison’s preface to *Palladas: Poems* makes clear his determination to rescue ‘the last poet of Paganism’ from obscurity and secure his position within the mainstream canon, and his decision to translate Palladas’ text using such a forceful and aggressive vernacular style suggests a desire to question the stylistic conservatism of most classical translation.¹⁷ Palladas’ poems are, Harrison claims, ‘the last hopeless blasts of the old Hellenistic world, giving way [...] before the cataclysm of Christianity’ (134) and he mentions several instances of Christian persecution of Hellenes as well as ‘the savage anti-Pagan riots and destruction of Greek temples’ of the fourth century (133). Harrison’s reclamation of Palladas is

¹⁷ Tony Harrison, ‘Preface to *Palladas: Poems*, in *Bloodaxe I*, p. 134. Further references in text.

therefore a multifaceted assault on various *canons* but most noticeably a scathing attack on the transcendental and metaphysical claims of Christianity, which emerges as an absurd post-Judaic belief system heavily indebted to Hebrew scriptures and to Plato's theory of the soul; a position ridiculed in the suite's opening epigram.

This first poem addresses itself to an unnamed interlocutor whose ideas of the divine are shaped by arguments derived from Plato:

think of your conception, you'll soon forget
 what Plato puffs you up with, all that
 'immortality' and 'divine life' stuff¹⁸ (1)

and this attack suggests, or presupposes, a familiarity with Platonic theory and with such texts as *The Republic* and *Phædo*, in which Plato argues for the existence of an eternal soul which is immutable and indestructible: finally returning to god after death. In *Phædo* Plato discusses the soul as 'most like that which is divine, immortal, intelligent, uniform, indissoluble, and which always continues in the same state,'¹⁹ whilst his discussion of the soul in part eleven of *The Republic*, entitled 'the immortality of the soul and the rewards of goodness', centres on the soul's 'kinship with the divine and immortal and eternal', which 'make it long to associate with them' and return to a pre-existing state of perfection.²⁰ To Palladas and Harrison, Plato's metaphysical claim is an

¹⁸ Tony Harrison, *Palladas: Poems, SP*, pp. 77-94.

¹⁹ Plato, *Phædo*, in *Five Dialogues of Plato*, intr. Dr. A. D. Lindsay (London: J. M. Dent, 1947), p. 164.

²⁰ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Desmond Lee (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p. 444.

arrogant conceit at odds with the mundane, terrestrial existence of humans born into squalor and suffering, and the majority of the poems in the collection maintain this humanistic, and darkly comical, anti-Platonic position. The barbaric tone of the opening poem culminates in a ferocious dismantling of Plato's divine theory, achieved by the image of 'your father, sweating, drooling, drunk' and the addressee himself, caricatured as 'his spark of lust, his spurt of spunk', and this relentless pessimism, or naturalistic focus on the empirical facts of existence, negates the divine claims made by Plato, whilst simultaneously satirising the early church and figures such as Augustine and Aquinas who both drew on Platonic theory in the formulation of their theological arguments.

Having established what he sees as the futility of belief, and rejecting the possibility of immortality, Palladas goes on to celebrate the fleeting life by, paradoxically, reminding the reader of their own mortality and proximity to death. Poems two to thirteen form a sort of *memento mori* section which stresses the importance of living for the moment and embracing the transience of human life, with life itself envisioned not as a prelude to existence in a heavenly realm but as the dominion of the pagan deity Fortune, who presides over a semi-chaos of suffering into which humans are born, victims of 'her irrational, brute force.' 'Born naked. Buried naked. So why fuss?' Palladas asks, concluding that 'the life of man's just one long cry' and, although uncompromising, his pessimism is actually life-affirming in its celebration of the evanescent pleasures of the everyday: 'thank your stars', he asserts, 'for wine and company and all-night bars.' These lines and others echo Ecclesiastes and its (more ironic) invocation of the temporal realm, Palladas' 'so drink and love, and leave the rest to fate'

recalling the exhortations of the Old Testament preacher, who argues that, given the madness and folly of the world, the individual should ‘go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart.’²¹ But where the Biblical text affirms God’s providential power in the life of the individual and the futility of striving after happiness in the fallen and corrupt realm of nature, Palladas enjoins his readers to seek satisfaction in *this* life, and his belief in the superiority of immediate sensory experience is delivered with an aphoristic brevity frequently used by Harrison when writing *in propria persona*:

learn to love tranquillity, and against all odds
coax your glum spirit to its share of mirth. (7)

This *summa* of the poet’s philosophical position is identical with Harrison’s own belief that ‘life ends with death, and that is all’, and looks forward to his Bahktinian, or Rabelaisian, celebration of life as ‘free and unrestricted, full of ambivalent laughter’ in such texts as *The Oresteia*, *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* and *The Common Chorus*.²²

The Palladas poems are, in their totality, a reiteration of the basic premise that the natural realm is the only reality of which we can be empirically certain: all other, supernatural states remaining philosophically contingent and their ultimate reality open to debate. This pragmatic focus on the naturalistic is therefore a continuation of Harrison’s argument from the *Loiners* poems and the family

²¹ Ecclesiastes 9. 7.

²² Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. 130.

sonnets from *Eloquence*, although expressed here in a more aggressive, but still bitterly funny manner:

you brainless bastard! O you stupid runt!
 such showing off and you so ignorant! [...]
your specialism's Plato. Bloody fraud! (37)

The Palladas poems do, however, concern themselves with more than just the dialectical debate between Platonist and pragmatist, and are equally concerned with the transmission of proverbial wisdom. Throughout the collection, Palladas asserts the values of Stoicism and the philosophical acceptance of life's hardships, stressing the need for resolve and dignified acquiescence:

weeping for the dead's a waste of breath –
 they're lucky, *they* can't die again (9)

if gale-force Fortune sweeps you off your feet,
 let it; ride it; and admit defeat (10)

the ignorant man does well to shut his trap
 and hide his opinions like a dose of clap (38)

These aphoristic fragments therefore counsel *sang froid* and deny the false consolation of Platonic immortality in a style which is partly derived from

Martial's epigrams, and partly from the Old Testament Book of Proverbs: an ironic collision which suggests a latent desire to undermine the sacred with the profane, a technique seen also in Blake's 'Proverbs of Hell' in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

Another theme taken up in the proverbial, or epigrammatic, sections is the folly of belief without evidence - a rejection of the Biblical 'evidence of things unseen'.²³ Rejecting the argument from faith, and the possibility of an afterlife whose existence cannot be determined rationally, Palladas instead argues in favour of the here and now, affirming the importance of accepting life as it is experienced and pointing out the fatuity of belief in unverified metaphysical claims:

mankind, self-destructive, puffed up with vanities,
even Death itself can't put you wise (41:3)

In true 'pagan' style, alcohol is also promoted as a restorative and healing agent, able to stupefy and induce forgetfulness during life's trials:

a good night's drinking, and I just don't care (55)

a drink to drown my sorrows and restart
the circulation to my frozen heart! (62)

²³ Hebrews 11.1.

and the cycle ends with a range of misogynistic material and ironic social commentary which employs the same levity of style encountered in the PWD Man monologues and Harrison's *U.S. Martial* translations:

agh, the world's gone all to fuck
when Luck herself's run out of luck! (63:1)

The comparison with Harrison's translation of Martial is relevant as there are clear similarities of compositional style and verbal expression uniting the two collections, a claim made more credible by their chronological proximity:

Palladas published first in 1975, with a second edition in 1984, just three years after the appearance of *U.S. Martial*. Like *Palladas*, Harrison's Marcus Valerius speaks in a barbaric voice rich in dialectal and non-standard references, often drawing on sexually graphic subject matter to shock the 'cultured' reader.

'Twosum' is indicative of the general tone:

add one and one together and make TWO:
that boy's sore ass + your cock killing you (ix)²⁴

and several other poems share this focus on carnality and Saturnalian riot:

she wants more and more and more new men in her.

he finally finishes *Anna Kerenina* (xvi: 'The Joys of Separation')

²⁴ Tony Harrison, *U.S. Martial* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1981), ix.

Like his Palladas, Harrison's Martial is a world-weary *bon viveur* whose extreme misanthropy is compellingly direct. His 'Sabidius's breath turns all to shit' (iii) is broadly similar to the former poet's claim that seemingly chaste women are in fact 'all utter whores'²⁵ and both poets relish attacks on rivals and enemies. The two poets also share an intense interest in, and sometimes ironic celebration of, the human condition, and each notably avoids invocations of heavenly morality or the metaphysical in their denunciations, diatribes and antagonistic ripostes. What therefore unites these two collections is their focus on physical and tangible realities and their rejection - direct or otherwise - of heaven. Like the PWD man who prefers 'living to all your heavens like a woman to a wank', Harrison's alter egos concern themselves with the concrete and quotidian rather than with the abstract and eternal, and Palladas' rejection of god and Platonism is all the more compelling given his historical period, which, as Harrison notes, was marked by the end of paganism and the slow encroachment of Christianity.

Harrison's active promotion of atheism in these collections signals an anti-canonical impulse in his work which is grounded upon an invasion of sacrosanct or culturally validated forms such as the classical translation, as well as upon a scathing satirical attack on faith and religion which recalls Juvenal's mordant commentaries on Roman society in his *Satires*. Although not distinct poetic forms in their own right, many translations – particularly those of classical texts – 'have been naturalized into the receiving cultures with the status of classics or *even of sacred texts*' and hence Harrison's decision to translate Palladas, and to

²⁵ *Palladas*, (52), *SP*, p. 88.

retain his barbaric idiom, may be read as an openly political gesture designed to question the elision of pagan voices from the canon.²⁶ Indeed, as the next chapter will make clear, the major motive force underpinning much of Harrison's masquerade writing is politically motivated satire which targets a range of socio-cultural beliefs, practices, and shibboleths and ridicules their various 'claims' to authority. In their place, Harrison insists upon a pragmatic materialism and social egalitarianism which is glimpsed in the Palladas translations, and which continues to define his most recent writing.

Later collections extend Harrison's rejection of the false hope of heaven and 'Two Poems For My Son in his Sickness'²⁷ from *Laureate's Block* exemplify his rejection of religious supernaturalism. 'Two Poems' is in fact an extended suite of fourteen lyric fragments composed in 'canonical' rhyming couplets which examine Harrison's reaction to his son's battle with schizophrenia, but which also serve as a testament of the poet's battle to sustain a rational humanism in the face of mental and physical suffering. The first section opens with the admission that 'anything, or almost, 's worth at least a try': the 'almost' a significant qualifier in a poem which will deplore the search for religious solace and recommend instead a Stoic acceptance of fate. Rather than lurch 'from chemotherapy back to the church', Harrison determines 'to stand by reason' and 'scorn religious quacks', admitting nonetheless that he once lit 'a candle in a church in Spain' in a desperate attempt to assuage his son's pain. This admission made, Harrison recalls the two *memento mori* paintings by Valdes

²⁶ Olive Classe, ed., *Encyclopedia of Literary Translation into English* Vol I (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2000), p. vii. Italics mine.

²⁷ Tony Harrison, *Laureate's Block* (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 27-35.

Leal in the Charity Hospital in Seville, *Finis gloriae mundi* and *In Ictu Oculi*, which lead him to speculate on ‘the monarch *esqueletto*’ squatting on ‘a globe with now 6 billion people in’: a pragmatic acceptance of the natural cycle of life and death. But Harrison rejects the religious iconography and sinister menace of the *vanitas* paintings, seeing them as ‘images designed to make you pray’ and regretting his weakness in lighting the votive candle: ‘how slippery the slope/when a despairing man runs out of hope.’ In the poem’s tenth section Harrison rejects his desperate flight to the metaphysical and turns instead to ‘my mind, my heart, my guts, my writing hand’; seeing poetry as ‘the one redemption that I know’ and concluding that ‘anything with God in is the worst’, as the poem ends with denunciations of ‘those superstitious nonsenses above’, ‘all false hope’ and any ‘quack concoctions’ designed to lure the gullible and emotionally fragile into a mental and spiritual capitulation which they would otherwise reject. Harrison’s rejection of theistic solace in this poem culminates in his later assertion:

fuck philosophy that sees
 life itself as some disease
 we sicken with until released,
 supervised by Pope or priest [...]

 meaningless our lives may be
 but blessed with deep fruitility²⁸

²⁸ ‘Fruitility’, *Laureate’s Block*, pp. 46-7.

and this cynically humorous anti-theism recalls Bakhtin's concept of carnival, with its profanation and rejection of 'terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette'.²⁹

Palladas, U.S. Martial and other atheistic poems by Harrison draw their power from their celebration of humanism and their belief in the human spirit's ability to find answers to everyday problems such as sickness, fear of death, marital conflict and ageing. Rejecting Jesus' exhortation to 'lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth'³⁰ but instead to 'lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven',³¹ Palladas and Harrison remain pragmatically materialistic, spurning the Platonic and Christian concepts of the divine and focusing instead on the amelioration and sustenance of one's fellow man or woman in the immediate present. Using the lyric mode and classical translation as a vehicle for his barbaric denunciations of the divine, and as the basis for his critique of the thematic conservatism of lyric poetry, Harrison affronts the religious mindset by treating matters of faith with a mixture of extreme levity and fierce scorn, and this satirical impulse informs all of his important irreligious writing. This is not to say, however, that all of Harrison's writing about religion and the divine follows the same pattern or offers the same type of critique of faith and the spiritual realm: as this section has demonstrated, his early work (mainly in the *Eloquence* sonnets) offers a thoroughgoing rejection of his parents' Christian worldview, whereas his later *Palladas* poems are far more politically motivated and outwardly focused. It is also true that the earlier poetry is more concerned with the invasion of specific lyric forms, whereas Harrison's interest in his

²⁹ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 123.

³⁰ Matthew 6.19.

³¹ Matthew 6. 20.

translations is the invasion of a major cultural narrative: the canon itself. It seems, therefore, that his atheistic writing tracks a definite trajectory: moving from a negation of particular aspects of his own religious upbringing, into a more nuanced and active anti-clericalism which uses satire to affirm an aggressively pragmatic secular humanism, and the apotheosis of this more politically engaged, social critique is *The Blasphemers' Banquet*.

Satanic 'Versus'

'I cannot censor. I write whatever there is to write' - Salman Rushdie³²

'I do not have to wade through a filthy drain to know what filth is' - Syed Shahabuddin³³

*Banquet*³⁴ is Harrison's 'angry defence'³⁵ of Salman Rushdie's right to publish blasphemous fiction and, according to Sandie Byrne, is 'a more or less unequivocal statement of position',³⁶ although the hedge seems superfluous given the ferocity of the poem's invective and its denunciation of religiously inspired hatred. Based loosely on Edward FitzGerald's translation of Omar Khayyám's celebrated *Rubáiyát*, Harrison's poem is a 'live' document, written in response to the splenetic fury occasioned by the 1989 publication of *The*

³² Lisa Appignanesi and Sara Maitland, eds., *The Rushdie File* (London: Fourth Estate, 1989), p. 40.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

³⁴ *Bloodaxe I*, pp. 395-406.

³⁵ Peter Symes, 'Blasphemy and Death: on film making with Tony Harrison', *Bloodaxe I*, p. 385.

³⁶ Byrne, *H, v. & O*, p. 60.

Satanic Verses and the domestic and international furore which followed. It is therefore a direct intervention into the debate surrounding the novel rather than a relativistic commentary on it, and it is clear that Harrison wished his poem to be read as a contemporaneous demonstration of artistic and political solidarity and as a bulwark against the many accusations of blasphemy and insensitivity then being levelled at Rushdie. Iranian contempt for Rushdie's 'crime' led to the severing of diplomatic ties with the UK, with writers such as Kayham Farangi accusing him of misrepresenting Islam as a result of his 'artistic and moral degradation',³⁷ whilst British intellectuals were also withering in their condemnation: Cambridge professor Dr Syed Ali Ashraf went so far as to call Rushdie 'a practitioner of black magic'³⁸ guilty of 'preaching an anti-Islamic theory'.³⁹ Into this maelstrom of overlapping voices stepped Harrison, whose poem comments ironically and acerbically on the Bradford book burnings, anti-Western hate speech, incitement to murder, and a sometimes orgiastic display of *ad hominem* vilification, such as Iqbal Sacranie's chilling comment that 'death, perhaps, is a bit too easy for him...his mind must be tormented for the rest of his life unless he asks for forgiveness to Almighty Allah.'⁴⁰

Delivered mainly *in propria persona* but assuming also a range of infamous blasphemous voices, the poem is a mixed-media piece, filmed for the BBC and aired, amid controversy, in 1989 shortly after the publication of Rushdie's novel and in the wake of the Ayatollah Khomeini's infamous fatwa suborning Rushdie's murder. As Daniel Pipes notes, the novel's publication was, initially

³⁷ Farangi, in Appignanesi and Maitland, p. 24.

³⁸ Ashraf, in Appignanesi and Maitland, p. 26.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁴⁰ Sacranie, in Appignanesi and Maitland, p. 100.

at least, a minor literary event, with little to suggest the coming conflagration. But by the time of the Bradford riots and biblioclasm recorded in the poem, it had ‘caused the death of over twenty people, disrupted billions of dollars in trade, brought profound cultural tensions to the surface, and raised issues about freedom of speech and the secular state that had seemingly been settled decades or even centuries earlier.’⁴¹ Harrison’s film-poem forms one part of a multifaceted defence launched by many writers and public intellectuals who felt that Rushdie’s novel ought to be published and translated without fear of intimidation or reprisal. Rather than avoid personal comment, the poem therefore proclaims Harrison’s a-theistic and pro-humanistic beliefs and is an impassioned expression of a solidarity which unites poet, dramatist and novelist (Rushdie, Molière, Byron, Voltaire) against a common fundamentalist foe: identified by Byrne as ‘totalitarian creeds which oppose or censure tolerance, imagination, and somatic pleasure’⁴² but which actually consisted of a range of Islamic organisations and scholars whose various pronouncements, insults and threats were tacitly supported by the Saudi Arabian and Iranian regimes.⁴³ The poem also exemplifies the politically motivated nature of Harrison’s masquerade, with the stately ‘Edward FitzGerald’ quatrains of Omar Khayyám’s *rubáiyát* made to sustain a range of epithets and subject matter quite alien to most lyric poetry, and for this reason I would argue that *Banquet* constitutes Harrison’s definitive statement of (non)-belief and the most forthright assertion

⁴¹ Daniel Pipes, *The Rushdie Affair: The Novel, the Ayatollah, and the West* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2009), p. 16.

⁴² Byrne, *H, v. & O*, p. 66.

⁴³ ‘The apostate Salman Rushdie must die. That was how Tehran Radio opened its main news bulletin yesterday afternoon’: Amir Taheri, in Appignanesi and Maitland, p. 92.

of his humanist principles, enabled by the masquerade mode and its invasion of the lyric tradition.

Although Harrison does not allude directly to Edward FitzGerald's translation in his poem, *Banquet* presupposes the reader's familiarity with the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* (1859) and its status as an established canonical artefact with considerable cultural history. Harrison is clearly aware of the original poem's status as a 'Victorian masterpiece'⁴⁴ and as 'one of the finest pieces of literary art in the English language'⁴⁵ and this would explain his decision to invade its 'measured repetitions of quatrain' and its 'soothing music'⁴⁶ with inflammatory language and denunciations of religious hypocrisy, heard in his angry rejection of 'life-denying fundamentalists' and his description of the late Ayatollah as 'that chilled corpse'. The famous opening quatrain of FitzGerald's translation sets the opulent tone of the rest of the poem, blending mellifluous diction and enjambment to create 'Omar's mood of jovial cynicism':⁴⁷

wake! For the Sun, who scattered into flight
the Stars before him from the Field of Night,
drives Night along with them from Heav'n and strikes
the Sultán's Turret with a Shaft of Light⁴⁸

⁴⁴ John Hollander, 'Paradise Enow', in Harold Bloom, ed., *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám: Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004), p. 185.

⁴⁵ John D. Yohannan, 'The Fin de Siècle Cult of FitzGerald's "Rubaiyat" of Omar Khayyam', citing Richard LeGallienne, in Bloom, p. 6.

⁴⁶ Daniel Schenker, 'Fugitive Articulation: An Introduction to The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám', in Bloom, p. 60.

⁴⁷ Yohannan, in Bloom, p. 17.

⁴⁸ Edward FitzGerald, *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Vol. II, ed. by Abrams *et al* (New York: Norton, 1993), pp. 1170-81.

Khayyám's invitations to drink and forgetfulness appear next, with references to wine and the 'Sev'n-ringed Cup' followed by the strident

come, fill the Cup, and in the fire of Spring
your Winter-garment of Repentance fling⁴⁹

and these joyous calls to indulge the senses affirm the Persian poet's belief that fear of death is futile, and uncalled for, given that, despite

threats of Hell and Hopes of Paradise!

one thing at least is certain -*This* Life flies.

Khayyám goes further, calling 'the Revelations of Devout and Learn'd' men mere 'stories' and casting doubt on the existence of heaven, which he dismisses as nothing more than 'the Vision of fulfilled desire'.⁵⁰ His repeated emphasis on the material and earthly actuates a visceral response from Harrison, who clearly feels a great affinity for Khayyám: 'the poet of Iran/whose quatrain I'm using here' as he calls him, and 'the poet who loves THIS life, however fleeting.' It seems then that although Harrison sets out to undermine FitzGerald's high-Victorian style and the stately progress of his quatrains, subverting their content and swapping gentle euphemism for powerful invective, he is motivated by a simultaneous desire to memorialise Khayyám and celebrate his religious doubt, hailing him as the 'Voltaire of the East' who rejects 'cascade-crammed castles in

⁴⁹ FitzGerald, p. 1171.

⁵⁰ FitzGerald, p. 1178.

the air/the Koran promises' to Muslim men. It is, of course, difficult to separate Khayyám's rubáiyát from FitzGerald's, and critical opinion tends to view the latter as the actual author of the sequence. Harold Bloom, for instance, calls the poem 'FitzGerald's nihilistic extended lyric',⁵¹ noting in it

a curiously negative joy that affirms Epicureanism and implicitly evades or rejects both Christianity and Islam. Had FitzGerald been a recent Iranian, the Ayatollah would have proclaimed a *fatwa* against him.⁵²

Despite this apparent scholarly confusion, it is clear that the subversive potential of FitzGerald's, or, more properly speaking, Khayyám's, text is the main source of *Banquet's* anti-religious sentiment and that Harrison's celebration of Khayyám's blasphemy is conceptually integral to the poem's success as a work of art.

Banquet's opening quatrain outlines the poetico-visual setting of the text and immediately anchors its events in the workaday world of the British working class, far removed from Iram, FitzGerald's legendary sunken rose garden, and the lush valleys of Naishápur. Seated at the ironically invoked but nonetheless factual Omar Khayyám restaurant in Bradford, Harrison awaits his guests, whose atheistic credentials are asserted, and developed, as the poem progresses:

the blasphemers' banquet table: there

⁵¹ Harold Bloom, ed., *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám: Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004), p. 4.

⁵² Bloom, p. 2. Emphasis in original.

on mirrored cushions will sit Voltaire,
 me, Molière, Omar Khayyam, Lord Byron
 and that, that's Salman Rushdie's chair.

The projected company constitutes a powerful phalanx of notable, and infamous, blasphemers: Voltaire, whose *Philosophical Dictionary* and anti-clerical writings scandalised the eighteenth-century French establishment; Molière, whose *Tartuffe* was banned by Louis XIV; Khayyám, whose rubáiyát celebrate wine and women and criticise the 'maggot minded'⁵³ religious fanatics of his day; Byron, whose 'satanic' verse shocked Regency England, and Harrison himself, 'a militant unbeliever.'⁵⁴ Rushdie's presence is of course more problematic, not least because, by the time of the poem's composition, he had been forced into hiding. More contentious still is his status as an actual 'blasphemer', a term used by some Muslims to describe *him*, rather than an epithet he applied to himself: indeed, in response to the furore over *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie 'published a statement asserting his credentials as a good Muslim', and asserted that the novel was not 'antireligious' although the Ayatollah's later fatwa would pronounce him a blasphemer *in absentia* and therefore 'deserving' of death.⁵⁵ Harrison at any rate takes great pains to align himself with a diverse range of atheists from different artistic and social backgrounds, and this 'mixed company' recalls the ironic invocation of Byron and Wordsworth in the opening quatrains of *v*. The opening stanza mimics the structural features of FitzGerald's translation, retaining its *a, a, b, a* rhyme

⁵³ See *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám: A Paraphrase from Several Literal Translations*, by Richard Le Gallienne, in Christopher Hitchens, *The Portable Atheist*, ed., (Da Capo Press, 2007), p. 10.

⁵⁴ Symes, p. 389.

⁵⁵ Pipes, p. 24.

scheme, and this pseudo-fidelity is integral to the powerful reworking of the poem as a traditional canonical artefact.

Having established the conceptual terrain to be occupied by the poem, Harrison invokes Khayyám as ‘the poet who loves THIS life’, capitalising the pronoun to emphasise his focus on the human as opposed to the heavenly. The phrase ‘this life’ actually appears four times in the poem, making the poet’s celebration of the tangible and concrete one of the major themes of the piece, the other being the spirited defence of ‘all those, then or now, damned by some priest.’ Bigotry and religious zealotry are explored in great detail in the opening section, with a montage of the Bradford book burning and a bust of Voltaire accompanying Harrison’s identification of bigots ‘burning a book I’m sure they’ve never read’. His subsequent evocation of biblioclasm and ‘Inquisitorial *Auto da Fés*’ reprises the burning motifs of the *Eloquence* sonnets and ‘The Nuptial Torches’ whilst highlighting the worst aspects of religious fundamentalism: the destruction of books by those ‘one-book creeds’ whose own sacred texts are exempted from such nihilistic destruction. Harrison’s technique of integrating atheistic subject matter into traditional poetic forms such as the rubáiyát becomes, by this point, a deeply political act which enables him to mock the solemnity of the pseudo-sacred and celebrate the freedom to transgress, and his desire to interrogate religious orthodoxy becomes more strident as the poem gathers conceptual momentum, with the Koran itself rejected as a *man-made* construct:

the Koran denounces unbelievers who
quote ‘love this fleeting life’ unquote. I do.

I'm an unbeliever. I love this life.

I don't believe their paradise is true

This foregrounding of pragmatic materialism and eschatological doubt is a common feature of Harrison's rejection of the divine but, given the political context of the poem and the Bradford book burnings of January 1989, his rebuttal of Koranic claims is all the more potent, and dangerous: Khomeini's *fatwa* of February 1989 denounced Rushdie as an infidel and called for his death in uncompromising terms, claiming that his novel was 'published in opposition to Islam [and that] all those involved in its publication who were aware of its content, are sentenced to death.'⁵⁶ Harrison's solidarity with Rushdie, because politically motivated, therefore presupposes his acceptance of the same death sentence and makes him a target of the '*Fatwa* Fascist' and his ideologues, and this blatant politicisation of literary form and discourse is, as we have seen, a key feature of Harrison's masquerade. The poem's repeated attacks on Islamic intolerance and 'the Paradise/promised to Muslim *men* by the Koran' are not simply barbaric intrusions within the stately Khayyám quatrains but also statements of ideological subversion uncommon in lyric verse. Harrison's willingness to express political views dismissive of supernatural and dogmatic claims includes a defence of Molière, whose plays were denounced by 'pious frauds', Byron, head of the 'satanic school', and Voltaire, whose *Mahomet* strips 'hypocrisy's sour mask away' in its critical treatment of the life of the Prophet, and Rushdie's novel is also celebrated for 'its brilliance and, yes, its blasphemy.' In all of this, the masquerade mode is central to the poem's ability to shock the

⁵⁶ See Pipes, p. 27.

reader and transmit its political message, with its quatrains made to sustain a range of unsettling, and antagonistic, messages.

Banquet is, in essence, a defence of blasphemy itself which, the poet argues, has ‘enabled/man to break free from the Bible and Koran’, and the poem is a call for a freethinking secularism which rejects religious criticism of the base, the human, the physical and, pertinently in a poem which includes the Ayatollah’s denunciation of both excrement and ‘*the excrement eating camel*’, human waste itself:

various creeds attempt to but can’t split
the world of spirit from the world of shit

This coprophilic image recalls the final quatrain of *v.* and other references to excrement in Harrison’s work, and is evidence of a Rabelaisian sensibility concerning the ‘bodily lower stratum’.⁵⁷ As Bakhtin argues concerning Rabelais’ widespread use of scatological imagery, ‘excrement is gay matter [...] linked to the generating force and to fertility’ and this elemental emphasis on the body and its excremental realities is indicative of Harrison’s celebration of the earthly and naturalistic, whilst his use of such imagery in a poem occasioned by religious conflict is markedly political given the rejection of Platonic ‘essence’ which it enjoins.⁵⁸ Harrison actually conflates ‘man’s fear of his own filth’ with the urge to seek ‘the unblemished beautiful in the untrue’, and calls for a

⁵⁷ The phrase is Bakhtin’s.

⁵⁸ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 175.

blasphemous rejection of religious codes and moral worldviews which are predicated upon a belief in the supernatural. Instead of the promise of divine reward, he therefore speaks in favour of a candid humanism which embraces life in all its squalor and degeneration:

what more could a godless mortal need
 than a samosa and a can of beer
 and books, like Rushdie's, to sit here and read?

As Sandie Byrne notes

Harrison's blasphemy is not so much against an establishment as for a form of humanism which regards all religions as constraints on human development, and involves an anti-theism which worships 'life' – the whole-hearted entering into sensuous appreciation of the material world.⁵⁹

This celebration of human sensory experience includes an awareness of its transience: a recognition which becomes life-affirming and empowering when set alongside 'Bible bombast' and the insidious proclamations of the '*Fatwah* Führer'. Indeed, Harrison champions Khayyam's own impassioned defence of the fleeting life, noting that

Omar loves 'this fleeting life' and knows
 that everything will vanish with the rose

⁵⁹ Byrne, *H, v. & O*, p. 62.

and yet, instead of Paradise prefers
 this life of passion, pain and passing shows

and these lines recall FitzGerald's rendering of Khayyám's humanistic evocation
 of the pleasures of the earthly life:

a Book of Verses underneath the Bough,
 a jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread - and Thou
 beside me singing in the Wilderness -
 oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow!⁶⁰

There is, to be sure, a determined invocation of the material and the temporal throughout the poem; a focus on the tangible and naturalistic which seems to be a form of literary *homage* paid to Khayyám, whose quatrains evoke the pleasures of a restrained hedonism echoed by Harrison in such images as 'Omar's ruby vintage', his 'choicest flask of wine', and 'Bradford bread and wine'. Opposing these simple pleasures are 'religious faith and moral rule', the strict adherence to dogma, and the sinister *argumentum ad baculum* implicit in all monotheistic texts, satirised by Harrison as the threat of 'doomsday with its dreadful but false dooms'.

Although the poem is clearly driven by a politically motivated anti-theism which promotes the thesis that 'the sacred is dangerous, to be kept in a cage rather than a glass case', one must not overlook the singular power of its language and

⁶⁰ FitzGerald, p. 1172.

vocabulary, which are integral to its success as an affronting artwork and which help to maintain its relentlessly sardonic and hypercritical tone.⁶¹ Clearly, the poem's power to shock or offend lies in its deployment of powerful language alongside invocations of the divine and religiously sacrosanct, and I consider this to be a deliberate tactical decision on Harrison's part, although Sandie Byrne suggests that 'the more important blasphemy [...] in Harrison's writing is not his use of taboo words.'⁶² Whilst Byrne is right to suggest that Harrison's atheism is conceptual and far-reaching, transcending mere 'blasphemous' language itself, she seems to overlook the confrontational and subversive potential of marrying sacred and profane language in poems such as *Banquet*, where the 'word' is centre stage as a mythopoeic concept. The poem attacks the Biblical claim that 'in the beginning was the word', and the idea that the Koran and Bible are God's literal word; an argument that has been used historically to safeguard 'divinely constituted' texts from criticism, alteration, and 'pollution' by profane speech or language. As I argued in Chapter One, 'barbaric' language is intrinsically political and subversive, and is used to target stable poetic forms in order to question their authority, and hence in *Banquet*, Harrison's barbarism is at its most sophisticated and multifaceted: attacking the stability of the lyric form, invading the FitzGerald translation, undermining its fidelity to Khayyám's own lyric gravitas, and wilfully blaspheming against holy scripture. Part of Harrison's *modus operandi* in the text is ironic or profane juxtaposition, with 'Koran' and 'unbeliever', 'fatwah' and 'fascist', and 'paradise' and 'Bradford' forced together on the page to suggest conflict or produce comic deflation: a

⁶¹ Terry Eagleton, *Holy Terror* (New York: OUP, 2005), p. 2.

⁶² Byrne, *H, v. & O*, p. 69.

playful conflation of opposites which looks forward to Armitage's serio-comic poems and their blurring of the boundaries between violence and comedy. Certain sections of the poem take this technique to extreme lengths, with antithetical words and concepts forced into coexistence within the regular quatrains of the text, whilst the poem's final section, introduced by an historical retrospective beginning 'Lord Byron heaves a bronze Byronic sigh' mixes references to 'Satan', 'Satanic', God, Allah, the Koran, Voltaire's *Mahomet*, and, finally, wine, 'blasphemers', TV, 'Tandoori' and passion. Harrison also employs the 'alliterative crag splinters' from his 'Yorkshire' Aeschylus in order to corrupt the euphony of the text and point its message of disharmony, disunity and dissent:

I too heard bigots rant, rave and revile [...]

Beer and Bombay special Biryani

Oust Bible bombast from the Scots divine

and the words 'blasphemer' and 'blasphemy' punctuate the poem, providing an earth-centred and anthropocentric fundamentalism which opposes the 'Moslem, Catholic, Protestant, Jew' and their various versions of the paradisiacal.

As I have demonstrated, Harrison's exploration of atheism in his poetry suggests both a personal attachment to rationalism and free thought, as well as a determination to integrate political material within popular lyric poetry in order to expand its range and challenge presuppositions concerning its 'typical'

content. In part inspired by, and extending, nineteenth-century Romantic atheism, Harrison's anti-religious satire also invites comparison with Juvenal in such satires as 'The Futility of Aspirations', in which the same gallows humour can be found:

the gods, in response to the prayers of the owners, obligingly
wreck
entire households⁶³

and it is possible to discern traces of the Juvenalian style across other collections. I have also demonstrated that Harrison's anti-religious writing is developmental and takes the form of a movement from the familial and local, to the public and social: suggesting a determination on his part to use his critique of organised religion as part of a politically committed poetics which seeks to place debate and interrogation at the heart of lyric poetry. Whereas the sonnets of *Eloquence* explore religious subjects in the context of the home environment and as part of Harrison's own upbringing, his later work in both *Palladas* and *Banquet* explores the wider social import of religious worldviews and the relationship between traditional faith and modern secularism, and this shift in emphasis signals the centrality of public utterance and overt political commitment within Harrison's writing. The next section considers the role played by violence and comedy in Armitage's poetry, and seeks to determine whether his invocation of the playful and macabre is intended as a political statement, as in Harrison's poetry, or whether his celebration of comedy and

⁶³ Juvenal, 'Satire X', in Rudd, ll. 7-8, p. 86.

aggression serves other purposes. Before analysing these comico-sadistic poems, and their relationship to his barbaric poetics, a brief re-evaluation of Armitage's writing in the comical mode is required.

Playful Violence: Armitage

'Assault on the Senses'⁶⁴ from *The Universal Home Doctor* brings together a number of features of Armitage's barbaric verse, including his distinctive use of humour and wordplay, which are here used to critique a range of lyric proprieties. Presented as a mock art gallery catalogue and register, the poem satirises the pretentiousness of the art establishment as it explores a private collection dominated by pieces whose titles are a medley of puns, taboo and irony. The first, mixed media, piece is called '*In the Line of Sight*' which enacts its own literal meaning by combining macabre images of 'assassinated world leaders' with cross hairs formed 'by two of the artist's own eyelashes'. '*Sweet Tooth*' is another pun, representing the 'artist's own mouth' as 'teeth sculpted from Kendal Mint Cake', while '*Shit for Brains*' and '*Samson and Vagina*' feature 'the artist's own excrement' and his/her hair 'grown to shoulder-length over several years.' Besides the obvious comical potential of Armitage's puns and taboo language, a subtle attack on the Brit Art movement and artists such as Tracey Emin seems to be implied here, with most of the poem's surreal exhibits

⁶⁴ Simon Armitage, 'Assault on the Senses', *The Universal Home Doctor* (London: Faber, 2002), pp. 54-6.

recalling works such as ‘My Bed’ and ‘The History of Painting’ which feature actual bodily secretions such as menstrual blood, along with used pregnancy tests and condoms: all used to emphasise the material qualities of the artist’s own body. Armitage’s poem employs a typically Bakhtinian levity to satirise this type of art and to suggest its ultimate ludicrousness, exemplified by the ‘tenterhooked rectangle of artist’s epidermis’ mentioned in ‘*Blood, Sweat and Tears*’ and the names ‘Raymond Kunt III’ and ‘Dr Malcolm Armsrace’ listed in the poem’s register section.

The poem also illustrates Armitage’s deployment of a broad range of satirical humour which is used in order to undermine the lyric tradition upon which it draws: bringing to mind Harrison’s Juvenalian material and its role as an agent of disorder in his work. ‘Assault on the Senses’ is an anti-lyric which masquerades as found poetry in order to undermine the traditional concept of lyric verse as ‘a unique intensification of literary language distinct from everyday experience’.⁶⁵ Of course the poem’s comedy and light-hearted mockery are ends in themselves, providing the reader with an enjoyable and inventive example of the poet’s ‘affinity for comedy’⁶⁶ but the barbaric potential of the text lies in its rejection of the normative features of traditional lyric poetry, and, in particular, its presumption that the lyric voice wishes to communicate ‘fundamental, enduring human emotions’⁶⁷ in an ‘authentic, personal, speaking voice.’⁶⁸ Here and elsewhere, Armitage uses ludic material

⁶⁵ Scott Brewster, *Lyric* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 6.

⁶⁶ Ian Gregson, *Simon Armitage* (London: Salt, 2011), p. xv.

⁶⁷ Brewster, p. 7.

⁶⁸ Sarah Broom, *Contemporary British and Irish Poetry: An Introduction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 181.

to undermine lyric traditions and to forestall his readers' expectations of lyric utterance - signalling a dissatisfaction with inherited tradition which culminates in the anti-poetry of *Seeing Stars*. 'Assault on the Senses' therefore exemplifies the previously adumbrated features of Armitage's masquerade, with pun, taboo and nonsense jostling for primacy in a poem whose satirical and political messages suggest an Harrisonian desire to challenge orthodoxy and received (artistic) opinion. The poem's comedic content exemplifies the centrality of playfulness and the ludic to Armitage's writing but also proves Ian Gregson's point that, however surreal and seemingly throwaway the humour, his 'kidding is a carefully calculated effect'.⁶⁹

A more straightforward exemplification of Armitage's use of playful language is provided by 'C.V.'⁷⁰ from *The Dead Sea Poems*, a dramatic monologue which details the many posts held by an unnamed and luckless narrator whose own fondness for inappropriate play leads to his repeated dismissal from a series of poorly paid jobs:

started, textiles, night shift,
 no wheels, bussed it,
 bus missed, thumbed it,
 in my office sunbeam, fluffed it

⁶⁹ Gregson, p. 22.

⁷⁰ Simon Armitage, 'C.V.', *The Dead Sea Poems* (London: Faber, 1995), pp. 7-8.

The syntactical organisation of the poem's quatrains, which use a momentum-gathering asyndetic style, suggests both the breathless impatience of the narrator and Armitage's own desire to question the traditional rhetorical reticence associated with speakers in dramatic monologues. In the place of the traditional speaker's graduated revelation of character, Armitage's male voice forces the reader to keep up with his breakneck confessions and sometimes garbled expression:

backwoodsman number, joiner,
 timber, lumber, trouble,
 axe fell, sacked for prank
 with spirit-level bubble

and his frequent use of vernacular language, heard in phrases such as 'three bags full sir', 'half stoned' and 'stuff that' introduces further levity into the poem's interrogation of formal lyric voice. The obviously 'male' qualities of the narrator's speech, with his sometimes aggressive expostulations ('half-arse O.U. student'; 'ate crap') insinuate taboo expression into the monologue's normally restrained linguistic range and this use of 'masculinised' genderlect, analysed briefly in chapter two, may be seen as a particular stylistic trait of Armitage's poetry, used, in poems such as 'Very Simply Topping Up the Brake Fluid' and 'Bus Talk', to deflate the composed style of traditional lyric poetry and open up closed forms to a Babel of contending voices normally excluded from anthologised verse. Sara Broom is one of many critics who have commented on 'the consistently masculine viewpoint in Armitage's poems', noting that many of

Armitage's personae speak in 'a voice that is for the most part decisively masculine' and this has two interesting implications for our reading of his poetry: first, because it illustrates the methodology behind Armitage's barbarian language and its deployment of male speech in order to shock, and secondly, because it raises interesting questions about the male propensity for violence explored by the comico-sadistic poems which will be analysed in detail below.⁷¹

As these brief examples show, play is central to Armitage's writing and is often used to open traditional lyric forms to a range of destabilising themes and registers. As Ian Gregson notes, 'comedy, in Armitage's hands, is a substantial genre' and this is borne out by the omnipresence of playful humour in his work.⁷² As the above examples also show, Armitage's playful writing frequently masks subtle political comment and critiques of social mores, with humour itself used as an unsettling thematic agent integral to his subversive agenda – making it both the object and the subject of his writing. As Dutch historian Johan Huizinga notes, the subversive potential of play is derived from its anti-rational and illogical properties, given that 'play is irrational',⁷³ 'play is superfluous', (8) and, furthermore, is 'a standstill to ordinary life' (22). Huizinga's central thesis concerning play is, in fact, that 'play is the direct opposite of seriousness' (5) and this is instructive for our reading of Armitage's use of humour as it suggests a latent, subversive tendency to be found within all manifestations of the playful and comedic - from Bakhtin's celebrations of Rabelais' riot and carnival, to the wisecracks and vernacular patois of Harrison's

⁷¹ Broom, p. 77.

⁷² Ian Gregson, p. 63.

⁷³ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955), p. 4. Further references in text.

PWD Man and Armitage's own colourful personae.⁷⁴ For Huizinga, whether or not it is self-consciously humorous, poetry is inherently playful and subversive, and Armitage's recognition of this fact explains his decision to explore humour in his poetry and place it at the heart of his renegotiations of lyric theme, where its 'defiance of authority and discipline' and 'saturnalian licence' (13) subvert traditional solemnities and evoke a Bakhtinian sense of disorder. 'All poetry is born of play' (129) Huizinga concludes:

it lies beyond seriousness, on that more primitive and original level where the child, the animal, the savage and the seer belong, in the region of dream, enchantment, ecstasy, [and] laughter (119).

Having established a sense of the range of Armitage's writing in the comic mode and some of its key features, we are in a position to move into an exploration of those poems, to be found throughout his work, which bring together, on the one hand, humour, wordplay and running jokes, and, on the other, evocations of graphic violence, murder and psychopathy. These poems rely for their effects upon comedic or ludic material juxtaposed with descriptions of interpersonal violence, suicide, murder and domestic abuse - explored in a deliberately deadpan and light-hearted style which suggests a postmodern desire to collapse boundaries between 'serious' and 'light' verse, as well as a barbaric determination to undermine a range of lyric poems and interrogate their limits of subject matter and theme. By analysing these comico-sadistic poems, we can determine the extent to which they resemble Harrison's atheistic pieces and ask

⁷⁴ 'nothing could be more playful than Rabelais - he is the play-spirit incarnate': Huizinga, p. 181.

whether they too are designed to undermine the formal and thematic unities of lyric poetry, or whether Armitage's intention is more subtle and complex.

'Don't Sing'⁷⁵ from *Zoom!* is an early example of Armitage's ability to mix comedy and violence in the same poem and use these unsettling elements to interrogate the thematic range of the lyric, 'seeking out new models and positions' as part of his renegotiation of literary inheritance.⁷⁶ Taking its title from a song of the same name performed by English pop group Prefab Sprout, the poem is dedicated to lead singer and musician Paddy McAloon. This part dedication, part homage anchors the poem in playful territory and suggests a postmodern blending of conflicting verbal and artistic registers: an 'aesthetic populism'⁷⁷ which signals the poet's willingness to open the lyric form to unusual influences from popular culture, and which recalls Huizinga's definition of 'poetry as a social game of little or no aesthetic purport'.⁷⁸ The poem itself blends levity of style and comical reference in its exploration of the symbolic properties of McAloon's lyrics and is seemingly inspired by the chorus line 'Oh no - don't blame Mexico', peopling its stanzas with a range of obviously Hispanic or Mexican sounding names such as Maria, Giraldo and Jose. Maria is the central character in the poem, a mother figure apparently married to the poem's anonymous narrator, whose name, allied to the poem's pseudo-Mexican setting, bring to mind Graham Greene's 1940 novel *The Power and the Glory*, a suggestive link given further credibility by references to a 'whiskey priest' in the

⁷⁵ Simon Armitage, 'Don't Sing', *Zoom!* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1989), p. 19.

⁷⁶ Hulse, Kennedy and Morley, eds., *The New Poetry* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1996), p. 25.

⁷⁷ Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 2.

⁷⁸ Huizinga, p. 124.

song's chorus and the fact that Greene's priest also has a daughter called Maria. This playful combination of literary allusion and reference to popular culture is again postmodern in its 'progressive deconstruction and dissolution of the high/low cultural distinction'⁷⁹ and leads to a series of comical episodes which establish the ludic tone of the text:

the first time, we were saying grace when
 the bump came right up through the table legs
 and jumped a custard-apple out of the fruit bowl

The 'bump', it transpires, is the sound of a man falling to earth, his body found 'splayed/into impossible positions', his head 'like a cracked egg, darkening the ground'; shocking images which recall Harrison's descriptions of torture in 'The Nuptial Torches' and which are at odds with the poem's tone of banal detachment and Isabel's extreme matter-of-factness:

Isabel, bless her, said [...]
 the dint
 was so deep we didn't need to dig a hole, just scrape
 the topsoil across to bury him.

The second stanza extends the comical content of the opening verse, introducing a character called Giraldo whose pig-hut has been destroyed by a falling man

⁷⁹ Andrew Milner, *Literature, Culture and Society*, second edition (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 82.

who ‘must have landed/straight across the dividing wall and exploded’. ‘The pigs’, we learn, ‘were already more than interested’ whilst the impossibility of burying the shattered remains is offset by the narrator’s pragmatic assessment that

the next time a priest was around
he might say a few words inside the hut

Giraldo, for his part, seems comically unconcerned, thinking at first that the deceased is a star, and wanting his neighbours to ‘share in the good luck’. His indifference is matched by the narrator’s unvarnished account, which avoids rhetorical commentary or any obvious show of sympathy, explained perhaps by fear of military surveillance or persecution, and suggested by Audenesque references to soldiers and ‘army helicopters heading for the clouds.’ Although the poem’s final stanza seems more sombre in tone and mentions men in Chaco, New Mexico, bursting ‘like melons’ as they hit the ground, further comical images intrude, such as Maria’s lie to the children that they ‘might see boats fall out of the sky’, the reference to people landing ‘in the soft sponge’ by the nearby river, and the final image of the stone cold ‘man in the potato-patch’; a constant switching between the comical and the unsettling which engenders a pronounced sense of ambiguity, and which is heightened further by the poem’s regular stanzas and apparent fidelity to structural regularity. ‘Don’t Sing’ therefore combines Armitage’s love of the comical and his celebration of the macabre to produce a serio-comic text which resists neat definition and subverts the reader’s attempts to define it in terms of one particular lyric tradition: an interrogation of

style and content which lies at the heart of his poetics. Clearly, the poem cannot be read as an example of merely 'light' or comical verse, but nor is it a serious piece of political writing, a confessional piece, or a dramatic monologue, although it combines elements of all of these different lyric forms and their competing registers. Its ultimate power resides in its ability to mix the comical and the serious; a testing of form and genre which motivates a range of other poems which blend levity of style and graphic evocations of sometimes casual violence.

'Man on the Line',⁸⁰ also from *Zoom!*, registers a similar sort of detached attitude concerning death, although there is no actual violence detailed in the poem. Instead, another of Armitage's many anonymous male narrators describes the scene of a possible train accident or violent attack which has left a man's body on the local branch line. The poem's opening line actually suggests the victim may have committed suicide, given his dog 'tethered to the bridge, tugging at the rope lead' but this point raises more questions than it answers as the narrator 'legged it before the cops came', denying closure and forcing the reader to concentrate on the minor clues in the text. The fact that the victim has 'the map of Ireland written on his face' may be significant or is perhaps only indicative of the narrator's inappropriate sense of humour, further evidence of which bookends the poem:

he didn't see me but his dog did (l. 1)

⁸⁰ Simon Armitage, 'Man on the Line', *Zoom!*, p. 23.

this morning's milk train will be late into Leeds (l. 12)

The dark humour of these comments echoes Isabel's detachment in 'Don't Sing' and the world-weary gravitas of Harrison's *Palladas* translation, underscoring Armitage's ability to mix mundane detail and frank explorations of death or violence in the same poem. The narrator's assessment of himself as a 'creep' and his terse commentary on the deceased reinforce the comedic aspects of the text, although its relative brevity does not allow for quite the same sense of shock as that generated in longer serio-comical poems by Armitage, where there is more time to create tension, reveal character, and prepare for the often violent dénouement. Perhaps the most humorous aspect of 'Man on the Line' is not the verbal candour of its narrator but the joke played on the reader, who may not realise, even as the poem ends, that the narrator may himself have killed the victim, disappearing as the police arrive and before his identity or culpability can be pronounced. Again, the blending of multiple levels of humour (verbal, circumstantial, caricature) and evocations of death and violence unsettles the composure of the poem and subverts its ability to make sense: like 'Don't Sing', 'Man on the Line' is a medley of competing lyric styles including narrative verse, miniature dramatic monologue, and epigram, and it would seem that one important result of Armitage's deliberate commingling of the ludic and macabre is a fracturing of form and formal cohesion which recalls Harrison's debasing of formal regularity in his sonnets, short lyrics and FitzGerald 'translation'.

A more complex example of Armitage's ability to merge humour and violence is 'Gooseberry Season'⁸¹ from *Kid*, an ironic dramatic monologue whose narrator, eschewing the reticence of Browning's Duke, openly confesses to murder and brazenly describes the means used to kill his victim. Opening *in media res* and spoken once more by an anonymous male narrator, the poem introduces the soon-to-be victim, who arrives 'at noon, asking for water' in what appears to be a remote rural location: certainly, the man has 'walked from town' and the later references to the 'county boundary' and meadows suggest an isolated farmhouse of some sort. Welcomed by a family composed of husband, wife and two children (recalling the use of the familial setting in 'Don't Sing'), the man takes up (semi)-permanent residence, sleeping through the weekend and staying for a month without 'a stroke of work, a word of thanks' before more egregious abuses of his host's hospitality:

taking pocket money
 from my boy at cards, sucking up to my wife and on his last night
 sizing up my daughter. He was smoking my pipe
 as we stirred his supper

This impertinence, however trivial, triggers a violent attack, with the narrator as instigator but not sole participant:

we ran him a bath
 and held him under, dried him off and dressed him

⁸¹ Simon Armitage, 'Gooseberry Season', *Kid* (London: Faber, 1992), pp. 1-2.

and the poem ends with the body dragged ‘like a mattress’ and thrown over the border into what, given the date of the collection, could be the Republic of Ireland. The narrator’s insouciance and the comical deflation of his recollections are chilling, as the matter-of-fact tone adopted above shows, but his psychopathy is more powerfully suggested by his banal deliberations before the murder: ‘where does the hand become the wrist?’ he ponders, before describing the ‘watershed’ between cosy familiarity and psychopathic rage in deadpan terms:

whatever turns up and tips us over that
razor’s edge

Even the victim’s offer to produce a recipe for ‘smooth, seedless gooseberry sorbet’ (an incongruous image in a poem about homicide) becomes, by the poem’s final stanza, material for a private joke, as the narrator, his crime seemingly undetected, scoops ‘the sorbet/into five equal portions, for the hell of it’, regaling his family with his humour.

‘Gooseberry Season’ is one of several monologues by Armitage which contain vestigial features of the ‘classic’ dramatic monologue, such as the revelation of a distinct character, the narration of a dramatic event and the sustained use of the first person voice to create intimacy or confession. Having used these surface similarities to establish a link to the monologue tradition, Armitage then tests and extends them, typically by introducing graphic and apparently random

violence: themes which are not stock features of the traditional monologue, despite the example of precursor poems such as Browning's 'My Last Duchess' and 'Porphyria's Lover' where violence is either passed over in euphemism ('then all smiles stopped together') or described in a quite lavish style emphasising erotic passion ('that moment she was mine, mine'). Armitage's poem is, therefore, a development and extension of the established dramatic monologue, as part of which the form's thematic range is expanded by the intrusion of unsettling material. To be sure,

the tendency of dramatic monologues [...] always appears to be to question rather than to confirm. From the very start, the dramatic monologue worked to disrupt rather than consolidate authority, drawing upon speakers who are in some way alienated from, rather than representative of, their particular societies.⁸²

Armitage's monologues therefore extend this tendency and take it to logical extremes, using humour and violence in order to subvert formal expectations and reject the normative and traditional themes of traditional lyric.

Perhaps the most notorious of Armitage's monologues is 'Hitcher',⁸³ a poem which builds on the psychopathic overtones of 'Gooseberry Season' in a Duffy-esque exploration of comedy and violence reminiscent of poems such as 'Education for Leisure' and 'Psychopath'. The poem's opening stanza is

⁸² Glennis Byron, *Dramatic Monologue* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 100.

⁸³ Simon Armitage, 'Hitcher', *Book of Matches* (London: Faber, 1993), p. 46.

innocuous and filled with commonplace details such as the narrator's admission 'I'd been tired, under/the weather', threats of dismissal from his employer, and the ironic, throwaway reference to hitchhiking:

I thumbed a lift to where the car was parked.

A Vauxhall Astra. It was hired

and this attention to mundane detail, delivered in the masculinised idiolect of another anonymous narrator, produces a humorous yet menacing tone which does little to prepare the reader for the meticulous descriptions of aggression which follow. Armitage delays this violence until the third stanza, at a point where the narrator and the eponym of the poem (also male, and anonymous) are travelling from Leeds across the Pennines on an apparently deserted moorland road - a setting which recalls the isolation implied in 'Don't Sing' and 'Gooseberry Season'. After some brief and rather clichéd badinage, the narrator

let him have it

on the top road out of Harrogate - once

with the head, then six times with the kooklock

in the face - and didn't even swerve.

I dropped it into third

before throwing his body out of the still moving car, a feat so deftly accomplished as to suggest previous experience:

[I] saw him in the mirror
 bouncing off the kerb, then disappearing down the verge.

The gleeful self-congratulation of ‘didn’t even swerve’, along with the apparent lack of any remorse or shock suggests an extreme psychopathy which eclipses the anecdotal stylisations of ‘Gooseberry Season’, whilst the narrator’s lack of an obvious motive for his attack is equally troubling. It could be that he resented the hitchhiker’s Dylan-esque patter (‘the truth/he said, was blowin’ in the wind’) or his itinerant, carefree lifestyle, but the only certain thing is his sadistic pleasure:

it was twelve noon.

The outlook for the day was moderate to fair.

Stitch that, I remember thinking,
 you can walk from there.

The overall impact of the poem is disproportionate to its size as, although brief and seemingly straightforward, the exploration of comedy and psychopathic rage in the same space invites a range of readings and responses which actuate a variety of differing and sometimes conflicting interpretations: is the narrator a Marxist victim of an acquisitive capitalist system? Is he psychopathically deranged? Is he, as Ian Gregson calls him, merely a ‘close-mouthed murderer’?⁸⁴ Is the poem an exploration of the constructedness of the self and further evidence of Armitage’s ‘fascination with the contours and contradictions

⁸⁴ Gregson, p. 59.

of masculinity’?⁸⁵ All of these readings testify to the poem’s ability to generate critical interest and suggest its power to capture the reader’s interest - a feature of many dramatic monologues, but one rarely derived from such powerful and controversial evocations of mindless violence. The playful violence in ‘Hitcher’ certainly sets it apart from the mainstream monologue tradition, and its deployment of a range of barbaric signifiers from comically invoked trade names to mild taboo and male genderlect suggests its ability to draw on the canonical tradition of Browning and Tennyson whilst simultaneously extending and testing this tradition: a key feature of masquerade writing and one which mirrors Harrison’s interrogation of form in his work. Interestingly, ‘Gooseberry Season’ and ‘Hitcher’ could easily claim Browning’s ‘My Last Duchess’ and ‘Porphyria’s Lover’ as literary forbears by virtue of the older poems’ exploration of extremes of psychological behaviour and monomania. Carol Ann Duffy’s ‘Education for Leisure’ and ‘Psychopath’ also resemble Armitage’s texts in their presentation of ruthless and comically sociopathic characters whose sexual and physical aggression parallels the discomfiting sadism of Armitage’s narrators. A comparison of these texts suggests a common approach to extending the thematic concerns of traditional monologues and their thematic and linguistic potential.

‘Education for Leisure’⁸⁶ most resembles ‘Hitcher’ by virtue of its dramatic opening line and the chilling implications of its focus on physical violence: ‘today I am going to kill something. Anything’. Less discriminating than

⁸⁵ Sarah Broom, ‘Gender, Sex and Embodiment’, in *Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 77.

⁸⁶ Carol Ann Duffy, ‘Education for Leisure’, *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 11.

Armitage's more composed narrator, Duffy's speaker seems to be defined by their listless desire for violence *per se*, rather than by any genuine grievance or obvious animus against a particular person, a fact noted by Stan Smith who comments on 'the indiscriminate nature of [their] hatred against the world'.⁸⁷ This indeterminate quality is signalled in the text by the use of pronouns such as 'something', 'anything' (used twice) and 'nothing', and by the narrator's indiscriminate targeting of a range of domestic animals such as a fly, cat, goldfish and budgie. Although comical, this list signals a gradual movement towards the targeting of a human victim, and many of the speaker's asides suggest a deep-seated psychological neurosis best explained as a psychotic episode or other sociopathic state:

I have had enough of being bored and today
I am going to play God [...]

I am a genius. I could be anything at all

The obviously solipsistic qualities of the speaker's personality are partly a function of the dramatic monologue form, although the multiple uses of the first person pronoun (sixteen across the poem's twenty one lines) suggests a fixation on the self which is ironic given the monologue's ability to mask identity and call the idea of the autonomous self into question, as Glennis Byron notes:

⁸⁷ Stan Smith, "What like is it?": Duffy's *différance*, in Angelica Michelis & Antony Rowland, eds., *The Poetry of Carol Ann Duffy: Choosing tough words* (Manchester: MUP, 2003), p. 157.

poets use the dramatic monologue to expose the conflicting and multiple positions through which the self can be situated and to emphasise the ways in which this self is produced by various socioeconomic and linguistic systems.⁸⁸

Sarah Broom similarly notes the ‘sense of division’ inherent within the dramatic monologue tradition and the ‘reader’s sense of a difference of opinion or perspective between speaker and author.’⁸⁹

Although both Armitage and Duffy exploit the ambiguous nature of selfhood by speaking through narrators rather than *for* them, there is still a sense in which the ‘self-centred-ness’ of the narrators in ‘Hitcher’ and Duffy’s poem articulates a tension between fictive self and lyric persona - as though the speaker were assuming a self beyond the text and the limits of the form. This interrogation of selfhood is obviously different to the accepted self-other dichotomy inferred by the dramatic monologue’s traditional insistence on impersonality and signals a novel departure from convention in Armitage and Duffy’s poems. In more prosaic terms, one could simply call these narrators ‘egotistical monomaniacs’,⁹⁰ a ‘potential murderer on the dole’⁹¹ or ‘a violently psychotic subject’:⁹² all fitting epithets for Armitage and Duffy’s complex narrators and equally expressive of their psychotic tendencies.

⁸⁸ Byron, p. 135.

⁸⁹ Sarah Broom, ‘Gender, Sex and Embodiment’, p. 88.

⁹⁰ H. F. Tucker, ‘From Monomania to Monologue: "St Simeon Stylites" and the Rise of the Victorian Dramatic Monologue’, *Victorian Poetry*, 22, 2:121-37, in Byron, p. 38.

⁹¹ Angelica Michelis & Antony Rowland, eds., introduction to *The Poetry of Carol Ann Duffy: Choosing tough words*, p. 9.

⁹² Jane Thomas, ‘“The chant of magic words repeatedly”: gender as linguistic act in the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy’, in Angelica Michelis & Antony Rowland, p. 134.

The naive self-confidence of Duffy's narrator is perhaps more obviously ludic than the more performative idiolect of the personæ in 'Hitcher' or 'Gooseberry Season', although the adolescent expression used in 'Leisure' does resemble the quips and male bravado of 'Man on the Line'. The narrator's desire to play God is echoed in their ironic recollection of Genesis ('I see that it is good'), and a series of comical details offset the dramatic psychopathy explored elsewhere:

it was in
 another language and now the fly is in another
 language [...]

the cat avoids me [...]

the budgie is panicking

Even the method used to despatch the goldfish is humorous ('I pour the goldfish down the bog') but the sudden eruption of proto-homicidal inclinations in the concluding stanza reaffirms the poem's ability to unsettle the reader and extend the monologue's traditional themes:

I get our bread-knife and go out.

The pavements glitter suddenly. I touch your arm

Like 'Hitcher' therefore, 'Leisure' is a barbaric text which uses comical and psychopathic material in order to extend the thematic range and expressive potential of the traditional monologue, thereby interrogating the status of those monologues which form the traditional canon.

'Psychopath',⁹³ also by Duffy, offers an even more extreme version of sadistic evil, written from the perspective of an experienced, and comically indifferent figure who reveals his crimes in an unabashed and direct manner reminiscent of the brazen confessions of Armitage's narrators in both 'Hitcher' and 'Gooseberry Season'. Sarah Broom compares the poem's reproduction of 'idiom to accentuate the repetitive performance of cultural scripts of masculinity' to Armitage's 'All Beer and Skittles' and this focus on the performative aspects of gender is one of many ways in which Duffy and Armitage's work interrelates.⁹⁴

Duffy's speaker opens the poem with a strikingly narcissistic observation:

I run my metal comb through the D.A and pose
my reflection between dummies in the window at
Burton's

and this description anchors the text in the same linguistic territory as Armitage and Harrison's barbaric texts by virtue of its incorporation of 'non-poetic' or un-

⁹³ Carol Ann Duffy, 'Psychopath', *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1994), pp. 43-6.

⁹⁴ Broom, p. 90.

poetic signifiers, including references to ‘Jimmy Dean’, ‘Brando’, biking leathers and Woodbines. A great deal of the narrator’s hyper-masculinised language focuses on clichés and idioms derived from the world of film and cinema, along with prurient innuendo and observations about previous sexual conquests. Comments such as ‘let me make myself crystal’, ‘here we go, old son’ and ‘drink/up son,/the world’s your fucking oyster’ depict an ‘hysterical masculinity’⁹⁵ very similar to the gendered speech of Armitage’s monologues, and ‘the psychopath’s obsession with his masculine identity’⁹⁶ seems the likely source of his callous objectification of women, suggested by comments such as ‘some little lady’s going to get/lucky/tonight’ and ‘I know what women want’.

Unlike ‘Leisure’ and Armitage’s poems, in which the central act of violence is conceived as a set piece within the text, or as a shocking *dénouement*, in ‘Psychopath’ the violent crime has already taken place and is reported as a series of interlocking fragments which appear randomly throughout the text, often embedded within the narrator’s frivolous and comical anecdotes:

she is in the canal [...]

she was clean. I could smell her [...]

no, she said, *Don’t* [...]

⁹⁵ Antony Rowland, ‘Love and masculinity in the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy’, in Angelica Michelis & Antony Rowland, p. 66.

⁹⁶ Jane Thomas, ‘“The chant of magic words repeatedly”: gender as linguistic act in the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy’, in Angelica Michelis & Antony Rowland, p. 133.

I grabbed the plastic bag [...]

she lost a tooth

This doubling of comedic and graphic content suggests the narrator's ambivalence towards the women he has killed but also illustrates Duffy's strategy of overlaying conflicting types of material - a thematic shifting also adopted by Armitage. Indeed, comments such as 'dirty Alice flicked my dick out' and 'a right well-knackered outrage' in the context of a poem which explores the 'domination, violation and obliteration [of a] threatening feminine opposite' seem highly transgressive and deliberately designed to discompose the lyric balance of the poem, and Duffy's constant melding of conflicting, and controversial, registers and themes is very close to Armitage's blending of discordant and antithetical elements in his poems, allowing us to conclude that in her dramatic monologues at least, Duffy is a fellow barbarian: using elements of masquerade to test and extend the traditional lyric.⁹⁷ Duffy's barbaric credentials certainly seem strong, given 'her demotic, and conversational poetics'⁹⁸ and the tension in her work between 'conservative form and politicised content'⁹⁹ and her proximity to Harrison and Armitage, however unlikely this might seem, would be a fruitful area for further research. One should not, of course, insist on similarities to the exclusion of obvious differences, and there are a number of key ways in which her work and Armitage's differs from Harrison's. One such difference concerns the

⁹⁷ Thomas, in Michelis and Rowland, p. 133.

⁹⁸ Angelica Michelis & Antony Rowland, p. 1.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

representation of gender and each poet's dialogue with feminism and gender politics.

As noted above, whereas Duffy and Armitage frequently explore gender in their work, with Armitage keenly interested in the representation of male voices and attitudes to women and Duffy advancing a feminist critique of male cultural narratives, Harrison seems far less preoccupied with the tension between gender and identity, and with the idea of sexual politics itself. His work, characterised by a male speaking voice which often objectifies women and assumes an anachronistic masculinist viewpoint, rarely comments on gender roles other than to affirm traditional cultural practice and reinforce stereotypes, even if his classical translations such as *The Common Chorus* (after Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*) and *Medea: A Sex-war Opera* do offer very powerful, and empowered, female characters. Certainly, Harrison's poetry does not engage with gender or feminist theory in any obvious way, and Sandie Byrne has found his presentation of women to be limited by a 'stereotyping which is the reverse of feminist',¹⁰⁰ and which 'associates woman with passion, irrationality, intuition, the element of earth, nature, blood, blood-grudge and brooding'.¹⁰¹ Many early poems from *The Loiners* seem to confirm Byrne's viewpoint, from the phallogentric specificity of 'The Pocket Wars of Peanuts Joe' to the objectification of the female body in 'Allotments', where Harrison's early sexual conquests are reduced to a series of graphic fragments: from 'hot trickles in the knickers' and 'a touch of breast' to the evocation of 'groin and bum'.¹⁰² Further

¹⁰⁰ Sandie Byrne, *H, v. & O*, p. 76.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹⁰² Tony Harrison, 'Allotments', *SP*, pp. 18-9.

references to ‘cunt as coastline’,¹⁰³ ‘Wife! Mouth! Breasts! Thigh!’¹⁰⁴ and the PWD Man’s lascivious interest in ‘furry little groins’¹⁰⁵ promote a (possibly unironic) view of women as sexual objects, and Byrne suggests that the *Loiners* poems as a whole do not ‘extend Harrison’s affinity with female sexuality’, so much as present the female body as a passive object for male sexual desire.¹⁰⁶ Other critics attribute the potentially sexist, if not misogynistic, content of his poetry to his working-class, post-War upbringing, with its emphasis on traditional gender roles for men and women, whereas Oliver Taplin argues that Harrison’s presentation of male and female characters in his work suggests the poet’s indifference to political correctness, rather than any overtly sexist agenda. As he puts it:

Harrison has sometimes been criticized for being an imperfect feminist – and that might well be true. This male poet has no interest in being PC; and he acknowledges the impossibility of *being* the other.¹⁰⁷

On this reading at least, Harrison is exculpated from charges of intentional sexism or the denigration of women.

Like Harrison’s, Armitage’s poetic voice is ‘decisively masculine’; the major difference being that Armitage is aware of the artificial or culturally conditioned nature of this masculine genderlect and is, as Sarah Broom notes, driven by a

¹⁰³ ‘Doodlebugs’, *SP*, p. 20.

¹⁰⁴ ‘The Heart of Darkness’, *SP*, p. 39.

¹⁰⁵ ‘The Songs of the PWD Man’, *SP*, p. 42.

¹⁰⁶ Byrne, *H, v. & O*, p. 79.

¹⁰⁷ Oliver Taplin, ‘The Chorus of Mams’, in *Loiner*, ed. by Sandie Byrne (OUP: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 175.

desire to explore ‘the idea of gender as *performance*’.¹⁰⁸ Ian Gregson likewise suggests that his poetry is characterised by an ‘increased gender self-consciousness’¹⁰⁹ and that Armitage himself ‘has an intensely masculine sensibility but is also *intensely aware of it*’ (52). Invoking Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* and its view of masculinity and femininity as performances of ‘available cultural fictions or scripts’,¹¹⁰ Broom argues that Armitage’s presentations of masculinity are parodic and ironic, with such markers as ‘male’ speech and idiom part of an exploration of cultural constructions of maleness and the pressure ‘to meet a given performance of masculinity’ (81). Armitage’s interest in gender as a socially constructed rather than biologically determined phenomenon therefore mirrors Duffy’s focus on the construction of gendered roles for women, and Broom argues that the two poets ‘have in common their skilled use of the dramatic monologue in order to reveal the process of the construction of self-image, including sex/gender identity’ (106).

We can see therefore that Duffy and Armitage’s dramatic monologues are strikingly similar in terms of theme and character, and in terms of their negotiations of gender and sexual politics: features of their work which, combined with their use of play and violence, suggest a definite commonality of purpose. Both poets’ work also illustrates the ‘contradiction, discontinuity, randomness and excess’¹¹¹ of post-War British poetry, and a postmodern fondness for fragmentation, irony and the collapsing of traditional boundaries

¹⁰⁸ Broom, p. 77. Italics in original.

¹⁰⁹ Ian Gregson, *Simon Armitage*, p. 47. Further references in text.

¹¹⁰ Broom, p. 77. Further references in text.

¹¹¹ Hulse et al, pp. 23-4.

which has earned them the opprobrium of the critical establishment.¹¹² But then, ‘for the neoconservative critic, postmodernism is fundamentally destabilizing, a threat to the preservation of tradition (and the status quo)’ and the comedic features of Armitage’s masquerade often announce a subversion of form, language, and content which threatens the cohesion of his poems and critical attempts to define, or limit, their meaning.¹¹³

If the poems discussed above reveal the existence of a playful but sometimes unsettling violence in Armitage’s work, two final poems confirm this sense of the macabre and exemplify his Kees-like capacity for the unnerving and the aberrant. ‘Robinson’s Statement’¹¹⁴ is a Kees homage which plays with comical descriptions of misogynistic violence and sexual deviance in a far more ludic manner than that achieved in Duffy’s monologues or ‘Hitcher’, and the main source of comedy in the poem centres on Robinson’s ‘statement’ explaining the presence of a female cadaver in his apartment. Robinson’s defence founders from the outset given the damning circumstantial evidence ranged against him, and his inability to construct a credible narrative:

He could lie.
 He could say
 she’d been dead a month
 when they dug out the hearth

¹¹² See, for instance, the discussion of Simon Brittan’s outspoken critique of Duffy’s ‘slapdash writing’, in Michelis and Rowland, p. 1ff.

¹¹³ Linda Hutcheon *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 15.

¹¹⁴ Simon Armitage, ‘Robinson’s Statement’, *Kid* (London: Faber, 1992), pp. 75-6.

and spuds were still in there,
 cased in tinfoil

while the manner of the female victim's death is shrouded in farce rather than
 mystery:

he could say
 she slipped from this world to the next
 like a rose dying back to its bud [...]
 he could lie about her teeth

This bizarre reverie is shattered by the arrival of a police sergeant who breaks into Robinson's room, crushing the victim's body beneath the shattered door and affording him a view of her 'ancient underwear soiled and irregular', a deflationary and far-fetched image delivered in an ironically Miltonic style made up of pre- and post-modification which sounds like a parody of the syntactical and stylistic organisation of *Paradise Lost*. The poem ends with Robinson's reflection that the sergeant looks like 'a big kid hogging the see-saw' or a surfer on a surfboard; an incongruous rather than psychopathic observation which nonetheless fails to assuage the reader's feeling that the poem, for all its levity, is yet another homicidal case study. Although less obviously shocking in its exploration of monomania and aggression than other Armitage poems, this poem retains its ability to unsettle the reader by virtue of what it leaves unspoken, whilst Robinson, for all his comical appeal, emerges as another sadistic and predatory male whose behaviour parallels that of Duffy's extravert narrators and

Armitage's more flamboyant killers. This tension between flippancy of tone and actual violence is as powerful as that evoked in the barbaric monologues analysed above, and results in a similar undermining of lyric stability.

'I Say I Say I Say'¹¹⁵ serves as an apt final exemplification of this melding of humour and violence, played out against the strict parameters of the Meredithian sonnet. The poem is self-consciously performative and features a streetwise narrator cum stand-up comedian eager to engage his audience and draw them into his world of attempted suicide and self-harming:

anyone here had a go at themselves
for a laugh? Anyone opened their wrists
with a blade in the bath?

Lacking the confessional edge of 'Hitcher', but retaining its presupposition of an interested interlocutor, 'I Say' reads as a miniature, self-contained comedy routine complete with opening scenario, anecdotal detail and final, ironic punch line: emphasised by the two rhyming couplets at the end of the poem. This parodying of stand-up recalls Harrison's own frequent invocation of the patter of the comic and is seen elsewhere in Armitage's work, especially in his *Zoom!* monologues. The narrator's opening questions invite intimacy, whilst his appeals to the audience's desire to 'come clean, come good', raising their hands to register a macabre group solidarity and showing 'that inch of lacerated skin/between the forearm and the fist', ensures their undivided attention. This

¹¹⁵ Simon Armitage, 'I Say I Say I Say', *The Dead Sea Poems* (London: Faber, 1995), p. 9.

strict control of audience and reader may be played out to comic effect, helped by humorous asides and clichés such as ‘a likely story’, ‘tell it like it is’ and ‘tough luck’, but the overall impression generated by the speaker’s apparent monomania is decidedly unsettling. There is certainly an acute tension generated by the intermingling of the narrator’s ‘hands up’ banter and his throwaway, but shocking, references to the ‘crimson tidemark/round the tub’ and towels ‘washed a dozen times’, and this tension is accentuated by the poem’s ironic adherence to features of the sonnet form such as rhyme, decasyllabic lines, occasional iambic feet and the sixteen line format of the original Meredithian. As in Duffy’s monologues, the male voice used here combines levity of style and delivery with a darker, violent edge which works against the closed form of the sonnet and its traditional subjects, whilst the poem’s apparent adherence to the sonnet form exemplifies the subversive potential of masquerade and shows the centrality of barbaric language and theme to its success.

God and Play: A Conclusion

This chapter has developed the position that barbarian masquerade is not limited to formal and linguistic subversion, but that it is also driven by a desire to explore controversial and shocking content normally absent from traditional lyric poetry, or, as in the case of Harrison’s classical texts, by a determination to translate authors whose work is already considered shocking or irreverent and extend these qualities by the adoption of a provocative barbaric register. Despite

having very different styles, we have found that both poets are clearly interested in the *politicisation* of popular verse forms, and we have found some important links which unite their work. For instance, many of Harrison's *Loiners* poems clear ground for Armitage's adoption of the comical mode, just as his focus on the macabre prefigures Armitage's later explorations of depravity and sadism, as well as his use of shocking material.

Although Harrison's style is clearly more aggressive than Armitage's playful one and suggests a more pronounced political agenda, Armitage's work is also the site of serious political commentary and subversions of literary norms, including, but not limited to, his interrogations of gendered voice and his critical focus on the constructedness of masculinity. As we have seen, Harrison's masquerade is heavily influenced by his interrogation of religious belief and by his aggressive rejection of theistic worldviews, making anti-religious commentary a major force in his writing, and pragmatic anti-materialism a conceptual *leitmotif* across his work. Although playful and parodic in a Bakhtinian sense, his work is therefore more aggressive and anti-authoritarian than Armitage's, attacking social phenomena such as religious dogma in order to interrogate the validity of cultural institutions. The atheistic features of his poetry, which exemplify Bakhtin's anti-piety theory, are rarely found in popular verse and it is this commitment to outspoken secularism which defines Harrison's masquerade. Armitage, in keeping with his fondness for comedy and irony, blends play and violence in his work in order to test the limits of lyric poetry and question its conservative thematic range. For both poets, linguistic dissonance and thematic licence enable them to include controversial subject

matter and political material normally excluded from the popular lyric, and Harrison's incorporation of atheistic material in particular is clearly intended as a Marxist assault on bourgeois religious metanarratives and as a critical commentary on the abuse of temporal power by religious elites. It also becomes apparent that Harrison is writing from within a long tradition of literary atheism - inaugurated by notable early heretics and extended by a range of more recent authors.

Historically, of course, atheism has been a sensitive topic rarely tackled by mainstream authors, with few outspoken infidels other than historical figures such as Lucretius, Julian the Apostate, Voltaire, and, arguably, Omar Khayyam. In Britain, issues of censure and censorship ensured that, for a long time, many freethinkers 'known personally as an atheist' were 'unable to put their name to such views in print'¹¹⁶ before 'the development of explicit atheism in the period 1780-1830' (1) and the liberatory example of the Romantics' 'explicitly unorthodox views on religion' (2). For much of the nineteenth century therefore, 'the simple conservative weight of the Church of England as part of the very fabric of most people's lives' (254) militated against the free expression of religious dissent in literature, such that the label 'atheist' constituted either 'an occasional daringly-adopted badge', or even 'a veiled or open accusation' (10). And yet, despite this stifling religious conservatism, it is in the nineteenth century that a range of texts such as Byron's *Cain*, Shelley's *Queen Mab* and his *The Necessity of Atheism* found an audience, although these texts were more

¹¹⁶ Martin Priestman, *Romantic Atheism: Poetry and Freethought: 1780-1830* (CUP: 1999), p. 12. Further references in text.

infamous, or notorious, than mainstream, with ‘Byron the renowned poet of ungodliness, denounced for *Cain* from pulpits throughout England’ and Shelley famously sent down from Oxford in March 1811 for his inflammatory pamphlet.¹¹⁷ As Ann Wroe notes, before Shelley’s attack on religious hypocrisy ‘no atheist pamphlet had ever before been published in England’ and this ensured that his religious and political views were anathematised by the deeply conservative and reactionary establishment of his day.¹¹⁸ Byron, writing ‘in the brief period when fundamentalist acceptance of Genesis had begun to collapse’,¹¹⁹ and who detested ‘the Christian religion and the sanctimonious platitudes of the English vicarage’¹²⁰ was, as Harrison reminds the reader in his *Blasphemers’ Banquet*, attacked by Robert Southey as the head of a supposed ‘satanic’ school of poetry, whilst Shelley’s views earned him the opprobrium of his Oxford tutors and the censure of ‘polite’ society. His position on the (im)materiality of the godhead is certainly close to Harrison’s own beliefs, and is expressed in a similarly barbed idiom:

whatever unknown power or imperative lay behind the material universe, it was not an organism and had no personal connection with human beings. Prayers were made to it in vain.¹²¹

His vociferous denunciation of the divine in *The Necessity of Atheism* is similarly uncompromising, evidenced by the confident declaration ‘there is no

¹¹⁷ Fiona MacCarthy, *Byron: Life and Legend* (London: Faber, 2003), p. 470.

¹¹⁸ Ann Wroe, *Being Shelley* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007), p. 162.

¹¹⁹ M. K. Joseph, *Byron the Poet* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1964), p. 121.

¹²⁰ MacCarthy, p. 143.

¹²¹ Wroe, p. 12.

God',¹²² by his argument that 'God is an hypothesis, and, as such, stands in need of proof', (35) and by his ironic question 'if he [God] has spoken, why is the universe not convinced? (43). His *Queen Mab* is even more scathing and comes close to some of Harrison's invective in his anti-religious poetry. *Mab*'s sixth canto is the focal point of Shelley's attack, in which he echoes his Oxford pamphlet by pronouncing 'there is no God!/nature confirms the faith his death-groan sealed',¹²³ and prefigures Marx's critiques of religion in such lines as 'the name of God/has fenced about all crime with holiness' (77) and in the damning definition of religion as a 'prolific fiend,/who peopled earth with demons' (68). Although no attempt can be made here to provide a more detailed historical overview of the development of atheism in European literature, it seems clear that anti-religious literature in English is a part of a tradition inaugurated by the major Romantics and that Harrison himself is self-consciously operating within it.

Harrison's atheism also has important, and recent, literary precursors, some of whose work has already been invoked in our discussion of his barbaric language and its tendency towards political subversion. Perhaps the most outspoken poet of the 'barbaric' school is Peter Reading, who frequently places religion at the centre of a range of sociological and anthropological phenomena which he feels account for the inexorable decline of human civilisation. Assuming a Shelleyan position on matters of faith and the spiritual realm, although expressing it in a

¹²² Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Necessity of Atheism and Other Essays* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1993), p. 31. Further references in text.

¹²³ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Queen Mab* (London: John Brooks, 1829), p. 76. Further references in text.

more aggressively proletarian idiom, Reading attacks religious conservatism and the ‘idiot evil/gormless theists’¹²⁴ it produces, labelling them

dogma-adherents,

orthodox hirsutes, smug in eternal truth

learnt from absurd delusions of troglodytes

and ironically transcribing Lucretius’ condemnation of the religious mindset

(tantum religio potuit suadere malorum) ...

heights of pernicious stupidity grow from molehills of nonsense¹²⁵

This impatience with the seductive pull of faith and the self-righteous hypocrisy it can generate also animates Harrison’s work and motivates some of his most aggressive writing, and this critique of the certainties of faith and dogma is part of a wider strand in post-War British poetry which, ‘in the absence of shared moral and religious ideals, or any philosophy on the conduct of life’, has long evinced a wariness regarding traditional beliefs and value systems, leading to a form of cultural apathy suspicious of religious fundamentalism.¹²⁶ Harrison’s dialogue with religion and faith is therefore part of an historical continuum stretching back to the Romantic poets, but is also indicative of a post-War ambivalence regarding matters of traditional piety, and a key manifestation of the barbaric in his work.

¹²⁴ Peter Reading, *Vendange Tardive* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2010), p. 47.

¹²⁵ Peter Reading, *Stet* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1986).

¹²⁶ Hulse et al, p. 15.

Harrison's critique of religious worldviews also recalls Marx's contention, in his famous introduction to the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, that the 'criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism' and his poetry takes up Marx's call in a variety of ways.¹²⁷ As an avowed atheist and humanist whose work 'consistently maintains an atheist case', Harrison frequently tackles both mainstream organised religion and matters of personal faith, with the result that much of his 'religious' poetry is the site of a dialectical debate between faith-based, eschatological or ontological claims on the one hand, and defiantly anti-supernatural, sceptical arguments on the other.¹²⁸ Although Harrison's critique of religious metanarratives is essentially Bahktinian in its ridiculing and mockery of the metaphysical claims of monotheism, it is also pointedly Marxist – especially in its recognition of the political abuses made possible by organised religion, and the subservience, spiritual stultification and exploitation of the weak which this entails. For Harrison, as for Marx, the rebuttal of supernatural religious claims and the liberation of the human mind from dogma are fundamental to the assertion of self-identity and necessary for the critique of bourgeois values: as the late Christopher Hitchens argued, 'the rejection of the man-made concept of god [is one] condition for intellectual or moral emancipation.'¹²⁹ Marx's claim that '*man makes religion*, religion does not make man'¹³⁰ and that the end result of the rejection of theocratic or faith-based worldviews will be spiritual and intellectual liberty, is championed by Harrison

¹²⁷ Karl Marx, *Toward a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction*, in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. Lawrence H. Simon (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1994), p. 28.

¹²⁸ Sandie Byrne, *H, v. & O*, p. 61.

¹²⁹ Hitchens, p. xxi.

¹³⁰ Marx, p. 28. Italics in original.

across a range of poems in which religion is subjected to ridicule, mockery, and exposed as an illusion: what Marx famously called both ‘the *opium* of the people’ and ‘the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world [...] the spirit of spiritless conditions.’¹³¹ Harrison’s critique of religion, like Marx’s, spans several collections and is developmental: beginning with critical assertions challenging specific religious doctrines and leading to his comprehensive denunciation of religious and clerical intimidation in *The Blasphemer’s Banquet*.

Like Marx, Harrison sees a connection between the promotion of religious worldviews and the stifling of human instincts and in response to this, celebrates the evanescent pleasures of human existence whilst denouncing the illusions of religious certainty, enjoining his readers to ‘cull the living flower’ and recognise the fragile beauty of their mortality.¹³² This Bakhtinian celebration of earthly pleasure runs counter to Biblical and Koranic injunctions to use one’s life as a preparation for the next and leaves Harrison open to charges of ‘blasphemy [and] the profanation of everything sacred’, and his writing, which openly challenges orthodoxy and advocates a militant secularism, is openly Marxist in its denunciation of the abuse of religious powers in the temporal realm.¹³³ If the church once held a monopoly on ‘revealed’ truth and used scripture as a tool of political power, it is through the agency of such figures as Marx that this hegemony has been eroded, and Harrison takes his place among a body of writers sceptical of the claims of ‘holy’ scripture. Of course this defiance of

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 28. Italics in original.

¹³² Hitchens, *The Portable Atheist*, p. 65.

¹³³ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 130.

religious power has always carried with it the threat of persecution, and his decision to use his poetry as a platform for humanist ideas, as in *The Blasphemers' Banquet's* defence of *The Satanic Verses*, is politically and morally daring. To the zealot, atheism is the ultimate heresy, and Harrison's masquerade, with its openly atheistic agendum and sardonic attacks on dogmatism, constitutes a composite rebuttal of the claims of the divine, the Platonic, and the other-worldly.

In terms of Armitage's use of comedy and violence, this chapter has demonstrated the centrality of play to his oeuvre and has suggested that his technique of fusing comedic and violent subject matter in his poetry mirrors Harrison's incorporation of atheistic material within his own writing. From *Zoom!* to *Seeing Stars*, comedy and irreverent material underpin his writing and serve much the same purpose as Harrison's interrogations of social class and culture elsewhere: introducing levity and disorder into a range of traditional poetic forms and challenging the conservative thematic content of popular lyric poetry. Importantly, this interrogation of lyric properties reflects the general trend of post-War poetry in Britain, where 'the hierarchies of values that once made stable poetics possible have been disappearing'¹³⁴ and where many poets, impatient with the 'established centrist tradition'¹³⁵ of traditional or 'mainstream' lyric verse have sought to disentangle themselves from a range of normative practices such as the use of 'poetic' speech, strict observance of form, and the production of what they deem to be easily consumed poetry which does

¹³⁴ Hulse et al, p. 15.

¹³⁵ Richard Caddel and Peter Quartermain, eds., *Other: British and Irish Poetry since 1970* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1999), p. xx.

little to challenge the reader's suppositions or worldview. Armitage's comico-violent verse therefore represents his contribution to a slow process of democratisation and politicisation of post-War poetry, or what Sara Broom has called 'a sense of discontent over the formal conservatism of the Irish and British poetic and critical establishments.'¹³⁶ In his playful texts, comical or avant-garde material is thrown into relief by the intrusion of graphic and sadistic violence and this arrests the poems' progress towards lyric closure. As a result, Armitage's serio-comic poems fracture the forms they inhabit and, in their playful blending of content and allusion, generate ambiguity and resist definition: exemplifying Huizinga's theory of 'poetry as a social game' and broadening the range of Armitage's masquerade writing.¹³⁷

The next chapter extends the analysis of Harrison and Armitage's writing offered here by increasing its scope: taking in a much broader and eclectic range of material which includes savage denunciations of the monarchy, the church and poet laureateship, and attacks on foreign policy, the destruction of the environment, international terrorism, and hate crime. As I will show, Harrison and Armitage's masquerade writing entails not merely a conceptual assault on literary proprieties and linguistic shibboleths, but is also an attempt to make poetry an agent of moral debate and social commentary: moving away from the traditional conception of poetry as meditative lyric utterance, towards a model of poetic composition defined by its engagement with public and political issues. The most powerful manifestation of this quest for a public poetics defined by its

¹³⁶ Sarah Broom *Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 1.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

moral or ameliorative possibilities is the film-poem: a multimedia platform pioneered by Harrison, and taken up by Armitage, and used by both poets to reach as broad an audience as possible. As I will show, it is in the film-poem that the three separate channels of linguistic barbarism, masquerade, and political commentary combine and interrelate most meaningfully, providing powerful evidence of Armitage's contention that his work and Harrison's contributes to an inherited tradition of subversive, politically engaged writing.

Ch.5 Unacknowledged Legislation: Politicising Masquerade

This chapter will argue that Harrison and Armitage's interest in the political potential of their poetry has led them to explore an increasingly varied range of material normally absent from traditional lyric, and to experiment with new forms of media for its public dissemination, including radio plays, film-poems and documentaries. Whilst their styles and choices of subject matter often differ, both poets are committed to a radical re-visioning of poetic practice which culminates in their multimedia productions and film-poems – texts which reveal their desire to promote poetry as a public art form. We will see that Harrison tends to focus on abuses of power by political elites such as the monarchy and church, and that his style is direct and outspoken: most of his poetry written in his own voice and reflecting his core beliefs. Armitage is a more mercurial figure whose work relies less on open statements of ideological commitment than on the subtle presentation of emotive material, typically focused on marginalised or victimised figures, and written from their perspective. More idiomatic and contemporary in style than Harrison's writing, his work is as politically committed but contains fewer open references to his private beliefs, and this means that, very often, the reader has to infer his moral or political views.

As noted above, Harrison's work often focuses on abuses of power by elites whose control of the written or spoken word, sometimes in the form of 'sacred' texts, permits them to stifle dissent, induce fear, and intimidate would-be critics,

and his political worldview is predicated upon the idea of *answering back*: speaking for those elided from the historical record, and allowing marginalised figures to speak out through the medium of his poetry.¹ Harrison also uses his masquerade writing in order to speak out *in propria persona*, attacking a range of social institutions which he considers anachronistic or outmoded, and uses his poetry as a platform for debate, satire, and dialogue: his pessimistic and cynical style bringing to mind the ‘vigorous and vehement’² idiom of the Roman poet Juvenal, whose ‘witty aphorisms and scathing comments’ look forwards to Harrison’s own barbaric and combative idiom, even if the objects of his satire can differ markedly from Harrison’s own.³ This section will focus on collections such as *Laureate’s Block*, v. and film poems such as *The Shadow of Hiroshima*, *The Gaze of the Gorgon* and *Crossings*, but I wish to suggest that all of Harrison’s published work, in every medium, is part of an ongoing political debate: ‘part of the same quest for a public poetry’ which inspires him to take on a range of moral, legal and historical subjects rarely explored in verse.⁴ As Peter Symes argues in relation to the film-poems (discussed below), ‘his is a public poetry, for public display’ and I intend to discuss Harrison’s masquerade in light of this important statement.⁵

In *Laureate’s Block*⁶ Harrison explores what he has elsewhere called ‘the versuses of life’, focusing in particular on ideologically opposed systems such as

¹ ‘Must I be always a listener only, never hit back[?]’; Juvenal, Satire I, in *Juvenal: The Satires*, trans. Niall Rudd (New York: OUP, 1999), p. 3.

² Susanna Braund, *Juvenal: Satires*, trans. William Gifford (London: Everyman, 1992), p. vii.

³ William Barr, *Juvenal: The Satires*, trans. Niall Rudd (New York: OUP, 1999), p. xviii.

⁴ Tony Harrison, Foreword to *Bloodaxe I*.

⁵ Peter Symes, ‘It’s All Poetry to Me’, in *Collected Film Poetry* (London: Faber, 2007), p. xxxiii.

⁶ Tony Harrison, *Laureate’s Block* (Penguin: London, 2000).

atheism and theism, monarchy and republicanism, war and peace, as well as writing several Stoic meditations on life and death. The collection exemplifies the binary and confrontational methodology of *v.*, using barbarian masquerade to explore the various political and social forces which animate and define human society. The collection opens with the deeply subversive '[A] Celebratory Ode on the Abdication of King Charles III'⁷, composed in mock-Horatian rhyming tetrameter couplets and written in self-conscious parody of Andrew Marvell's 1681 '[An] Horatian Ode upon Cromwel's Return from Ireland'. The choice of the ode as a literary form is important as this situates Harrison's work within the European canonical tradition, which views Horace as 'one of the most cherished of Europe's literary possessions'⁸ while the proximity of Harrison's poem to Marvell's panegyric upon Oliver Cromwell recalls that poem's paean to republicanism and Cromwell himself, who Marvell describes as 'the three-fork'd lightning'⁹ and 'Fortune's son.'¹⁰ Harrison's choice of form is therefore deliberate and calculated; situating the poem simultaneously within the canonical tradition and in opposition to it, while the Marvellian model prefigures Harrison's attack on the laureateship, the monarchy and the established Church: indeed, his poem is clearly intended as a homage to Marvell and as an extension of its defence of republicanism. While Horace's odes are associated with 'images of nature and the passing seasons',¹¹ praised for their 'timeless, proverbial quality' (xv) and 'their haunting memorability' (xv) Harrison's poem avoids the traditional harmonies of the form by his use of a powerful invective

⁷ *Laureate's Block*, pp. 1-4.

⁸ Antony Lentin, *Horace: The Odes* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1997), p. xi.

⁹ Andrew Marvell, 'An Horatian Ode upon Cromwel's Return from Ireland' in D.S. Carne-Ross and Kenneth Haynes, eds., *Horace in English* (London: Penguin, 1996), pp. 496-9, l. 13.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, l. 113.

¹¹ Lentin, p. xvi. Further references in text.

reminiscent of real speech, which combines his trademark barbaric epithets and puns, but which also advocates a bloodless revolution and return to the heyday of Cromwell's *Interregnum*: making the language of the poem shocking not only by virtue of its candid and often profane content but also because of its ideological and political message.

Harrison's ode opens by denouncing the laureateship as a 'charade' and by invoking the Muse, who chooses him to 'hymn the Crown's demise'.

Highlighting the ideological link between monarchy, laureateship and church, Harrison also rejects the divine right of monarchs

and anything that still pretends

divinity shapes human ends.

Juxtaposing Latin (*Fidei Defensor*) and more prosaic expression such as 'good riddance' and 'the worn-out Church from knacker's yard', Harrison's opening stanza actually attacks three institutions in quick succession, ironically invoking the Muse and retaining the formal elegance of an Horatian ode and its air of intimacy. The incorporation of barbaric language and anti-authoritarian subject matter within the ode typifies Harrisonian masquerade but its subversive potential is increased by the nature of the themes being explored: anti-clericalism, atheism and revolutionary politics.

Addressing a marble bust of Milton, who 'shed no tears' for the execution of Charles I, Harrison contemplates 'desceptering 'this sceptered isle''; a

combination of images which blend literary and historical reference in support of social revolution. Of the *Interregnum*, Harrison claims that ‘Britain had a chance she blew’, lamenting the return to monarchy at the Restoration, although simultaneously envisioning the imaginary abdication of Charles III as the result of ‘the momentum of the modern’ – the inevitable culmination of social forces set in motion in the seventeenth century. Harrison then calls for the removal of the royal ‘R from every acronym’, suggesting that the National Theatre shed its ‘royal endorsement’ and rely instead on the quality of its stage productions for social kudos. ‘In a republic work’s enough’ he declares, suggesting the moral superiority of the meritocratic over the monarchical, before offering an extended Shelleyan critique of Britain as a nation of fawning sycophants and ‘bepurpled parasites’. Attacking directly the etymological or semantic implications of the United Kingdom as ‘*King-dom*’, Harrison instead suggests ‘Former’ be appended, noting that ‘the acronym comes out as FUK!’, and this combination of Bakhtinian levity and barbaric language leads to the poem’s dénouement, and the voluntary abdication of Prince (here King) Charles:

now finally we’ve cast aside
the monarch without regicide.

The title poem of the collection extends the political critique of Marvell’s Ode, updating its message and renewing its call for the institution of a British republic: evidence again of Harrison’s homage to Marvel, and evocative also of Armitage’s interaction with the dramatic monologue tradition in his own work.

‘Laureate’s Block’¹² also addresses itself directly to Queen Elizabeth and is a daring call for the end of the monarchy and the laureateship, both denounced as outmoded and anachronistic institutions. Harrison, angered at having been “‘widely tipped’ for a job I’d never seek”, attacks the post of poet laureate, asserting that in the wake of the previous incumbent’s death ‘there should be no successor to Ted Hughes.’ Without attacking Hughes’ laureate poems directly, Harrison nonetheless infers that much of what is written by laureates is, in Thomas Gray’s borrowed phrase, ‘saponaceous’, or soapy. Harrison writes:

‘the saponaceous qualities of sack’
are purest poison if paid poets lose
their freedom as PM’s or monarch’s hack

- implying that the true poet is one unencumbered by royal or official titles and therefore free to write as they wish: able to ‘scatter scorn on Number 10’ and ‘blast and bollock Blairite Britain’. Although otherwise respectful concerning Hughes’ death, Harrison suggests that any laureate, as a paid member of the royal household, ‘still sports retainer’s rank with rat’: the staccato rhythm of the consonants here recalling some of Hughes’ early alliterative poetry, which is very different to his mellifluous and deferential laureate poems.¹³ Avoiding a direct denunciation of *Rain-Charm for the Duchy* and the poems it contains, Harrison nonetheless implies a distasteful complicity between royal poet and monarch - a parasitic arrangement satirised by Gray in the excerpted prose

¹² *Laureate’s Block*, pp. 12-7.

¹³ Cf. ‘Rain-Charm for the Duchy’ and ‘Two Poems for Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother’, in *Rain-Charm for the Duchy* (London: Faber, 1992).

section. Harrison's invocation, and quotation, of Gray is apposite given that poet's own rejection of the laureate post, due no doubt to the fact that 'by the eighteenth century, the Laureate had come to symbolize dullness and sycophancy, the supreme dunce around whom the *hacks* congregate and the world implodes in Pope's [...] *Dunciad*,' and this vision of the laureate as a jaded court performer suggests a deep-seated dissatisfaction with the financial and ideological entanglements binding monarch and poet.¹⁴ 'Laureate's Block' is certainly a mocking parody of such poems as Hughes' 'A Birthday Masque',¹⁵ deploying subversive and sub-literary material in order to comment ironically on Hughes' stately address to Queen Elizabeth and question the motives underpinning laureate verse. The poem is overtly political, with Harrison claiming that monarchist aspirants to the laureate post (such as Hughes' successor, 'Di-deifying Motion') might, as inducement, 'get a Garter for their guts': a pun which again denounces the link between poetry and payment, art and reward, whilst, in a more daring and outspoken tone than that adopted in the preceding Ode, Harrison defends his right to compose poetry that will allow him to 'say up yours to Tony Blair' and

to write an ode on Charles I's beheading
and regret the restoration of his heir.

Harrison's poem ends by lamenting the continuation of a post which the poet views, like the monarchy itself, as no longer fit for purpose. The 'Ode' and

¹⁴ Trevor Ross, *The Making of the English Literary Canon: From the Middle Ages to the late Eighteenth Century* (Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998), p. 176. Italics mine.

¹⁵ Ted Hughes, *Rain-Charm for the Duchy*, pp. 9-21.

‘Laureate’s Block’ are therefore companion pieces which form a diptych of angry dissent: targeting monarch, God, Church and poet laureate in verse heavily inflected by alliterative metre, scathing neologisms, and Harrison’s distinctive barbaric idiom. Although constant themes throughout his work, anti-establishment satire and atheism reach an apotheosis in this collection, showing Harrison’s determination to use masquerade in a forceful and politically committed manner as part of his project to create public poetry with a defined social message. In *v.*, the politicisation of form and content is equally pronounced, and this long, ‘state of the nation’ poem exemplifies Harrison’s commitment to political and ideological combat, radical subversion of literary form, and the creation of public art which addresses important contemporary issues.

Harrison’s long reply to Thomas Gray’s ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard’ has generated a great deal of critical debate, most of it concerned with the public furore following the airing of Harrison’s televised reading of the poem on Channel 4 in November 1987. The Bloodaxe edition of the poem contains several reproductions of newspaper articles and front pages from the time of the broadcast and, to judge from the string of references to ‘sexually explicit language’,¹⁶ ‘a torrent of four-letter filth’ (40) and the apt punning of *The Star* with its ‘FROM BAD TO VERSE...’, (44) it would seem that the main objections to the poem are based on preconceived ideas about poetic language and the supposed moral decline signalled by crude proletarian taboo, or what

¹⁶ Bloodaxe edition of *v.*, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1989), *The Observer*, Oct 11th, 1987, p.39. Further references in text.

Sean O'Brien calls the 'spraycan discourse' of the poem.¹⁷ Interestingly, this widespread opprobrium was still much in evidence as recently as 2013, when Radio 4 broadcast a one-hour programme dedicated to the poem, with a contextual introduction by Blake Morrison and a recitation of the full, unexpurgated, text by Harrison. Perhaps signalling the moral climate of the day, the *Guardian* was moved to describe the poem as 'expletive-laden' and the Radio 4 broadcast, introduced by warnings about explicit content, was aired at eleven o'clock, suggesting the enduring controversy generated by the poem and its overtly political content.¹⁸

Gray's original 'Elegy' is an eighteenth century text which exemplifies the periphrastic diction and stately cadence of the neo-classical period. Lines such as 'the curfew tolls the knell of parting day', 'some mute inglorious Milton here may rest' and 'far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife'¹⁹ have a stately and graceful air, derived in part from their bucolic frame of reference and partly from the euphony of their vowel sounds, while the mood they help to create is at once melancholic, restrained and formal: 'part of the mid-eighteenth-century revaluation of melancholy' as Peter M. Sacks notes.²⁰ *v.* comes from a wholly different socio-political context and contains a variety of speaking voices, themes, and political arguments which undermine the stability of the elegy tradition upon which the poem draws, fracturing the regular quatrains and

¹⁷ Sean O'Brien, 'Tony Harrison: *Showing the Working*', in *The Deregulated Muse* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1998), p. 60.

¹⁸ John Plunkett, *Guardian* online, Monday 14 January 2013, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2013/jan/14/radio-4-controversy-tony-harrison-vTonyHarrison>> [accessed 13th June 2013].

¹⁹ Thomas Gray, 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard', in M. H. Abrams, ed., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Sixth edition, Volume 1, (New York: Norton, 1993), pp. 2458-61.

²⁰ Peter M. Sacks, *The English Elegy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 135.

iambic rhythm of the original poem and trading aggressive political discourse and social commentary for the ‘received phrases’ and ‘sonorous’ tone of Gray’s text.²¹ Written during the Miners’ Strike in 1984 and introduced by an epigraph from Arthur Scargill, the poem is, like *Banquet*, a direct intervention into contemporary political discourse, with references to pits, coal and the NUM used throughout the text to anchor it in the ‘desecrated urban space’²² of Holbeck cemetery (which ‘stands above a worked-out pit’) and, simultaneously, in the wider social fabric of its time: ‘arms are hoisted for the British ruling class/and clandestine, genteel aggro keeps them up’. Although the poem strikes an initially controlled and melancholic note, with its ‘next millennium you’ll have to search quite hard/to find my slab behind the family dead’, reminding us that the poem is set, like Gray’s, amidst tombs and sepulchres and that its opening panorama is the *terra mortis* of the traditional graveyard (actually the ‘bleak, scarred, desecrated landscape’²³ of Holbeck), the imagery of traditional elegy is soon displaced by demotic speech and references to lower working class culture. Gray’s iambic quatrains are left in place (Christopher Butler notes ‘the careful measured relationship of Harrison’s quatrains to those of Gray’s *Elegy*’)²⁴ but the language is suddenly pugnacious, aggressive and openly ‘offensive’. References to ‘this graveyard on the brink of Beeston Hill’, Leeds United and, as early as the eighth stanza, ‘FUCK’ and ‘SHIT’ form an opening salvo of ‘absolute pornography’,²⁵ complemented by subsequent references to ‘coal Board MacGregor and the NUM’, ‘CUNTS’, ‘PAKI GIT’ and ‘NIGGER’,

²¹ See Forbes, ‘In the Canon’s Mouth: Tony Harrison and Twentieth-Century Poetry’, in Sandie Byrne, ed., *Loiner* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 196-7.

²² Antony Rowland, *Tony Harrison and the Holocaust* (Liverpool: LUP, 2001), p. 286.

²³ Byrne, *Loiner*, ‘On Not Being Milton, Marvell, or Gray’, p. 70.

²⁴ Christopher Butler, ‘Culture and Debate’, in Byrne ed., *Loiner*, p. 111.

²⁵ Enraged caller to Channel 4, in v., *Bloodaxe*, p. 72.

which serve as scathing proletarian rejoinders to Gray's 'yonder ivy-mantled tower' and 'rugged elms'. As Sandie Byrne notes, Harrison's language 'paradoxically assaults with invective and embraces with a common register' whilst subverting 'the stately measures of Gray's conventionalized address', but the poem's main political power resides in its exploration of Thatcher's Britain, and the alienation, post-industrial decline, and social unrest which defined the country in the 1980s.²⁶

The 'skin' who explodes into the fabric of the poem with his '*so what's a cri-de-coeur, cunt?*' represents the excluded proletarian voice of working class Britain: failed, or at least ignored, by the state school system ('like that red tick/they never marked his work much with at school') and excluded from active participation in social and cultural life. His profane expletives and angry remonstrations with Harrison are a projection of the great social unrest in Britain during the 1980s, as unemployment rose and many traditional industries went into terminal decline, and this historical context informs his 'aerosol aggro':

*Aspirations, cunt! Folk on t'fucking dole
ave got about as much scope to aspire
above the shit they're dumped in, cunt, as coal
aspires to be chucked on t'fucking fire*

This anger stems ultimately from the skin's feeling of alienation and lack of self-worth, tied in concrete terms to his inability to find employment. '*Me, I'll*

²⁶ Byrne, *Loiner*, 'On Not Being Milton, Marvell, or Gray', p. 72.

croak/doing t'same nowt ah do now as a kid' he observes, before asking, 'what'll t'mason carve up for their jobs?/The cunts who lieth 'ere wor unemployed?' His 'stupid idiotic foul language' is therefore a powerful indicator of working-class frustration exacerbated by Thatcherite social policy in the 1980s, as well as a barbaric intrusion into the 'elegiac' quatrains of the poem.²⁷ Unlike Gray's 'mute inglorious Miltons', who are caricatures denied speech and expression, (their 'uncouth rhymes' and 'unlettered Muse' reported but never heard), Harrison's skin speaks for himself and, behind him, for a whole political subculture of disaffected working-class figures whose anger at the economic divisiveness of Thatcher's Britain finds expression in bourgeois-baiting taunts directed at authority figures such as the '*vicar and cop*' and class invective such as '*don't talk to me of fucking representing/the class yer were born into any more.*'

v. is therefore an unapologetically political text, as Douglas Dunn makes clear when he comments that, in the poem, there is 'no hiding behind imagery [...], no wriggling out of implications, no shunning of reality in favour of pleasant, remote subject-matter'²⁸ as there is in Gray, and one important example of the text's successful merging of social, moral and political themes is Harrison's analysis of the divisive symbolism of the skin's Vs, which become

[...] all the versuses of life
from LEEDS v. DERBY, Black/White

²⁷ See v., Bloodaxe, p. 70.

²⁸ Douglas Dunn, 'Abrasive encounters', in *Bloodaxe I*, p. 347.

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

Communist v. Fascists, Left v. Right

class v. class as bitter as before,

the unending violence of US and THEM

Here, the subtle juxtaposition of political, racial, ideological and sexual divisions forms part of the poet's project to *unite* contending social forces in his poem, thus offering solutions to the apparently insoluble conflicts within British society, and allowing him simultaneously to reclaim the 'UNITED' daubed on his parents' grave and turn it into an emblem of hope: 'an accident of meaning to redeem/an act intended as mere desecration.' Given the violent idiom adopted by the poem's personæ, it seems ironic that much of the text is actually committed to ideas of reunification, restoration and cohesion: political arguments which seem out of place in a poem noted for its unrelenting pessimism and anger. The lines

[...] a call to Britain and to all the nations

made in the name of love for peace's sake

are echoed by later references to 'a working marriage [...] a blend of masculine and feminine' and 'that UNITED that I'd wished *onto the nation*'²⁹ and all suggest Harrison's determination to use his poem as a state-of-the-nation address: an attempt to politicise popular, accessible poetry in order to effect, or

²⁹ Italics mine.

at least encourage, societal reform. His use of popular idiom and barbaric language, although controversial, is therefore part of his ethic of accessibility, as Peter Forbes suggests when he says that ‘what made the difference was that here was a *cause célèbre*--and it was a poem you could understand! Not since Betjeman had there been a poet who so clearly wrote to be read widely, and to be read aloud’,³⁰ and it is certainly possible to see the poem as an optimistic, if not elegant, call for solidarity and coexistence between members of different classes, political backgrounds, and ideological commitments:

I doubt if 30 years of bleak Leeds weather
and 30 falls of apple and of may
will erode the UNITED binding us together.

The political arguments explored in *v.* are to be found throughout Harrison’s published work, and appear in collections as early as *The Loiners* and *The School of Eloquence*. A key conceptual shift in the early 1980s was, however, his adoption of the film-poem as a platform for the articulation of his poetic and political ideas, leading to the composition of such works as *Arctic Paradise* (1981), *The Big H* (1984) and *Loving Memory* (1987). *The Blasphemers’ Banquet* (1989), written in response to the ‘Rushdie’ affair and analysed in detail in chapter four, then heralded a move towards highly politicised and controversial material absent from the earlier film-poems, and the exploration of emotive subject matters not normally treated in lyric poetry. I would contend

³⁰ Peter Forbes, ‘In the Canon’s Mouth: Tony Harrison and Twentieth-Century Poetry’, in Byrne, *Loiner*, pp. 195-6.

that the overtly, even aggressively, political content of Harrison's work from this point may be explained in two ways: one, as a result of his decision to respond directly to live political debates already in the public realm; and also as an indication of his desire to reach as broad a spectrum of viewers and listeners as possible, with these later film-poems articulating 'things closer to my heart, or a greater burden on my spirit', as Harrison has explained.³¹

In short, his move towards film-poetry signals, or mirrors, his desire to communicate directly with a previously inaccessible audience (the television viewer), for whom poetry and film would be separate, if not irreconcilable, media. Harrison's aims in all of this, I would again suggest, are both political and *politically determined*: not simply a materialisation of his wish to tackle political topics, but *occasioned* by social phenomena (book burnings, religious intimidation, homelessness, war and genocide) which, as it were, forced him to answer back: a dialogic aspect of his work which echoes Percy Shelley's comments about the social role of poetry in his *Defence of Poetry*, in which he declared that poets

are the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society and the inventors of the arts of life and the teachers [and who were] called in the earlier epochs of the world legislators or prophets.³²

³¹ Harrison, 'Flicks and This Fleeting Life', in *Collected Film Poetry*, p. xxiv.

³² Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 6th Edition, Vol 2 - ed. by Abrams *et al.*, (New York: Norton, 1993), p. 755. Further references in text.

Shelley's simultaneous beliefs that 'poetry acts to promote the moral improvement of man' and that it 'strengthens that faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man [sic]' (759) also seem apt in any discussion of Harrison's film work of the 1990s, which tackles a range of themes such as homelessness, atomic war, and the 2001 foot and mouth crisis in order to open poetry to moral debate, and moral debate to poetry. Mirroring Shelley's view of the poet as a moral agent, Harrison seems to see himself as an 'unacknowledged legislator' (765) charged with a duty to criticise, satirise and sometimes attack the culture to which he belongs in order to effect a moral revaluation of its practices, beliefs, and systems of thought. Harrison's film-poetry of the 1990s seems also to be a natural extension of the political features of his masquerade writing and its search for a public medium: in this case, audio-visual mixed-media. This is not, of course, to say that the multi-modal texts can be read in the same way as Harrison's uniquely poetic productions, given the necessity of adopting a quite different critical approach when considering their blending of media. It is however also true that a definite conceptual link ties Harrison's early masquerade writing to his later filmed work, and it seems logical to assume that Harrison's masquerade, already politically committed to radical subversions of language, form and literary discourse, led directly to his decision to produce poetry supported by film: an interdependence insisted upon by Harrison, who has spoken of 'the creative co-existence of poetry and film'³³ and of his belief that his film-poems 'will always require the films they are an organic part of to be fully understood.'³⁴ His collaborator Peter Symes has remarked that 'it seems

³³ Harrison, 'Flicks and This Fleeting Life', in *Collected Film Poetry*, p. xi.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xxx.

now the most natural thing in the world that Harrison should have gravitated to television [...] and used it to extend his experiment with theatre and with poetry'; a poetics of aesthetic experimentation which leads to the anti-war polemic *The Gaze of the Gorgon* (1992).³⁵

Gorgon is an extended monologue delivered by 'dissident German Jewish poet' Heinrich Heine, or rather by his statue – removed from the Corfu palace of Elizabeth, Empress of Austria by the Kaiser in 1899 and ultimately deposited in Toulon in France.³⁶ 'Heine becomes a guide for the film, and his octosyllabic form is used as a metrical template', as Peter Symes notes.³⁷ The poet's meditations focus particularly on the bloody wars of the twentieth century and on the future prospects for armed conflict as the millennium dawns, and take the gaze of the Gorgon as their controlling metaphor:

the Gorgon under the golden tide
brings ghettos, gulags, genocide

'What polished shields can neutralise/those ancient petrifying eyes'? Heine asks, standing alone in 'a little park in Toulon, virtually unknown and unrecognised, having survived the war hidden in a crate.'³⁸ Commenting sardonically on his expulsion from Corfu and his vilification as a 'hounded Jew',³⁹ Heine's own

³⁵ Symes, *Collected Film Poetry*, p. xxxiv.

³⁶ Tony Harrison, *The Gaze of the Gorgon*, in *Collected Film Poetry*, p. 156.

³⁷ Symes, p. liv.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Gorgon*, *Collected Film Poetry*, p. 159. Further references in text.

gaze confronts the urban squalor and societal collapse of modern day Europe with a combination of contempt and pragmatic resignation:

your average Frankfurt-am-Mainer
doesn't give a shit for Heine (159)

and he bemoans his exile as 'junkies winding tourniquets [...] some scarcely older than their teens' (159) sit beneath his plinth and spray his statue with blood. Harrison's lexical field is morbidly precise in the opening sections of the poem, and his intrusion of Juvenalian imagery such as 'gore-caked coiffure', 'junkies' blood' and 'botched injection' into the Heine-derived iambic tetrameter lines of the text undermines the metrical composure of the poetry and accentuates the unrelenting pessimism of the piece as a whole: Harrison's masquerade offering a tragi-comic condemnation of war and a call for art to connect with political material by meeting the gaze of the Gorgon. After all,

if art can't cope
it's just another form of dope,
and leaves the Gorgon in control
of all the freedoms of the soul (160)

The poem's focus on the devastation wrought by war is certainly sustained, Heine's statue reflecting on a century of conflict which culminates in the 'spirit-suicide' (161) of the present age and the resulting social chaos symbolised by drug addicts who, 'afraid of Aids [...] queue/to trade old needles in for new'

(163). Harrison's determination to make poetry fit to confront the Gorgon's gaze leads to his call for a Shelleyan art able to articulate responses to human evil and capable also of helping to memorialise the forgotten victims of war; a determination underpinned by a Stoic recognition that 'human beings have been flaying and butchering one another since the dawn of time.'⁴⁰

First the dead man gaze goes rotten
 then flies feast, then he's forgotten [...]
 unless a bard like Homer brings
 the dead redemption when he sings⁴¹

Harrison writes, and the power of *Gorgon* as an anti-war polemic resides in its unflinching contemplation of conflict and in its refusal to sentimentalise or abstract the suffering it brings about, as when Harrison invokes

Terpsichore, the muse who sees
 her dances done by amputees.
 How can they hope to keep her beat
 when war's destroyed their dancing feet?
 Shelled at the Somme or gassed at Ypres,
 they shuffle, hobble, limp and creep⁴²

⁴⁰ Terry Eagleton, *Holy Terror* (New York: OUP, 2005), p. 2.

⁴¹ *Gorgon*, pp.165-6.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 171.

As we will see in our analysis of his anti-war documentary/film-poem *The Not Dead*, Harrison's call for poetry able 'to look unflinchingly at the unbearable'⁴³ is taken up in a remarkable way by Armitage, whose own use of the film-poem has shown a pronounced awareness of the form's ability to combine text and image in the service of political and moral consciousness-raising: evidence both of his interaction with Harrison's political masquerade and his film-poetry legacy, but also of the 'inheritance' alluded to in the opening chapter, and which we have charted across Armitage's writing career. As Peter Symes has noted, Harrison films such as *Black Daisies for the Bride* (1993) have proven 'to be a trailblazer for later work, notably by the poet Simon Armitage and the director Brian Hill in documentaries such as *Drinking for England* and *Feltham Sings*' and this symmetry between the two poets' use of the film-poem medium will be analysed below.⁴⁴

Gorgon ends with a medley of images (verbal and visual) which reflect Harrison's determination to use his work in a politically eviscerating manner. References to the 'ghettos, gulags, genocide' and 'the barbed-wire gulags round the soul'⁴⁵ initiated by the Kaiser's lust for blood are used to suggest a perpetuation of war which results in past atrocities such as the Holocaust ('I weep for six million Jews') (174) and contemporary conflicts such as the first Gulf War, whilst shots of Franz von Matsch's *The Triumph of Achilles* provide ironic contrast. Heine's lines immediately after the Matsch segment are

⁴³ Symes, p. liii.

⁴⁴ Symes, p. lvi.

⁴⁵ *Gorgon, Collected Film Poetry*, p. 172. Further references in text.

particularly evocative, and summarise the strident anti-war/pacifist dialectic of the whole production, focusing specifically on

the empty helmet of one whose eyes
 have gone to feast the desert flies,
 the eyes of one whose fate was sealed
 by Operation Desert Shield.
 They gazed their last these dark dark sockets
 on high-tech Coalition rockets (176).

Although a single victim of war, this unnamed soldier ultimately assumes a metonymic role, exemplifying the millions of victims lost during the twentieth century's bloody conflicts, often killed in barbaric ways by ultra-modern weapons of war. This illustration of the co-existence of primitive barbarism and modern military sophistication anticipates Slavoj Žižek's analysis of objective violence and the institutionalisation of barbarism within the modern nation state, as well as his recognition that 'culture itself is the source of barbarism and intolerance.'⁴⁶ Harrison's juxtaposition of images suggesting brutal annihilation and modern armaments certainly hints at the ritualised barbarism which underpins many Western military interventions, and the apparent 'sophistication' of their weaponry – a sophistication critiqued by Eagleton, whose terse observations deflate the myths of Western military propaganda. 'Civilization and barbarism are near neighbours' he argues, adding that

⁴⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (London: Profile, 2008), pp. 120-1.

the evolution of humanity brings with it more sophisticated techniques of savagery. We are not more rapacious than the Etruscans, merely supplied with sleeker technologies of domination.⁴⁷

The next film-poem after *Gorgon, The Shadow of Hiroshima* (1995), is an extended filmic monologue delivered by Shadow San, the disembodied voice of a victim of the Hiroshima hydrogen bomb whose carbonised remains were ‘etched onto the pavement’ by the force of the detonation.⁴⁸ Another of Harrison’s barbaric elegies, *Shadow* opens with an unequivocal denunciation of the attacks on Japan in 1945, narrated by ‘the shadow cast/by Hiroshima’s A-bomb blast’. Reduced to a metonymic fragment of his original self, Shadow San fans the face ‘he used to have before the flash/turned face and body into ash’ and considers the

A-Bomb Dome, symbolic wreck
left standing for our meditation
on nuclear death and devastation⁴⁹

This *memento mori* section then segues into a series of images, again both filmic and verbal, which seek to contemplate the ‘gaze of the Gorgon’ by expressing the potentially inexpressible horror of a nuclear detonation, with the artist Hara San introduced in order to give a vital human context to the ‘A-Bomb Day’ being commemorated by the (foredoomed) release of ‘peace-doves’ into the

⁴⁷ Eagleton, *Holy Terror*, p. 11.

⁴⁸ Symes, p. lix.

⁴⁹ Tony Harrison, *The Shadow of Hiroshima*, in *Collected Film Poetry*, p. 238.

skies above Hiroshima. Shadow San's lament for the victims of the American attack, although emotive, is not sentimental: instead, graphic images of 'burning and bomb-blackened skin', 'black flaps of flesh like chiffon veils' and the startling description of schoolchildren 'whose skin slid off their flesh like clothes' arrest the elegiac progress of the poem by insisting on the physical realities of atomic war. Harrison's unflinching focus on death and annihilation is offset by various filmed shots of the Hiroshima baseball stadium, river, and Shinto shrine, but the potential optimism of the commemoration event planned to mark the 1945 attack is undermined by further intrusions of graphic material:

where you see baseball I can hear
 all those thousands who can't cheer.
 Listen, can't you hear the choir
 of those who perished in the fire?

As this quatrain reveals, a great many images in the poem suggest immolation or burning, and subsequent references to 'Shadow San, destroyed by heat', 'the fiery fountain dragon' and 'burned and blackened, soon to die' form part of a network of imagery which reminds the reader of the firestorm caused by Little Boy as it struck the city:

when you hear the Peace Bell chime
 that's 8.15, my burning time

These images also form one part of Harrison's implied critique of American foreign policy (what Gore Vidal has called 'the unremitting violence of the United States against the rest of the world'),⁵⁰ and the text certainly reminds the viewer/reader of 'a will which takes itself to be all-powerful' and which 'tends to wreak an exceptional amount of chaos and misery [...] known today [...] as US foreign policy,' even though no direct denunciation of American aggression or moral hypocrisy is offered by the narrator.⁵¹ That said, the text *presupposes* American military culpability by exploring its effects in such harrowing detail and hence any further manifestation of moral opprobrium would be redundant: the images of Japan shown in the film are sufficient symbols of American military barbarism and its many thousands of casualties.

Harrison's interest in the human cost of the bombing is explored in Shadow San's memories of his lover Sonoko, lost in the conflagration which killed seventy thousand other inhabitants of Hiroshima and memorialised by Shadow San's simultaneously poignant and pathetic

seeing Sonoko asleep
 could even make a shadow weep.
 Girls as beautiful, as young, as sweet
 were seared to cinders by the heat

⁵⁰ Gore Vidal, *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace* (Trowbridge: Clairview, 2002), p. 45.

⁵¹ Eagleton, *Holy Terror*, p. 118.

and the poem ends with the symbolic deaths of the peace doves - attacked by hawks who find 'their ripped-out innards good to eat'. Although one could argue that *Shadow* is less overtly political than *Gorgon* or, for that matter, *The Blasphemers' Banquet*, its ability to shock is still considerable, and Peter Symes is right to praise 'the power and potential' of its poetry.⁵² This power resides as much in the pity evoked by Shadow San's sometimes plaintive commentary as by any of Harrison's uncompromising descriptions of fire and death, and the political argument advanced by the text is reinforced, rather than diminished, by its focus on the human tragedy of the bombing. The poem is a key text in Harrison's canon of anti-war writing and articulates his sense of outrage at the indiscriminate murder of civilians; further evidence of the essentially political motivation underpinning his masquerade writing and, in particular, his film-poems. As Symes again notes, Harrison's politically motivated film-poems 'brought poetry into the homes of millions of people, and made it immediate. It was work that attempted to face up to the changing society we live in' (xxxv) and comment directly on contemporary events. One final film-poem by Harrison, *Crossings* (2002), is particularly noteworthy in this regard, demonstrating his 'ability to respond to events as they happened' (xlv) in a public, and highly accessible, medium, and his ability to use traditional lyric form in a conspicuously political way.

Although Peter Symes rightly points out that *Crossings* is Harrison's 'homage to Auden and to *Night Mail*', (lxii) complete with Audenesque rhyming couplets

⁵² Symes, p. lx. Further references in text.

and strident metrical beat, there is a sense in which the text is also an angry retort to Auden's film-poem, and a critique of its mood of optimistic celebration:

Thousands are still asleep [...]
 But shall wake soon and hope for letters,
 And none will hear the postman's knock
 Without a quickening of the heart.⁵³

In the place of Auden's ebullient evocation of the London-Scotland night mail service, 'bringing the cheque and the postal order' and charging 'past cotton-grass and moorland border' before disgorging her 'letters of joy from girl and boy' in Glasgow, Harrison's text offers a bleak vision of urban decay, rural impoverishment, and homelessness; occasioned, ironically, by the cancelation of the same service commemorated by Auden. Harrison's retention of the rhyme scheme and general metrical rhythms of the source poem certainly suggests conscious modelling or *homage*, but also a politically motivated subversion of the lyric gracefulness and phonological euphony of the original, and this thematic invasion of Auden's text is further evidence of Harrison's politically-driven masquerade.

Harrison's poem opens with a medley of voices which fracture the monolingual authority of Auden's text and suggest a more quarrelsome polyphony. A female postal worker's Black British vernacular ('me a empty mail bags all night in mi

⁵³ W. H. Auden, 'Night Mail: *Commentary for a G. P. O. film*', in *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber, 1976), pp. 113-4; p. 114.

sleep')⁵⁴ merges with Harrison's own voice, before the introduction of the voices of an Asian 'bag-tagger', a homeless Scottish man called Angus, those of various drinkers in the Great Northern Inn and, most powerfully of all, that of a 'suicidal Yorkshire farmer' whose cattle has been culled as part of the DEFRA response to the foot and mouth crisis of 2001. The poem is equally 'vociferous' in its immediate focus on mail which heralds bad news or 'panic...pain':

A letter for someone homeless, alone
 Sent back to his mother 'addressee unknown' [...]
 great news for a pupil with good exam grades,
 'the result of a blood test for HIV AIDS

and it soon becomes clear that Harrison's chief concern in the text is to address the rural and urban crises facing Britain by assuming a position contrary to that adopted by Auden: one more in keeping with his reputation for tackling highly contentious subject matters in an aggressive, Cynical, pragmatic idiom.

Evidence of Harrison's terse response to Auden's somewhat kitsch treatment of the night mail service ('clever, stupid, short and long,/the typed and the printed and the spelt all wrong')⁵⁵ can be seen in the extended diatribe given to the 'culler' at the Royal Mail depot, whose job title evokes the contemporaneous slaughter of thousands of sheep across the north of England at the height of the FMD outbreak:

Along with culled cattle, culled kingdoms of coal,

⁵⁴ Tony Harrison, *Crossings*, in *Collected Film Poetry*, pp. 403-14; p. 403.

⁵⁵ Auden, p. 114.

one dumped on the bonfire, one on the dole.

The only pits now that you'll find on this route
are mass graves for cattle that MAFF came to shoot.

The culler's words also evoke the bleak imagery and topography of *v.*:
suggesting the ruinous social policies of successive Westminster administrations
and the slow, inexorable decline of the coal industry in Yorkshire through their
focus on death, decay and mass unemployment. Far more politically committed
than Auden's text (which, admittedly, was a commissioned piece and hence not
evidence of Auden's own political opinions), Harrison's poem maintains a
relentless focus on human misery, and becomes, in Peter Symes words, 'both an
elegy and a state-of-the-nation protest' in much the same way that *v.* used Gray's
elegiac text as a platform for mordant socio-political commentary.⁵⁶ From the
young Scottish boy huddled beneath Vauxhall Viaduct to the Yorkshire farmer
ruined by debt, Harrison's thematic *modus operandi* is confrontation,
intermingled with black comedy of the grimmest kind:

all those millions of letters and not one mine.

Fuck you, sodding Nightmail! Mam, drop us a line [Angus]

Them fields were all full. Now they're not!

The cullers turned up and murdered the lot

⁵⁶ Symes, p. lxiii.

and the poem's focus on human tragedy amid the mass cull of infected cattle is expressed in a blend of taboo and dialect which recalls the skin's scathing expostulations in *v.*:

if I try counting sheep all I see in mi bed
 are 't'poor beasts queuing up to be shot in the head [Farmer]

while the mail rumbles over the Tyne viaduct
 we're out on the pull to get worsels fucked ['Geordie Girl']

Although some parts of the poem indicate a more measured appropriation of Auden's original, heard in such lines as 'this is the Nightmail picking up speed', *Crossings* should mainly be thought of as an ironic pastiche, or politicised response, to Auden's text, and as a poem of political protest, written, like *Banquet* and *Hiroshima*, in response to a decisive moment of crisis in British cultural (and agricultural) life. Like *v.*, *Crossings* is also a 'failed' elegy: morbidly eulogizing a nation of derelicts and suicides without offering any consolatory or spiritual uplift, and written more in the tradition of Juvenal than Gray: displaying the former's predilection for 'harsh, contentious [and] vituperative' satire and seeking to unsettle lyric proprieties and the neat symmetry of formal elegiac closure.⁵⁷ Concluding the suite of highly politicised film-poems inaugurated by *Banquet*, *Crossings* is also the apogee of Harrison's satirical writing, and displays the 'sense of moral vocation' and 'concern for the

⁵⁷ Ejner J. Jensen, 'Verse Satire in the English Renaissance', in *A Companion to Satire Ancient and Modern*, edited by Ruben Quintero (Massachusetts: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), p. 105.

public interest' outlined above in our discussion of Harrison's public, and Shelleyan, poetics of political commitment.⁵⁸ Echoing Juvenal's '*difficile est saturam non scribere*', Harrison's politically committed film-poems exemplify his desire to use his poetry as part of a public, and accessible, debate with a range of targets, from hegemonic political forces to religious institutions and governmental bodies. As Ruben Quintero argues, satirists 'encourage our need for the stability of truth by unmasking imposture, exposing fraudulence, shattering deceptive illusion, and shaking us from our complacency and indifference', and Harrison's complete range of public poetry from *v.* to *Crossings* shows a similar commitment to moral and ethical debate, mediated through his ubiquitous barbaric idiom and facilitated by his constant subversion of literary form and tradition.⁵⁹ The extent to which Armitage's work may be said to have inherited the satirical impulse and politically subversive public role of Harrison's poetry is the subject of the next section.

Armitage's Film-Poems: Beyond Play

Given the ludic potential of Armitage's poetry, few critics have responded to the political arguments which also animate his work. As the critical overview provided in the opening chapter suggests, he is most often envisioned as an

⁵⁸ Ruben Quintero, 'Understanding Satire', in *A Companion to Satire Ancient and Modern*, p. 1.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

ironic and playful author whose work investigates a range of topical themes without direct, or obvious, political engagement, in contradistinction to Harrison, for whom political arguments are of primary importance. I will argue in this section that Armitage's work is, in fact, as committed to the exploration of political and contentious material as Harrison's, but that this aspect of his work is often masked by his ironic style, and by his tendency to avoid open declarations of political commitment: an emotional distancing very different to Harrison's exclamatory style, and one which helps to define his very different approach to the creation of public art. In his poetry written for public broadcast by radio, Armitage tackles a range of political issues such as hate crime, war and genocide which echo Harrison's commitment to a public art capable of responding to contemporary social crises, historical abuses of power, and tragedy. It is, however, in his adoption of the film-poem that Armitage most resembles Harrison and his dedication to public protest: his *Xanadu*, *Killing Time*, *Out of the Blue* and *The Not Dead* providing powerful evidence of the inheritance alluded to in the opening chapter, and suggesting a conscious interaction with Harrison's filmed poetry which will be analysed here. I begin by considering the radio work.

'Cambodia',⁶⁰ a commissioned piece for BBC Radio 3, was written to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the rise of the Khmer Rouge, and is split into two sections, each of which attempts to answer an initial, problematic question. In the first section, Armitage's narrator asks 'is evil a substance, a thing?' and proposes a series of ways in which this epistemological conundrum might be

⁶⁰ Simon Armitage, 'Cambodia', in *Out of the Blue* (London: Enitharmon, 2008), pp. 53-63.

answered – or approached. Unlike Harrison’s poems, which dramatise the poet’s emotional and moral responses, Armitage’s poem offers no definitive answers or moral judgments, relying instead on the delineation of factual detail in order to achieve the (near) catharsis of its final lines. The questions ‘does evil germinate, radiate, rise?’ and ‘does it seep like gas through keyholes?’ are ‘answered’ by the images of ‘a bowl of rice peppered with red corn’ and ‘a brilliant mind ordered to carry dirt’, which suggest a suppressed, rather than vocalised, anger very different to Harrison’s declarative style and his preference for strident, first-person narration and the immediate expression of emotion. The subsequent images of ‘a Buddhist monk smashed with a spade and lashed to a tree’ and ‘a young man smashed for saying the wrong word’ are more obviously Harrisonian in their focus on graphic detail, but the poet maintains his objectivity and allows the factual details of the text to carry its moral and political message. Even direct references to Cambodia’s infamous ‘killing fields’ are muted, although the resulting idiom is unsettling rather than euphemistic:

can evil be buried [...]

or ploughed back, will it surface again?

Will it elbow out of the mud in the clawing rain?

Will its femurs and jaw-bones sprout and shoot,

will the seeds of its marrow take root?

The refrain ‘Cambodia. Say it. A word’ is perhaps the only indication of Armitage’s moral position, although his decision to report rather than comment

directly on the Cambodian genocide is itself a conscious choice, which suggests the author's shared sense of outrage at the unspeakable acts to which the poem refers. It should be noted that the poem-broadcast was produced as part of a season entitled *The Violence of Silence*, and hence Armitage's objective, 'reportage' style narration might also illustrate his wish to let the words 'speak for themselves'.

Like Harrison's political writing, this poem focuses most on the human cost of conflict, and, in particular, on the millions of deaths brought about by Pol Pot's Communist dictatorship in the 1970s. The use of torture by the Khmer Rouge is evoked in the lines 'leg-irons hung from a nail in a room./Jump leads. A blindfold. Crocodile clips', while the forced extermination of supposed anti-Communist 'decadents' is glimpsed in references to 'your name on a list – the call of death.' Other details are more obviously graphic, such as 'a million faces defaced, face down in the dirt', but the first section of the poem seems more concerned with *finding words*: actualising grief, and allowing grief to form. Again, it is the *attempt* to vocalise emotion which is most obvious in the text, rather than the outpouring of moral anger and the expression of definite moral positions (as in Harrison's work):

Why here?

Why then?

Were conditions ripe?

Did it hatch from an egg?

The poem's second section opens with a similar range of rhetorical questions, although the evocation of physical violence in this part of the text is much more pronounced: almost as though there were something irrepressible about the truth of Cambodia that must make itself heard despite the almost insupportable evil which is thereby revealed. Graphic images such as that of a man 'who had not eaten in nineteen days', or of those 'bludgeoned for wearing glasses to read', 'bludgeoned for stealing a rodent to eat' or

bludgeoned for having a thought in his head,
 then bludgeoned again
 then bludgeoned again

are complemented by a barrage of equally graphic content, describing

Cambodia witnessing line after line after line after line after line
 of Cambodians
 clubbed on the back of the skull by Cambodians
 slashing the throats of Cambodians
 swords in the hands of Cambodians

and culminating in the historically accurate evocation of people buried alive in mass graves as a way of avoiding the expense of shooting them:

not shot but hammered to death because bullets are money –

bullets have physical worth.

It might be objected that Armitage's distance from the subject of the poem is so pronounced as to call his emotional commitment into question; almost indicating a lack of sensitivity to the atrocities explored in the text. However, this attempted objectivity is better seen as an index of his commitment to the search for truth and as an indicator of his determination to report facts honestly. To write on such a politically sensitive topic at all indicates a definite moral position, and his evocation of the Cambodian genocide recalls the most forceful of Harrison's rhetoric, even if the poem in its final form does not offer an unambiguous statement of the poet's personal feelings. A linked objection might be the text's slight historical bias: accentuating the 'plain peasant revenge' of the Pol Pot regime, but ignoring the fact that, as Noam Chomsky has argued,

it's not clear that Pol Pot killed very more people – or even *more* people – than the *United States* killed in Cambodia in the first half of the 1970s. We only talk about "genocide" when other people do the killing.⁶¹

This, however, would be to confuse Armitage's *commissioned* poetry with objective historical research, and to ignore his other criticisms of American cultural barbarism in texts such as *Killing Time*, where Anglo-American foreign policy is openly attacked.

⁶¹ Noam Chomsky in Peter R. Mitchell and John Schoeffel, *Understanding Power: The Indispensable Chomsky* (London: Vintage, 2003), p. 92. Italics in original.

Far more obviously political is the poem's subversion of the conventions of traditional elegy, with the typical motifs of sorrow, loss and emotional catharsis replaced by fractured syntax, strikingly unadorned speech and an apparent lack of moral or emotional closure: 'when will today, washed of its camouflage paint, look itself in the face?' Like *v.* and *Crossings, Cambodia* refuses to conform to the normative definitions of elegy and offers instead a barbaric inversion of the form which actualises grief and memorialises victims without enacting 'the movement from grief to consolation'⁶² or, indeed, charting 'the basic passage through grief or darkness to consolation and renewal.'⁶³ As with Harrison's renegotiations of elegiac discourse, Armitage in *Cambodia* is concerned as much with the politics of form as with political arguments themselves, replacing the elegy's 'traditional focus on the localised grief of the subject'⁶⁴ with a more nuanced, but highly political, focus on the lost millions of Cambodia's 'killing fields'.

Black Roses is another radio-poem, or 'radio drama-documentary',⁶⁵ first broadcast on BBC Radio 4 in 2011. An extended elegy for murdered teenager Sophie Lancaster, *Roses* is chiefly concerned with the idea of allowing Sophie to speak posthumously in her own words: 'I wanted to give her back her voice', as Armitage explains.⁶⁶ This undertaking to allow the dead to speak for themselves is quite different to Harrison's technique of speaking *for* figures such as the skin in *v.* and Salman Rushdie in *Banquet*, but the resulting poetry is equally

⁶² Peter M. Sacks, *The English Elegy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 2.

⁶³ *ibid.*, p. 20.

⁶⁴ Rowland, p. 146.

⁶⁵ Simon Armitage, *Black Roses: The Killing of Sophie Lancaster* (Pomona: 2012).

⁶⁶ Armitage, *Black Roses*, introduction.

unsettling in its exploration of politically sensitive material. Armitage's subversion of the motifs and stylistic conventions of traditional elegy is more obviously Harrisonian, although here, too, there are interesting points of stylistic divergence.

The text derives its emotional force from its air of intimacy, and from the sensation of pathos evoked from the knowledge that the speaking voice belongs to someone who has been brutally murdered. The opening sections of the text form a biographical section which recalls Sophie's childhood and her youthful naïveté, but which also predict her future persecution and bullying at the hands of other children:

November's child is

watchful, calm.

The twilight month [...]

Were those gothic days where I got it all from?

- and, having established Sophie's emotional withdrawal from her peer group ('to be sometimes remote./to be sometimes withdrawn'), the text prepares the reader for its tragic dénouement by emphasising Sophie's physical frailty and her gradual reinvention as a 'goth':

I was lean and sharp,

not an ounce of fat [...]

In my difficult teens
I was strange, odd [...]

Armitage then details her relationship with her boyfriend Robert, the intended victim of the attack in Stubbylee Park, before the poem's seventh section, in which the attack itself is described.

In this section, an initial scene of pastoral calm recalling the traditional floral motifs of traditional elegy gives way to a more ominous evocation of the dangers of Stubbylee Park.⁶⁷ Moving from

Summer. August.
The people's month.
Easy, effortless,
endless days [...]

geraniums spelling the name of the town,

to the sinister 'had we only known...', the speaking voice 'hardens', employing harsh consonants and monosyllables in its description of a place 'where shadows waited' and 'where wolves ran wild'. Cigarettes and mobile phones are described as 'glimmering and sparking' as 'figures materialised out of the black' to form 'a group', 'a gang', 'a mob', 'a pack'. The attack itself, which arises

⁶⁷ Cf. Sacks' comments that 'laurels, myrtle, and ivy' are 'conventional symbols' in traditional elegy: Sacks, p. 95.

from ‘dope and booze [...] and pent-up hate’, is narrated by Sophie posthumously – a stylistic subversion of traditional elegy, in which the speaking voice mourns the dead and expresses the grief of the living poet. The result is a powerful reworking of elegiac convention:

knocking the stuffing
out of my man,
kicking his skull
for all they are worth

and Sophie’s voice then reappears in section eight to declare ‘I am dead/but alive’; describing her hospitalisation and the coma from which she was never to recover. Her death in the final section of the poem evokes both pathos and anger, with Sophie asking her mother for forgiveness (‘mother, mum,/don’t think me rude...’) whilst reliving the attack and recalling how she ‘cradled and kissed’ her boyfriend in order to protect him. As ‘the line on the screen goes long and flat’, Sophie demands one final act of tenderness:

Now let me go.

Now carry me home.

Now make this known

and it is at this point that the poem's political force can be fully felt, and its memorialising function put into effect.

Although more obviously emotive in its creation of pathos than Harrison's *Banquet* and *Crossings*, *Roses* is equally powerful in its exploration of controversial sociological phenomena such as hate speech, violence and 'feral' adolescents, and in its deliberate undermining of traditional elegiac responses to death and mourning. In point of fact, the poem actually *refuses* to mourn, preferring instead to allow Sophie space to speak and frame her own, typically Stoic, response to her own death ('pull the curtains around./Call the angels down'), and this subversion of elegiac norms, although different to Harrison's more forceful material, is equally destabilising. Despite the elision of his own voice from the text, Armitage's own emotional commitment to the radio-documentary project is suggested by his references to the 'appalling details' of Sophie's death, and by his belief that her murder was 'a hate crime': triggered, if not explained, by her 'unconventional appearance', whilst his decision to produce the text as a multimodal radio-poem may be seen as an act of emotional and political solidarity, signalling his wish to use his poetry in the service of memorialisation, but also education: forcing his listeners to confront the moral collapse of British society and the evil of hate crime.⁶⁸ Like Harrison therefore, Armitage clearly sees his radio-poem as public art: deliberately constructed so as to reach as wide an audience as possible, and committed to tackling unsettling topics rarely confronted by lyric poetry.

⁶⁸ Armitage, *Black Roses*, introduction.

Armitage's earliest 'poem film for television' is *Xanadu*,⁶⁹ broadcast in 1992 with Harrison's long-standing collaborator Peter Symes as executive producer. Whereas *Roses* addressed itself to a fairly limited radio audience, *Xanadu* provides early evidence of Armitage's desire to build on Harrison's filmic legacy by fusing poetry and audio-visual material in order to reach as broad and eclectic an audience as possible, and *Xanadu* also brings to mind Harrison's political predilections in its undermining of lyric form and its choice of theme: a failed elegy for a condemned housing estate in Rochdale, Lancashire. Like Harrison's film poems, *Xanadu* is therefore an act of social intervention: a piece of public art written to respond to a contemporary event. As the jacket information to the Bloodaxe edition makes clear, the Ashfield Valley housing estate 'was in the process of being demolished as the poems were written and the film was being made',⁷⁰ and Armitage's text is therefore a political commentary on the lives of the estate's remaining residents, as well as a sardonic attack on British social housing, council bureaucracy, and social mobility: the latter poignantly satirised in the text's opening poem, 'last night I dreamt.'

The opening shots of the film-poem show the poet's arrival at the Ashfield Valley estate in bleak, hibernal weather, and accentuate the exposed situation of the housing and its red-brick exterior. The expected pathetic fallacy is momentarily undercut by the narrator's recollection of a recent dream, in which

I went to Manderley again,

⁶⁹ Simon Armitage, *Xanadu: A Poem Film for Television* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1992).

⁷⁰ *Xanadu*, rear jacket blurb.

unravelling the thread

of the drive

and stood gazing on the du Maurier property: 'the terrace, the lawns, / the turrets' and 'the line of the stream/running out to sea.' It becomes clear from the fifth stanza, however, that this was only a dream, and that the estate in question was not the country estate of *Rebecca* but the council housing of Ashfield Valley, envisioned as an ocean liner with its hull pointing

to Manchester

and its great armada;

each house a boat,

each street a tanker.

The narrator's emerging consciousness is mirrored in the shift in the poem's imagery; away from evocations of the 'silver stream' and towards more concrete evocations of the estate and its prosaic physical properties, narrated in Armitage's distinctive idiom and grounding the text in pragmatic candour:

this is midnight

and moonshine plays a cheap trick [...]

mischief, sorcery,

moonlight, mockery

The estate is described using deadpan deixis such as ‘this land’, ‘this place’ and ‘this plot’: monosyllabic phonemes suggesting deflation and disappointment, and announcing the general mood of successive sections of the production, which focus on the ennui experienced by those residents still living in the various, ironically named, blocks of flats on the estate. Armitage goes on to explain this curious nomenclature:

a maze of a place I'd once heard said
had twenty-six blocks labelled A to Z

and comments sardonically on the administrative indifference that led to such inappropriate, and perfunctory, labelling: ‘get the picture?’; ‘and so on, and so on’; ‘etc etc’. The still shots of the estate in the Bloodaxe text are monochrome reproductions of stills from the televised film, which was shot in colour, and this technique of text and image juxtaposition anchors the text in the mundane realities of the estate and suggests the foreboding felt by the narrator when he first visited the area as a young probation officer: ‘on hold, awaiting the order.’ The combination of text and image also recalls the Bloodaxe pamphlet of *v.*, which appeared after the controversial broadcast of Harrison’s *filmed* poem in 1987: only five years before the composition of *Xanadu*. The final printed format of Armitage’s poem seems in fact to consciously copy the Harrison text, or at least reflect a similar concern for photographic realism and simplistic production levels, although the cost of printing a full-colour edition would be an equally probable, pragmatic, explanation.

The next section of the text is narrated as a first-person monologue by Armitage, who reflects on his first official visit to the estate as a ‘fresh-faced P.O.’

Describing himself as a ‘rookie’ receiving advice from an older, more experienced, colleague about Ashfield Valley and its residents, the poet recalls the sinister warnings given:

take care when you walk

in the shadow of the Valley.

A fist of keys

and a torch would be handy

and this suggestion of imminent violence and the terror of the *terra incognita* permeates the whole of the text: the allusions to Psalm 23 and the image of the makeshift knuckle-duster contributing ominous notes. Further references to feral dogs and the need to take a map in order to navigate the warren of ‘streets in the sky’ suggest the narrator’s sense of claustrophobia (reinforced by passing references to the Greek and Roman myths of Theseus, Mercury, and Orpheus) whilst injunctions to ‘keep to the path’ and ‘never look back’ justify his fear of unprovoked violence from ‘a man/with a hell of a past.’ The narrator’s early impressions of the estate do nothing to dispel its reputation as an isolated, hostile environment, and his admissions that ‘this place [was] beyond me’ and ‘the hour ungodly’ also suggest something *barbaric* and uncouth about its inhabitants: hints which are realised in the next section of the text, which is narrated by an unnamed female voice recalling her partner’s imprisonment for arson. This first representative of the estate’s residents speaks in the playful idiom of many of

Armitage's early poetic personæ, and her frequent plays on words and comedic asides recall the narrators of several poems in *Zoom!* and *Kid*. References to fire and arson, such as 'blaze our way' and the ironic 'you carried the can' suggest desperation as well as criminality, and the partner's letter from 'the Strangeway's Hotel' relies on Armitage's ubiquitous use of anaphora in order to convey, simultaneously, urgent revelation and a profoundly dispiriting sense of emotional stasis:

not the slopping out
but the smell of the cabbage [...]

not the forearm smash
but the smell of the cabbage

Subsequent sections of the text, interspersed with monochrome stills which accentuate the structural decay of the estate's buildings, focus on the blighted dreams of tenants who took up residency expecting 'place and space' but who actually found 'flea pits' and 'pig sties'. Armitage's exploration of the pathos of their predicament suggests a determination to give a voice to those normally elided from public discourse and this technique of vocalising the thoughts and concerns of his characters again contrasts with Harrison's tendency to speak for the figures in his poetry:

Remember how we idolised their names?

Remember how we dreamed

of Otterburn, and Jevington, and Buttermere? [...]

And then at long last

the long lost flat,

out of bounds

on health and safety grounds

In the ‘Solomon Grundy’ parody, Armitage extends this critique of the inadequacies of the estate’s accommodation by directly linking the deterioration of the fabric of the buildings to the spiritual collapse of the community which they housed. In this section, Ashfield Valley is envisioned as Solomon Grundy himself, delivered ‘over the drawing board’ then opened ‘up with a pair of scissors’ before an inevitable physical breakdown which signals his imminent death:

on Friday evening at twenty to nine

with boards at the windows they closed his eyes,

put him down,

read the last rites

After his symbolic demise, Grundy is ‘ashes to ashes, dust to dust’; his ‘broken bones [used] to pave the way/for a business park and a motorway’, and this section most obviously reveals the formal and political objectives of the text as a

whole, although without the adoption of Harrison's emphatic and aggressive mode of speech. Unlike traditional elegy, which typically mourns a lost loved one through the deployment of established motifs of loss, sorrow or consolation, *Xanadu* mourns the death of a council estate in an idiom which is resolutely colloquial: a deliberate undermining of lyric propriety similar to Harrison's inversions of elegiac response in *v.*, but different in style to the older poet's embittered, Cynical idiom.

Armitage also politicises the content, or theme, of his film-poem, with repeated references to urban decay and bureaucratic mismanagement, and this combination of lyric subversion and thematic experimentation is intensified by the medium adopted for its transmission. Certainly, Armitage's adoption of the film-poem and the opportunities it provides for social commentary suggests a deliberate manipulation of the multimodal characteristics of the text in the pursuit of social justice, and this commitment to a public art brings to mind Peter Symes' observation about Harrison being 'passionately concerned with the business of making *language public*, using the page and the stage to do this before he turned his attention to the small screen.'⁷¹

Armitage's critique of local government and town planning departments becomes more comprehensive in the final section of the text: a satirical faux council debate concerned with 'picking some names for these blocks of housing', and conducted by the ironically named councillors Appleby,

⁷¹ Symes, pp. xxxii-iii; italics mine.

Buttermere and Crosshill. Their *modus operandi* is as perfunctory as it is calculating:

pass me that Atlas of Britain and a pin,
I'll run through the sections and stick it in,

and wherever it lands, whatever it falls on,
that'll be the name, that's what we'll call them

and their concern for a 'neat and tidy', 'plain and simple' solution to the problem of naming 'twenty-six of these rotten buggers' suggests a complete detachment from social reality and an institutionalised apathy which views council residents as unimportant human details and annoying encumbrances. Certainly, Armitage's councillors do not think to consult focus groups, or select names for the estate which will inspire or create civic pride: rather, their immediate concern seems to be the brisk, but heartless, despatch of one more agenda item before moving on to 'any other business'. Councillor Crosshill's

sorry to piss on the fireworks, gents,
but there's nothing in here beginning with X

is indicative of the mood of impatient exasperation, and the proposal that the twenty-fourth block of flats should be called 'Xanadu', based on a hastily sourced dictionary reference, or 'Exford', despite its obvious lexicographical inaccuracy, concludes the meeting:

well, if that's O.K.

we'll call it a day,

and here's me thinking we'd be here till Christmas.

Moving on then. Any other business?

Although essentially an optimistic, or defiant, evocation of life on a condemned housing estate, *Xanadu* is also a satirical broadside, intended to attack the impersonality of council bureaucracy, and remind the reader of the sometimes tragic living conditions experienced by the residents of social housing projects. Images such as 'a scream', 'a bruise', 'this baseball bat', 'booze' and 'waiting lists' are to be read against the opening references to *Manderley* and its promise of middle-class security, and the text as a whole evokes the sometimes pathetic deflation experienced by those, like the narrator who closes the text, who dreamt of 'a meltwater stream/like milk from the moors', and whose subsequent experience of life on the Ashfield Valley estate can be reduced to the bleakest of metaphors:

A light goes green.

but nobody moves

Despite its obvious levity of style and ironic references, *Xanadu* also recalls Harrison's desire to speak for minority groups and the victims of social inequality, although Armitage frequently draws on the voices of the estate's

residents in order to give *them* space to speak, rather than speaking for them as is common in Harrison's poetry: a technique used in *Roses*, and which is a prominent feature of his later film-poems such as *Out of the Blue* and *The Not Dead*, analysed below. Once again, although there are many stylistic differences separating Armitage's film-poems from Harrison's, there is a significant, and overlapping, commitment to the idea of poetry as a public medium with a social role, and this evolving sense of the political utility of film-poetry animates one of Armitage's most ambitious projects; his millennial revue, *Killing Time*.⁷²

Killing Time is a commissioned piece, broadcast on New Year's Day, 2000, as a 'full-length film'.⁷³ Although this blending of media necessitates a different critical approach to the text (one cognisant of its visual and verbal features), Armitage's chosen medium does not lessen the impact of his masquerade writing so much as actively intensify it: more so, given the inter-relatedness of text and image, poetry and film, in this piece. Indeed, the filmic qualities of the poem reinforce the poetic qualities of the film, resulting in an audio-visual symbiosis which exemplifies the public and political potential of Armitage's appropriation of the masquerade mode.

The poem is part millennial retrospect, part contemporary satire, and the text also functions as another ironic, or subverted, elegy – this time for the one thousand years of Western culture and civilization preceding the poem's composition, and symbolised by its 1,000 lines of verse. Although

⁷² Simon Armitage, *Killing Time* (London: Faber, 1999).

⁷³ *Killing Time*, liner notes.

heterogeneous in terms of its scope and range of allusion, several *leitmotifs* animate the text and suggest an abiding fascination with war, class, poverty, and violent crime: the latter ironic given the contentious treatment of violence and aggression elsewhere in Armitage's work. The masquerade style is immediately evident in the opening section's faux-Gray elegiac quatrains and their presentation of 'a new freak in the ape-house'. This simian android is described as 'some monkey gone wrong' with 'fibre optics for body hair' and 'a microchip brain', and the barbaric invasion of elegiac discourse litters the text: 'porridge oats', 'Black Forest gateaux' and 'a virtual fart' working against the traditional register of elegiac language.

The poem's political themes are introduced immediately, with a particular emphasis on the commercialisation of modern culture and the simultaneous denigration of traditional cultural norms:

meanwhile, the lights on Oxford street this year
 ask us to stop and think
 not of Christ in his crib or reindeers hauling a sleigh
 but a chemically-inferred orange drink

Subsequent references to 'the church where money is God', and the startling image of 'the bright star over the Middle East' suddenly transformed into 'a cruise missile homing in' imply a geopolitical focus critical of mechanised warfare and the spiritual stagnation of a media-rich culture which 'experiences' world events as sanitised, televisual simulacra:

and on satellite TV we watch a game-show host
 disguised as an anchorman for CNN
 go live to some security camera on an embassy roof

Recalling the first Gulf War, with its ‘laser-guided missiles’ and ‘radar and flak’
 (images which mirror Harrison’s allusions to military might in *Gorgon*),
 Armitage satirises the US-UK ‘special relationship’, parodied here as a
 gentleman’s agreement with ironically destructive repercussions:

a well-shod president walks to the camera to say why
 we should put in the boot,
 and when that happens, a well-dressed prime minister
 usually follows suit

Despite its ironic punning, this image of president and prime minister
 (Eagleton’s ‘Pentagon promoters of shock and awe’)⁷⁴ united in the pursuit of
 ‘diplomacy by other means’ is scathingly satirical – suggesting pre-meditated
 collusion in the creation of international conflict and the subsequent
 victimisation of service personnel, whose job will be to obey orders without
 questioning their ethical value:

the nod of a head gets a squaddie on stand-by
 out to the kill zone

⁷⁴ Eagleton, *Holy Terror*, p. 1.

The possibility of divine aid, or a *deus ex machina* figure bringing world peace and an end to conflict, is mocked by Armitage, who rightly points out the futility of invoking the supernatural as a solution to conflicts whose own origins are themselves divine, or at least scriptural:

when two sides say they are trying
to do what must be done for the best in the eyes of their God
they could both be lying

and he is close here to Harrison's critique of religious dogmatism in *Banquet*, and to that text's rejection of religious worldviews in favour of a reasoned secular humanism based on shared moral values.

This anti-war material is developed by the poem's next section, in which Britain is envisioned 'as an aircraft carrier/moored off the coast of continental Europe', home to 'hawks and harriers' flying sorties to war zones. The reference to St Nicholas 'bent double with the heavy pillow-case of peace in Ireland' further anchors the text in the idea of religious conflict, and in the context of the Good Friday agreement, finally signed in April 1998, and brought into effect in December 1999: an event contemporaneous with the composition of the poem which provides further evidence of both poets' integration of 'live' political material into their work. Ominous references to a third World War, 'a thing of the past' coming up 'once more like the dawn', and bringing with it something 'dark and cold', suggest a war-induced state of apathy and pessimism which is

only momentarily offset by the comical material in the poem, and the ironic praise of fashion houses who peddle ‘khaki body-warmers, anything/in camouflage, and combat trousers’ is immediately deflationary in light of the evocations of armed conflict elsewhere. Like Harrison’s anti-war satire in *A Cold Coming*, although lacking the sense of barely restrained moral outrage encountered in that collection, these satirical subsections in *Killing Time* imply a commitment to pacifism which make the poem’s title an ironic, although apposite, pun: less about having time to kill than about a time *to* kill.

The ‘meanwhile, hot air rises’ section tracks the flight of hot air balloonists Piccard and Jones as they ‘lap the equator’ quicker than the moon goes ‘though its snowball-cycle of freezing and thawing’, and invites the reader to reflect not on only war and killing, but on a range of social problems, ecological disasters, and examples of human incompetence. This section may be seen as an extension of the political material analysed above, although its constant movement between disparate, but related, themes suggests both desperation and frustration: a *cri-de-coeur* similar to Harrison’s expressions of thwarted fraternity in *v*. The thematic territory covered deliberately tracks the balloon’s transcontinental divagations, and takes in a similar, metaphorical, landscape of human and societal collapse:

the sink estates and the island tax-havens [...]

golf-blight and deforestation [...]

the veins and arteries of roads,
the blood-clots of traffic lights and service stations

Armitage therefore deliberately exploits the point of view afforded by the balloon's elevation to suggest the trivial nature of human conflict and petty nationalism when placed in their proper, cosmic context. Seen from the remote, and therefore emotionally distant, perspective of the stratosphere, 'invisible borders' collapse, land wars in 'East Timor, Rwanda, Eritrea' disappear, and 'flags on sticks, dolls in national costume' become pointless accessories without any corresponding human value. Armitage's proposal that humans take to the skies in imitation of Piccard and Jones, giving the planet time to heal and nature space to recover from war and pollution, is only semi-jocular:

all along we could have sided with the angels.

All we have to do,
apparently, is catch the breeze and hold our breath

and is developed towards the end of the section, where an additional note of frustration is again heard:

we could do worse
than hang around up there, thoughtful and vacant at once [...]
while gaps and partitions are given the chance
to meet and mend [...]

but couldn't we just, couldn't we just?

The comprehensive range of the themes treated here is then offset by the tragicomic specificity of the 'meanwhile, somewhere in the state of Colorado' section, with its focus on the Columbine High School massacre of April, 1999, and the political debate about gun control which followed.

The section opens with the arresting image of adolescent gunmen, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, 'armed to the teeth/with thousands of flowers', entering Columbine high school in order to give 'floral tributes to fellow students and members of staff', and there is a Hardy-esque humour at work here as Armitage deliberately puns on the name 'columbine', a common type of garden flower, in order to pursue his floral conceit. This subversion of the symbolic role of floral imagery recalls Harrison's undermining of the traditional emblems of elegiac mourning in *v.*, and shows how both poets use the traditional iconography of mourning in new and provocative ways, albeit through the use of very different language and expression; Armitage's comical and irreverent style contrasting sharply with Harrison's unequivocally confrontational idiom. The floral imagery intensifies as the passage describes Harris and Klebold's homicidal attack, drawing on language reminiscent of Ophelia's flower offerings in *Hamlet*: 'red roses [...] followed by posies/of peace lilies and wild orchids [...] the colour-burst/of a dozen foxgloves' and the resulting, sanitised description of the graphic murder of twelve students comically undermines the 'catalogues of flowers'⁷⁵ style of pastoral elegy and suggests its inability to express fully the

⁷⁵ David Kennedy, *Elegy*, New Critical idiom series (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 13.

horror of human evil. The euphemistic power of such phrases as ‘showered with blossom’ and ‘decorated with buds’ avoids the graphic description of death but simultaneously deflates the formal invocation of flowers as fit symbols or analogues for mourning. And, just as humour is deployed in *v.* and *Xanadu* as an antidote to the ‘high seriousness’ of the elegy mood and its ‘meditative or reflective’ features, so here Armitage turns to paronomasia as a ludic way of calling into question the restrained formality of traditional elegiac expression.⁷⁶

‘Those who turned their backs or refused *point-blank*/to accept such honours/were decorated with buds’⁷⁷ Armitage writes, once again injecting humour into the elegy form in order to test its boundaries and its ability to transform loss and grieving into ‘consolation and detachment.’⁷⁸ The section ends with a dramatised re-reading of the gun control debate in the US, where ‘many believe that flowers should be kept/in expert hands/only’, whilst others believe that ‘God, guts and gardening made the country.’ The pro-gun lobby or NRA argument of self-defence is ridiculed in the lines

deny a person the right to carry
flowers of his own
and he’s liable to wind up on the business end of a flower
somebody else has grown

⁷⁶ Kennedy, p. 2.

⁷⁷ My italics.

⁷⁸ Kennedy, p. 5.

and Armitage's floral elegy ends by suggesting the human cost of emotional attachment to anachronistic political worldviews, and the tragic results of raising children in a culture dominated by violence and gun crime.

If *Killing Time* marks something of a watershed in Armitage's work, and bears witness to an intensification of his interest in specifically political subject matter, the later film-poems *Out of the Blue* and *The Not Dead* may be seen as extensions of its style, and as novel experiments in their own right: moving Armitage's work closer to Harrison's politically-charged film poetry and suggesting a direct interrelation of the two poets' artistic projects at the level of formal experimentation, if not theme and style. *Out of the Blue*,⁷⁹ directed by Ned Williams and written to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the September 11th attacks in New York, is part elegiac film-poem and part documentary: fusing text, image, music and interviews as part of a critical, and politically provocative, reassessment of the events of 9/11. Unlike many responses to the attacks, *Out of the Blue* chooses to focus on the experience of victims and their relatives rather than on geopolitical or military repercussions, and this avoidance of overt political commentary is, ironically, a political act: a statement of solidarity with the thousands of victims who perished on September 11th. Armitage's approach contrasts sharply with the heated ideological and political debates which have characterised many other responses to the 9/11 attacks, and which are represented, in part, by figures such as Christopher Hitchens and Gore Vidal: the former seeing the September 11th attacks as 'a challenge from a barbarism that is no less menacing than its three predecessors

⁷⁹ Simon Armitage, *Out of the Blue* (London: Enitharmon, 2008).

[imperialism, Fascism, and Communism]’,⁸⁰ and the latter interpreting the attacks as products of the ‘relentless demonization’⁸¹ of the world’s Muslim population.

Armitage, as we will see, is more concerned with the human cost of the attacks than with the attribution of blame, and his text chooses as its narrator an unnamed English trader who becomes, like Shadow San before him, an Everyman figure representing innocent victims of global conflicts and catastrophe. His disembodied, post-mortem, recollections are poignant but also subversive: suggesting the impossibility of emotional closure and the inadequacy of elegiac discourse, especially given his status as a ‘dead’ speaker, or speaker for the dead:

all lost.

All lost in the dust.

Lost in the fall and the crush and the dark.

Now all coming back.

Stylistically and filmically, the film-poem is more obviously provocative in its deliberate intermingling of Armitage’s poetry, spoken on screen by English actor Rufus Sewell, with short interviews conducted with survivors and relatives of victims such as parents, spouses and friends, and one senses that this text could not stand alone, or be properly understood, without this accompanying footage

⁸⁰ Christopher Hitchens, *Arguably* (London: Atlantic Books, 2011), p. 104

⁸¹ Gore Vidal, *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace* (Trowbridge: Clairview, 2002), p. 45.

and its frequently graphic content. The footage includes clips of the two passenger planes striking the World Trade Centre towers and their subsequent collapse, although this material is not included for any sensationalist or voyeuristic reasons, but rather as a way of memorialising the victims of the attacks and challenging the viewer or reader to contemplate the way in which they died: as in *Killing Time*, therefore, the fusion of audio-visual media signals an inter-relatedness of form and content which intensifies the power of the material being explored. As in *The Shadow of Hiroshima*, very little detail is spared, or euphemised, and the filmed version of the text includes harrowing audio clips of telephone calls made by people in the twin towers, as well as witness statements describing the noises made by bodies hitting the concrete in the plaza below the building.

The text is written as a series of thirteen (symbolically apposite) monologues delivered by the trader, and the opening sections convey an air of hopeful optimism which suggests the exhilaration of working in downtown Manhattan: ‘up with the lark, downtown New York’; ‘breakfast to go’; ‘just me and America’. The relatively calm mood generated by these reflections is, however, deliberately undermined by Williams’ technique of juxtaposing interior shots of Sewell, dressed smartly for work, and filmed interviews with survivors of the attacks, whose recollections initially mirror the trader’s joie-de-vivre (‘the sun like a peach’) before turning to more sombre, and graphic, evocations of explosions, falling masonry and the struggle to escape the towers. The emphasis placed on the text’s multimodality, with its constant blending of poetry and image, is in fact the main source of its power, and this reliance on mixed modes

looks forward to the documentary style of *The Not Dead*, as well as bringing to mind Harrison and Syme's combination of text, sound and image in their productions.

The use of first person narration also foregrounds the human and familial details of the text, and the narrator's asides are filled with incidental details which intensify its sense of impending tragedy:

here is a rock from Brighton beach,

here is a beer-mat, here is the leaf

of an oak, pressed and dried, papery thin

Subsequent references to children's paintings and 'the silent prongs' of the Trade Centre before the impact of the first aircraft establish a fragile sense of calm, and the attack itself is narrated in an almost jocular manner:

a thump of a thud [...]

a Pepsi Max jumps out of its cup

until the intrusion of more violent imagery which suggests the true scale of the attacks:

the horizon totters and lists [...]

then hell lets loose

As chaos unfolds around him, the narrator maintains an ironic detachment from events which enables him to comment almost dispassionately on the immediate aftermath of the explosions in the floors below. The seventh section of the text is presented as a stream-of-consciousness prose poem whose staccato sentences and capitalisation hint at the panic inside the skyscraper, and the desperation of those trapped inside:

They say it's a plane. So bung it with something to stop the smoke. Or we choke. Use a skirt, use a short. Rescue services now on their way. What with? With what - a magic carpet? A thousand foot rope? Stand back from the door. They're saying its war

and the film represents this breathless and sometimes incoherent passage as a series of alternating shots which juxtapose Sewell and images of the first plane's impact, before further interview footage and exterior shots showing the arrival of emergency services and the early stages of the attempted evacuation of the North Tower.

Although not overtly or aggressively political in an Harrisonian sense, and actually avoiding any direct attribution of blame, Armitage's close focus on the human story which unfolds as each plane strikes the Trade Centre towers is just as emotionally intense as Harrison's technique of direct confrontation. Images such as 'smoke like fear', 'clawing and scrabbling' and 'air won't arrive' evoke

the human cost of the tragedy, and the matter-of-fact description of bodies falling ‘till the distant hit and the burst of dust’ has an air of pitiful resignation, reinforced by the narrator’s ‘I was fighting for breath/I was pounding on the glass.’ Once again, however, the text is only one part of the composite, multimodal experience offered by the film, and although Armitage seems to avoid direct political commentary, the imagery which accompanies these passages is strikingly graphic: showing the billowing dust clouds enveloping lower Manhattan as the towers ultimately collapse, and fleeting shots of trapped survivors waving shirts and other clothing in windows. The merging of text and image is therefore key to the text’s ability to memorialise the three thousand victims of the 9/11 attacks, and the integration of the two media is essential to the message of the documentary as a whole. Armitage wants to focus attention on the individual human being caught up in acts of unspeakable terror, and this close concentration on human experience suggests his solidarity with the victims, which in turn explains his desire to give them a voice: a technique of vocalisation which recalls his adoption of Sophie Lancaster’s voice in *Roses*, and which parallels Harrison’s concern for those ‘mute inglorious Miltons’ elided from public discourse.

Armitage’s focus on the physical destruction at ground zero is compellingly frank, although he once again avoids Harrison’s tone of visceral anger when describing the immediate aftermath of the attacks. That said, there is a notable shift in the speaking voice, and a harsher phonological edge to such lines as ‘the steaming mound like a single corpse’, ‘gag and wretch’ and ‘the body count’ which approaches Harrison’s graphic descriptions of Hiroshima after the

American hydrogen bomb attacks of 1945, and Armitage's text also mirrors Harrison's undermining of elegiac closure in *Shadow* through its refusal to offer consolatory messages of hope and optimism. Reviewing the scene 'five years on', the narrator refers to the 'open wound' left by the towers, and calls the area 'the scene of the crime': the strongest indication of Armitage's political sympathies, and one reinforced by the poem's bleak final lines:

what future can promise to keep faith?

Everything changed. Nothing is safe.

Like Harrison's film-poems, *Out of the Blue* seeks to appeal to the broadest possible audience and is written as a self-conscious intervention into public affairs: as much a commentary on the events it describes as an act of elegiac memorialisation or documentary film making. In its evocation of human suffering, the text suggests the poet's desire to create art capable of addressing the most momentous, and tragic, human circumstances, and the composition of the poem itself signals a definite political commitment to public art. The final, televised multimodal production may also be seen as an extension or expansion of the form which Armitage inherited from Harrison, and this conscious dialogue with the older poet's work also informs his most politically engaged and moving film-poem, *The Not Dead*.

The Not Dead is an immediately political text, broadcast on Remembrance Sunday 2007, and conceived as a piece of public art. In his detailed introduction

to the text, Armitage speaks of his desire to ‘make memorable television’⁸² and of his Shelleyan, or Harrisonian, belief that ‘poetry at its best says something about the human condition’, (ix) and these statements help to explain the motivation underlying the film-poem, and its unequivocal support of ‘soldiers - real people with true stories to tell’ (ix). Referencing the work of Owen *et al*, Armitage is concerned to present the text as ‘a war film’ (xi) which seeks to investigate the pity and futility of war, and as a continuation of the work of modern poets who have written in response to modern conflicts: from James Fenton and Peter Reading, to Tony Harrison, whose ‘Initial Illumination’ and *A Cold Coming* are described by Armitage as direct, ‘head-on’ (x) responses to war which have inspired his own treatment of various foreign campaigns. The text is certainly similar to Harrison’s anti-war polemic in its satirical deconstruction of the claims of the nation state to the ‘hearts and minds’ of its own populace, and is similarly ambivalent to the idea of war and combat as symbols of love for an idealised *patria*. Like Eagleton and Vidal, whose opposition to the exploitation of the armed forces and their deployment in the service of a suspect *realpolitik* has been touched upon, Armitage here seems to be interrogating the idea of military service as sacrifice, concluding, like Eagleton, that

the idea of sacrifice is not in the least glamorous these days. It is what mothers do for their loutish sons, harassed wives for their imperious husbands, and working-class soldiers for pampered politicians. Sacrifice is

⁸² Simon Armitage, *The Not Dead*, introduction (Hebden Bridge: Pomona, 2008), p. ix. Further references in text.

the clarion call of the fascist Fatherland, with its necrophiliac rites and ceremonials of self-oblation.⁸³

This is certainly Armitage's most powerful film-poem, and his most politically committed text, and his introduction is littered with statements of solidarity with the British armed forces, and with those service personnel who have been badly treated, or actively overlooked, by government, the public, and the Ministry of Defence. Focusing on five individual war veterans, Armitage seeks to investigate the sometimes appalling treatment of retired or wounded servicemen and women, and to permit them to speak about their experiences of combat, and returning to civilian life after combat; often suffering from PTSD, but reticent about expressing their emotions or revealing the extent of their psychological wounds. Speaking of veterans of the Malaya Emergency and the war in the former Yugoslavia, Armitage observes that 'it was appalling to hear how little help these men had received',⁸⁴ and his film-poem becomes a platform for their rehabilitation, as well as for the education of a public ignorant of the plight of those members of the armed forces whose lives have been blighted by war and its pitiful record of human annihilation: 'a pregnant woman tied to a tree, cut open, with her dead, unborn baby hanging from her womb' (xii).

Like Harrison in *Shadow* and *Crossings*, Armitage is therefore concerned with human tragedy and the impact of geopolitics on individual human lives, and the final filmed version of *The Not Dead* presents the stories of Rob, Cliff and

⁸³ Eagleton, *Holy Terror*, p. 128.

⁸⁴ Armitage, *The Not Dead*, p. xi. Further references in text.

Eddie: three very different individuals with different combat experiences, but united by their shared sense of abandonment and alienation from the British government, Armed Forces, and civilian population. Armitage attributes some of their desperately painful emotional state to their inability to speak out, and sees this as a cultural or institutional vestige of their life in uniform:

The army is a MAN'S WORLD [sic]. Trained soldiers are not encouraged to open their hearts, and confessing feelings of vulnerability, insecurity and fear on national television constitutes, in my view, a supreme act of bravery (xii).

This criticism of the British Army ethos pervades the text and is reprised at the close of the introduction, where Armitage addresses the country, and the Army chiefs of staff in particular, in a hortatory expostulation which reveals his deep-seated feelings of political, spiritual and moral solidarity with the soldiers he interviewed for the documentary – people abandoned by

Britain itself, its majors and generals bemused, irritated and embarrassed by these broken men, the mother country washing her hands of those soldiers who escaped death only to return home as “untouchables,” as haunting and haunted ghosts (xiii).

These final images of ghosts and hauntings then look forward to the evocations of PTSD, ‘combat stress’ and emotional fragility which dominate the text and film.

The opening shots of the film-poem emphasise the reality of combat, and focus on graphic footage rather than military parades and propaganda. Film clips from the first Gulf War, the Malaya Emergency, the Falklands, and the conflict in Bosnia establish an anti-war message reinforced by extended interviews with the three principal actors, whilst the spoken poetry element, although sustained throughout the film, actually forms only a very minor part of the documentary: suggesting that Armitage wished to give primacy to the interviews with Rob, Eddie and Cliff, and allow them space and time to speak. The title poem, read by all three men, opens with the haunting line ‘we are the not dead’, and deliberately invokes the war-weary ennui of McRae rather than the ebullient early war verse of Begbie, Pope and Bridges. It also combines poignant recollection and savage indignation in a similar manner to Sassoon’s juxtaposition of such themes in ‘The General’ and ‘Base Details’, and its invective is very close to Harrison’s biting commentaries in *Palladas* and *Laureate’s Block*, with a constant evocation of abandonment and alienation which suggests a betrayal of the terms of the armed forces covenant and a moral retreat from its core principles:

we worshipped Britannia [...]

So why did she cheat on us?

Didn’t we come running when she most needed us?

When tub-thumping preachers

and bullet-brained leaders

gave solemn oaths and stirring speeches

then fisted the air and pointed eastwards,
 didn't we turn our backs on our nearest and dearest?

The open derision of preachers and politicians is particularly evocative of Sassoon's invective in 'Suicide in the Trenches', and echoes that text's denunciation of nationalists, hypocrites and religious zealots who glorify wars in which they do not serve:

You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye
 Who cheer when soldier lads march by,
 Sneak home and pray you'll never know
 The hell where youth and laughter go.⁸⁵

The final images of 'back-biting jeerers', 'mealy-mouthed sneerers' and 'two-timing, two-faced Britannia' go on to establish an Harrisonian idiom which is developed as the film progresses, and the implied moral redundancy of the British establishment, pictured here as indifferent to the suffering of soldiers who 'idle now in everyday clothes', is glimpsed in the images of 'Britannia' who 'crosses the street/or looks right though us':

the country which flew the red white and blue for us
 now shows her true colours

⁸⁵ Siegfried Sassoon, 'Suicide in the Trenches', in David Roberts, *Minds At War: The Poetry and Experience of the First World War* (Burgess Hill: Saxon Books, 1999), p. 313.

This anger is also directed at ordinary members of the British public, who seem to have forgotten the ‘unwanted, unlovable’ veterans now returned from combat, with no ‘bar-code of medals’ to mitigate their feelings of alienation and spiritual dereliction.

‘The Black Swans’, written for Eddie and detailing some of his experiences in the former Yugoslavia, extends the sense of anger heard in the opening poem and adds to it ironic echoes of Tennyson, the Bible, and Sassoon’s poetry which evoke the chaos of conflict and its human misery. The Black Swans of the title are death squads who pass through military checkpoints ‘wielding Kalashnikovs’ on the way to commit atrocities which the ‘blue lids’ of the UN peace-keeping force are powerless to stop. They are ‘not to be checked or blocked’, and go on to kill and torture innocent civilians with impunity:

This woman won’t talk, standing there open-mouthed,
tied to a tree, sliced from north to south

and this graphic imagery is complemented by references to ‘flesh-smoke – sweet as incense’ and ‘mounds of soil planted with feet and hands’ which recall Harrison’s descriptions of burial and immolation in *Shadow*. The Tennysonian injunction to ‘walk in the valley. Walk in the shadow of death’ is an apposite image for the collection as a whole, and the montage overlaying this section of the text is deliberately uncompromising: showing civilian casualties and ruined villages in Bosnia.

‘Remains’ was written for young Iraq war veteran Rob, and explores his feelings of guilt following the killing of an unarmed Iraqi civilian during the coalition invasion of 2003. The language of the text is unadorned and pragmatic; composed of a barbaric idiom which brings to mind Harrison’s direct address and graphic lexis in *Shadow*:

I see every round as it rips through his life –
 I see broad daylight on the other side

The description of the victim, ‘guts [thrown] back into his body’ then ‘carted off in the back of a lorry’ also recalls Owen’s affecting descriptions of combat in ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’, and Rosenberg’s imagery in ‘Dead Man’s Dump’, where the dead are treated with a correspondingly perfunctory indifference, and this undermining of elegiac consolation illustrates the inherently subversive qualities of Harrison and Armitage’s masquerade writing.

Owen’s claim that his poetry derived from the ‘pity of war’ is also particularly resonant here, especially given Rob’s own guilt, and his expressions of pity for his victim, whose ‘blood-shadow stays on the street’ where he fell, but whose memory haunts him after his return to Britain:

he’s here in my head when I close my eyes,
 dug in behind enemy lines

The closing couplet's 'here and now,/his bloody life in my bloody hands' strikes a note of intense pathos which subverts the closure of traditional lament, and this denial of the emotional catharsis of conventional elegiac response is echoed in Owen's belief that poetry after World War One was not capable of fully rendering the experience and pity of the War, or of offering consolation to those who experienced its horrors: 'the presumed inadequacy of language itself to convey the facts about trench warfare', as Paul Fussell notes.⁸⁶ In his famous 1918 preface, Owen declared that his book was

not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them.

Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War.

Above all I am not concerned with Poetry.

My subject is War, and the pity of War.

The Poetry is in the pity.

Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next. All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful.⁸⁷

This undermining of the consolatory and cathartic roles of elegy is seen throughout Armitage's poem, with its evocations of the ongoing psychological trauma and debilitating neuroses caused by PTSD:

⁸⁶ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: OUP, 1975), p. 170.

⁸⁷ Wilfred Owen, Preface to *Disabled & Other Poems*, in Jon Stallworthy, *Wilfred Owen* (Oxford: Chatto & Windus and OUP, 1974), p. 266.

dream, and he's torn apart by a dozen rounds.

And the drink and the drugs won't flush him out

- lines which recall Owen's

in all my dreams, before my helpless sight,

he plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.⁸⁸

'The Malaya Emergency', part of an extended interview segment with Cliff in the filmed version of the text, exemplifies this failure of elegy and showcases Armitage's use of masquerade to question the limits of elegiac response.

Detailing a violent ambush in the Malayan jungle in which two of his friends were killed, Cliff's recollections combine intimate character sketches and an Owen-like suggestion of suppressed anger as he questions the barbarism of war and its futility. The poem opens with the ironic juxtaposition of jungle ('a tented camp on a river bank') and urban space ('Manchester's oily ship canal'), and the somnolent mood of the opening stanzas, sustained by lines such as 'one road in, one road out' and 'leaf-light dapples a mountain track', is matched by the incantatory reading of the text in the film. This technique of establishing an early mood of calm before the interposition of more graphic material is strikingly similar to Owen's approach in 'Dulce Et', where the initial, soporific images of men 'marching asleep' and 'cursing though sludge' give way to

⁸⁸ Wilfred Owen, 'Dulce Et Decorum Est' in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 6th Edition, Vol 2 - ed. by Abrams *et al.*, p. 1846, ll.15-6.

powerful descriptions of a German gas attack, and Armitage's poem employs a similarly abrupt segue into more dramatic material:

Leaf-light dapples a mountain track.

Then all-out attack.

Buds like bullets, flowers like flak

Having escaped from this initial firefight, Cliff and two other soldiers regroup in a jungle clearing before deciding to return to help 'Joe and Tommy', whose names evoke the working-class origins of most enlisted non-commissioned soldiers, as well as bringing to mind Kipling's 'Tommy' and 'Danny Deever' portraits from *Barrack Room Ballads*. Entering 'the killing zone', the trio find the bodies of their two comrades, who

are butchered now and their shirts are burning

- Joe 'with his eye shot out of his head' and Tommy 'asleep with a hole in his brain'. Cliff then finds the man who killed them and shoots him:

tossed him onto a barbed wire fence,

taught him a lesson, left him to rot

and although he suppresses, or ignores, his own act of brutal homicide for thirty years, he finds that 'the dead, like the drowned, float up to top' and haunt the living. The closing lines of the poem further subvert the lyric solemnity of

traditional elegy with their overtly political content, and their cynical commentary on the Malayan conflict recalls Sassoon's famous protest against the conduct of the First World War, which he claimed had become a 'war of aggression and conquest':⁸⁹

One road out, one road in.
 And all for what – rubber and tin.
 A can of beans, a bicycle tyre.
 A river in flames, a river on fire.
 A bicycle tyre and a can of beans.

The Not Dead therefore demonstrates two definite impulses in Armitage's work: on the one hand, the quest for a public poetry capable of tackling contemporary political issues in an active and relevant way, and, on the other, an engagement with Harrison's work and an extension of his use of the film-poem medium. Although all of Armitage's film-poems exemplify the inheritance outlined in the opening chapter of this thesis, *The Not Dead* in particular recalls Harrison's aggressively political material, and his insistent focus on the human experience of conflict, societal collapse, poverty and geopolitics. To be sure, one may see this film as evidence of Brian Hill and Armitage's continuation of the work of Symes and Harrison, and of their search for a politically engaged multimedia art form which exploits the full range of television, drama, documentary, film and poetry. Just as Harrison's film poetry is an extension of his poetics of dissent

⁸⁹ Siegfried Sassoon, *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston* (1937; London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p. 496, in Neil Corcoran, 'Wilfred Owen and the poetry of war' in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-century English Poetry*, ed. by Neil Corcoran (New York: CUP, 2007), p. 94.

and political commitment, Armitage's own films may be seen as part of a conscious dialogue with this work and its multifarious political concerns, and this chapter has highlighted many points of contact which suggest a conscious conceptual interface uniting the two poets' work.

Turning now to the conceptual and artistic implications of the political use of masquerade which this chapter has delineated, a review of the various themes and subject matters explored by both poets in their work suggests a common interest in public art, and a deliberate treatment of topics uncommon, if not actually suppressed, in popular lyric poetry. Building on the analysis of Harrison's militant secular humanism and Armitage's use of graphically violent material in chapter four, this chapter has provided further evidence of the intrinsically political nature of the two poets' writing, and of their commitment to a public poetics of dissent, dialectics, and debate. Various points of contact emerge, and these can be adumbrated as part of our assessment of the extent of the claimed 'inheritance' alluded to by Armitage in the first chapter.

Evidence of the interrelatedness of the two poets' work centres on their shared commitment to a public and political role for poetry, regardless of its form or subject matter, although the political themes of their film poems in particular emphasise their belief in the social utility of verse and its suitability as a medium for satire, critique and commentary. Although Harrison's combative style differs from Armitage's more ironic idiom, both poets share a Shelleyan belief in poetry's ability to contribute to moral dialogue, and both exemplify his vision of the poet as seer, or prophet: commenting on social issues as part of the moral

amelioration of their culture. There is also a noticeable animus towards abuses of power and social exclusion which animates their work, and much of their filmed poetry seeks to redress wrongs done to lower working class victims of war, geopolitics and crime. In their work for radio and television, a commitment to formal experimentation emerges which suggests a common interest in the expansion of the formal properties of verse and its potential audiences, and Harrison's 'film poetry' seems to have inspired Armitage's more eclectic meta-textual productions, and his constant experimentation with what he variously calls his film poems, radio-poems, radio drama-documentaries, poem films for television and war films. These texts provide ample evidence of a conscious extension of Harrison's earlier work, and a fascination with the multimodality of form and genre, whilst recent productions such as *Feltham Sings* (2002) and *Songbirds* (2005) add music and lyrics to Armitage's multimedia repertoire, and his work with Brian Hill on these and other projects suggests a constant search for form as part of an aesthetics of experimentalism which develops Harrison's earlier mixed-media work and mirrors its dedication to social realism.

There are, of course, notable stylistic differences and points of thematic divergence which separate both poets, with Harrison's work clearly more aggressive than Armitage's in its use of language and more obviously interested in promoting Harrison's Marxist view of history: an ideological commitment which leads to his often savage attacks on outmoded or culturally moribund institutions such as the monarchy and the established church, alongside denunciations of 'Western imperialism and domination, military interventions

and neocolonialism' in works such as *Shadow* and *A Cold Coming*.⁹⁰

Armitage's style is, as already noted, far more parodic and, in such texts as *Killing Time* and *Xanadu*, idiomatic and contemporary. This is not to overlook the obvious pathos of *Black Roses* and his poignant evocations of PTSD and personal tragedy in *The Not Dead*, although his style is typically far more conversational, playful and ironic. Harrison's scope is also more internationalist, and his work takes in a wider series of locales, than Armitage's, although *Crossings*, like *Xanadu*, shows that Harrison does sometimes focus on major domestic issues. Harrison's insistent focus on class war and the abuse of power by theocratic and autocratic elites is also different to Armitage's more eclectic range of interests, as is his sustained promotion, throughout his work, of republicanism as an alternative to the monarchy.

It is important also to consider the status of the multimodal text itself when reviewing the two poets' work, as mixed-mode writing is a consciously self-advertising medium which implies dissatisfaction with inherited modes of expression and, here, poetic form. Building on the subversion of form central to their barbarian poetics, both poets' adoption of the multimedia or multimodal mode can be seen as the culmination of their previous experiments with structure, form and language, and as an extension of their masquerade writing and its constant interrogation of lyric proprieties. The film-poem also seems to be a deliberate attempt, on the part of both poets, to gain access to much wider audiences than those afforded by poetry anthologies or journalism, whilst its fusion of two distinct genres – the audio-visual and the written – suggests a

⁹⁰ Žižek, p. 126.

commitment to experimentation and the exploration of form in the service of public art. It is therefore both a pragmatic choice of vehicle for the transmission of the two poets' socio-political agendas, and an artistically apposite hybrid which indicates their willingness to explore novel configurations of form and content as part of their interest in experimentation and the accessibility of poetry.

In terms of the inheritance claimed by Armitage in the opening chapter, it now seems clear that the main property connecting his work to Harrison's is its essentially political, and public, nature. Just as Harrison's work seeks to question formal conservatism, traditional themes and the idea of 'poetic' language, so Armitage extends this critique of form, language and theme throughout his own work. Again, this is not to insist on any stylistic congruence or political ideology binding the two poets' work, but rather to suggest a shared conceptual commitment to experimentation and subversion which leads ultimately to the film poem as the most public and accessible of media, and one which allows each poet to address his work to a broad and politically diverse audience.

Having therefore established that Armitage and Harrison's poetry may be fruitfully compared and that it contributes to a shared tradition of subversive writing, there remains the question of the continuation of this tradition, and whether or not it extends beyond Armitage's own work. The next section addresses this question, and argues that barbarian masquerade survives in the output of several modern poets, whose adoption of the barbaric mode builds on the tradition of radically non-conformist, subversive, and linguistically playful

composition which defines Harrison and Armitage's writing. As in the case of Armitage's relation to Harrison, I do not claim that these modern poets share thematic or stylistic concerns, or that they knowingly respond to Harrison and Armitage: rather, my contention is that their work sustains the tradition of barbarism proposed by this thesis, and that it may be seen as evidence of a new wave of writing dedicated to the interrogation of traditional poetics and lyric norms.

Conclusion

Harrison, Armitage, and a Future Barbarian Poetics

This thesis began with Simon Armitage's claim that his writing is linked to Tony Harrison's work by a shared interest in the political potential of lyric poetry and its language. Having tested this claim by exploring both poets' work, a number of similarities emerge which validate Armitage's claim and suggest a series of meaningful interrelations which encourage a re-valuation of their work and its place in the canon of post-War British verse.

A major concern of both poets is the politics of language and form, with renegotiations and structural reworkings of the sonnet, elegy, and dramatic monologue found throughout their work. Harrison's fondness for taboo, paronomasia and direct political commentary is matched by Armitage's own use of pun, profanity and dialect, as well as by the integration of more subtle, but still important, political arguments in his work, and both poets clearly see poetry itself as a form of protest: using their poems to test presuppositions and challenge received ideas about acceptable poetic speech, theme, and content. This has led them to deploy a challenging and uncompromising 'barbaric' idiolect composed of graphic language, contemporary reference, profanity and specifically northern expression: the latter typified by harsh consonants and an Anglo-Saxon phonology normally absent from popular lyric poetry. Harrison's

barbaric register in particular recalls the ‘inventive and graphic language’¹ described by Philip Hobsbaum in his 1979 study, *Tradition and Experiment in English Poetry*, in which he argues that the barbaric voice is ‘full of muscular movement and packed with interacting consonants’, (308) as well as being powerfully onomatopoeic, meaning that

it recreates in sound sensations of pain or labour; it mimes violent or difficult body-movement and action; it actualises experience in muscular rhythms; it grasps for particulars in concrete and realised imagery (329).

This analysis helps to define Harrison’s distinctive locutions, as does Hobsbaum’s identification of the alliterative patterning and ‘masculine’ qualities of the barbaric voice, suggested by his emphasis on ‘climaxes of intensity’ (308) over ‘passive convention’, (310) and recalling the gendered diction and harshly discordant monosyllables of many Harrison poems. Armitage’s barbaric voice is, by contrast, more playful and detached, with a more self-ironising deployment of masculine genderlect, but this is not to suggest that his voice does not sometimes mimic Harrison’s own rebarbative speech: in many key poems, particularly his film-poems, Armitage actually employs a direct form of address which relies for its effects on the same phonological and dialectal pragmatism which underpins Harrison’s writing. What most unites both poets’ work is, however, the use to which this barbaric tongue is put, and we have seen that it is chiefly used as an agent of semantic, lexical and phonemic disorder: invading

¹ Philip Hobsbaum ‘The Poetry of Barbarism’, in *Tradition and Experiment in English Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 314. Further references in text.

traditional forms and challenging their syntactical and thematic symmetry. We have called this deliberate invasion of culturally validated forms by non-standard and dialectal language ‘masquerade’ in token of its wilful misappropriation of lyric proprieties and as an indication of its deliberately duplicitous nature: playing superficial adherence to formal conservatism off against demotic speech and subversive content. Masquerade writing emerges as a polyglot and eclectic fusion of conflicting registers, voices, and modes of expression, and this heterogeneous blending recalls Bakhtin’s analysis of the carnivalesque and its polyphonic and multivocal style: an apt analogue for Harrison and Armitage’s relentlessly playful and subversive poetics.

Although it is true that Harrison’s work is more obviously Marxist and aggressive than Armitage’s, we have identified a shared use of controversial subject matter which tests lyric proprieties and extends the thematic concerns of their poetry, whilst their commitment to the pursuit of a public poetry has resulted in their use of the film-poem as a multimedia accompaniment to their written work: a hybrid form pragmatically suited to the transmission of politically subversive material to a wide (television) audience, and one which seems to be a natural extension of both poets’ initial experimentation with form in their earlier work. We have seen, then, that, notwithstanding differences of style, ideological commitment and theme, both poets’ writing aims at the same destabilisation of lyric norms, and that the conceptual harmony of their work arises as a result of their use of barbarian masquerade. This fact allows us to view them as operating within a shared conceptual framework, in contradistinction to the claims of those critics who see them as representatives of

wholly different socio-literary, political and cultural environments with little in common other than their status as ‘northern’ writers, and one result of our work here is, in point of fact, to force a redefinition of such terms as ‘northern’ and ‘regional’, which are too often employed as a limited and limiting critical shorthand, and to promote a wholly different view of Harrison and Armitage as practitioners of a radically subversive poetics which undermines a range of canonical forms and stylistic norms in order to interrogate such concepts as literary value and ‘poetic’ speech. To be sure, their work goes beyond mere ‘protest’ or experimentation, and is better seen as a multifaceted and politically complex reworking of key concepts and formal traditions which results in a novel blend of old and new, or culturally prestigious and barbaric. It is similarly clear that both poets view their barbaric writing as a serious political and artistic project integral to their aesthetic and ideological vision: resulting in poetry which is simultaneously accessible, populist, avant-garde, internationalist, subversive, philosophical and comedic.

One way of exemplifying the subversive range of the two poets’ work, whilst simultaneously evoking something of their essential difference as writers, is to briefly juxtapose excerpts from Harrison’s adaptation of the *Mysteries* and Armitage’s *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: texts which feature prominently in each poet’s oeuvre, and which seem to aim at the same destabilisation of canonical tradition and linguistic euphony. In his *Mysteries* cycle, Harrison highlights the geographical bias of many anthologised translations of the York cycle, which are typically written in a southern, standardised dialect, as opposed to the northern dialect of the originals. He argues that the canonical status of the

mystery plays is conferred not only because of their historical importance, but also because of their having been ‘dubbed’ into a non-native dialect more acceptable to a southern audience. As Sandie Byrne explains, ‘Harrison’s adaptation of medieval mystery plays [provides] a chance to undo the north/south, [...] Standard English and RP/regional and social dialect oppositions’ of many translations and this subversion of literary form is integral to Harrison’s poetics and its emphasis on the politicisation of poetic speech.² Harrison’s political motivation stems from his experience of seeing the York mystery plays performed

in the 50s in York; and they’re written in an earlier medieval form of the accent I ended up speaking. And God was terribly posh, and Jesus was terribly posh, and only the comic parts were allowed to be Yorkshire. And they...even then I was irritated by that, so that I remember when I talked to Bill Bryden at the National, I thought, ‘Now is my chance to reclaim Northern classics for the voice they were written’.³

His aim in translating the *Mysteries* is therefore ‘reclamation’,⁴ and his integration of northern expression is a political act, as he makes clear:

² Sandie Byrne, *H, v. & O* (MUP, 1998), p. 46.

³ John Tusa, Interview with Tony Harrison, BBC Radio 3, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/johntusainterview/harrison_transcript.shtml#top> [accessed 24th March 2012].

⁴ Cf. Harrison’s comment concerning ‘the sort of retrospective aggro I built in to the reclamation of ‘the *Mysteries*’, John Tusa interview.

the Northerness was useful, not only useful, it's necessary to *The Mysteries*. I was angered when I went to see them at York, and God and Jesus were played by very posh-speaking actors from the South.⁵

Harrison's politicisation of the *Mysteries* starts on the first page of the play where he sends the reader 'to the dialect dictionary'⁶ in order to translate 'lout' (meaning *praise*) and, as Bernard O'Donoghue comments, 'this regionally-based exclusivity is carried to very considerable lengths, *and quite deliberately so*.'⁷ Harrison's Joseph, for example, speaks in a broad Yorkshire idiom rarely encountered in other translations of the plays, and one which risks the alienation of some readers from the text: 'nevertheless 'tis my intent/To ask her who got her her bairn'⁸ he declares, going on to ask Mary 'whe! Why gab ye at me so?' (50). Even Harrison's God is 'translated' into a voluble Yorkshireman, who, in conversation with Abraham during the dramatisation of Genesis 22, tells the Jewish patriarch 'thy son I spared thee for to spill./Like thine Isaac, my loved lad/Shall do full heartily his Father's will' (48). In fact, every character in *The Nativity* speaks with a Yorkshire voice of one kind or another. Even Herod, who also appears in *The Big H*, (another Harrisonian *Mystery* play), here speaks in the northern alliterative style analysed by Thorlac Turville-Petre in his *The Alliterative Revival*⁹ and used for similarly regionalist and political reasons by Armitage in his *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

⁵ Richard Hoggart, 'In Conversation with Tony Harrison', in *Bloodaxe I*, p. 44.

⁶ Bernard O'Donoghue, introduction to *The Mysteries* (London: Faber, 1999), p. 5.

⁷ *Ibid.* My italics.

⁸ Tony Harrison, 'The Nativity', in *The Mysteries*, p. 49. Further references in text.

⁹ Thorlac Turville-Petre, *The Alliterative Revival* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer Ltd, 1977).

Unabashedly frank and hubristic, the Yorkshire Herod declaims:

The moon at my might, he musters his might;
 And kaisers in castles great kindness me show.
 Lords and ladies as lovers list, lo,
 For I am fairer of face and fresher, I hold.¹⁰

- written by Harrison in ‘the rich alliterative vocabulary so characteristic of the writers of the north.’¹¹ Although there is no specific use of dialect in the lines above, there is still a rhythm to them which comes from the ‘muscularity’ of the alliterative line, which Turville-Petre, foreshadowing Hobsbaum, suggests is a northern lexical and phonological development.¹² There is also in these lines, and the speech from which they come, a sense of Herod-as-comedian (‘how think ye, these tales that I told?/I am worthy, witty, and wise’)¹³ which is comically irreverent given the sacred context of the narrative, and which recalls Armitage’s own subversive humour elsewhere. Referring to his son, Herod comments that he is ‘learned in Latin and full lovely of lyre./I’m bold, the blood-shedder, my bairn has the brains’, before addressing the boy directly with ‘hail, lad, my adviser, most learned in t’land’, to which the son replies ‘all hail, pater most potent who right royally reigns.’¹⁴ What O’Donoghue terms the ‘monolingistic’¹⁵ voice of the plays is coupled here with the alliterative style to evoke a specifically northern phonology and soundscape very different from the

¹⁰ Harrison, *The Mysteries*, p. 55.

¹¹ Turville-Petre, p. 51.

¹² See Turville-Petre, p. 56.

¹³ Harrison, *The Mysteries*, p. 55.

¹⁴ Harrison, *The Mysteries*, p. 55.

¹⁵ O’Donoghue, introduction to *The Mysteries*, p. 2.

language of the standard Oxford edition, despite its retention of some alliterative lines, such as ‘the fellest freeze that ever I feeled’,¹⁶ and Herod’s lines throughout *The Nativity* are delivered with a broad Yorkshire inflection which brings to mind his similarly aggressive, and alliterative, voice in *The Big H*, where such lines as ‘tot up the tonnage of TNT/to liquidate all toddlers from Tynemouth to Torquay’¹⁷ are common. ‘All those agen us get donged down and done/by t’buxom’¹⁸ he cries, addressing his son, going on to refer to Jesus as ‘that shitty shrew/his dam just dropped’ (80) and a ‘shitty-arse shrew that robs me of right’ (75) towards the end of the play. This language can be compared to the ‘Oxford’ Herod’s less splenetic outbursts such as ‘upon life and limb/May I that faitour fang’¹⁹ or ‘ah, dogs, the devil you speed,’²⁰ and the resulting contrast underlines the aggressive phonic range of Harrison’s barbaric writing.

Like *The Mysteries, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a major text in the canon of early Middle English alliterative poetry which has come to occupy a central position in the traditional body of English metrical verse. In Armitage’s words, it is ‘one of the jewels in the crown of English Literature’²¹ and has been called a ‘recognised masterpiece’²² which is ‘most brilliant’ (29) and ‘pre-eminent among romances in English’ (33). In approaching his translation, Armitage referred to two translations by Tolkien and Marie Borroff and, in both cases, he has intimated that, whilst scholarly and comprehensive, these versions

¹⁶ Richard Beadle and Pamela King, *York Mystery Plays* (OUP, 2009), p. 62.

¹⁷ *The Big H*, in *Theatre Works 1973-1985* (Bungay: King Penguin, 1985), p. 331.

¹⁸ Tony Harrison, *The Mysteries*, p. 56. Further references in text.

¹⁹ Beadle and King, p. 93.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

²¹ Armitage, introduction to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (London: Faber, 2007), p. v.

²² Turville-Petre, p. 26. Further references in text.

lack the alliterative power of the original - alliteration being, for him, ‘the warp and weft of the poem, without which it is just so many fine threads.’²³ It is important to note that the text is northern in origin and that Armitage’s aim in working on *Gawain* was to relocate the poem within the context of the north of England and its alliterative verse tradition, and it is immediately striking how similar this politically motivated act of reclamation is to Harrison’s work in *The Mysteries*.

Armitage also views his adaptation as an important act of preservation, and has suggested that he was seeking to restore the text to its original form after centuries of ‘important scholarly restorations’,²⁴ many of which have either ignored the phonological patterning of the original manuscript or else diluted its alliterative rhythms in favour of more ‘genteel’ expression, as seen here in an excerpt from Borroff:

The most noble knights known under Christ,
 And the loveliest ladies that lived on earth ever,
 And he the comeliest king, that that court holds,
 For all this fair folk in their first age
 were still.²⁵

As the Norton edition makes clear,

²³ Introduction to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, p. viii.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Marie Borroff, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in M. H. Abrams, ed., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol.1, (New York: Norton, 1993), p. 203, ll. 51-5.

the dialect of *Sir Gawain* points to an origin in provincial England, about one hundred fifty [sic] miles northwest of the capital [...] remote from the royal court at London.²⁶

whilst Armitage is far more specific, observing that ‘the diction of the original [poem] tells us that its author was, broadly speaking, a northerner.’²⁷ This focus on the provenance of the text, and its status as a cultural artwork, is very similar to Harrison’s focus on the linguistic and regional specificity of his own text, and is motivated by the same impulse towards preservation, as Armitage makes clear: ‘coaxing Gawain and his poem back into the Pennines was always part of the plan.’²⁸

Armitage’s translation opens with images of ‘the great and the good’, ‘hubbub’ and ‘fine folk,’²⁹ all of which anchor the text in a recognisably northern idiom which recalls Harrison’s opening to *The Nativity*. The language of the text then moves closer to the Harrisonian alliterative style in such lines as ‘time after time, in tournaments of joust’, (l. 41) ‘lunged at each other with levelled lances’ (l. 42) and ‘the hubbub of their humour was heavenly to hear’ (l. 46) which create a dense weave of phonic ‘crag-splinters’ similar to Harrison’s northern kennings in his *Oresteia*, as well as contributing to the memorability of the text itself, given that ‘the percussive patterning of the words serves to reinforce their meaning [and] countersink them within the memory.’³⁰ There is in fact an

²⁶ Ibid., p. 200.

²⁷ Introduction to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, p. vi.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Armitage, *Gawain*, p. 7, ll. 38-54. Further references in text.

³⁰ Introduction to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, p. viii.

extensive use of alliteration throughout Armitage's translation which aligns it with Harrison's *Mysteries* and, beyond both, with the medieval Alliterative Revival, and this 'consonantal' style is heard in such lines as 'a hulk of a human from head to hips'³¹ and 'who has the gall? The gumption? The guts?'³² which exemplify Turville-Petre's 'high style' of the north'³³ as well as Armitage's playful barbaric idiom.

Both poets' use of alliterative language is certainly vital to their adaptation-reclamation project and its aim of politicising language and using it to interrogate assumptions about poetic speech. Speaking of the *Gawain* poet's northern dialect, the Norton introduction points out that 'his language [...] and his alliterative measure would have been considered barbaric by Chaucer's London audience'³⁴ and Christopher Tolkien concurs, noting the 'remote' grammar, style and vocabulary of the *Gawain* poet, which was 'harsh and stiff and rugged to those unaccustomed to it,'³⁵ and hence Armitage's retention, and extension, of these features of the original work is integral to the subversive politics of his masquerade. Lines such as 'the fellow in green was in fine fettle',³⁶ 'they gaped and they gawked', (l. 232) 'bum-fluffed bairns', (l. 280) 'got up in his gear', (l. 667) 'folk came flocking', (l. 1323) and 'neither mope/or moan', (l. 1811-2) combined with comically subversive verbs such as 'snoozed', (l. 1731) 'mushed', (l. 1428) 'riled', (l. 1437) 'pogged out', (l. 1359) 'wolfed

³¹ Armitage, *Gawain*, p. 11, l. 138.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 17, l. 291.

³³ Turville-Petre, p. 51.

³⁴ *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol.1, p. 200.

³⁵ Christopher Tolkien, Introduction to J.R.R. Tolkien's *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (London: HarperCollins, 2006), p. 2.

³⁶ Armitage, *Gawain*, p. 13, l. 179. Further references in text.

down' (l. 1135) and 'turns pear-shaped' (l. 496) are typical of Armitage's comical style and its apparent levity, but also illustrate his tactical inclusion of barbaric speech within his adaptation of *Gawain*, mirroring Harrison's own deployment of barbaric language within *The Mysteries*.

There are a number of implications of having identified a shared experimental poetics uniting the two poets' work, and one is the need to reevaluate their relative positions within the canon of post-War British poetry. Normally seen as distinct writers whose work belongs to two different stylistic traditions, their shared commitment to literary iconoclasm and ideological combat with the canon has in fact demonstrated several points of contact which suggest a profound interrelatedness of vision and artistic sensibility. Rather than writers separated by 'school' or generation, what emerges from our analysis of their work is a shared poetics of dissent which transcends historical moment and the neat divisions of literary criticism. This is not to claim that they write in the same style, or that Armitage's indication of Harrison as a precursor and model entails an attempt to replicate his voice or thematic concerns: rather, we now recognise several features of Harrison's writing, such as his use of a deliberately sub-literary barbarian dialect and his politicisation of poetic speech and form, which resurface in Armitage's work and are taken up by him, meaning that a form of trans-generational dialogue has been opened up, and sustained, between the two poets.

This new view of Harrison and Armitage has interesting implications for our interpretation of post-War British poetry and, in particular, for our view of the

so-called ‘new generation’ poets of the early 1990s, whose work was defined by its ‘accessibility, democracy and responsiveness, humour and seriousness’ and by its ability to reaffirm poetry’s ‘significance as public utterance.’³⁷ What is immediately striking about this description of the New Poets and their work is that it could just as easily be applied either to Harrison’s own early poetry, or the poetry he was producing in the 1980s and 1990s, meaning that, far from representing a moribund poetics which was subsequently rejuvenated by poetry ‘fresh in its attitudes [and] risk-taking in its address’, Harrison’s work should be seen as a necessary precursor to the New Poetry and linked to it by virtue of its political arguments, linguistic inventiveness and commitment to public speech.³⁸ It would be interesting to see, in light of this, whether Harrison’s influence went further: reaching not only Armitage and Duffy, but potentially informing the work of many other poets whose work appeared in the 1990s. We have already seen that Duffy’s work resembles Harrison’s in terms of its linguistic bravura and its deliberately provocative attitude to form, but further research is just as likely to find connections between Harrison and a range of other poets from her generation. A reevaluation of his position in relation to more modern poets is certainly in order, as is an appreciation of Armitage’s own influence among his contemporaries.

As to whether any poets writing at the present time are producing work which interrogates formal conservatism and lyric cohesion in the same way that Harrison and Armitage have done, we might begin by observing that there does

³⁷ Hulse, Kennedy and Morley, eds., *The New Poetry* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1996), p. 16.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

indeed seem to be evidence of a continuation of the barbaric style and its contentious dialogue with literary traditions. Helen Mort's work, for example, is written in an idiomatic, vernacular style which recalls Armitage's early *Zoom!* lyrics, and her 'Scab'³⁹ suite engages with a range of political themes previously explored by Harrison. 'Scabs' is inspired by the infamous 'Battle of Orgreave' which took place in 1984 during the Miners' Strike, and a central concern of the poem is class: the poem a semi-autobiographical account of Mort's own move from a working-class background in Sheffield to Cambridge, where she read Social and Political Sciences. The poem presents class war, social mobility and class-consciousness in a distinctly Harrisonian manner, linking the scabs attacked by their fellow miners and her own abandonment of her Sheffield background and its people:

on New Year's Eve, the dead end of 2003,
 my Cambridge offer sits untouched
 for hours amongst the bills.

I drink the old year out in Calow WMC,
 my breath sickly with Malibu and coke

[...]

guess which picket line
 you crossed – a gilded College gate,
 a better supermarket

³⁹ Helen Mort, 'Scab', in *Division Street* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2013), pp. 16-23.

and the language used throughout the poem is a mixture of taboo, pun and northern reference which constantly undermines the neat progression of the lyric segments which make up the text. References to ‘ *fucking royal shite*’ and ‘ *fuck knows who we are*’ bring to mind Harrison’s angry prole-speech and the blunt invective of Armitage’s narrators in *Seeing Stars*, whilst the constant shifting from personal anecdote to political commentary, accompanied by references to miners, coppers and picket lines, threatens the formal cohesion of the poem’s self-contained lyric sections and their Roman numerals, which, instead of providing structural or typographical solidity, instead become ironic invocations of a lost formal elegance undermined by barbaric references to scabs, ‘cunt’, ‘bollocks’ and ‘the shit/pushed through your letterbox.’

Two other poets who also engage with the politics of form are Chris McCabe and Simon Barraclough; the latter’s work in particular characterised by its weaving of traditional form and contemporary reference. Barraclough’s *Bonjour Tetris* pamphlet is particularly ludic, with poems ‘dedicated’ to pinball machines and the computer game ‘Doom’, and a range of punning references, including ‘Fritz Languidly you’d lean against the wall’⁴⁰ and ‘Gomorrah is Another Day’⁴¹ which have an Armatigeian quality. In his debut collection *Los Alamos Mon Amour*⁴² Barraclough’s barbaric reworking of the English sonnet runs to thirteen examples, each one trading formal or metrical orthodoxy for subversive idiom

⁴⁰ Simon Barraclough, ‘Bride of Pinbot’, in *Bonjour Tetris* (London: Penned in the Margins, 2010), p. 30.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴² Simon Barraclough, *Los Alamos Mon Amour* (Cambridge: Salt, 2008). Further references in text.

and ‘depraved’ diction, and this sustained focus on the form invites comparison with Armitage’s *Matches* pieces. ‘Retuning St Paul’s’ (24) opens with a dedication ‘*for all the fucked up children of this world*’, an ironically invoked iambic line which precedes references to the ‘gargantuan organ’ getting ‘a good going over’ and the caricature of the tuner, ‘smearing/red gums with coke, snorting smoke from the censer’, whilst ‘Protecting St Paul’s’ (35) extends this verbal and formal play, juxtaposing ‘since the shit hit the fan we’re on Brown Alert’ and references to ‘Al Qaeda foot soldiers’ wearing ‘C-4 body warmers’ before the neat summation of its (half) rhyming couplet:

I swear I heard the approaching drone,
saw a wing tip shear off the eggshell dome.

McCabe also subjects the sonnet to a sustained attack in his *Zeppelins* collection,⁴³ with a suite of twenty-two poems entitled ‘The Transmidland Liverpool to London Express: *sonnets in simultaneous time*’⁴⁴ which explore the topography and iconography of the two cities in a vernacular idiom which once again recalls Armitage’s ludic patterning (‘action fuckin Jackson & Orson Frickin Welles’) as well as his observational comedy, heard in such lines as ‘stop swearing/in front of the fucking baby’ and ‘Mr Thornton with his strap-on choc cock’. Other lyrics by McCabe and Barraclough suggest an interest in formal experimentation similar to Harrison and Armitage’s multifarious

⁴³ Chris McCabe, *Zeppelins* (Cambridge: Salt, 2008).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 38-48.

subversions of lyric norms, and their work arguably warrants inclusion in the 'barbaric' school of post-War writing.

Although necessarily brief, this survey nonetheless suggests that there is a small group of modern poets producing work which evokes the playfulness and irreverence of Harrison and Armitage's poetics, and which extends the formal and linguistic range of the traditional lyric poem, whilst the thesis as a whole has demonstrated the existence of a tradition of anti-authoritarian and linguistically deviant poetry whose roots lie in the Modernists' bold experiments with form and language and in their impatience with inherited poetic precursors, models and themes; a tradition taken up in the work of figures such as Auden and the Movement poets, and extended by writers such as Harrison, Reading, Leonard and Armitage. That this barbaric idiom continues to manifest itself in the poetry produced by a range of stylistically distinct and politically diverse modern poets suggests an ongoing desire to interrogate inherited traditions, formal prescriptivism, and mainstream conceptions of lyric verse as somehow removed from, or uninterested in, political and social commentary. It also allows us to propose provocative, because unexpected, parallels between a range of modern writers, and this final feature of barbarian masquerade – its powerfully unifying and egalitarian quality – is perhaps its most important and outstanding feature. Just as critical opinion has tended to dismiss any evidence of commerce between Harrison and Armitage's work, so few critics have so far explored the possibility of conceptual and ideological dialogue between contemporary poets and the work of Harrison and Armitage, and it is my hope that future writers will explore this important area of post-War poetics: one defined by linguistic innovation,

playful interrogations of style, and by a celebration of poetry's continued relevance to social, moral and intellectual debate.

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