
Man Enough

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THE TRAGIC theater is where I first encountered the fire and poetry of Tony Harrison. Into the mostly grey, early English spring of 1982 came the comet of Harrison's *Oresteia*. I had almost missed it. Though I was, at the time, writing a dissertation on Greek drama *as* performance, I had given up on the theater. I expected the usual clichés and that sinking sense that we have lost the classics through the conventions by which we classicize them.

What I experienced at the National Theatre was poetry, *dramatic* poetry in English of absolutely astonishing originality and power and so integral a part of the performance itself that you could not say whether it was the drama that turned the words into poetry or the poetry that elevated the drama. Either way it was the rhythm, and the encoded musical structure of the language, especially the intricate, interwoven arrangement of consonants that gave this performance its dramatic force and momentum. The dramatic tension peaked or relaxed on waves of percussive or softened sounds. At dramatically appropriate moments the characters or the chorus seemed caught in the spell cast by their own language, a language of drumming, incantatory power. Then the mood would suddenly shift, a sea change of sibilants or voiceless consonants, the spell broken or, alternatively, suspended in trance. "This text is written to be performed, a rhythmic libretto for masks, music" was Harrison's laconic translator's note to his 1981 version. Of course, behind this was a complex poetic strategy and a profound feeling for the rhythmic range and possibilities of the English language, at once ad-

miring, for example, of the weight of Browning's consonanted Aeschylus, but also of the flow of Swinburne's Aeschylean English, poetically attuned to the fact that Aeschylean verse is both massive and sweeping, characterized by gravity and momentum. Drawn by poetic temperament (and a native Yorkshire ear) to the alliterative metrics of Anglo-Saxon and later Northern poetry, with its consonantal music and rich repertoire of compound words and kennings, Harrison worked out an Aeschylean poetics in English, grounded in the muscular language of its ancient sagas but able to move swiftly through the music of its alliterative patterning. Harrison himself has described the genesis of his *Oresteia* in an essay that I regard as possibly one of the single most revealing and illuminating glimpses into the inner workings of a poet's creative and intellectual workshop. It was my privilege to be able to publish this essay ("Egil & Eagle-Bark") in *Arion*, almost twenty years to the day after I first saw his play.

But I am getting ahead of my story. After that experience at the Olivier Theatre, I began to read everything by Tony Harrison I could find. I would discover the world of his poetry, his translations, and his plays (and later, his films), and come to feel, even more strongly, that something of the spirit that drew me to the Greeks in the first place was still very much alive in his work. Some thirteen years after my initial encounter with Harrison's *Oresteia* in London, I found myself, now a professor, at a conference in Athens on Greek drama in translation. There were some fifty participants representing as many languages and traditions. I was speaking on Greek translation in America. I noticed, with some excitement, that Tony Harrison's name was down for England. It was to be three full days of speeches. The large auditorium was wall-to-wall people, invited guests, Greek professors, students, press, Greek television. I wasn't even sure I knew what Tony Harrison looked like.

I must confess, I am not wild about conferences. I would rather read papers than listen to them read. The auditorium

was stiflingly hot. The morning seemed to be dragging on forever. The jet lag started getting the better of me. So I decided to duck out to get some air. The building in which the conference was taking place was fronted by broad stone stairs, on either side of which were stone banisters, each ending in a landing. I seated myself on the left one. At first, groggy from jet lag and the airless room, I saw no one and nothing. Then I noticed, on the landing to the right, a solitary figure seated, staring straight ahead, as I had been. I don't know how, but I knew right away it was Tony Harrison. I got up and walked over to meet him and introduce myself. He knew *Arion* and seemed pleased to meet me. I sensed instantly the warmth and earthiness of the man, and the pure, physical pleasure he took just soaking up the Greek morning air. I liked him instantly, with the feeling of having found a kindred spirit, a man after my own heart.

After only the briefest banter about the conference and the special quality of the morning light in Greece, Tony turned to look at me, almost as if sizing me up, and after a moment's silence said, with only the slightest mischievous glint in his eyes, "Herby, mi lad, are you man enough to eat balls?" I was taken aback, but only for an instant, and, recovering my composure replied, "As long as they're not mine." "Let's go, then," he said, "I know a little place. They're not so easy to come by in Athens any more." With that we were off across Athens, with Tony showing me and telling me about parts of the city I had never seen or known before. Maybe an hour had passed, and we were finally seated in a small indoor taverna in a part of the city I had never been. Balls, or *ἀμελέτητα*, the "unmentionables," as they are called in Modern Greek, are best eaten deep-fried and with mustard. I remember feeling, as we spoke during our testicular lunch and Tony watched me eat, that I had passed some sort of test, a rite of passage. After lunch, we wandered a while through Athens, ending up in the Theater of Dionysos. A beautiful fall day, but there was, uncannily, no one else there. We sat on the tiered marble seats close to

the orchestra and Tony began to speak about poetry. I remember thinking to myself at the time, *Does it ever get any better than this? To sit in the Theater of Dionysos in Athens with your favorite poet and listen to him talk about poetry?* I knew this was a moment in my life that I would never forget.

Later that evening, back at the hotel, I scribbled some notes in a little notebook. I don't know if this is, in any literal sense, what Tony had said or if it was merely how I had chosen to remember and interpret it, or simply what I had been inspired to write down at the time. And of course, we were there for maybe an hour, so this is by no means a transcript, rather an epitome, a few words, jotted down at the end of a long, tiring but exhilarating day:

Greek tragedy begins where Munch's *Scream* leaves off—staring dumbly into atrocity. It begins with poetry—that gives a voice to suffering—which must *rhythmically* carry to the spectators. It's meter and rhythm that make the poetry into drama, that can compel an audience—not the science of acoustics. Street vendors use rhythm, metrical utterance, musical phrasing to be heard over street noise.

Nietzsche said that tragedy enables you to look at the Gorgon's mask without turning to stone. Tragedy provides a formal means—it is the only one in our tradition—that enables us to look at and make sense of suffering, to transfigure sorrow as song. After atrocity, poetry is the only adequate response.

Every course I have taught on Greek drama since that day I have begun by reading that scribbled note. I then explain the provenance, some notes scribbled after spending an afternoon in the Theater of Dionysos in conversation with one of our greatest living poets, one moreover who has probably done more to make Greek drama live in English than any other writer of our time. From there, I of course unpack the shorthand of the words and expound on their meaning.

So powerfully do Harrison's own versions of Greek drama become prismatic reflections on contemporary injustices and atrocities (what he calls his kamikaze productions, whether

set on a colliery spoil heap in Northern England or a Greek construction site, a US military base or a nuclear power plant), that I was not surprised to learn that he had been commissioned by a major mainstream newspaper, *The Guardian*, to cover the war in Bosnia. He had been sent there by *The Guardian* not as a war correspondent, but as a *poet*. I do not know of any other living poet to receive such an assignment. In our world, it is hard even to imagine that: a poet sent to cover a war? Not since Aristophanes has anyone thought that poetry might save a society. Harrison's poetry stares down that Gorgon. After atrocity, poetry may be the only adequate response.

I am always surprised that Tony Harrison's work is not as well known in America as it should be. This fact may have something to do with the Yorkshire dialect in which he often writes and through which many of his characters and dramatis personae come rhythmically and bodily to life (though Harrison's verbal range is enormous: just look at the Shakespearean medley of voices in a text like his *Prometheus*, from the chain-smoking Promethean miner, choking on his own Northern consonants, to the archly mellifluous and upmarket, grandiloquent Hermes), which can be alien in cadence and idiom to American ears. But when I think of Harrison's verse, and what strikes me as the broadness of its appeal, I am reminded of something Eliot once said about Yeats, that his being so *Irish* a poet made him so *universal* a poet.

This is not the place, in this personal reminiscence, to give an overview of Tony Harrison's poetic oeuvre. I wish only to comment on what strikes me as so singular about his work. One often finds oneself carried along in what I can only describe as a torrent of words, often moving abruptly from the profane to the sublime, where the one seems to intensify and energize, validate, and revalorize the other. Harrison himself once commented, "In the unashamed coupling of 'high' and 'low' the theatrical poet finds his most persuasive voice." The movement is always rhythmic and muscular, owing to his ex-

traordinary feeling for the richness of rhyme and metrical phrasing in English, and also, as remarked above, to an uncanny sense of the heft and force of alliterative patterning native to, and part of the genius of, the English language itself. When I read Tony Harrison, I always have the sense that I am rediscovering English, and I don't mean British English or his Northern dialect. I mean the essence of the language and its power to express, inextricably intertwined, feeling and meaning. Anyone who has read Tony Harrison can attest to the visceral power of his verse. I have focused on esthetic qualities of Harrison's verse, but the focus of his verse itself is more often than not something disturbingly, mordantly political, informed by a vast, haunted historical sense, and also, needless to say, by something deeply personal.

From that first afternoon in the Theater of Dionysos more than ten years ago, we became friends. It is strange how this suddenly and irrevocably happens. But it did. I have only seen and spent time with Tony a few times since that day—some wonderful late-summer days together at the Telluride Film Festival, and then again time spent one spring at a conference at the Getty in Los Angeles. But we are, despite time and distance, friends. When he invites me to visit him in Newcastle, I know he means it. When he has invited me to spend New Year's with him and his grandchildren, I know the invitation is sincere. Even though, over the years, we have mostly communicated through faxes, postcards, and *Arion*.

His presence in *Arion* has meant a great deal to me. His work embodies that sort of profound (and deeply learned but also poetically passionate) assimilation and wholly contemporary recreation of the classics in living idiom that represents the spirit of *Arion* at its best. I count among the pieces that I have been most excited to publish over the years, in addition to the essay mentioned above, his Presidential Address to the Virgil Society ("The Tears and the Trumpets"), the complete text of his *The Kaisers of Carnuntum* (originally performed in the Roman arena outside Vienna with lions, bears, and a tiger in cages underneath the

spectators' seats) and more recently, his Lucretian meditation "Reading the Rolls: An Arse Verse." It's hard to imagine a more natural home for these than *Arion* and, conversely, such works define what *Arion* aspires to: the classics engaged *through* and *as* living culture, the creative fusion of being and book. For all his support over the years, and for helping make *Arion* what it is, I am deeply grateful.

And for much more besides. For instance, his remarkable film poems. For me, an incredible discovery, expanding both my understanding of film and poetry. His *Crossings*, to mention only one—a film dealing with AIDS, homelessness, unemployment, and a host of other social ills—is a "remake" of the 1936 John Grierson documentary *Night Mail*, a documentary about the nightly train carrying the mail from London to Scotland, for which W. H. Auden famously composed verse, the first actual film poem. Harrison composed his entire film poetically, that is, the verse is less a poetic commentary over images already filmed than metrical lines determining the pace, rhythm, and feeling of the shots themselves. The verse, in a sense, leads the film, but it is the rhythm of the film and its images that gives the work its power and that, in a sense, makes its cinematic poetry. So important is a sense of rhythm in filmmaking (and I have heard filmmakers like Werner Herzog emphasize this and read filmmakers like Eisenstein and Kurosawa on this) that Méliès used to compose his films to a metronome. Harrison's film is, apart from being both filmic tour de force and moving poetic narrative, a refreshing rediscovery, for me, of something essential and constitutive of both cinema and poetry: it is rhythm that compels an audience, holds attention, and allows the work to rise above "street noise." In this context, I will only mention his epic film *Prometheus* (about which Edith Hall has written brilliantly and insightfully in an earlier *Arion*), a film set amid the detritus, killing fields, and industrial wastelands of Western and Eastern Europe, and which carries these principles of poetic rhythm and vision to another level.

A few years ago a little gift arrived from Tony, just before Christmas, a little book called *Black Marigolds & Coloured Stars* by E. Powys Mathers, an enigmatic early twentieth-century literary figure, a poet, amateur orientalist, translator, and crossword puzzle setter. Tony had been trying to get the book back in print for more than twenty years, a book he himself had discovered some fifty years ago in a book stall in Leeds. The new edition came with an introduction by him. He immediately directs the reader to the section *Black Marigolds* at the rear of the book, where one finds a poem called *Chaurapanchasika* (“The Fifty Stanzas of Chauras”), translated from Sanskrit by Mathers somewhere on the Front during World War I, and originally written nearly 2,000 years ago by a young Brahman poet, Chauras, in his last few hours as he awaited execution. He had been sentenced to death for having loved the king’s daughter, Vidya, and the poem is his lover’s lament and farewell. When I read it, it simply took my breath away. It has taken my breath away every time I have read it since. It is, quite simply, the most astonishingly beautiful and ecstatic love poem I have ever read. As Tony aptly described it in a letter to me, “in the presence of death but reeling with sensual recall.” Reading this poem aloud has now become a New Year’s Eve ritual for me, as the old year dies and a new one cries to be born.

I often think about Tony around the New Year. Maybe because it has often been the time when we reconnect, after a hiatus of some time, and send faxes one another’s way. Maybe because I get the urge then to revisit that remarkable love poem. Or maybe it is because of the image I have of Tony, in the cold grey winter of Newcastle upon Tyne. It is the time when I am sure he is there. Delphi is certainly his favorite place, and Greek warmth and light an elixir, “bright flecks” in life that is, as his Promethean miner says, “mostly grey.” But something always brings Tony back to that Northern landscape he calls home, that earth where his poetry is grounded, to that old house with all his books and notebooks. It’s the place where he can be still and write,

where he seeks refuge from the demands of being Tony Harrison (in one 2005 letter to me he mentioned, in passing despair, what was on his plate from April through June: directing his translation of *Hecuba* in London; preparing and taking the production to New York and DC; and in between, travel to Moscow to begin preparations for directing *Square Rounds* in Russian, three poetry readings in Italy, a showing of film poems, and a rehearsed Italian version of *Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*—"All I want to do is stay here and be still"). It is *there* that I like to think of him, every New Year. Walking the length of Hadrian's Wall, standing at "the end of the world," a howling wind at his back. Then returning home to a house full of grandchildren, and bushels of oysters, goat, goose, venison pie, hare soup, and, of course fruit (letters from Tony are full of figs, and mulberries, and apples). I don't know why, but my vision of this rugged, earthy man always comes back somehow finally to an image of women and fruit. Although it was just a casual remark tossed off in a note Tony sent me as he was preparing his Prometheus film, it has stayed with me: "I'll scour the landscapes of the Promethean aftermath. And somewhere there has to be a key role for Pandora, women and fruit . . ."

There is no way to thank Tony adequately for all his many gifts, which can be summed up best as the narrator in his *Prometheus* does, "Fire and poetry, two great powers / that mek the so-called gods' world OURS!"

These essays, appreciations, and reminiscences were collected as a small tribute and expression of gratitude to Tony as he turns seventy. I am deeply indebted to Hallie Rebecca Marshall for alerting me to this milestone in Tony's life and also for first suggesting we do something to commemorate it.