

## ABSTRACT

Tony Harrison has spoken of the way children state their address: "Beeston, Leeds, West Riding, Yorkshire, England, Great Britain, Europe, The World, The Universe". This thesis will be concerned to explore the conflicts and problems produced by the constant effort in Harrison's verse to scale this carefully differentiated 'social ladder' of identity. It will do this by examining some of the ways in which he has negotiated these conflicts in *The Loiners*, *Continuous*, and *v*. In seven chapters a close reading of *The Loiners* examines the volume's depiction of individuals struggling against their entrapment within a debilitating cultural and historical inheritance. The assumption in the adolescence of the 'childhood' poems of a repressive authoritarian construction of personal identity is considered first. Then, in the second and third chapters, the dual status of the P.W.D. Man and the White Queen as emblems of imperial history and ideology and failed rebels against their authoritarian inheritance is first discussed. Konrad Lorenz's *On Aggression* is then used as a means to expose some of the tensions and dynamics underlying the use of sexuality in *The Loiners* as a metaphor for political and historical relationships. In the fourth chapter Pascal's *Pensées* provide the important source of reference for an understanding of the connection established in the poems between the Western colonists' experiences of personal entrapment and the recurring theme of 'the Fall'. The remaining three chapters on *The Loiners* consider the dramatisation of a consciousness permeated by guilt in 'The Railroad Heroines', the overlaying of such a consciousness with emblematic representations of the disintegration of the British Empire in 'The White Queen', and one other central issue which pervades the portrayal of authoritarian culture in the volume---the emphasis upon a destructive, repressive construction of masculinity.

A detailed discussion of 'On Not Being Milton', in which the poem is explored in the light of Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* and E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, examines the terms by which Harrison is able to extricate himself from the location of self elaborated in *The Loiners*. Other poems in *Continuous* are then examined to reveal in more detail the shift in the location of self from *The Loiners*; and the tensions which arise between Harrison's reclamation of his working-class affiliation and his desire to affirm a wider location of identity. As a coda to the previous themes the conclusion, offered in the final chapter, considers Harrison's renegotiation of these tensions in *v* and the terms in which he affirms a new resolution of them.

I is the Other: Conflicts and Continuities of Identity in  
Tony Harrison's *The Poems, Collected and New*

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Thesis presented for the degree of Ph. D.

University of Newcastle upon Tyne

September 1997

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## Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to my mam and dad, Doreen and Gilbert Hairsine, and to my sister, Karen Thorne, for their unwavering support during the last eight years.

I would also like to thank Lesley Hicks and Beverley Hicks for their love and care, Ellie Hurrell and Robin Kelly for their companionship, and Jennie Dickerson for her tenderness.

Above all, I must thank Dr. Desmond Graham, who has been a skilful and sensitive supervisor, a staunch advocate, and a wise friend.



## INTRODUCTION

I always remember the way kids at school used to write out their addresses in full, starting with their name and school and going on with 'Beeston, Leeds, West Riding, Yorkshire, England, Great Britain, Europe, The World, The Universe': I think I have a mind and sensibility which keeps running up and down that kind of ladder...<sup>1</sup>

This thesis will be concerned to explore the conflicts and problems produced by the constant effort in Tony Harrison's verse to scale this carefully differentiated 'social ladder' of identity. It will do this by examining some of the ways in which he has negotiated these conflicts in *The Loiners* (1970), *Continuous* (1981) and *v.* (1985). Evidence of the extent of his success in these negotiations can be found in the collection of essays, *Tony Harrison: Loiner*, which was published in 1997 in celebration of the poet's sixtieth birthday. It contained the following tribute, by the theatre director Richard Eyre, which is typical of the expressions of admiration for Harrison's attainment of a richly inclusive cultural identity; "The baker's son from Leeds is probably the most cosmopolitan man I know. Multilingual...much travelled—a citizen, as they say, of the world..."<sup>2</sup>. In the same collection of essays, however, Rick Rylance observes that in Harrison's first major collection of verse, *The Loiners*, the emphasis upon this wide location of identity does not lead to an ennobling expansion of 'affiliation' but, on the contrary, to a consciousness which is "isolated and solitary, desperately introjecting public experience as a fearful, anxious inwardness"<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>Tony Harrison, interview, John Haffenden, 'Interview with Tony Harrison', *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies 1: Tony Harrison*, ed. Neil Astley (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991) 230.

<sup>2</sup>Richard Eyre, 'Tony Harrison the Playwright', *Tony Harrison: Loiner*, ed. Sandie Byrne (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) 44.

<sup>3</sup>Rick Rylance, 'Doomsongs: Tony Harrison and War', *Tony Harrison: Loiner*, ed. Sandie Byrne (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) 160.



The main focus of the thesis will be upon Harrison's portrayal, in *The Loiners*, of this consciousness. The first seven chapters offer a close reading of *The Loiners* which examines the volume's depiction of individuals struggling against their entrapment within a debilitating cultural and historical inheritance. Chapter One considers the dramatisation, in the 'childhood poems' of Part One of the volume, of the assumption in adolescence of a repressive authoritarian construction of personal identity, and of the traumatic acquisition of the knowledge of one's location in a 'fallen' patriarchal history. The 'P.W.D. Man' poems and the first section of 'The White Queen' sequence are looked at in the second chapter. The 'P.W.D. Man' poems are discussed in relation to the poem 'Mandalay' by Kipling. This chapter emphasises the dual status of the P.W.D. Man and the White Queen as emblems of imperial history and ideology and failed rebels against their authoritarian inheritance. Chapter Two also considers briefly Harrison's implicit invocation in the poems of a principle of 'universal affiliation' which opposes the authoritarian exclusion and denial of the cultural Other. This notion is explored in greater detail in the third chapter. Here an outline of the main arguments contained in Konrad Lorenz's *On Aggression* is used as a means to expose some of the tensions and dynamics underlying the use of sexuality in *The Loiners* as a metaphor for political and historical relationships. Particular attention is drawn to the role in the poetry of the notion of personal love as a potentially subversive energy which opposes the pervasive experience of alienation and division in the volume. The fourth chapter, however, emphasises the depiction of Western love relationships as enervated, and characterised by mutual estrangement, in 'The White Queen'. Through a consideration of some of the writings of Pascal in his *Pensées*—a book referred to several times in 'The White Queen'—the connection established in the poems between the Western colonists' experiences of



personal entrapment and the recurring theme of 'the Fall' is explored. This chapter delineates, in the discussion of 'Distant Ophir', the link forged in the poems between the Loiners' personal debilitation and an historicised apprehension of 'the Fall' as a haunting sense of the 'transgressions' of Western, patriarchal history. The dramatisation in 'The Railroad Heroides' of a consciousness permeated by this guilt-ridden location of self is highlighted in Chapter Five. Chapter Six examines the overlaying of such a beleaguered consciousness with the emblematic representation of the disintegration of the British Empire in the 'Manica' section of 'The White Queen'. In Chapter Seven another issue which pervades the portrayal of authoritarian culture in the volume—the emphasis upon a destructive, repressive construction of masculinity—is approached through readings of the 'Cold War' poems, 'Heart of Darkness', and 'Ghosts: Some Words Before Breakfast'.

The remaining three chapters extend the exploration of these themes through a look at the sonnets of *Continuous* and the long poem v. The detailed discussion of 'On Not Being Milton' which is presented in Chapter Eight, examines the terms by which Harrison is able to extricate himself from the location of self elaborated in *The Loiners*. This becomes clear through tracing the relationship of this poem to Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* and E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*. The ninth chapter emphasises the ways in which those concerns which *Continuous* shares with *The Loiners* have been altered following the relocation of self described in Chapter Eight. Chapter Nine discusses also the tensions which arise in *Continuous* between Harrison's reclamation of his working-class affiliation and his desire to affirm a wider location of identity. As a coda to these previous themes the conclusion, offered in a final chapter, considers Harrison's re-negotiations of these tensions in v.



## CHAPTER ONE

Harrison's own experience of a sense of entrapment within history can be seen to inform the terms he uses to describe the situation of the Greek poet Palladas (whose bitter epigrams Harrison has translated with a measure of venomous sympathy);

His are the last hopeless blasts of the old Hellenistic world, giving way reluctantly, but without much resistance, before the cataclysm of Christianity. It is difficult, if not impossible, at this time of sectarian violence, Pagan hopelessness and Christian barbarity, to characterise Hellenism as worldly sanity, or Christianity as sweetness and light... There seems to have been little or no moral sustenance or sense of identity in the one, and little sense of hope in the other. The choice was between a crumbled past and a future of specious regeneration.<sup>1</sup>

In *The Loiners* Harrison and his various personae appear to be confronted with a similarly bleak choice. I will discuss later the way in which a notion of "specious regeneration" becomes a central theme of the book. The cultural rubble of the Victorian Age is prominent in the volume's vista of a "crumbled past", but the ruinous decay extends much further back and embraces the whole of the West. The era of Christian Imperialism, and the vitality of Christian culture, is perceived to be in decline. Yet, for Harrison, post-imperial Britain is streaked with the ideological residue of a past which continues to exert an oppressive and enervating influence on the present, and the poetry of *The Loiners* returns obsessively to images of the "crumbled past".

### **i Thomas Campey**

In the first poem of the volume, 'Thomas Campey and the Copernican System', the opening lines could be read as an image of the shadow

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<sup>1</sup>Tony Harrison, *Palladas: Poems* (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1975) 8.

of the past hanging over, and then descending upon, the present. The "waste" is Thomas Campey's retail stock; second-hand goods, especially books and Victoriana;

The other day all thirty shilling's worth  
Of painfully collected waste was blown  
Off the heavy handcart high above the earth,  
And scattered paper whirled around the town. (p.11)<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, this dispersal could be interpreted as an omen of change and disruption, even revolution, especially in the light of the succeeding lines;

*The earth turns round to face the sun in March,*  
He said, resigned, *it's bound to cause a breeze.*  
Familiar last straws. His back's strained arch  
Questioned the stiff balance of his knees. (p.11)

This ambiguity is, in fact, central to the poem and is reflected in the ambivalent status of Campey himself. He is in part an emblematic figure whose wrecked body and decaying spine ("*Tabes dorsalis*"), symbolises the diseased condition of a failing culture. The literary allusions in the third stanza reinforce this connection;

Thomas Campey, who, in each demolished home,  
Cherished a Gibbon with a gilt-worked spine,  
Spengler and Mommsen, and a huge, black tome  
With Latin titles for his own decline:

*Tabes dorsalis...* (p.11)

Spengler's *Decline of the West* appeared towards the end of the First World War. The nineteenth century German historian Theodor Mommsen published *History of Rome* and Edward Gibbon wrote the famous *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Comparisons and parallels between

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<sup>2</sup>For the first seven chapters of the thesis (unless otherwise indicated), the page reference numbers cited in brackets refer to *The Loiners* (London: London Magazine Editions, 1970).



colonial empires, the Roman and British in particular, occur frequently in *The Loiners*. Usually, as here, such juxtapositions are ironic and pointed. These books on the demise of Roman imperial power, which display their respective cultures' own assumptions of authority through the ostentatious stateliness of their physical appearance, are now themselves faded remnants of a derelict past. They are rescued from oblivion only by Campey, whose symbolic relationship to their degenerative themes is indicated firstly by the phrase "his own decline" and, more subtly, by the pun on "spine". The suggestions of wealth and strength evoked by "gilt-worked spine" are sharply reversed by "*Tabes dorsalis*". A similar contrast underlies the grotesque echo of 'triumphal arch' in the earlier spine image, "His back's strained arch/ Questioned the stiff balance of his knees". Campey's posture forms the shape of a question-mark and the uncertainty which he embodies concerns endurance: when will the strained arch collapse? The references to the Copernican System invoke notions of the irresistible march of time, yet the Copernican model is curiously altered to suggest sudden and violent change. This idea, which derives from Campey's misunderstanding, "*The earth turns round...in March*", is employed with grim irony in the eighth stanza which anticipates "one/ More sharp turn of the earth";

Keen winter is the worst time for his back,  
Squeezed lungs and damaged heart; just one  
More sharp turn of the earth, those knees will crack  
And he will turn his warped spine on the sun. (p.12)

However the suggestion of impending disruption or transformation, discernible in the second stanza, remains only an enigmatic undercurrent in the poem. The consuming bitterness of these lines foreseeing Campey's death reflects the dominant mood and attitude, which perceives Campey not as an emblem, but a victim, of the past which he himself



"cherishes". His death highlights therefore the continuing, rather than waning, power and influence of the colonial, Victorian inheritance upon present-day Leeds. The central metaphor is of Campey's diseased spine bearing, to breaking point, this cultural "dead weight" (p.12). The poetry stresses his physical suffering. The repeated word "flex", for example, suggests the strain of 'flexing';

*Tabes dorsalis*; veins like flex, like fused  
And knotted flex, with a cart on the cobbled road... (p.11)

and also, with "fused", produces a reductive image of obsolete, overworked machinery. Harrison incorporates the dehumanizing heritage of industrialisation into his scathing travesty of Campey's baroque vision of a Victorian heaven;

And every pound of this dead weight is pain  
To Thomas Campey (Books) who often dreams

Of angels in white crinolines all dressed  
To kill, of God as Queen Victoria who grabs  
Him by the scruff and shoves his body pressed  
Quite straight again under St Anne's slabs.

And round Victoria Regina the Most High  
Swathed in luminous smokes like factories,  
These angels serried in a dark, Leeds sky  
Chanting *Angina –a, Angina Pectoris*. (p.12)

Campey's dream reveals how the oppressive religious and economic authoritarianism of nineteenth century Britain becomes internalised. Much more than the scattered objects of Victoriana, this internal experience retains an insidious potency. An awareness of this, combined with the old man's unquestioning acceptance of his lot, fuels the derisive satire. The ghastly humour of the liturgical chorus of "*Angina*" leads into the stanza on Campey's



death. Following this, the indignation and irony rises to the crescendo of the final address to Leeds:

Leeds! Offer thanks to that Imperial Host,  
Squat on its thrones of Ormus and of Ind,  
For bringing Thomas from his world of dust  
To dust, and leisure of the simplest kind. (p.12)

There are several puns on the phrase "Imperial Host", which can refer to either a passive, suffering god, (Christ as the exalted 'host' or victim of sacrifice), or to an aggressive army of empire. Here the wordplay highlights the replacement of a god of atonement with an authoritarian deity presiding over conquered lands. The effect is to lambast sarcastically the installation of Queen Victoria as a quasi-religious icon.

These puns also pick up the earlier allusions to colonialism. The poem insistently locates Leeds within this history. 'Loiners' are natives of Leeds, and the major unifying factor within the volume's ostensibly (at least, geographically) disparate sequence of poems, will be the common cultural heritage of Leeds. This organizational feature (which is not uniformly adhered to—there are some anomalies in Part Three) is one of the main traces of Harrison's original model, Joyce's *Dubliners*.<sup>3</sup> Another similarity is the early concern, in both collections, with childhood and adolescence.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>"The first book I wrote was called *The Loiners*. It suddenly comes back to me now what I wanted to do. I wanted to be a poet, but I found that in prose, in fiction, there was the life of a city; you could find it in the novel. I was very impressed with Joyce's *Dubliners*. And I began writing stories about Leeds; they were a little like imitations of Joyce's *Dubliners*; but that dissatisfied me because I wanted everything to go into poetry...". Tony Harrison, interview, Richard Hoggart, 'In Conversation with Tony Harrison', *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies 1: Tony Harrison*, ed. Neil Astley (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991) 40.

<sup>4</sup>'Thomas Campey...' is the notable exception to this pattern. There are some correspondences, however, between Campey and the figure of Father Flynn, whose death is the subject of the opening story of *Dubliners*, 'The Sisters'. The priest's body, as a metaphor of paralysis, and Campey's as a metaphor of oppression and disease, establish lines of imagery which reverberate through each volume. Flynn also shares Campey's ambivalent role as both a representative and a victim of a chronically debilitating cultural inheritance (Flynn's physical disease follows a mental breakdown).



## ii. The Childhood Poems

The portrayals of emergent sexuality in the 'childhood poems' immediately following 'Thomas Campey...' ('Ginger's Friday', 'The Pocket Wars of Peanuts Joe', and 'Allotments') dramatise the painful process of assuming the cultural inheritance of Leeds. Each of these poems moves from a depiction of sexuality as innocent and life-affirming to an account of 'fallen sex' which is permeated by guilt and death. While mythic ideas of the Fall underpin 'Allotments', however, the haunts which the young Harrison and his nameless Eve frequent are far from Edenic. The ironies of the poem's first section pivot on the pre-lapsarian obliviousness of the couple to the fact that they inhabit a physically and culturally 'fallen' environment which is hostile not only to their passion but to life in general. While alert to the practical problems of finding a suitable site for sex ("In Leeds it was never *Who* or *When* but *Where*" (p.16)), they are unconscious of the history—industrial, commercial, religious and military—which formed the malignant landscapes that now present them with such a poverty of choices. The polluted "slimy River Aire" (p.16), and the vapid "cold canal that ran to Liverpool" (p.16), dampen their ardour. The allotments of the title are not healthy, orderly refuges of greenery, but "Choked, reverted *Dig for Victory* plots" (p.16). The places which they are driven to choose (graveyards and "by the abattoir"(p.16)) are, pointedly, precincts of death and mortality, backdrops which throw the sexual acts of affirmation into stark relief;

The graveyards of Leeds 2  
Were hardly love-nests but they had to do—  
Through clammy mackintosh and winter vest  
And rumpled jumper for a touch of breast...  
And after love we'd find some epitaph  
Embossed backwards on your arse and laugh.  
And young , we cuddled by the abattoir,



Faffing with fastenings, never getting far. (p.16)

Engrossed in negotiating the post-Edenic paraphernalia of winter clothing, however, the disquieting portent of human mortality, the "embossed epitaph", fails to disturb the couple.

The film of ingenuousness surrounding them is finally pierced by the intervention of "the Pole" (p.16) at the start of the poem's second section. He makes explicit the terrible associations which the language describing the abattoir evokes;

Cowclap smacked  
Onto the pavings where the beasts were packed.  
And offal furnaces with clouds of stench  
Choked other couples off the lychgate bench.

The Pole who caught us at it once had smelt  
Far worse at Auschwitz and at Buchenwald,  
He said, and, pointing to the chimneys, *Meat!*  
*Zat is vere zey murder vat you eat.*

And jogging beside us, *As Man devours*  
*Ze flesh of animals, so vorms devour ours.* (pp.16-7)

The knowledge imparted here is more than a general revelation of human sin and mortality, however. These lines establish a number of specific juxtapositions which also occur in 'Ginger's Friday' and 'The Pocket Wars...'. Sexual desire is placed alongside repellent images of death, decay, and violent oppression; and the sexual consciousness of the human body becomes entangled with a brutal animal reductivism in which human flesh is disturbingly associated with (often cooked) animal meat. These elements inform the closing depiction of adolescent turmoil (which is also a Joycean epiphany);

Nearly midnight and that gabbling, foreign nut  
Had stalled my coming, spoilt my appetite  
For supper, and gave me a sleepless night  
In which I rolled frustrated and I smelt

Lust on myself, then smoke, and I felt  
Street bonfires blazing for the end of war  
V.E. and J. burn us like lights, but saw  
Lush prairies for a tumble, wide corrals,  
A Loiner's Elysium, and I cried  
For the family still pent up in my balls,  
For my corned beef sandwich, and for genocide. (p.17)

It is difficult to unravel the complex snarl of ideas and emotions portrayed here. Primarily, the passage dramatizes the youth's assumption of a new kind of personal identity. The secure but illusory shell of privacy, described in the first section, is broken. It is replaced with an anguished awareness of his own involvement in the continuities of history (and of the human condition: these are the existential "allotments" of the punning title). Significantly, the smell of smoke is located on his own person. The blending of the smells of lust and smoke suggests the way in which sexual appetite is adulterated by the appalling connotations of the abattoir smoke. The resulting fusion of creative and destructive energies is symbolised by the image of the victory bonfires celebrating the end of World War II. As in 'The Pocket Wars...', the heat of these bonfires is associated with the destructive forces unleashed in the war. "V.E. and J. burn us like lights" strikingly combines an evocation of the nuclear flash of the A-bomb with the hell-fire which appears in 'Ginger's Friday'. Recoiling from these terrifying thoughts, the youth desperately conjures up images of a spacious, wholesome landscape, an ahistorical idealization where, on "lush prairies", uninhibited sexual expression could be rediscovered. (Further, where respect for the dignity of living things might be restored; the horses and cattle of the abattoir are momentarily relocated in "wide corrals".) The net effect of this brief wish-fulfilment, however, is to heighten the sense of intellectual and emotional confusion which finds release, but not resolution, in tears. The formal correlative of this release is the poignant humour of the poem's final two lines which is produced by the apparent incongruousness of



his list of anxieties; sexual frustration, the pedestrian "corned beef sandwich", and "genocide". In fact, of course, these juxtapositions succinctly express his adolescent insight which is, precisely, the horrific immanence of history within himself and his immediate surroundings.

The impulse to escape into an Elysian landscape highlights the youth's claustrophobic feeling of entrapment inside his cultural inheritance. Not only is the latest generation constrained by the appalling past, however. The shadow of the past darkens the future as well as the present. "I cried/ For the family still pent up in my balls" attends literally to the next generation, and pities them. The phrase "pent up" subtly refers back to the animals in the abattoir. In the midst of his despair the unborn appear already to be victims of history, corrupted by their pedigree. In the language of the earlier quotation on Palladas, Harrison and the other Loiners feel squeezed "between a crumbled past and a future of specious regeneration", "specious" precisely because it is undermined by the malign influence of the past.

The notion of "specious regeneration" is in fact the common subject of the 'childhood poems' in so far as they depict the process by which dawning sexual consciousness becomes fractured and brutalized. The closing lines of 'Ginger's Friday' resonate, as I have already suggested, with associations which recur in 'Allotments';

*Paternosters stuck*  
At *peccata*, and the devil with his huge jam pan  
Would change his boiled-up body back to muck.  
And no Hail Marys saved him from that Hell  
Where Daley's and his father's broad, black belts  
Cracked in the kitchen and, blubbering, he smelt  
That burning rubber and burnt bacon smell. (p.13)

Again the fusion of smells link sexuality with an image of cooked meat (the smell of rubber connecting with earlier lines in which Ginger tries on his



father's condoms). More starkly, however, these smells are the product of the boy's beating, the "bacon smell" emanating from his own flesh. The psychological effect of these associations is to imprint onto the young mind an authoritarian concept of the body as a vulnerable object which can be used, mutilated and consumed by a higher power. This concept opposes, and attempts to control, the adolescent's growing awareness of the body as a source not only of sensual pleasure, but of strong individual (and so potentially subversive) appetites and impulses. Therefore Ginger's mildly deviant and disobedient sexual behaviour represents a symbolic threat to authority which explains the priest's decision to reveal the details of the confession. The church's oppressive linkage between sexuality, sin, and images of infernal bodily torment (such as the "boiled-up body" here), is, as a result of the priest's betrayal, not simply reinforced, but realised in the "burning" pain of Ginger's beating. The pivotal role of the anonymous priest emphasises the position of the church as the primary source, in this poem, of authoritarian ideology. The response of the father and neighbour exposes their own deeply internalised sexual distaste and guilt, the violence of the punishment reflecting the intensity of their repression. At the close of the poem, therefore, the depressing suspicion is that the beating may actually constitute part of a process of initiation into an authoritarian male hierarchy in which Ginger will later assume the role of the father.

The notion of sexuality as a source of potentially rebellious, subversive energies is foregrounded in 'The Pocket Wars of Peanuts Joe'. Even the adolescent diction and intonation (which infiltrate the early passages of all three 'childhood poems'), here voice a language of conscious opposition to authority, dismissing the adult prohibition on masturbation;

We knew those adult rumours just weren't true.

We did it often but our minds stayed strong.  
Our palms weren't cold and tacky and they never grew  
Those tell-tale matted tangles like King Kong. (p.14)

The behaviour of Peanuts Joe, however, whose mind has not "stayed strong", is recognised as distinct and disturbed. Masturbation is not for him a source of pleasure or release, but an act of aggression;

We knew that what was complicated joy  
In coupled love, and for lonely men relief,  
For Joe was fluted rifling, no kid's toy  
He fired and loaded in his handkerchief. (p.14)

Harrison is deliberately vague about the origins of Joe's psychological condition, but carefully rules out the war: "Some said that it was shell-shock. They were wrong" (p.14). The poem's epigraph,

'Poor old sport,  
he got caught  
right in the mangle.' (p.14)

emphasises the perception of him as a social victim, engulfed by those pressures of patriarchal culture which twist sexual energy towards destruction. In his personal "Pocket Wars" these energies are turned in on themselves and his private suffering informs the "solemn" (p.15), subversive public gesture which denies and deflates the glorification of the 'public' war;

...heaped souvenirs:  
Swastikas, Jap tin hats and Rising Suns.  
The Victory bonfire settled as white ash.  
The accordion stopped Tipperarying.  
It was something solemn made Joe flash  
His mitred bishop as they played *The King*.  
*Happy and Glorious...faded away. Swine!*  
The disabled veteran with the medals cried. (p.15)

The "souvenirs" are totems of pure opposition which dehumanize the perception of the defeated nations. This perspective is contradicted, however, by the disquieting connotations of nuclear explosion evoked by "Rising Suns",



"flash", and the "white ash" of the bonfire's remains. The exposure of "the cock/ That could gush Hiroshimas" (p15), is an exposure of the perverse sexual forces underlying the destructive drive which culminates in the development of the atom bomb. The "solemn" revelation of the "mitred bishop" also ridicules the moral and intellectual pretensions of authority by unmasking its hidden sexual nature. While Joe's act involves a momentary challenge to the reductivism which underpins authoritarian psychology, however, the cry of "*Swine!*" signals its swift and brutal reassertion. He is quickly disposed of; guarded by "Desert Rats" (p.15) until "frog-marched" (p.15) to prison;

A sergeant found him gutted like a fish  
On army issue blades, the gormless one,  
No good for cannon fodder. His last wish  
Bequeathed his gonads to the Pentagon. (p.15)

The cliché, "cannon fodder", restates the familiar association of the human body with animal meat (and "gutted like a fish" is an image of food preparation), yet, importantly, the poem ends on a note of satirical defiance.

While the 'childhood poems' highlight the pessimistic theme of "specious regeneration", they are not fatalistic. The poetry, in various ways, enacts its own struggle against the reinforcement of patriarchal culture; it does not simply describe, but protests against, authoritarian ideology. Harrison, speaking in 1983, makes an interesting comment on his translation of *Palladas*;

If I were writing the poems of *Palladas* in my own voice I would have to take into account the fact that the historical pessimism – the nightmare of history and the feeling of despair about the way it's going – is only part of my make-up. We really seem now to be in an historical cul-de-sac, and when you're in that situation you somehow need a running jump to get over it. For me that running jump is achieved by plugging into the life-support system of metrical verse...(I) instinctively feel that it's associated with the

heart beat, with the sexual instinct, and with all those physical rhythms that go on despite the moments when you feel suicidal.<sup>5</sup>

If, through the use of metrical verse, the poetry is fundamentally, formally, "plugged in" to these affirmative energies, this connection is not considered to be an end-in-itself. It 'supplies the power' that sustains the poet's appetite to resist and negotiate the "historical cul-de-sac" which, in the context of *The Loiners*, is the recurring cycle of cultural indoctrination that I have been outlining. Again, therefore, poetry may realise the subversive potential of such energies. At the same time these existential appetites, which precede and enable historical and political engagement, are themselves perceived to be under threat. The danger is not only that creative sexual desires may be perverted; desire may also be extinguished. Harrison observes that, in Palladas' poems, "the sense of death is stronger than any urge to sensual life". One of the primary themes of *The Loiners* is the struggle against the "sense of death" which permeates the cultural and historical legacy of Leeds.

'Allotments', the last of the three 'childhood poems', ends with the youth disgusted by, and alienated from, his personal "urge(s) to sensual life"<sup>6</sup>.

The revelations of the Pole

Had stalled my coming, spoilt my appetite  
For supper, and gave me a sleepless night  
In which I rolled frustrated... (p.17)

'Allotments' is the penultimate poem of Part One (*The Loiners* being divided into five sections). The ambiguous eight-line poem which succeeds it, 'A Proper Caution', connects with the theme of stifled desire;

The sun's in cloud. The fat man with string-vest  
Patterns sun-printed on his woman's chest,

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<sup>5</sup>Tony Harrison, interview, John Haffenden, 'Interview with Tony Harrison', *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies 1: Tony Harrison*, ed. Neil Astley (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991) 235-36.

<sup>6</sup>Harrison, *Palladas: Poems* 9.



Starts up from his deck chair suddenly,  
And dragging his toe-ends in the ebbing sea,  
Crowned with a useless *Kiss Me*, King Canute,  
Red-conked and ludicrous, but still a man,  
Shouts out before the cuddlesome and cute  
To death and darkness: *Stop!* to prove they ran. (p.18)

Much of the poem's ambiguity is generated by the multiple puns of the title. Firstly, 'a proper caution' is a colloquialism meaning 'a thoroughly amusing person' (a 'caution' being "an amusing person" (O.E.D.)). The man looks "ludicrous" and makes an exhibition of himself on the beach. The cry of "*Stop!*" is also a 'caution' and an appropriate ('proper') existential appeal in the face of oblivion. Yet, because it is hopelessly ineffectual, this injunction appears to be as improper as King Canute's command to the waves. What begins as a cri-de-coeur is changed by the final phrase, "to prove they ran", into an act of self-delusion and machismo. It is merely "the cuddlesome and cute" who are frightened away. The man's loss of vitality and sexual being (his "*Kiss Me*" crown constituting another "useless" appeal), represents a 'caution', a warning, to others. Sounded at the end of the volume's first section, this warning applies not only to the young generation such as the speaker of 'Allotments', but also to the subsequent personae who struggle to affirm their sensual appetites.

It is interesting to note that 'A Proper Caution' is the only complete poem in the first and second sections of *The Loiners* to be omitted from the *Selected Poems* (minor parts of 'The White Queen' sequence are also dropped). This decision may have been made because the relationship of the poem to those around it is rather obscure and laboured. Certainly 'Doodlebugs', which replaces 'A Proper Caution' in *Selected Poems*, provides a more overt and suggestive bridge between the 'Leeds' and 'African' poems.

While 'A Proper Caution' considers loss of sexual energy 'Doodlebugs', as the title suggests, meditates on its explosive potential. The focus upon boyhood is familiar and the poem's concerns overlap with those of the other 'childhood poems'. The subject of the poem, secret classroom doodles of genitalia and their subsequent concealment within 'decent' images, is used by Harrison as a neat device to explore unconscious associations between sex and culture. Again innocuous, childish images, such as "Caspar the friendly ghost" (*Selected Poems*, p.20), here undergo grim transformations;

Even the Vicar teaching Classics knows  
how the doodled prepuce finishes as man...  
Caspar the friendly ghost or Ku-Klux-Klan,  
and sees stiff phalluses in lynched negroes... (*Selected Poems*, p.20)

An implication of the title is that these doodles resemble unexploded bombs in so far as their symbolic import is priming the schoolboys for later action: the phallic "doodled prepuce" will in this important sense "finish as man". The references to slavery and racism are not arbitrary. They inform the poem's final image of Africa;

Though breasts become sombreros, groins goatees,  
the beard of Conrad, or the King of Spain,  
bosoms bikes or spectacles, vaginas psis,  
they make some fannies Africa, and here it's plain,  
though I wonder if the Vicar ever sees,  
those landmass doodles show a boy's true bent  
for adult exploration, the slow discovery  
of cunt as coastline, then as continent. (*Selected Poems*, p.20)

As an urge which gravitates towards vital consummation with the Unknown, these lines celebrate the boys' desire to penetrate 'the dark continent' of female sexuality. Yet this tone, and the metaphor of discovery, is profoundly qualified by the associations of colonial exploitation developed earlier in the poem, notably in the line "the beard of Conrad, or the King of Spain". (These two



allusions are particularly suggestive in the wider context of *The Loiners* sequence, pointing towards two later poems, 'The Heart of Darkness' and 'The Nuptial Torches'.) The taboo word "cunt" contains, and highlights, this thematic conflict. While its use constitutes a rebellious, determined breaking of the sexually repressive linguistic taboo, it also inescapably carries patriarchal connotations of the aggressive male urge to dominate the female.

Similar tensions are present within the image of Africa. On one level the image implies a fetishistic reduction of the continent yet, equally, Africa represents a compellingly attractive and unconfined expanse which stretches out beyond the boys' comprehension. This is not only the realm of femaleness but also of the boys' own powerful, emerging sexuality which "the Vicar", as a guardian of authoritarian culture, would prefer to keep repressed and fenced-off as an 'alien' land. The vicar is symbolically deceived and thwarted, however, by the anarchic medium of the doodle. The poem recognises that the effects of the energy released by the bomb-like doodles may be harmful as well as beneficial but, despite these reservations, the dominant tone of these final lines remains celebratory. By contrast, the depictions of colonial psychology in the African poems of Part Two foreground the baleful side of this equation. The tension, however, persists.

## CHAPTER TWO

A combination of the geographical shift from Leeds to Africa and the vigorous adoption of the dramatic monologue form creates the superficial impression of a decisively fresh start at the beginning of Part Two. Indeed the African setting does add an important new dimension and inflection to the Loiners' struggle with their native cultural inheritance. Still, this should not obscure the fact that the kinds of thematic conflict and ambivalence observed in the opening section continue to permeate the verse. In many respects the White Queen and the P.W.D. Man are, like Peanuts Joe, rebellious, anti-authoritarian Loiners. In Africa, however, their dissident status is seemingly contradicted by the wider identity which they acquire as symbolic representatives of British colonial power and culture (and, further, of White European culture).

### **i. Kipling and the P.W.D. Man**

On one hand, therefore, the P.W.D. Man rejects with vulgar relish the repressive asceticism of Christianity and Islam;

...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 wank. (p.55)

His own sexual encounters with African women, though, reproduce the colonial terms of exploitation and conform with the colonial reduction of the Africans, in this instance to exotic sex-aids;

Here I'm getting younger and I don't need monkey glands,  
Just a bit of money and a pair of young, black hands. (p.52)

It is this insistent awareness of implicit political metaphor which most sharply distinguishes the P.W.D. Man poems from their literary source, which is a specific one, Kipling's *Barrack-Room Ballads*; in particular, the best known of



these ballads, 'Mandalay'. Harrison's complex response to 'Mandalay' provides a useful literary and historical context in which to approach the paradoxes and conflicts which pervade the African poems.

There are striking thematic as well as formal traces of 'Mandalay' in the P.W.D. Man poems. The most immediately apparent debt, however, is metrical. Harrison's irregular line consistently retains an echo of the rhythm of Kipling's unusual tetrameter couplets. Fourteen or fifteen syllables long, the tetrameters of 'Mandalay' usually comprise an opening iamb or anapaest followed by three paeonic feet in which the stress falls on the fourth syllable, as here:

For the wind is in the palm-trees, and the temple-bells they say

'Come you back, you British soldier; come you back to Mandalay!<sup>1</sup>

Harrison diverges greatly from this strict stress pattern, and the line-length of the P.W.D. Man poems ranges from ten to sixteen syllables. The pronounced medial caesuras remain, however, a feature which helps to sustain the metrical resemblance. It may be no accident that the couplet which most closely reproduces the characteristic rhythm of 'Mandalay' occurs near the end of 'The Death of the P.W.D. Man' and contains an implicit reference to the demise of the British Empire (on which it was said the sun never set). The memorable refrain from the chorus of 'Mandalay' describes a dawn;

On the road to Mandalay,  
Where the flyin'-fishes play,  
An' the dawn comes up like thunder outer China 'crost the Bay!<sup>2</sup>

Harrison's ironic epitaph for the Empire almost duplicates this metre but contains an opposing image of sunset;

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<sup>1</sup>Rudyard Kipling, *The Complete Barrack-Room Ballads of Rudyard Kipling*, ed. Charles Carrington (London: Methuen, 1973) 64.

<sup>2</sup>Kipling 64.

I'm a sort of setting sun, all my light drawn in to shed  
Only darkness on the living, only darkness on the dead. (p.58)

The P.W.D. Man poems, highly conscious of their political and historical context, invite us to read Kipling's poem from a similarly wide perspective. Yet, like the P.W.D. Man, the speaker of 'Mandalay' cannot be viewed simply as an agent of empire. As working-class colonists both of them are, like the native populations, subordinate and subject to the governing British hierarchy. Furthermore both voice similar expressions of dissent against the dominant authoritarian culture. The *Barrack-Room Ballads* describe the experience of colonialism largely from the point of view of the lower ranking soldier. The poems were hugely popular and 'Mandalay', like most of the ballads, is written in Cockney dialect. Whereas Kipling skilfully manipulates the dialect to fit the metre, however, Harrison's departure from the regular tempo of 'Mandalay' is in favour of stronger conversational rhythms which emphasise the northern working-class idioms of his verse. Partly as a result of this, the voice of the P.W.D. Man is more vigorous and abrasive. 'Mandalay' moves between two major tonal keys; languid nostalgia for the East and sullen dissatisfaction with the present in England. Harrison repeats some of the specific protestations of disaffection found in 'Mandalay' but, as rehearsed by the P.W.D. Man, they acquire a new tone of aggressively subversive defiance. The lines quoted earlier from 'The Death of the P.W.D. Man', which contrast "the bottle to the Christians' Cross", are an interesting example. They may have been suggested by two passages from 'Mandalay' which they appear to conflate. Firstly, this couplet from the final verse;

Ship me somewheres east of Suez, where the best is like the worst,  
Where there aren't no Ten Commandments an' a man can raise a thirst.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Kipling 66.



The phrase "where the best is like the worst" expresses a desire to escape the rigid hierarchies of Victorian society, and "Ten Commandments" stresses the authoritarianism of Christianity. The opposition here between submissive, spiritual devotion and sensual enjoyment ("raise a thirst"), also underlies the earlier passage where the speaker recalls first seeing his "Burma girl"

...a-wastin' Christian kisses on an 'eathen idol's foot:  
Bloomin' idol made o' mud—  
Wot they called the Great Gawd Budd—  
Plucky lot she cared for idols when I kissed 'er where she stud!<sup>4</sup>

Harrison, alluding to Islamic prayer, also uses prostration as a conspicuous symbol of religious submission, and makes explicit the authoritarian alignment of the separate faiths against the senses, which is implied in 'Mandalay'. (The phrase "Christian kisses" is a humorous impiety; it is not Christianity that the soldier converts the native girl to in the last line.) The P.W.D. Man's rejection of austere other-worldliness is blunt and contemptuous and, typically, his endorsement of earthy physical pleasure is provocative;

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 wank. (pp.54-5)

These defiant lines reverberate ironically through a later passage, however, which contains a flash-back to Africa and is the closest that the P.W.D. Man approaches to the tone of nostalgia which dominates 'Mandalay'. Again Harrison's imagery may have been prompted by specific details in Kipling's poem:

When the mist was in the rice fields an' the sun was droppin' slow,

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<sup>4</sup>Kipling 65.

She'd git 'er little banjo an' she'd sing 'Kulla-lo-lo!'  
With 'er arm upon my shoulder an' 'er cheek agin my cheek  
We useter watch the steamers an' the hathis pilin' teak...

But that's all shove be'ind me – long ago an' fur away...<sup>5</sup>

Harrison transforms grotesquely the soldier's sentimental and seemingly innocuous reminiscence, changing the form of the female musical performance from song to dance and expressing overtly the tacit associations between music, rhythm and sexuality present in 'Mandalay'. The coy sexual frisson of "cheek agin my cheek" is exploded. Also, as the African memory is provoked by the P.W.D. Man's reflections upon his own decay and decline, the role of the dance as a symbol of life and vitality is thrown into sharper relief. Travelling northwards from London to Leeds, and observing a series of abandoned railway stations, the P.W.D. Man notes wryly that weeds are

Springing up wherever life is teetering on the brink  
Like pensioned-off yours truly's pickled in his drink.  
With a bit of help off Bitter I can do it on my own.  
They can stuff their pink *Somalgins* and their *Phenobarbitone*,  
O those lovely bubs that almost touched black chin and shiny knees,  
Leaping up and down to drumming like hoop-jumping Pekinese!  
Ay, it's a pity all that's over. From now on every night  
It's *Whatsoever Thy Hand Findeth To Do, Do It With Thy Might*. (p.56)

A comparison between these lines and the earlier imagery of "the bottle" versus "the Cross" and "a woman" versus "a wank" suggests how, in his own terms, the P.W.D. Man is diminished on his return to England. He manages to retain an anti-authoritarian posture, dismissing on this occasion the medical authorities, rejecting their pain-killing drugs in favour of his own choice, "Bitter". In contrast to the earlier passage, however, "the bottle" no longer represents an invigorating affirmation of sensual pleasure. It is instead a source of insensibility. His beer takes on the properties of formaldehyde. The careful

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<sup>5</sup>Kipling 65.



and slightly awkward syntax of "yours truly's", as opposed to 'yours truly', insists on the precise emphasis, that what is "pickled in his drink" is his life. Similarly, the show of bravado as he resigns himself to a future of celibacy cannot completely obscure the curious logic of his own earlier comparison in which "a woman" corresponded to "living" whereas "a wank" appeared, like the despised "heavens" of his religious targets, to be once removed from life.

The enervation which the P.W.D. Man experiences on his return to England parallels the condition of the soldier in 'Mandalay'. The thematic continuity which links the poems most centrally and pervasively is the opposition established by both poets between the culture of the colonizing country, Britain, which is presented as diseased and exhausted, and the perceived vitality of the colonized cultures. The opposition is expressed in various ways but the most significant contrast is sexual. In 'Mandalay' the soldier compares English women unfavourably to his "Burma girl";

I am sick o' wastin' leather on these gritty pavin'-stones,  
An' the blasted Henglish drizzle wakes the fever in my bones;  
Tho' I walks with fifty 'ousemaids outer Chelsea to the Strand,  
An they talks a lot o' lovin', but wot do they understand?  
    Beefy face an' grubby 'and –  
    Law! Wot do they understand?  
    I've a neater, sweeter maiden in a cleaner, greener land!<sup>6</sup>

The unyielding hardness ("gritty pavin' stones") of the urban environment and the sobering dreariness of the climate informs both the description of the housemaids and the repeated rhetorical question, "Wot do they understand?". This repetition insists on the presence of a cultural inadequacy which remains unspecified but is implicitly sexual. Harrison, making a similar comparison in 'The Songs of the P.W.D. Man', relies on ribald sexual metaphor;

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<sup>6</sup>Kipling 66.

...those furry little groins  
 I grope for through strange garments smelling of dye-pits  
 As I graze my grizzly whiskers on those black, blancmangy tits...  
 They all know old Roller Coaster. And, oh dear, ugh!  
 To think I ever nuzzled on a poor white woman's dug,  
 Pale, collapsed and shrivelled like a week-old mushroom swept  
 Up at Kirkgate City Markets. Jesus bleeding wept!  
 Back to sporting, smoky Yorkshire! I dread retirement age... (pp.51-2)

Throughout both P.W.D. Man poems Harrison expands extravagantly upon Kipling's tentative employment of food imagery. The juxtaposition between the unpalatable "beefy face" and the "sweeter maiden" is translated here to the "week-old mushroom" and the 'sweeter' "blancmangy tits". The revulsion expressed by both personae symbolises their discontent with the home culture, and Harrison develops this theme by compounding his sexual imagery with connotations of nurturing. The language of the line, "To think I ever nuzzled on a poor white woman's dug", evokes breast-feeding and suggests the notion of 'the Mother Country' (which surfaces later in 'The Death of the P.W.D. Man'; "Britannia, Old Mother Riley, bending down to prey" (p.55)). Yet the "white woman's dug" and, by extension, British, European, 'white' culture, is an impoverished and impoverishing source of nourishment, "pale, collapsed and shrivelled". These connotations also affect our reading of the opposing image: "I graze my grizzly whiskers on those black, blancmangy tits" is not simply a brazen declaration of sensual celebration and, therefore, of cultural rebellion. Paradoxically, the colonist approaches the native women (and the native culture), from a position of weakness rather than strength. Emotionally, the P.W.D. Man bears the aspect of an infant, still seeking a form of existential sustenance which will compensate for his inherited deficiency or deprivation. This theme, of the debilitated colonizers' longing for recovery and revival within the colonies, accounts for the otherwise surprising and prominent reference to illness in the final chorus of 'Mandalay';



On the road to Mandalay,  
Where the old Flotilla lay,  
With our sick beneath the awnings when we went to Mandalay!  
O the road to Mandalay,  
Where the flyin'-fishes play,  
An' the dawn comes up like thunder outer China 'crost the Bay!<sup>7</sup>

The dynamic, 'thunderous' dawn of the chorus's refrain is imbued with this desire for renewal, and the image of the "flyin'-fishes" produces an evocation of virility which is more striking in these closing lines because of the contrast with the dormancy of "the old Flotilla" and the languishing "sick beneath the awnings".

The word "play", however, like "neater, sweeter maiden", exposes an element of childishness which informs the nostalgic escapism characteristic of the poem. The "cleaner, greener land" resembles in some respects an ideal playground where the speaker is not only freed from authoritarian religion but evades all responsibility. While he is attracted to the chorus' images of natural vigour, his imagination is beguiled by scenes of languorous ease;

For the temple-bells are callin', an' it's there that I would be –  
By the Old Moulmein Pagoda, looking lazy at the sea...<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, the P.W.D Man's attempts to satiate his existential appetite are reminiscent of the feeding behaviour of a spoilt child. The unwholesome self-indulgence which characterizes his sexual diet is highlighted by images of confectionery. As well as "blancmangy tits", there is the following description;

Those colonial D.O.'s  
Knew what they were up to when they upped and chose  
These slender, tall Fulanis like Rowntrees coffee creams  
To keep in wifeless villas. No Boy Scout's fleapit dreams

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<sup>7</sup>Kipling 66.

<sup>8</sup>Kipling 66.

Of bedding Brigitte Bardot could ever better these. (p.50)

The detail "wifeless villas" again signals male flight from responsibility, and the comparison with a "Boy Scout's fleapit dreams" reflects the immaturity of the P.W.D. Man's own sexual imagination.

In fact the opposition which pervades the adolescent consciousness in 'Doodlebugs', between sexual celebration and sexual oppression, is also central to 'Mandalay' and the P.W.D. Man poems. (As I mentioned earlier, this tension continues in Harrison's African poems, although the theme of sexuality as a means of oppression is most prominent.) The undercurrent of awe present in the final image of 'Doodlebugs', which is inspired by the uncharted immensities of Africa, femaleness and sexuality, is also discernible in 'Mandalay'. The soldier paints an intimate, exotic scene, looking across the bay at sunset with the native girl's "arm upon my shoulder an' 'er cheek agin' my cheek", watching

Elephints a-pilin' teak  
In the sludgy, sjudgy creek,  
Where the silence 'ung that 'eavy you was 'arf afraid to speak!<sup>9</sup>

The soldier's feeling of awe is stimulated as much by the woman at his side as by the foreign landscape. In contrast, however, to the active desire for exploration and discovery, which is the subject of 'Doodlebugs', the soldier's response appears passive, almost paralysed. The portrait of the scene is paradoxical in so far as the onomatopoeic invention of "sjudgy" seems to contradict the emphasis on "silence" in the final line. The strikingly unromantic "sludgy, sjudgy creek" is imbued with connotations both of earthy fecundity and pollution. The swift transition from this image of corporeality to the spiritual "silence" of the next line is suggestive but ambiguous. The

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<sup>9</sup>Kipling 65.



soldier's passivity could be interpreted as indicating either sexual inhibition or sexual wonder. Similarly the extent to which the silence is not general but, perhaps, between the woman and himself, suggests the idea of an imposing tension or distance between the couple and, equally, the notion of an ineffable communion. Clearly these readings are not incompatible.

The final image of 'Doodlebugs', of a journey into a vast, unknown continent—which is Africa, femaleness and sexuality—is, in part, an image of risk. Exploration, especially of such a potent, alluring environment, involves the threat of a loss of security, a loss of mastery. Awe implicitly contains such a loss. Yet the expressions of awe in 'Mandalay' are equivocal. They form part of the soldier's nostalgic reconstruction of the past. In fact the determining impulse in the poem is manipulative. The objects of desire, the "Burma girl" and the East, are inscribed by the soldier in terms which satisfy his own emotional needs. These needs, however, are regressive. This is exposed most clearly in the reductive description, which possesses a pathetic nursery-rhyme quality; "I've a neater, sweeter maiden in a cleaner, greener land". These idealizations diminish the woman and the landscape, neutralizing any threat posed by the potentially disturbing facts of their actual force and Otherness. The woman in particular is tightly confined by the epithets "neater, sweeter". Her sexuality is largely suppressed throughout the poem. The P.W.D. Man, on the other hand, reduces the African women he encounters to sex-objects. Harrison insists on the link between this psychology of reduction and the colonial enterprise. One way in which this is highlighted is through a series of similes in which the womens' body-parts are likened to commodities. For example;

All's bare but for ju-jus and, where it parts, a thigh  
Sidles through the opening with a bloom like purple grapes... (p.50)

and

No! I think they're very beautiful, although their hair's  
A bit off-putting, being rough like panscrub wires,  
But bums like melons, matey, lips like lorry tyres. (p.51)

Neither the P.W.D. Man nor the speaker of 'Mandalay' explore or discover new lands in the sense expressed in 'Doodlebugs'. Ideologically, despite their limited cultural rebellions, they stay at home. Two earlier commodity similes contain specific references to Yorkshire, establishing in the opening lines of 'The Songs of the P.W.D. Man' the inflexible, parochial vision which he, the Public Works man, like the British Empire, imposes upon Africa. Fulani women are compared to the "coffee-creams" (p.50) of the York-based confectioners Rowntrees and, a few lines later, he alludes to the semi-precious stones mined in north-east Yorkshire, "Whitby jet". He describes "girls like black Bathshebas";

Black as tar-macadam, skin shining when it's wet,  
From washing or from kissing like polished Whitby jet. (p.50)

The "tar-macadam" simile reminds us of the P.W.D. Man's actual occupation, which appears to be road construction. His work is mentioned only once in the poems when he boasts of "Laying roads and ladies up as far as Kano town" (p.51). The pun on "laying" exposes this work as an act of political domination. The roads announce the arrival of western civilisation and in this respect the P.W.D. Man is a symbolic outrider for the Empire, carrying to the native inhabitants an authoritarian, commercial reductivism and venereal disease.

At the same time, as the chorus of 'The Death of the P.W.D. Man' makes clear, the P.W.D. Man is himself consumed by the same cultural malady, which he diagnoses as "*British Isles Disease!*";



*My belly's like a blow-up globe all blotched with Empire red.  
Chancres, chancres, Shetlands, spots, boils, Hebrides,  
Atlasitis, atlasitis, British Isles Disease! (p.55)*

There is an irony in the opening paragraph of 'The Death of the P.W.D. Man' which is reminiscent of 'Thomas Campey...' as the P.W.D. Man registers pride (albeit "dismal pride") at the enduring presence in Africa of Yorkshire's industrial contribution to the Empire;

...fine, windborne sand and downpours can't obliterate  
BLAKEBOROUGH'S (BRIGHOUSE) from the iron hydrant grate  
Outside the Residence, and I've a sense of dismal pride  
Seeing Yorkshire linger where ten Governors have died.  
The same as in Nigeria, though the weather rots the cross,  
There's HUNSLET (LEEDS) in iron on an engine up at Jos. (p.54)

The abiding, inhuman "iron" legacy of Yorkshire's industrial past is contrasted with the graves and the lives of individual, former colonists, which are being obliterated and lost, like

...Leeds medic, Rothery Adgie, dead at twenty-six,  
His barely legible wooden cross a bundle of split sticks. (p.54)

whose name haunts the P.W.D. Man in the chorus of 'The Death of the P.W.D. Man'. Harrison develops the imagery of iron into another symbol of Britain's historical and cultural legacy. Church bells are described as "swung iron against iron" (p.54). The P.W.D. Man's feeling of "dismal pride" in the durability of Yorkshire's industrial products is ironic as this culture and history of "iron" is part of his inherited "*British Isles Disease*", which is shortly to obliterate him. The ominous lines, at the end of the poem's first section, clinch this irony;

...it's a bottle that I'm needing as I get back to the boat  
With a lump like coal or iron sticking in my throat.  
Though I take several bottles, though I hawk like hell and cough,  
It stays fixed like a lodestone Northwards as the boat casts off. (p.55)

The failure of the P.W.D. Man's personal symbol of cultural rebellion, "the bottle", to dislodge the pathological lump in his throat, reflects his inability to escape from this cultural inheritance (and the superficiality of his attempt to do so). This idea is reinforced by the image of the lodestone and the puns on "fixed". A lodestone is a naturally magnetic iron oxide and so "fixed", as well as bearing the meanings of 'wedged' and 'immovable', also denotes the permanent position of the compass needle, pointing north. The combination of this image of compelling magnetic attraction with the image of disease shrouds the P.W.D. Man's departure for Britain, appropriately, in an air of doomed inevitability.

The reference to the lodestone also contains wider historical associations with the origins both of modern navigational technology and (in the context of the poem's themes), modern maritime exploration and imperialism. These connotations are apposite because, on one level, the homecoming of the P.W.D. Man symbolises the historical contraction of the Empire back to the confines of the British islands themselves. The actual death of the P.W.D. Man parallels, as I suggested earlier, the eclipse of the British Empire ("I'm a sort of setting sun" (p.58)). This corrosion of imperial power is highlighted at the start of the poem's second section as the earlier 'iron' images of industrial strength and durability give way to a depiction of inertia and obsolescence in a landscape which is "rusting up";

Sunday Scotsman Northwards, autumn trees all rusting up;  
My fifth *Light Ale* is swashing in its BR plastic cup.  
Coming back to England; there's no worse way than this  
Railroad North from London up to *Worstedopolis*.  
Britannia, Old Mother Riley, bending down to pray,  
The railway line's the X-Ray of her twisted vertebrae.  
I'm watching England rolling by; here a startled grouse  
Shoots out from a siding, and there Sabbath-idle ploughs  
Clogged in soggy furrows are seizing up with rain.



Life's either still or scurrying away from the train. (p.55)

In this landscape even the symbols of potential new growth and fertility, the "Sabbath-idle ploughs", are decaying in waterlogged fields. The personification of Britain again stresses the legacy of nineteenth century industrialization, the Victorian railway lines pictured as the diseased backbone of the modern nation. This motif recalls 'Thomas Campey...', as does the posture of genuflexion; the country is bent physically by the railway lines and subjugated ideologically by an authoritarian religion. The notion of internal domination and defeat is reinforced by the division insisted upon between the metropolis, London, and the North of England, which is characterised in terms of its political subjection to the capital as "*Worstedopolis*". Harrison is precise about his geographical focus of attention. The magnetic attraction which began as vaguely "Northwards" closes in upon Yorkshire;

The rot sets in at Retford and the stations beyond;  
Coffles of coupled rusty coaltrucks chalkmarked COND. (p.56)

Entering this industrial graveyard, the train carrying the P.W.D. Man, 'The Flying Scotsman', appears an incongruous anachronism. The train's status as a symbol of a dying culture is underlined in the final image of the stanza where "Life" is presented as "scurrying away from the train" as if in fear of contamination. The P.W.D. Man, of course, shares this status. He is a carrier of "*British Isles Disease*", and the same conceit is used later in the poem after he observes his ghost-like reflection in the train window;

Night behind the window. My coaster's tan gone deathly pale.  
It's *me!* It's *me* the fauna's fleeing... (pp.56-7)

The line just quoted, "Coffles of coupled, rusty coaltrucks chalkmarked COND.", occupies a pivotal position in 'The Death of the P.W.D. Man'. The image becomes an important echo in the poem's final couplet, and it also looks back ironically at the earlier use of 'coffle';



Ozanne, D.O. Blackwater Fever. FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH.  
A commissioner, they say, who mustered his last breath  
And went on chanting until he croaked the same damn thing:  
*A coffle of fourteen asses bound for Sansanding!* (p.54)

Part of the irony derives from the obsolescence of the word itself. 'Coffle', like the "rusty coaltrucks", might be seen to be "chalkmarked COND"; that is, it is scrapped and discredited. The word is a product of the British Empire, meaning "a train of men or beasts fastened together, specifically a gang of slaves fastened together", (O.E.D.). The use of 'coffle' in the modern context, therefore, continues the description of the North of England as politically subject and defeated, but also recalls the role of the derelict coaltrucks within the imperial system. "COND", of course, is an abbreviation of 'condemned', and clearly this label expresses a moral judgement, as well as signalling imminent physical oblivion. The poem in fact closes on a repetition of this pun. The P.W.D. Man, and the empire which he becomes increasingly emblematic of, are the final objects of condemnation;

Life the bright compartment between dark cattle trucks  
Concertinaed in the crush like a bug between two books.  
Night and silence, and the Scotsman rushing, second  
Coupled to anxious, anxious SEcond...COND...COND...COND... (p.58)

The implied image in the first two lines of this quotation is of a train crash. This is the dreaded train crash which obsesses the P.W.D. Man in the chorus and symbolises his death; "*Anxious, anxious, anxious, anxious, perhaps the train'll crash*" (p.55). Throughout the poem the fear of death is registered in terms which stress anxiety not about the loss of being as such, but about the loss of mastery and dominance. Death is perceived as a defeat which renders an individual worthless, "a bug between two books" or commercial "cattle" being transported. Death and Time appear to the P.W.D. Man's imagination as



authoritarian colonizers, reducing the status of their human conquests to commodities, or less. Death is the ultimate imperialist;

*Veni, vidi, vici*, Death's cackling in my ear.

And there he is a Caesar with an earth-caked Roman spear. (p.56)

The allusion to the Roman Empire's colonization of Britain ironically observes the transience of empire but also, more radically, the personification of Death insists upon the immutable boundaries which confine human power and agency. The final image of time as an inexorable concatenation, "second/ Coupled to anxious, anxious SEcond", is again an image of constraint. The echo of "Coffles of coupled, rusty coaltrucks" (and the evocation of "*a coffle of fourteen asses*" by the phrase "dark cattle trucks"), produces another grim, but levelling imperial conceit: we are all equally subject within one universal coffle, bound together by the chain of time.

For the P.W.D. Man's authoritarian psychology, therefore, fear of death involves a fear of losing control and mastery. In the poem's penultimate stanza this anxiety is projected in terms of the European imperialists' dread of a native uprising. The P.W.D. Man's embattled consciousness connects the phrase 'heart seizure' with violent connotations of a black 'seizure' of power. Blackness signifies both the African and the Void in the white male colonists' role-reversal nightmare where the emperor is black;

Nay! Come on, Julius Seizure, you black, buck bastard come.

I can hear those muffled heartbeats like a Yoruba drum.

And see the curving shadow of the sinister drumstick,

A bit of whittling that depicts an old man's drooping prick,

Poised above the tautened heart, on the point of being played,

Just once, just once, and then I join the goners' masquerade. (p.57)

The nightmarish quality of the passage is reinforced by the surreal image of the "tautened heart" as a drum. The heart appears detached from the body, exposed and vulnerable to "the sinister drumstick". "Curving shadow" evokes



the sickle of the conventional personification of Death, the Grim Reaper, but Harrison transforms the drumstick into a derisive symbol of impotence and moribund authority, the "old man's drooping prick". The image of the drum derives from the poem's epigraph, an Abakua proverb which has been translated as "the goat who breaks the drum pays with his own skin"<sup>10</sup>. The implication of the proverb in relation to the destruction and cultural devastation wrought by the British Empire is clear. The epigraph forges a link between the nation's imperial past, the current death-throes of the Empire (symbolised by the P.W.D. Man), and the depiction of Britain's internal division and decay, in a way which is reminiscent of the prophetic sentiments of 'Distant Ophir' (from the 'Travesties' section of 'The White Queen' sequence), which begins;

'Westerners who laid the Sun's fowl low,  
the flocks of Apollo, now stand and hear  
the dreadful sufferings you must undergo...' (p.31)

In a sense there are two 'deaths' of the P.W.D. Man. The contrast between this highly metaphoric, symbolic demise on board The Flying Scotsman and the alternative 'death' which the persona imagines for himself at the close of 'The Songs of the P.W.D. Man' provides another illustration of Harrison's ambivalent attitude towards the old Loiner;

As kids when we came croppers, there were always some old dears  
Who'd come and pick us up and wipe off blood and tears,  
And who'd always use the same daft words as they tried to console,  
Pointing to cobble, path or flagstone: *Look at the hole*  
*You've made falling*. I want a voice with that soft tone,  
Disembodied Yorkshire like my mother's on the phone,  
As the cook puts down some flowers and the small boy scrapes the spade,  
To speak as my epitaph: *Look at the hole he's made*. (p.53)

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<sup>10</sup>Quoted in Romana Huk, 'The Leeds Renaissance', *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies 1: Tony Harrison*, ed. Neil Astley (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991) 81.



The gentle tone of this passage distinguishes it from the rest of the P.W.D. Man poems. The image of the child falling over is, like the train crash, an image of lost control. The invocation of childhood, however, frees the P.W.D. Man from the authoritarian obligation to dominate and enables him to accept his own vulnerability in the face of death and acknowledge his need for consolation. This attitude is juxtaposed with the macho reductivism of the immediately preceding lines in which the P.W.D. Man imagines another fatal crash, a car crash. The effect of this juxtaposition is to expose the harshness of the description of the crash as an attempt to avoid serious contemplation of mortality: death occurs and "that's that";

Smash turned into landscape, ambulance, that's that,  
A white corpse starkers like a suddenly skinned cat. (p.53)

The repugnant simile of the "skinned cat" recalls the later "bug between two books". However in the 'childhood' passage death is not perceived as extinguishing human value. Individual worth is preserved by the epitaph. The anonymous Yorkshire voice insists on the P.W.D. Man's uniqueness. His death has created a permanent vacuum: *"Look at the hole he's made"*.

Yet the epitaph, and the passage as a whole, is ambiguous. The P.W.D. Man's retreat to a pre-lapsarian "cleaner, greener land" of childhood has the consequence of circumventing, at the point of 'death', issues of responsibility. Harrison disallows this evasion through the pointed pun on "falling" which focuses, precisely, upon these issues by alluding to the myth of the Fall. Even without this pun the epitaph, as a retrospective comment on the P.W.D. Man's life, invites negative interpretations. The paradox contained in the epitaph, of constructing an absence, implies a worse than unproductive life. The imagery of gaps, silences voids and absences developed in 'The White Queen' sequence is used there to refer to an existential loss of being. In the



context of the African poems, therefore, the epitaph can also be read as a verdict on what the P.W.D. Man became, not in death, but in life: "*Look at the hole he's made*".

Opposing this verdict is the theme of the P.W.D. Man as a rebellious Loiner, snatching life from the hostile and barren environment of Leeds which, like the malignant urban landscape described in 'Allotments', represents a cultural necropolis. The imagery of weeds, which appears in both P.W.D. Man poems, illuminates this theme. Like the weeds that still manage to flourish amid the industrial dereliction depicted in 'The Death of the P.W.D. Man', "springing up wherever life is teetering on the brink" (p.56), the P.W.D. Man's defiant claim to life refuses to be "put down" by the destructive efforts of authority;

I used to cackle at that spraycart trying to put down  
That grass and them tansies that grew all over town.  
Death's like the Corporation for old men back in Leeds,  
Shooting out its poisons and choking off the weeds.  
But I'm like them tansies or a stick cut in the bush  
And shoved in for a beanpole that suddenly grows lush  
With new leafage before the garden lad's got round  
To plucking the beans off and digging up the ground.  
Yes, better to put the foot down, go fast, accelerate,  
Than shrivel on your arses, mope and squawk and wait  
For Death... (p.52)

The perceived imminence of death is used by the P.W.D. Man to justify his life-style of rampant self-gratification. The simile of the "stick cut in the bush", which combines suggestions of dislocation and adaptation, even resurrection (but also the bleak prospect of looming elimination), is primarily another image of rebellion. The severed "stick" ignores its assigned role of inert, utilitarian "beanpole" and, like the P.W.D. Man, seeks to satisfy its own urgent needs and impulses. In both poems weeds are admired for their resilience, and the specific reference to the tansy emphasises this characteristic, 'tansy' deriving



from the ancient Greek word for 'immortality', "the name probably referring to the long persistence of the flowers", (O.E.D.).

At the same time the imagery of weeds constitutes another expression of the theme of "specious regeneration". Although the weeds' survival is celebrated they proliferate in a landscape of neglect and disintegration and their prevalence signifies a general collapse and disorder;

The rot sets in at Retford and the stations beyond;  
Coffles of coupled, rusty coaltrucks chalkmarked COND.  
But at each abandoned station shunned like a suicide  
There's that loveliest of flourishers, the purple *London Pride*.  
Though why the 'proud' metropolis should monopolise weeds  
Beats me, when we've got millions more all over mucky Leeds,  
Springing up wherever life is teetering on the brink  
Like pensioned-off yours truly's pickled in his drink. (p.56)

The name of the flourishing, regal-coloured "purple *London Pride*" is ironic in a landscape which discloses not the pride but the fall of London's empire. The emphasis in 'The Songs of the P.W.D. Man' on weeds as symbols of life grasped against the odds is qualified here by the perception of them as harbingers of death.

## **ii. Weeds and White Roses: humour, sex and petrification**

These conflicting connotations inform our reading of the folk poem, echoed in the "weeds/Leeds" rhyme above, which constitutes one of the two epigraphs of *The Loiners*;

There was a young man of Leeds  
Who swallowed a packet of seeds.  
A pure white rose grew out of his nose  
And his arse was covered with weeds.

Traditional. (p.7)

The limerick is a richly suggestive epigraph to the volume, and apt not least because of its exclusive focus upon male experience. The "young man of



Leeds" represents not only Harrison himself but all of the male Loiners. The poet-persona of Tony Harrison is connected with all the other male personae because they have each been fed from the same "packet of seeds"; that is, they have internalised a common cultural and historical inheritance. As a result they have each suffered the same contrary and problematic harvest, which is characterised by the dichotomy between the weeds and the rose. The rose, which grows out of the head, signifies the intellect and the conscious mind. It also alludes to a specific symbol of authority, the White Rose of Yorkshire. Further, "pure white" evokes connotations of a wider authoritarian context; of Christian iconography, where whiteness indicates moral purity, and of the 'white' imperialism of the West with its underpinning notions of racial purity and racial superiority. The weeds represent, on the level of political metaphor, the subjugated and suppressed, and are also associated with the body, the unconscious, and sexuality. However the anal rather than genital imagery, the vulgar diction of "arse", and the scatological implications of the image, suggest sexual repression and disgust. The epigraph glosses the sexual pun on 'loins' in *The Loiners*. The Loiners of the volume are those whose loins are metaphorically "covered with weeds"; that is, whose rank cultural inheritance has bequeathed them a legacy of adulterated sexuality and existential pollution. They are either politically powerless or subordinate. Those personae in Part Three who are not natives of Leeds are still 'Loiners' in this sense.

In its role as an epigraph to *The Loiners*, therefore, the limerick is transformed into—or reveals itself as—a pointed epigram which conflates ideological, sexual and historical issues. Such compression, of course, permeates the volume, as Harrison has emphasised;

To go back again to *The Loiners*, which dealt with sex and history: the intimacies of the private life are a kind of earthing area for the lightning of history and of political struggles. Separating those issues is done by people



who need to separate those issues, people who find culture more comfortable if it is ahistorical and apolitical, and I don't believe it can be.<sup>11</sup>

The symbolism of the weeds and the rose encompasses a disorder which is public and physical as well as psychological and existential. The tone of disgust discernible in the limerick-as-epigraph can be seen as a response to this pervasive disorder and corruption, expressing for Harrison not simply sexual alienation, but a sweeping moral repulsion which, as it encompasses both the private and public realms of experience, appears potentially unremitting and unrelieved.

Yet the comic dimension to the poem resists a passive acceptance of cultural contagion. The bizarre, wittily vulgar imagery undercuts and disrupts the notion of hierarchy implied by the relationship between the 'high' "nose" and the 'low' "arse". The image of the fecund arse parodies the growth of the ethereal, idealized rose, subverting authoritarian ideology by releasing through humour repressed sexual (and political) energies. At this point the connotations of the weeds' stubborn resilience become relevant. The overall result of the serio-comic tonal tension is an irony which is at once bitter and defiant. This tone, as the discussion of the P.W.D. Man poems might suggest, is typical of the volume.

Such irony emerges under conditions of authoritarian subjection and constraint. Harrison, writing in 1969 about the Russian suppression of the 'Prague Spring', considers the subversive role of humour and satire in a context of imperial domination. The occasion is a piece entitled 'The Context' written for the catalogue of an exhibition of work from August 1968 by the Czech cartoonist Jirí Jirásek. It begins;

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<sup>11</sup>Tony Harrison, interview. John Haffenden, 'Interview with Tony Harrison', *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies 1: Tony Harrison*, ed. Neil Astley (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991) 231.



At the very end of his book *On Aggression* Konrad Lorenz allows himself an avowal of optimism, and states that he believes in 'the ultimate victory of Truth'...But Lorenz believes that this truth will emerge not through the 'militant enthusiasms' of aggressive nationalism, but through the 'great and beneficial force of humour'. Almost he implies our survival depends on our taking our humour seriously.

In the Prague of August 1968 he would have seen much to confirm at least this part of his optimism, where an unarmed resistance more unanimous than the world has ever seen took place before the tanks and weapons of the Warsaw Pact troops. 'Force' said Simone Weil, 'is that *x* that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing'. 'We can fight only with words', said the editorial of the special edition of *Literární Listy*, 22nd August, 1968. And it might have added drawings. Argument, reason, humour, reverse the metamorphosis, the petrification that the presence of force imposes. The 'thing' at the point of the gun, speaks, reasons, laughs and is man again.<sup>12</sup>

Typically, for Harrison, the boundaries of the "Context" for the work of art are fluid. Harrison's first focus is not upon political issues of national sovereignty or integrity, or even human rights. He starts from the wider perspective of human social evolution; in particular the threat posed by human urges towards destruction, and the ultimate question of species survival, "our survival". He subtly modifies Lorenz's undefined, capitalised "Truth" to "this truth". It seems that "this truth" refers to an implicit ethical cornerstone which opposes the act of reduction defined in the line quoted from Simone Weil. Lorenz discusses a similar reduction in *On Aggression*;

Every militant ideology in history has propagated the belief that the members of the other party are not quite human and every strategist is intent on preventing any 'fraternization' between soldiers in confronting trenches. Anonymity of the person to be attacked greatly facilitates the releasing of aggressive behaviour.<sup>13</sup>

The opposing "truth" entails the fundamental recognition of mutual humanity. Humour, by insisting on such a recognition, subverts the authoritarian

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<sup>12</sup>Tony Harrison, 'The Context', *72 Drawings by Jirí Jirásek*, exhibition catalogue, catalogue notes by Tony Harrison (Newcastle upon Tyne: Stand, 1969) 8.

<sup>13</sup>Konrad Lorenz, *On Aggression*, trans. Marjorie Latzke (London: Methuen, 1967) 243-44.



"petrification", the denial of human status. However, "the 'thing' at the point of the gun" does not only display this humanity to the aggressor. In the moment of "speaking, reasoning, laughing", as he "reverse(s) the metamorphosis", the victim also reclaims and reaffirms his personal identity as "man again".

Much of the humour of *The Loiners* enacts this implicit rebellion. The adult Loiners are engaged in a struggle against the brutalizing effects of the psychological violence depicted in the childhood poems. For these 'polluted' personae humour becomes an instrument by which they try to sustain their own humanity in the face of the petrifying force of their cultural and historical inheritance. The results of this humour can, however, be double-edged. The P.W.D. Man's vulgar, exuberant comedy proclaims, in itself, his refusal to be reduced to an object like the inanimate "beanpole"; yet his comic vision apprehends African women as commodities. The White Queen's witty sexual jokes often contain the same opposition. Unlike the P.W.D. Man, though, the White Queen is aware of the resulting contradiction: that the act of objectifying the Other necessarily diminishes one's own humanity.

Sexual expression, for the Loiners, involves a parallel contradiction. The childhood poems dramatize the onset of sexual alienation and brutalization. The consequences of this process are first presented at the close of 'Allotments', where the portrayal of the young man, alone, estranged from his sexual partner, and consumed with self-disgust, is the first of a series of recurring images of the male Loiner in anguished isolation. The first three parts of 'Satyrae' (the opening section of 'The White Queen'), describe the same transition from the failure of sexual contact to a desolate retreat into the self; and this regress prefigures the larger movement of 'The White Queen' sequence, which culminates in the moment of utter personal alienation at the close of 'Manica' (Section Four); "The one red thing, I squat and grab/ at myself

like a one-clawed crab" (p.39). In this image of masturbation sexuality appears to be no more than an involuntary reflex and the authoritarian reduction to a "thing" is (temporarily) realised.

### iii. The White Queen: Satyrae (1)

Yet the sophisticated poet-persona, The White Queen, is painfully conscious of the authoritarian pressures which impede and petrify his sexual relationships, and he is preoccupied with the struggle to break free of such impoverishing cultural repression. Even so, as in the P.W.D. Man poems, his own sexual exploitation of the Africans (in this case African males), is a metaphor for colonial domination. While his identification with Queen Victoria in assuming the title of 'The White Queen' is on one level parodic it also reflects his personal sense of complicity with the Empire. The irony of the following quotation, in particular the euphemistic use of "courtiers" (implying prostitutes), is primarily directed against himself;

A radiant white queen  
In sub-Saharan scrub, I hold my court  
On expat pay, my courtiers all bought. (p.20)

Again like the P.W.D. Man, his sexual behaviour confirms his deep internalization of imperial psychology at the same time as it marks him out as a dissident against the authoritarian repression of the body. (As a homosexual, of course, he is even more radically an outsider). He is aware that he finds the sexual violence inherent in his relationships with the African boys erotic; "I sometimes cruise/ For boys the blackness of a two-day bruise" (p.20). Yet, in contrast to the P.W.D. Man, he is not satisfied by these liaisons. Rather he recoils from them, longing for a more mutual exchange of pleasure;

I hang about *The Moonshine* and *West End*,  
Begging for pure sex, one unembarrassed friend  
To share my boredom and my bed—*One masta want*



*One boy—one boy for bed...and like an elephant  
That bungles with its trunk about its cage,  
I make my half-sloshed entrances and rage  
Like any normal lover when I come  
Before I've managed it. Then his thin bum  
That did seem beautiful will seem obscene;  
I'm conscious of the void, the Vaseline,  
Pour shillings in his hands and send him back  
With the driver, ugly, frightened, black,  
Black, black. What's the use? I can't escape  
Our foul conditioning that makes a rape  
Seem natural, if wrong, and love unclean  
Between some ill-fed blackboy and fat queen. (p.21)*

The consensual language of his aspiration—to find a sexually 'liberated' "unembarrassed friend" who will "share" his bed—is, however, exploded by the crude imperial dichotomy, "*One masta want...one boy for bed*". The desire for "pure sex" expresses his futile wish for a relationship 'untainted' by the intrusion of cultural determinants. He quickly realises, "I can't escape/ Our foul conditioning that makes...love unclean". Nor can he evade the material facts of political and economic domination emphasised by the contrast between "ill-fed blackboy and fat queen". This is the sexual reality which earlier, referring to the phrase "my courtiers all bought", he describes as his "compromise/ with commodities and cash" (p.20). Here, though, the juxtaposition of "the void" and the symbolic sexual commodity, "the *Vaseline*", highlights his understanding that such a reduction does not assuage but reinforces his isolation and despair. In this transaction he too is dehumanized and, "like an elephant/ That bungles with its trunk about its cage", remains confined within authoritarian culture.

Still, despite the excruciating failure of this experience, the distinction between "a rape" and the ambiguous, ill-defined "love" survives. Exploiting this distinction, the immediately succeeding lines challenge his anguished assertion that he "can't escape" the imperial "conditioning" which

defines the African as a victim of the European, and so "makes a rape/ Seem natural". Addressing explicitly two of the symbolic custodians of authoritarian culture, "Policeman! Priest!", he presents an example of the "love" he seeks;

Things can be so much better. Once at least  
A million per cent. Policeman! Priest!  
You'll call it filthy, but to me it's love,  
And to him it was. It *was*. O he could move  
Like an oiled (slow-motion) racehorse at its peak,  
Outrageous, and not gentle, tame, or meek—  
O magnificently shameless in his gear,  
He sauntered the flunkied restaurant, queer  
As a clockwork orange and not scared.  
God, I was grateful for the nights we shared.  
My boredom melted like small cubes of ice  
In warm sundowner whiskies. Call it vice;  
Call it obscenity; it's love; so there;  
Call it what you want. *I just don't care.* (pp.21-2)

His argument is not only with the policeman and the priest. The White Queen also conducts a debate with the sixteenth century poet, Sir Thomas Wyatt, whose poem 'They flee from me that sometime did me seek' is echoed in this passage. As with the allusion to 'Mandalay' Harrison's poetry interrogates and subverts the cultural assumptions of the earlier poem;

They flee from me that sometime did me seek  
With naked foot stalking in my chamber.  
I have seen them gentle, tame, and meek  
That now are wild and do not remember  
That sometime they put themselves in danger  
To take bread at my hand; and now they range,  
Busily seeking with a continual change.

Thanked be fortune it hath been otherwise  
Twenty times better, but once in special,  
In thin array after a pleasant guise,  
When her loose gown from her shoulders did fall  
And she me caught in her arms long and small,



Therewithal sweetly did me kiss  
And softly said: "Dear heart, how like you this?"<sup>14</sup>

The mock editorial note at the end of the third section of 'The White Queen', 'Travesties', informs us:

*The rest of the Travesties consist of translations from many languages...but by far the greatest number are homosexual variations on famous heterosexual love poems in English poetry. (p.34)*

Throughout the sequence the White Queen enjoys such sexual and gender 'translations' (beginning, of course, with the regal title which he adopts). The adaptation of heterosexual love poetry provides him with a number of opportunities for subversion. For example, the vilification of homosexuality is undermined by highlighting the similarities in the experience of homosexual and heterosexual love. The authority of the White Queen's protestation, "You'll call it filthy, but to me it's love,/ And to him it was", is subtly augmented by the fact that his celebration of the sensual moment shares some of the characteristics of Wyatt's vision of his ex-lover. Both poets recall a single delicious memory, "once in special", "Once at least", when love had been "so much better", "Twenty times better", "A million per cent". Wyatt's erotic visualisation of the woman's clothing, and her confident, provocative, even aggressive sexual behaviour becomes, in Harrison's 'translation', "O magnificently shameless in his gear". This line of subversion, which counteracts the authoritarian definition of homosexuality as fundamentally transgressive, is also emphasised in the 'editorial note', which continues;

*However, since the differences are slight, involving as they do only an occasional flattening of the breast, the occasional change of a pronoun, or the occasional shift of anatomical focus it has not been considered worthwhile to reproduce them here. (p.34)*

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<sup>14</sup>Sir Thomas Wyatt, *Sir Thomas Wyatt: The Complete Poems*, ed. R. A. Rebholz (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978) 116-17.



Perhaps the most important subversions, however, proceed from the way in which the White Queen's view of his lover diverges from Wyatt's in 'They flee from me...'. Although Wyatt enjoys the woman's 'magnificent shamelessness' the poem also reveals his anxiety about her independence and assertiveness. This concern is apparent in the poet's ostensible complaint (expressed in lines 3 to 7) against the woman's transformation from a "tame" or domesticated animal, who meekly comes "To take bread at (his) hand", into a "wild" creature beyond his control. Still, whether the woman is "tame" or "wild" the poet remains, within the hierarchy implied by these metaphors, reassuringly positioned as man/human/benefactor/hunter above woman/animal/pet/prey. The extent to which the poem's imagery threatens a reversal of this hierarchy suggests the depths of the poet's anxiety. The notion of the male as a potential object of prey is first suggested by "stalking" in line 2. This connotation produces the exquisite ambivalence at the moment of 'possession'; "she me caught in her arms long and small". His equivocal response to this capture is reflected in the almost contradictory "long and small". Although these epithets primarily describe limbs of slender elegance, "long" contains a nuance of menace which is made alluring, rather than intimidating, by the heartening qualification, "and small". The syntax of "she me caught", which produces a strong stress on each of the three words, emphasises her agency and his passivity, and this relationship is underlined by her appropriation of one of the defining human characteristics, language. The conventional pun on heart/hart completes the inversion; he is now the dumb animal and, consequently, either her pet or prey. The question which she articulates, therefore, is profoundly apposite; "Dear heart, how like you this?". Wyatt relishes the woman's exercise of sexual freedom in his bedroom but her accompanying desire for social liberation, exemplified by her choice of leaving



him to pursue other lovers, deeply disturbs him. The tone of sullen restraint at the close of the poem barely contains the volatile residue of anger, disgust and confusion which permeates his final expression of grim exasperation, and even brims over to elicit a distant threat;

But since that I so kindly am served  
I would fain know what she hath deserved.<sup>15</sup>

The most striking contrast between Wyatt's tone in 'They flee from me...' and the White Queen's 'translation' is the absence of such anxiety. In Harrison's adaptation there is a pointed rejection of the language of subservience/dominance;

O he could move  
Like an oiled (slow motion) racehorse at its peak,  
Outrageous, and not gentle, tame, or meek—  
O magnificently shameless in his gear... (p.21)

The image of the racehorse, unlike that of the deer, celebrates a sexuality and physical beauty which is unequivocally active, energetic and powerful. The gaze of the poet, emphasised by the televisual concept of "slow-motion", enjoys this vigour without, however, wishing to disable or control it. In contrast with Wyatt's "stalking" lover, the White Queen recalls the confident but unthreatening gait of his consort who "sauntered". The Loiner's retrospective attitude to his lover is imbued not with resentment but continuing appreciation, "God, I was grateful for the nights we shared...Call it obscenity; it's love; so there".

As well as the implicit comparison with Wyatt's metaphor of the deer, the racehorse simile opposes the earlier "like an elephant/ That bungles with its trunk about its cage". If this image of constraint symbolised the White Queen's entrapment within "our foul conditioning", the graceful movement of

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<sup>15</sup>Wyatt 117.



the racehorse expresses his lover's ('magnificently shame-less') freedom from such cultural confinement. What the White Queen depicts in this passage is the "love" or "pure sex" which he "begg(ed) for" earlier. That is, a sexual relationship which is liberated from the culture of authoritarian repression. In this relationship the consciousness of hierarchy which pervades authoritarian ideology, and which is so problematic for Wyatt, has disappeared.

In the colonial context Western culture imposes the hierarchy of male/female onto the dichotomy of European/White versus African/Black. The African is 'female', that is, subjugated.<sup>16</sup> The poet's "magnificent" Black lover, by contrast, is emphatically not 'female'; he is "not scared", "not gentle, tame or meek". In the phallic image of the sleek racehorse the White Queen confronts the potency of the Black male—and responds, in an unintimidated mood of celebration, with an explicit expression of desire.

The repudiation of the male/female opposition is facilitated by the homosexual adaptation of 'They flee from me...'. However the elision of the 'female' does not involve a rejection of femaleness but the removal of the symbolic category of 'the female', the repressed, from their affair.<sup>17</sup> They meet as equals. Yet, significantly, the implication that they meet on equal terms as 'males' would not be appropriate in this context. Within the authoritarian dichotomy of male/female, 'male' signifies the repressor, possessor, dominant—precisely the figure, "Policeman! Priest!", that the White Queen is challenging in this passage. Their relationship illustrates his insistence that "things can be so much better" by depicting a human connection that confounds the inherited symbolic categories of male/female. The power relationship of

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<sup>16</sup>As the liaison with the "ill-fed blackboy" illustrates, a superficial gender reversal does not prevent the "fat queen", in his grotesque guise as the female British monarch, from being an executor of phallic power and exploitation.

<sup>17</sup>At the same time, the absence of the female from the (now) political metaphor does have the effect of implicitly excluding *women*, rather than the symbolic 'female', from the arena of political affairs.



dominance/submission, which underlies all authoritarian hierarchies, is suspended in favour of a bond based upon mutual respect and mutual consent.

By carefully subverting Wyatt's poem, therefore, the White Queen is able to contemplate briefly a radical alternative to the political structure of authoritarian relationships. This insight, however, is momentary and isolated, and its fragility is underlined by the immediate and sinister reassertion of the culture of domination;

Call it obscenity; it's love; so there;  
Call it what you want. *I just don't care.*

Two figures in grey uniforms and shorts,  
Their eyes on quick promotion and the tarts,  
Took down the backing number of my car.  
I come back raddled to the campus bar  
And shout out how I laid a big, brute  
Negro in a tight, white cowboy suit. (p.22)

These are the final lines of the first part of the 'Satyrae' section. The act of taking the car number is particularly ominous because, within the submerged narrative of the sequence, it may be related to the White Queen's incarceration which occurs at the end of the third part of 'Satyrae', ("Next door erotomaniacs. Here, queers..."(p.25)). The return to a patriarchal consciousness is emphasised by the concerns of the policemen whose focus is fixed upon the hierarchy itself, "their eyes on quick promotion". Similarly, all the people referred to are summarily objectified; the policemen are reduced to "grey uniforms and shorts", the White Queen to his car number, the prostitutes to pastries. Most strikingly, the White Queen himself reverts to crude imperial psychology: the Black male is simply a fetishized "brute" animal to be mastered and used, "laid".

Of course this outburst is bar-room bravado. The White Queen publicly conceals and privately flees from the desolation of the real episode

with the "ill-fed blackboy". It is not only bravado, however. Its ideological assumptions are continuous with his treatment of the boy as a sexual commodity. Still, appearing immediately after the 'Wyatt' passage, it is apparent that this macho public façade also masks his desire for a non-exploitative, fulfilling relationship. The effect of the ideological reversion in these lines, therefore, is not only to undermine the idealism of the appeal to "love" but, equally, to emphasize by juxtaposition the earnest tone of that appeal. The sentiments expressed in the 'Wyatt' passage warrant serious consideration (not least because their significance reaches beyond the White Queen sequence to inform the whole volume); but further qualification is required first.

The colonist Loiner tends to inscribe the African in relation to his own needs. This fact applies just as much here, where those needs are progressive and the lover is presented as an equal, as in those other instances where the African is objectified. The absence of the Black lover's voice provokes unease about the claim of mutuality, of "shared" love. Perhaps the White Queen is deluding himself? An 'editorial note' at the end of Section Five, 'from *The Zeg-Zeg Postcards*', reinforces this suspicion; "*It is curious that those [postcards] that were actually posted are addressed to a completely illiterate lover*" (p.46).

Even so, what these reservations expose is the White Queen's isolation; they do not cast doubt on his sincerity. His rhetorical challenge to the "Policeman! Priest!" terminates abruptly with a display of insouciance which is also a retreat from argument and social engagement;

Call it vice;  
Call it obscenity; it's love; so there;  
Call it what you want. *I just don't care.* (pp.21-2)



At the same time, this is a defiant, positive statement; a stubborn insistence on the irreducible validity of personal experience. For the Loiners, inside the authoritarian consciousness, hierarchical divisions generate the forms and categories in which the world is defined. The experience described in the 'Wyatt' passage has provided the White Queen with a glimpse of an alternative possibility; an insight that the oppressive hierarchies which structure personal and political relationships are (culturally and historically) contingent. The significance of such moments is that they point beyond and, however briefly, dismantle the dichotomies which sustain authoritarian culture. Another example of this occurs in the second 'translation' of the 'Travesties' section, 'The Ancestor', "after" Nicolás Guillén, where Black and White man are shown to be 'pre-historically' united. The poet describes his lover's European body; his "cold eyes", "his snowblown flesh/ his white geography", and continues;

Lover, under your bleak landscape are  
rivers of strange blood...  
...and there you'll see a restless spirit stare  
and turn, your ancestor's dark shadow flee,  
who gave the frizzle your golden hair. (p.33)

Again these lines look 'beyond' a psychology of hierarchical opposition, in this instance by invoking a common 'pre-cultural' identity. What has been perceived and projected as Other (and 'lower') is revealed to be 'within', a part of the self. This point echoes the subversive epigraph to Part Two of *The Loiners*, which declares;

*There is all Africa and her prodigies in us;  
we are that bold and adventurous piece of Nature.*

Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici* i.15 (p.19)

The European mind inscribes Africa in terms of the 'lower' categories of its own cultural oppositions; such as the body, emotion, sexuality and femaleness.



The quotation from Sir Thomas Browne implies that these categories ought not only to be accepted as regions of the Self, but also admired and explored. This challenges the authoritarian conception of them as alien, anarchic forces which need to be constantly subjugated and repressed. The most significant expression of the impulse in the volume to see 'beyond' the entrenched cultural hierarchies occurs when Harrison cries "New-/castle *is* Peru!" (p.84). The complex tone of this exclamation is informed by the relief and excitement of a momentary escape from the pathological repression of the Other.

The poetry of *The Loiners* exposes unremittingly the continuity between this interior, psychological repression and the exterior, political violence of authoritarian cultures. This connection is expressed grimly in the third part of the 'Satyrae' section, where the imagery of torture as a metaphor for sexual repression is disturbingly realised in The White Queen's actual punishment for his illegal homosexuality. After the failures of sexual and social contact, first with the "ill-fed blackboy" and then with the female novelist in part two of the section, the White Queen retreats into the self;

Back to loneliness, pulling myself off,  
After a whole *White Horse*, with photograph  
And drag, a Livingstone with coloured plates,  
That good old stand-by for expatriates  
Hooked on the blacks; again have to withdraw  
Into myself, backwards down a corridor,  
Where in one of many cold, white cells  
They play cold water on my testicles,  
When I should be breaking out...must...must  
Matchet the creeper from my strangled lust. (pp.23-4)

"They play" emphasises the profound alienation depicted here. As he masturbates the White Queen struggles against the internalised impulses which, like a ceaseless Chinese torture, attempt to subdue or, like the insidious "creeper", attempt to extinguish his libido. The lines which follow this passage



describe obliquely, from the poet's satirical perspective, a coup d'état and the installation in the unspecified African state of an even more 'repressive' regime;

The proclamation: murder, looting, rape,  
*Homosexuality*, all in the same breath,  
And the same punishment for each—death, *death!* (p.24)

The hitherto internalised ideological attack on the White Queen's urge to life becomes a material threat to his existence. His incarceration follows, and again the poem juxtaposes psychological imagery, of being mentally "locked away", with its physical enactment;

Now life's as dizzy as the Book of Kells.  
Thank God for London and Beaux/Belles.  
I must get back again. I must, but must  
Never again be locked away or trussed  
Like a squealing piglet because my mind  
Shut out all meaning like a blackout blind.

Next door, erotomaniacs. Here, queers,  
And butch nurses with stiff hoses mock  
As we grow limp, *Roundheads* and *Cavaliers*,  
Like King Charles bowing to the chopping block. (pp.24-5)

In fact the lines on being "locked away or trussed" are ambiguous in so far as they may refer to his actual or metaphorical imprisonment. Either way, he links his reduction to "a squealing piglet" ("trussed", meaning 'to fix for cooking, as with a skewer', makes this another image of food preparation), with his own internal surrender of meaning. The war image, "blackout blind", indicates that this withdrawal was a defensive response. Yet the connotations in this phrase, of sightlessness in "blind" and unconsciousness or obliteration in "blackout", underline the dangers of such a retreat. Passivity and inaction lead to subjection. The White Queen's defiant "I must...never again be locked away" is immediately, and ironically, reversed by the epigrammatic depiction of his institutionalization. Still, he is not defeated. This bleak tableau of his



humiliation is a good illustration of the use of humour in the volume to defy and resist authoritarian petrification. In the face of derisive objectification the pointed wit of the White Queen's conceit affirms his humanity. The allusion to the English Civil War suggests ironic parallels between the class tension in that conflict and the uprising of the Africans against the colonists. The imagery of shrinking penises recalls the "old man's drooping prick" (p.57) in 'The Death of the P.W.D. Man', a metaphor for the demise of British colonial power. Hence it is appropriate that both "*Roundheads and Cavaliers*" (a visual conceit on circumcision), should join their 'monarch', "King Charles"/White Queen, in a symbolic 'ceremony' of national castration. Power, in the form of "stiff hoses", is now in Black hands, but this phallic image stresses an ideological continuity. The new regime retains the oppressive character of the ousted colonists; patriarchal, authoritarian, repressive.

The imagery of phallic confrontation situates this revolution in the context of patriarchal history where successive waves of conquest and defeat always perpetuate the categories of dominant and subject. These four lines are the antithesis of the 'Wyatt' passage which, in attempting to break free of this fundamental authoritarian opposition, is subversive of the entire history of empire. The appeal to a common evolutionary origin in 'The Ancestor' refers in particular to a shared human identity which is anterior to the dichotomies of patriarchal history. The Wyatt passage, on the other hand, looks not simply towards a post-colonial consciousness but to one which is post-patriarchal. The cry in 'Newcastle is Peru' looks both ways at once. It is because the subversion is so radical in these expressions of momentary union that there is in each case a sense of being at the borders of (at least the Loiners') culture. The concentration of intellectual effort involved in the 'Wyatt' passage produces this feeling. The complexity of the allusion to Wyatt also reflects the ("almost")



only surviving focus of academic interest for the White Queen, "Professor! Poet!" (p.20);

(I)...walk

These hot-house groves of Academe and talk  
Nonsense and nothing, bored with almost all  
The issues but the point of love. (p.20)

In the midst of a culture saturated by an authoritarian concern with power, the phrase "the point of love" asks, provocatively, what is the purpose of love, why does it exist? One answer to this question, which illuminates the insistent conflation of political, historical and sexual metaphor in *The Loiners*, is provided by Konrad Lorenz in *On Aggression*. Interestingly, Lorenz's attention also stretches beyond either 'side' of patriarchal history.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The point of love

*On Aggression* was first published in 1963 and, writing at the height of Cold War tensions, Lorenz's focus is upon 'political' themes, particularly group formation and inter-group conflict. In the final chapter, 'Avowal of Optimism', Lorenz's concern is to review those inherited 'resources' available to the human species which may enable it to avoid such conflict. (This is the chapter that Harrison quotes from in the catalogue to the Jirásec exhibition, referred to earlier. Harrison uses Lorenz's words to begin his discussion of the "unarmed" subversion of authoritarian petrification.) It is difficult to summarize Lorenz's arguments—a curious blend of comparative biology and sweeping cultural analysis—without travestying them. Certain concepts and perspectives which are elaborated in *On Aggression*, however, can be usefully employed to expose some of the tensions and dynamics which inform the main themes of *The Loiners*.

Lorenz, an ethologist, is concerned not simply with the purpose of human love but with the function of all "personal bonds" between animals.<sup>1</sup> He therefore looks to pre-human evolution to discover the origins of "the personal bond, love".<sup>2</sup> The purpose of love, Lorenz argues, is to inhibit aggression between members of the same species, ('intra-specific aggression');

A personal bond, an individual friendship, is found only in animals with highly developed intra-specific aggression, in fact this bond is the firmer, the more aggressive the particular animal and species is...Undoubtedly the

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<sup>1</sup>"If it is argued that animals are not persons, I must reply by saying that personality begins where, of two individuals, each one plays in the life of the other a part which cannot easily be played by any other member of the species. In other words personality begins where personal bonds are formed for the first time." Konrad Lorenz, *On Aggression*, trans. Marjorie Latzke (London: Methuen, 1967) 118.

<sup>2</sup>Lorenz 186.



personal bond developed at that phase of evolution when, in aggressive animals, the co-operation of two or more individuals was necessary for a species-preserving purpose, usually brood-tending.<sup>3</sup>

Lorenz's procedure in *On Aggression* is to set out detailed hypotheses on the ways in which particular behaviour mechanisms have evolved within various animal species, to extrapolate general characteristics and dynamics of evolution at work in this behaviour, and then to apply these concepts to a human context. These comparisons are intended as analogies which attempt to uncover those fundamental evolutionary functions of behaviour that have been obscured by the fantastic elaborations of human culture.

In Chapter Five, 'Habit, Ritual and Magic', Lorenz contrasts the personal bond with a different kind of bond, which he does not assign a name to, but which effects group cohesion and may be called a 'social' bond. This bond is dependent upon the evolution of shared rituals within a group, such as gestures of appeasement, recognition, etc. Where these rituals have to be learnt by the young Lorenz uses the term "cultural ritual" (as opposed to "instinctive ritual"). Lorenz strips the role of culture to three fundamental (political) functions;

The triple function of suppressing fighting within the group, of holding the group together and setting it off, as an independent entity, against other, similar units, is performed by culturally developed ritual...

Any human group which exceeds in size that which can be held together by personal love and friendship depends for its existence on these three functions of culturally ritualized behaviour patterns.<sup>4</sup>

This remains true, he insists, no matter how large and sophisticated a culture and its rituals become;

From the smallest peculiarities of speech and manner which cause the smallest possible sub-groups to stick together, an uninterrupted gradation

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<sup>3</sup>Lorenz 186.

<sup>4</sup>Lorenz 65-6.



leads to the most elaborated, consciously symbolical social norms and rites which unite the largest social units of humanity in one nation, one culture, one religion or one political ideology.<sup>5</sup>

The tendentious term which Lorenz adopts to describe the historical development of different cultures is revealing. The historical divergence of cultures, he suggests, "erects barriers between cultural units in the same way as divergent evolution does between species"<sup>6</sup>. Cultural difference is therefore referred to as "pseudo-speciation"<sup>7</sup>. This term is unsatisfactory for (at least) two contrasting reasons. On one hand it appears to be rather dismissive of cultural distinctions; the term suggests that they are in some way spurious distinctions. On the other hand the metaphor of speciation might be taken to imply that the differences between cultures are as radical, and share the same degree of fixity, as the biological barriers between species. Lorenz retains the term, however, because he wishes to use it to underline the fallacy contained in the authoritarian confusion of 'pseudo-speciation' and actual speciation. The term "pseudo-species" is employed in the following passage to full rhetorical effect:

The dark side of pseudo-speciation is that it makes us consider the members of pseudo-species other than our own as not human, as many primitive tribes are demonstrably doing, in whose language the word for their own particular tribe is synonymous with 'man'. From their viewpoint it is not, strictly speaking, cannibalism if they eat the fallen warriors of an enemy tribe.<sup>8</sup>

Implicit in Lorenz's arguments is the notion that ethical and social responsibilities derive from, and depend upon, an individual's sense of belonging to a family or group, and that such responsibilities apply only within

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<sup>5</sup>Lorenz 69.

<sup>6</sup>Lorenz 67.

<sup>7</sup>Lorenz 67. The term 'pseudo-speciation', as Lorenz acknowledges, was coined by Erik Erikson.

<sup>8</sup>Lorenz 70.



the group.<sup>9</sup> Of course human individuals belong simultaneously to many different groups; for example family, gender, class, national and wider cultural groups. Lorenz, unlike Harrison, is not concerned to emphasise the conflicts and divisions prevalent within 'cultural units'. His focus is upon the divisions between 'cultural units'. In particular, he is interested in how these divisions are maintained, and how they may be overcome. His reference to cannibalism, paradoxically, is part of an appeal for deeper inter-cultural understanding and tolerance. Never-the-less, the cannibals' exclusion of the cultural Other from any notion of a binding, shared identity—and, consequently, from any ethical claims—is repudiated by the force of Lorenz's rhetoric. The language of 'pseudo-speciation' insists upon subsuming human cultural divisions within the overarching, universally inclusive 'species-group'. The recognition of this 'universal affiliation'<sup>10</sup> requires that ethical consideration be extended to all humans. Given Lorenz's ultimate pre-occupation with the Cold War, his reference to so-called "primitive tribes" at this point is perhaps surprising. Harrison's main attack, and Lorenz's elsewhere, is upon the racist, nationalist or ideological exclusion of the Other which pervades the culture of the 'advanced', 'civilized' West. The introduction of cannibalism into this context, however, does inform the recurrent imagery of human meat in *The Loiners*.

In the chapter, 'Rats', Lorenz presents a form of social organization in which the exclusion of the cultural Other is total. Rat-clans will not tolerate the presence of a rat from a foreign clan in their territory. The foreign rat will always be killed. As rival clans expand, territorial wars will

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<sup>9</sup>Lorenz suggests, for example, that "love of something or other is, in very many cases, the motivation behind the power of the categorical imperative - an assertion which, I think, Kant would deny." Lorenz 217.

<sup>10</sup>This term is mine. It is not used by Lorenz.



ensue if the space available for colonization is limited. The chapter ends with a thinly disguised, ominous analogy for the Cold War;

On the small North Sea island of Norderoog, Steiniger found that the ground was divided between a small number of rat-clans separated by a strip of about fifty yards of no-man's land - no-rat's land - where fights constantly took place. The front is relatively larger for a small clan than for a big one, and the small one is therefore at a disadvantage.

It can be predicted that in the not-too-distant future all small clans will have gone to the wall. The question, however, whether two or three well-balanced large clans will remain in co-existence or whether one of them will achieve ultimate mastery cannot as yet be answered.<sup>11</sup>

In the 'Avowal of Optimism', Lorenz turns his attention to those inherited capacities which enable members of the human species to see beyond, and subvert, "the dark side of pseudo-speciation". That is, those capacities which enable divergent human groups, unlike rat-clans, to recognise the fact of their 'universal affiliation'. He gives prominence to rational intelligence and humour as faculties of discernment which can expose and combat the dehumanization of the Other inherent within militant nationalism and authoritarian ideologies.<sup>12</sup> Humour, according to Lorenz, is "the best of lie detectors"<sup>13</sup> and "a powerful ally of rational morality"<sup>14</sup>. In the Jirásec catalogue Harrison quotes approvingly the suggestion that, because of the scepticism of contemporary (Western) populations about moral preaching,

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<sup>11</sup>Lorenz 140.

<sup>12</sup>The spread of education and knowledge, he believes, will also increase the consciousness of a 'species bond' by arousing "enthusiasm for causes which are commonly recognised as values of the highest order by all human beings irrespective of their national, cultural or political allegiances", (Lorenz 224). Partly due to the anxieties produced by the Cold War, Lorenz presents and promotes a distorted, and in many ways undesirable, notion of international cultural convergence. In passages which seriously underestimate the potent influence of cultural difference, he emphasizes the emergence of intellectual enterprises which embody such "commonly recognised" values: "There are at least three great human enterprises, collective in the truest sense of the word, whose ultimate and unconditional value no normal human being can doubt: Art...Science...Medicine", (Lorenz 247).

<sup>13</sup>Lorenz 254.

<sup>14</sup>Lorenz 255.



"satire is the right sort of sermon for today"<sup>15</sup>. Furthermore, Lorenz claims, humour is "rapidly developing in modern man"<sup>16</sup>. After concluding that "humour and knowledge are the two great hopes for civilization"<sup>17</sup>, Lorenz develops, at the close of *On Aggression*, a startling theory;

There is a third more distant hope based on the possibilities of human evolution; it is to be hoped that the cultural factors just mentioned [i.e. the expansion of knowledge and the development of humour] will exert a selection pressure in a desirable direction. Many human characteristics which, from the palaeolithic to recent times, were accounted the highest virtues, today seem dangerous to thinking people and funny to people with a sense of humour.<sup>18</sup>

The (supposedly) out-moded characteristics that he is referring to are the so-called 'warrior virtues'. Lorenz believes that "the great constructors of evolution" —mutation and selection—"will solve the problems of political strife and warfare but they will not do so by entirely eliminating aggression...for this would mean dispensing with all its indispensable functions"<sup>19</sup>. Instead "a new inhibitory mechanism"<sup>20</sup> will develop, which he envisages as an extension of the already evolved inhibitory mechanism of the personal bond. The final paragraph of the book, therefore, suggests;

We know that, in the evolution of vertebrates, the bond of personal love and friendship was the epoch-making invention created by the great constructors when it became necessary for two or more individuals of an aggressive species to live peacefully together and to work for a common end. We know that human society is built upon the foundation of this bond, but we have to recognize the fact that the bond has become too limited to encompass all that it should: it prevents aggression only between those who know each other and are friends, while obviously it is all active hostility between all men of all nations that should be stopped. The

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<sup>15</sup>Lorenz 255.

<sup>16</sup>Lorenz 255.

<sup>17</sup>Lorenz 257.

<sup>18</sup>Lorenz 257.

<sup>19</sup>Lorenz 257-58.

<sup>20</sup>Lorenz 258.



obvious conclusion is that love and friendship should embrace all humanity, that we should love all our human brothers indiscriminately. This commandment is not new. Our reason is quite able to understand its necessity, as our feeling is able to appreciate its beauty, but nevertheless, made as we are, we are unable to obey it. We can feel the full, warm emotion of friendship and love only for individuals, and the utmost exertion of will power cannot alter this fact. But the great constructors can, and I believe they will.<sup>21</sup>

The arresting sense of incongruity at the close of this passage occurs when Lorenz, despite addressing global problems of international conflict, and in particular the Cold War, turns away from the terms of law, "commandments", education and "rational morality" in favour of an appeal to the irrational attachment of the personal bond. This emphasis is intelligible, however, given Lorenz's implicit position that "rational morality" is underpinned crucially by those irrational feelings of affinity, affiliation and love which relate to an individual's sense of group identity. Reason may elaborate and define ethical notions, but they originate in the experience of the personal bond, and if the underlying bonds of affiliation are denied, or decay, then moral injunctions lose their 'binding' force. As "the point of love" is to inhibit aggression between members of the same species, therefore, we may say that in order to fulfil this evolutionary function it is also the purpose of love, in the case of the human species, to initiate and sustain a moral universe.

If the appeal to the irrational at the end of this passage is consistent, therefore, its appearance at this stage in the argument is also in some ways redundant. This "third more distant hope", of an evolutionary solution to "the problems of political strife and warfare", seems to be an unnecessary supplement to the first "two great hopes", humour and knowledge, which, according to Lorenz's 'Avowal of Optimism', will overcome those problems by cultural means. Perhaps it is more illuminating to view this closing prognosis

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<sup>21</sup>Lorenz 258.



not so much as a product of optimism, but as a last attempt to allay persistent anxieties about human limitations—relating to both rational and irrational capacities—in the present, "made as we are". Despite the earlier assertion of a belief in "the ultimate victory of Truth", this passage reveals doubts about the final efficacy of reason. Furthermore, the inherited emotional limitation which Lorenz describes here is a crucial 'gap' as it facilitates the spread of "the dark side of pseudo-speciation". This limit to our affective capacities is, in a sense, the dark side of the personal bond. "Made as we are", he rightly points out, "we are unable to obey" the commandment "to love all our human brothers indiscriminately". Neither reason, nor "the utmost exertion of will power (can) alter this fact". If we evolved the emotional capacity to do so, however, then this new inhibitory mechanism would 'plug the gap' and not allow "the dark side of pseudo-speciation" to gain entry into the human psyche.

Ignoring the issue of whether such a development in human evolution is plausible, it is also pertinent to ask if it would be desirable. The reason that the 'gap' produced by the limitations of the personal bond opens the way to "the dark side of pseudo-speciation" is because this is the biologically undetermined space in which moral choices are made. The kind of cultural, moral struggles in which, Lorenz hopes, humour and knowledge will play decisive roles, are fought out in this space. We may not, because of our emotional constitution, be able to choose to love an anonymous stranger, or nation of strangers, with the same "full, warm emotion of friendship and love" that we feel for our family, friends or neighbours; but this fact does not preclude the possibility of the sort of expansion of personal identity, or sense of affinity, which would be sufficient to defeat the petrification and moral exclusion of the cultural Other (nor does Lorenz suggest that it does). We might see the notion of this new inhibitory mechanism, therefore, to be an



unnecessary and perhaps incoherent 'insurance policy', shoring up Lorenz's determined avowal of optimism. On the other hand, Lorenz does emphasize that such a notion is a "distant hope" and, further, that it might arise only as a result of the positive effects of cultural developments on selection.

Either way such a notion is irrelevant for those who are confronted with moral choices now. "Made as we are", the idea of 'universal affiliation' is never secure, but is always tested and strained within actual historical circumstances. When Harrison, in an introductory piece to a selection of poems from *The Loiners*, invokes a similar (but in fact more radical) conception of 'universal affiliation', therefore, he immediately introduces a specific historical context which emphasises the constant, ongoing conflict or tension between issues of moral recognition and moral exclusion;

When I search my childhood for something to explain what drove me into poetry, something like Pablo Neruda's story of the silent exchange of a toy lamb and a pine cone between himself and an unseen boy through a hole in the fence, I can find nothing quite so significantly beautiful, but there are things which brought to me, early but obscurely, the same precious idea 'that affection that comes from those unknown to us who are watching over our sleep and solitude...widens out the boundaries of our being and unites all living things!' My images are all to do with the War. One of my very earliest memories is of bombs falling...The next morning I found the overgrown tennis courts in the local park pitted with bomb craters. As I rooted around in one for shrapnel, I heard someone talking to a policeman utter the still haunting but no longer so puzzling phrase: *humane bomber*. Another is the contact I had with German prisoners of war in a work party near our street. I remember only we children talked to them much...Another is of a street party with a bonfire and such joy, celebration and general fraternity as I have never seen since. As I grew up the image stayed but I came to realise that the cause of the celebration was Hiroshima.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Tony Harrison, 'The Inkwell of Dr Agrippa', *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies 1: Tony Harrison*, ed. Neil Astley (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991) 32.



Harrison's insistent emphasis upon moral crisis and conflict informs the striking contrast between Neruda's invocation of a benign world of infancy and the images of childhood during the War. The Other in Neruda's story is represented by the "unseen boy" and by the benevolent, "unknown" multitude "who are watching over our sleep and solitude" with a loving, parental vigilance. The tranquil, peculiarly passive expansion of identity depicted by Neruda occurs as a result of his awareness of this simultaneously anonymous and familial embrace. The War, on the other hand, constitutes a cultural-historical environment which is extremely hostile to this "precious idea". The Other, in Harrison's examples, has been urgently and emphatically defined as alien: the enemy. As a result, Neruda's comfortable experience of union with "all living things" is rendered fraught and problematic. In the War context the same widening of the boundaries of being must confront and overcome the pervasive petrification of the Other. This produces a tension which is at the heart of the *Loiners*' experience; the impulse towards recognition and union clashes with the knowledge of exclusion and divorce. The most profound expression of "general fraternity" that Harrison has ever witnessed is indelibly overlaid with the later understanding of its actual, horrific, exclusivity. This is why in 'The Pocket Wars of Peanuts Joe' Harrison disrupts the victory party and turns his poetry against the passionate fraternity of his 'own' people. Their collective act of exclusion and the nuclear flash of Hiroshima are both shockingly 'brought home' by the white "flash" of the phallus.

In the situation of the War the "precious idea" of universal affiliation is pushed to the margins of experience. The "humane bomber" is not just an exception to the 'rule' but a contradiction of it; "only" the children speak to the German prisoners. It has already been noted that expressions of recognition and affinity in *The Loiners* occupy a similarly marginal position.

Just as Lorenz's notion of a general inhibitory mechanism is a "distant hope", so Harrison, trying to hold on to an ephemeral sense of union with the estranged Other, a union between Newcastle and Peru, and between himself and his lover, is driven back into the experience and imagery of separation and deferral;

This moment when my hand strays  
your body like an endless maze  
returning and returning, you,  
O you; you also are Peru.

And just as distant. (p.86)

From Lorenz's perspective the love and unity of the personal bond is both a primal model, and an elemental source of positive energy, which not only enables but even urges the development of wider bonds of affiliation. In *The Loiners* this flow of energy has been reversed and inverted: social, political, historical divorce and conflict invades and fractures the personal bond itself. For the Loiners, estrangement and petrification, not affiliation and union, are the dominant, central modes of experience.

Significantly, the close of 'Allotments' locates Harrison's dawning realisation about the relationship of the victory bonfires to Hiroshima within a dramatization of the dislocation of the personal bond;

...I smelt  
Lust on myself, then smoke, and I felt  
Street bonfires blazing for the end of war  
V.E. and J. burn us like lights, but saw  
Lush prairies for a tumble, wide corrals,  
A Loiner's Elysium, and I cried... (p.17)

The phrase "burn us like lights" not only combines connotations of the A-bomb (and conventional bombs) with Hell-fire, but also suggests a profound empathy with the victims of the fire. In this respect the inclusive "us" contains another



fleeting moment of universal affiliation. At the same time the "us" refers specifically to Harrison's 'side'; to the Allies, the British, the Loiners. The guilt expressed by the association with Hell appropriately conveys the haunting sense of transgression which his understanding of the War's and the victory bonfire's terrible petrification of the Other has produced. It is precisely "V.E. and J.", the victories in Europe and Japan, which "burn us like lights". He is of course implicated with this transgression because of his social, national identity, but the fusion of the smells of lust and smoke implicate him more intimately and personally. The smell of lust is associated with the sexual urge for power and dominion which is also exposed in 'The Pocket Wars...'. The smell of smoke invokes the victims of that lust. The overwhelming knowledge of transgression becomes entangled with his sexual desire for the young woman, fracturing the personal bond.

In fact the knowledge of the horrifying results of moral exclusion leads to a more pervasive disturbance of the sexual consciousness and of all personal and social bonds. The discussion of the 'childhood poems' outlined the way in which recurring images of cooked meat and bodily torment dramatise the imposition of an authoritarian concept of the body on the adolescent mind. The body comes to be viewed as a vulnerable object which can be used, mutilated and consumed by a higher power. At the close of 'Allotments' the youth identifies with both the vulnerable body and the higher power, simultaneously assuming the fear of the victim and the guilt of the tormentor. Like the smells of lust and smoke, guilt and fear, when 'inhaled', are felt to have emanated from one's own being; "I smelt/ Lust on myself, then smoke".

The myth of 'the Fall', which underpins 'Allotments', informs the poem's representation of the divisive and alienating force engendered by the

emotions of guilt and fear. The emphasis is upon the sexual alienation of the young couple (the poem's utter silence on the feelings of the unnamed Eve is in itself significant). Yet the process of estrangement depicted in 'Allotments' reaches out beyond the adulteration of this single personal bond. However inclusive or exclusive the "us" in "burn us like lights" is taken to be, the anguished epiphany of 'Allotments' portrays a general permeation of guilt and fear into all relationships; these emotions invade and fundamentally disrupt any notion of 'us'. The personal bonds within the family and the social bonds of class, region, nation and so on are all dislocated, as well as the relationship with the cultural Other. This process of divorce and alienation also extends into the self. The individual subject becomes confined and cramped by fear and guilt, even in the privacy of the mind. This is dramatized by The White Queen's tortured "withdraw(al)"

Into myself, backwards down a corridor,  
Where in one of many cold, white cells  
They play cold water on my testicles... (p.24)

Reacting to his first experience of this traumatic contraction of identity, the youth in 'Allotments' generates the momentary wish fulfilment of the fresh "lush prairies" and spacious "wide corrals" of "a Loiner's Elysium": but his own discovery of his cultural, historical, existential 'allotments' has barred him from such a Paradise.



## CHAPTER FOUR

As we have seen, the personal bond (according to Lorenz) forms an experiential basis for the cultural development of the idea of 'universal affiliation'. This notion is fundamentally subversive of the ideology of authoritarian culture. It is unsurprising, therefore, that authoritarian ideology systematically reinforces the breakdown and corruption of the personal bond. 'Ginger's Friday' highlights the way that Christianity reinforces the associations of guilt and fear with sexuality. By brutalizing the perception of the body, the sexual perception of the Other is also brutalized. Incorporated in the concept of the Other are not only the objectified bodies of other people, but also the individual's own objectified body. Again the process of alienation sweeps across the borders of 'inner' and 'outer', colonizing new regions and designating them Other. 'Allotments' closes with the youth crushed and distraught, mourning the loss of the personal bond. In many of the 'adult poems', however, beginning with 'The White Queen', the personae resist and struggle against the authoritarian invasion of the personal bond. The White Queen's phrase "the point of love" is, of course, a sexual pun. The point is not only the purpose of love, but also the place of love, the moment of love. There is another sexual pun, it follows, on "issues", which can refer to topics of argument or to orgasm; "bored with almost all/ The issues but the point of love" (p.20). These puns are profoundly apposite because sex, in *The Loiners*, represents a critical "point" of tension between the "issues" of recognition or denial of the Other.

Despite the pervasive corruption and fragmentation of the personal bond, sexual experience always has the potential to destabilize and subvert authoritarian ideology because it excites instincts and behaviour mechanisms which are prior to 'the fall' into patriarchal history and culture.

Sexuality also insists on the fact of our common, physical identity. It locates the body as a source of (shared) pleasure, opposing the authoritarian emphasis on physical pain and mortality. Above all, it releases the unifying energy of "the bond of personal love and friendship". This primary momentum threatens to contradict and overturn the insistent move by authoritarian culture to define the experience of sexuality and love in terms of repression and divorce. If this elemental energy was to cross culturally imposed boundaries such as those between Blacks and Whites in the British Empire, then more material structures of power would inevitably be challenged.

#### i. Satyrae (2)

A searching examination and critique of the culture of love and sexuality in the West is undertaken in *The Loiners*. In parts two, four and five of 'Satyrae', and in Section Two of the sequence, 'The Railroad Heroides', the White Queen turns away from the theme of his own sexual anguish to consider the malaise of Western heterosexuality. He finds the Western heterosexual to be as beleaguered, alienated and isolated as himself. Or even more so. The schoolteacher in the fourth part of 'Satyrae' is presented as being captive within both her home and her consciousness. Perceiving herself to be beset on all sides by an encroaching Otherness, her typically authoritarian response is comprehensive prejudice and vicious repression. Whether the Other is defined in terms of race, sex, religion, class or species, she locates them in a fundamentally Other dimension, sexuality;

There's too much spawning. Men! Beasts! Ticks!  
Spawn in their swarmfuls like good Catholics. (p.25)

Rustle and gasp. Black creatures claw  
At one another in her packing straw. (p.26)



Ah who knows? Who knows?  
Some drunken Public Works might still propose.  
But she wouldn't have him. No, not her. Boy!  
She'll give you the sack for those grunts of joy. (p.26)

The sexual repression is relentless. Even her pet "grey cat" is "spayed".

The reference in this poem to a coup follows the description of the military takeover, in part three of 'Satyrae', which leads to the incarceration of the White Queen. The resulting panic and insecurity of the Whites ("*coups/* Can throw the whole white quarter on the booze" (p.26)), is reflected here by the schoolteacher's decision to hire a Black "watchman" to guard her property. In the course of the poem he is visited by a prostitute. The schoolteacher experiences the sexual behaviour of the watchman as an incursion into her own private space (at the same time as she is obsessively drawn to it). His presence actually brings the Other closer rather than keeping it at a distance, heightening the impression that she too, like the White Queen, is imprisoned. Furthermore, this constriction again extends into the self. After darkness her psyche, as well as her private garden, is swayed disturbingly by alien presences;

...darkness falls. Her garden moves  
With mambas, leafage like damp leather gloves,  
Cobras, rats and mice, and bandicoots,  
The drunk *maigardai* and their prostitutes... (p.25)

The undetected 'alien' encroachments within her consciousness are subversive desires—for love, companionship, romance, sex. Such desires threaten to compromise those prejudices which, by maintaining the rigid demarcations between herself and the Other, sustain her identity. These 'aliens' emerge in the form of the unguarded, wistful contemplation of marriage, "Ah who knows?". A reflex class prejudice, against the imagined "drunken Public Works" man, slams the door on such a prospect, keeping her securely locked in. This internal, personal movement of repression is then immediately turned outwards

against the Other, the switch signalled by the contemptuous declaration, "Boy!". Ironically, it is in the end her sense of exclusion from the simultaneously loathed and longed-for realm of Otherness, sexuality, which motivates the vindictive display of power, the decision to dismiss the watchman.

Although the poem exposes unflinchingly the schoolteacher's oppressive personality, it also registers a note of compassionate sympathy for her experience of exclusion. Following her disdainful, implicit allusion to large Catholic families, who "spawn in their swarmfuls", the next lines respond;

She wanted children but she gets instead  
Black houseboys leaving notes beside her bed:  
*Madam your man is me. Where is the yes?* (p.25)

The specific irony of her position as a childless schoolteacher is understated in the poignantly humorous juxtaposition between unfulfilled desire and humiliating actuality. For the schoolteacher the demotic proposal represents an incongruous absurdity which reinforces her feeling of cultural and personal isolation. It also discloses to her the Other's apprehension of her emotional vulnerability and loneliness. At the same time the ingenuous enquiry—"Where is the yes?"—reaches beyond the context of the note "beside her bed" and provokes wider questions about the prevalence of denial in her life and the absence of affirmation.

Images of emptiness, absences, gaps, holes, and so on, are prominent in the poems of 'Satyrae'. While the schoolteacher turns to alcohol to try to escape her sense of desolation, the White Queen imagines the "bright/ And boggling" (p.22) eyes of the female novelist (in part two of 'Satyrae') to be the result of "cheap hashish", smoked "as if"

to console  
Her for the absences, that great, black hole



Pascal had with him once, *l'abime ouvert*  
He thought was special but is everywhere. (p.22)

The interjection "as if" highlights the fact that the White Queen is imposing his own anxieties onto the novelist's experience. It is he (the White Queen) who perceives obsessively Pascal's "*l'abime ouvert*", 'the gaping abyss', to be "everywhere". Yet it may be his apprehension of the novelist and the schoolteacher as fellow victims of this "absence", caught in the 'gravitational pull' of a cultural "black hole", which prompts his feelings of compassion for them. When the novelist "(eggs him) on to kiss her in the scented dark" (p.22), therefore, he makes an awkward and tentative attempt, as he rejects her advance, to reciprocate her movement towards connection, her "gesture" against the abyss;

I touched her bosom gently just to show  
I *could* acknowledge gestures, but couldn't stroke  
Her leathery, dry skin and cracked a joke  
Against myself about my taste in little boys. (pp.22-3)

"Her leathery, dry skin" recalls the image, from 'The Songs of the P.W.D. Man', of the "poor white woman's dug/ Pale, collapsed and shrivelled like a week-old mushroom" (p.52). Again the body of the white, Western female, in this case the novelist whose "thin lips the harmattan/ Had cracked and shrivelled like a piece of bark" (p.22), evokes the sexual and existential enervation of the West. In 'The White Queen' sequence, of course, descriptions of male bodies predominate; the symbolism, however, remains the same. The bodies of the Western males, such as the novelist's "scrawny, listless husband" (p.23), are equally unpalatable and feeble. "Listless" European bodies are contrasted with the perceived physical vigour of the Africans—here not so much the "little boys" as the "magnificent" lover who appears twenty lines earlier in the 'Wyatt passage'.

Unlike the White Queen, the P.W.D. Man, and the speaker of 'Mandalay', who all look to the colonies for sexual renewal, the novelist's husband remains attached to an exhausted Western romantic heritage. He purveys a jaded and degenerate European culture of love and sexuality;

I've seen her scrawny, listless husband still  
Such rowdy booze-ups with a madrigal,  
His tonic water serving for rare wine  
Toasting the ladies with *O Mistress Mine*;  
Sort of impressive. I confess such prick  
Songs make me absolutely bloody sick,  
But he can sing them straight at his *third* wife. (p.23)

The Bacchanalian "rowdy booze-up" is interrupted by his pretentious invocation of the courtly love tradition. The White Queen's phrase "prick/songs" is apposite in so far as the songs distil the patriarchal love-values of that tradition; the concept of the "lady" reflects the oppressive idealization of the woman, and the excessive formality of the "toast" recaptures the official distance which was maintained between the sexes. In fact the ideology of courtly love has already been implicitly exposed and rejected (in the first part of 'Satyrae'), by the complex allusion to Wyatt's 'They flee from me...' outlined earlier. Here the couple enact an updated travesty of the sexually repressive, neoplatonic sublimation of courtly love poetry. Not only do they "meditate together with joined hands" (p.23), but the husband's "psyche flutters" (p.23) with a sexual-literary frisson

...when he thinks he's kissed,  
Cuddled and copulated with New Zealand's  
Greatest, unpublished, *woman* novelist. (p.23)

The deflating qualifications of this last line are typical of the ironies of the passage. The "rare wine", which is intended to invoke the 'rarified' love of former times, is in fact "tonic water". "Tonic", in wry conjunction with "listless", implies instead contemporary enervation. More explicitly, the



husband's earnest delivery of "*O Mistress Mine*", with that title's suggestion of possession and devotion, is comically undercut by the White Queen's appalled revelation that the novelist is "his *third* wife". Therefore the allusion to 'O Mistress Mine' has a further ironic sting to it, given that Shakespeare's lyric ends with the lines,

Then come kiss me, sweet and twenty:  
Youth's a stuff will not endure.<sup>1</sup>

It is again possible to discern within such ironies an undercurrent of pathos in the White Queen's depiction of the couple. However the major tone is one of disgust with the existential degeneration of the West. Yet, significantly, both tone and theme here correspond closely to the White Queen's description of himself in the opening lines of the sequence:

Professor! Poet! Provincial Dadaist!  
Pathic, pathetic, half-blind and half-pissed  
Most of these tours in Africa. A Corydon  
Past fifty, fat, those suave looks gone,  
That sallow cheek, that young Novello sheen  
Gone matt and puffed. A radiant white queen  
In sub-Saharan scrub, I hold my court  
On expat pay, my courtiers all bought. (p.20)

"Corydon" is "a generic proper name in pastoral poetry for a rustic" (O.E.D), but Harrison (or the White Queen) probably has the 'Corydon' who appears in the young Milton's celebration of joy and mirth, 'L'Allegro', particularly in mind. Combined with the allusion to the early twentieth century fashionable ideal of effeminate glamour personified by Ivor Novello, this reference evokes a lost past of youthful romance. The account of the White Queen's physical deterioration is the first and definitive use in the sequence of aging, white

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<sup>1</sup>*Twelfth Night* II.iii,53/4.

European bodies as symbols of the decadence of the West.<sup>2</sup> He may, "in sub-Saharan scrub", be transformed into "a radiant white queen", but this self-mocking appellation is sardonic; he presents himself, on one level at least, as a scything burlesque of Queen Victoria. The pun on "bought" in the phrase "my courtiers all bought", implying bribed officials, suggests that his court is corrupted, and this connotation of moral debasement informs the other meaning of the phrase, that his "courtiers" are actually prostitutes. The various underlying puns insinuated here, on "court", courtly, "courtiers", courtship and courtesan, prepare the ground for the critique of the Western ideology of (courtly) love.

The first line of the sequence also invokes an extreme intellectual symptom of Western decadence and self-estrangement, the Dadaist movement. However "Dadaist", as a description of the White Queen, is in many ways inappropriate. Whereas Dadaism sets out to repudiate received cultural structures of all kinds, the White Queen's poetic practice draws extensively on established forms and conventions. He also interrogates obsessively the cultural and political continuities between past and present. Yet the continuities he highlights are themselves narratives of fragmentation and disconnection, of profound psychological and social disorder. His characteristic experience of Africa is glossed by the next lines of the poem; "Provincial Dadaist!/ Pathic, pathetic, half-blind and half-pissed/ Most of these tours in Africa". Again European structures of order dissipate and breakdown in Africa, ("pathic" meaning 'diseased' and 'disordered').

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<sup>2</sup>In the wider context of *The Loiners* it is difficult not to connect the opening description of the White Queen's physique with the "fat man", "King Canute", of the previous poem in the volume, 'A Proper Caution'. Each 'figure' embodies the symptoms of Western enervation. "King Canute's" sexuality is atrophied and he is impotent before the gathering waves of "death and darkness". The White Queen and the other Europeans in the sequence also struggle against sexual repression and are haunted by 'the abyss'.



Yet, to the Dadaist, such a collapse may be welcome. Dada's rejection of the past can be interpreted as being motivated by a subversive desire for wholesale cultural rebellion. If structures disintegrate in the provinces of Empire then an anarchic freedom may be made possible there: a provincial Dadaism. Perhaps, then, the White Queen is a proud "Provincial Dadaist". On the other hand, it seems perverse to read this phrase in a way which exempts it from the tone of sarcastic self-derision that marks the rest of the passage. In fact the phrase seethes with ironic contradictions. The etymology of 'province', an Imperial term that has been current in histories of Empire from ancient Rome through to modern European colonialism, disallows Dada's declared obliteration of the past. "Provincial" locates the White Queen within a hierarchical power structure, ironically disabling Dada's pretence of anarchic rebellion. The alternative definition of 'provincial' also undermines the claim to unfettered liberation by emphasizing a confinement or commitment to the narrow values and manners of a particular cultural background. The Dada movement was determinedly cosmopolitan; both in the sense that it was centred around various European capitals, and because, in rejecting the culture(s) of the past it also rejected received distinctions and divisions between cultures. "Provincial" emphasises the White Queen's definitive attachment to the culture of Empire, Britain, Europe; he is not a cosmopolite, a 'citizen of the World'. A further irony occurs because of the fact that, in English, the signification of 'Dada' is disrupted by the association with 'father', and so with patriarchy. As the sequence progresses, the White Queen discovers that he is indeed a "Dada-ist", although only in this parodic, patriarchal sense.

The opening line of the poem establishes the White Queen's 'official', social identity, which combines the dual intellectual roles of "Professor!" and "Poet!". The derisory exclamation marks, and the



juxtaposition of these honorific titles with the ironies of "Provincial Dadaist" suggest, at the poem's outset, that he can be viewed as being emblematic of a European intellectual ("Professor!") and spiritual ("Poet!") bankruptcy. He is, like the other Europeans in the sequence, stalked by 'the abyss'. However this abyss, this Nothingness, is in fact within them; it is the existential outcome of their European cultural inheritance. It is appropriate, therefore, that the imagery of the body developed in Part V of 'Satyrae' does not describe external deterioration but refers to its internal workings. The Russian medical officer, Boris, locates 'the abyss' inside the body;

The campus wants its pep- and sleeping pills.  
It's not diseases but the void that kills,  
The space, the gaps, the darkness, that same void  
He hears vibrating in clogged adenoid  
And vocal chords. Through his cool stethoscope  
He hears despair pulsate and withered hope  
Flutter the failing heart a little, death  
Of real feeling in a laboured breath.  
He knows with his firm finger on a pulse  
It is this Nothingness and nothing else  
Throbs in the blood. (pp.26-7)

Boris' lover, we are told, has returned to Europe and in her absence he finds (like the White Queen himself), bleak illumination in the philosophy of Pascal, reading "his damp-stained *Pensées* on their double bed" (p.27). In the above passage an apprehension of spiritual emptiness—of "despair", "withered hope", and a general emotional alienation, "death/Of real feeling"—is translated into a brand of ontological nihilism. For Boris, "Nothingness" is the essence of Being; he feels its presence at the very quick of life, in the throbbing pulse. Also, as "the void" is always present in the 'vibrations of the vocal chords', meaninglessness permeates all utterances. This view accords with Pascal's description of 'fallen man' who, divorced from God, is *essentially* empty and



purposeless. Human activity, for Pascal, is no more than a series of strategies of diversion, an attempt to evade the consciousness of this essential non-Being:

Nothing is more intolerable to a man than a state of complete repose, without desires, without work, without amusements, without occupation. In such a state he becomes aware of his nothingness, his abandonment, his inadequacy, his dependence, his emptiness, his futility. There at once wells up from the depths of his soul weariness, gloom, misery, exasperation, frustration, despair.<sup>3</sup>

The predicament of Boris, (and of the White Queen), implies that the intense feeling of "abandonment" found in Pascal's dark Christianity has only been etched more deeply into the European psyche by the growing secularization of the continent.

The opening lines of Part V of 'Satyrae', however, suggest a cultural perspective from which to view this nihilism. The obsessive designation of Africa as Other has led to a profound alienation from the African environment and an inability to discover or assign comprehensible meaning to it;

Northwards two hundred miles, an emptiness  
As big as Europe; *Sah'ra*; Nothingness.  
South six hundred, miles of churning sea  
Make of the strongest swimmer a nonentity... (p.26)

The limits of Eurocentric values and systems of thought are exposed by the failure or refusal to find a foothold of recognition, connection, or any sense of belonging, within this environment. The European consciousness instead transfers its own fears and anxieties onto the Otherness. The feelings of impotence, vulnerability, insignificance and "abandonment" provoked by the immensities of Africa correspond with Pascal's projection of an inner desolation and emptiness onto the universe, space and time;

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<sup>3</sup>Blaise Pascal, *Pascal's Pensées*, trans. Martin Turnell (London: Harvill Press, 1962) 149.



I see the terrifying spaces of the universe which imprison me, and I find myself planted in a tiny corner of this vast space without my knowing why I happen to be here rather than in some other place, or why the brief space of life that is mine has been allocated to me at this point rather than another in all the eternity of time which preceded me and all the eternity of time that will come after me. I see only infinities on all sides which enclose me like an atom and like a shadow which only lasts for a second and which will not return...

...I only know that on leaving this world I shall fall for ever, either into the void or into the hands of an angry God...<sup>4</sup>

To Pascal any and every human environment is irrevocably Other. The anxieties produced by this condition of complete exclusion or dissociation from any physical or metaphysical 'home' are expressed elsewhere in *The Loiners*. In 'The Death of the P.W.D. Man', for example, Pascal's inhuman "infinities on all sides" become the brutal, dehumanized "dark cattle trucks", and the effaced self, the "atom" or "shadow", is the repellent "bug" which is crushed in 'the train crash', death; "Life the bright compartment between dark cattle trucks/ Concertinaed in the crush like a bug between two books" (p.58). Yet the three separate references to Pascal in 'Satyrae' also insist upon the fact that the debilitating vision of an absurd universe which the P.W.D Man, the White Queen and Boris have inherited is a specifically European construct. The historical tendency of European culture to project its own radical alienation outwards is subtly exposed by the description of the Sahara as "an emptiness/As big as Europe".

The pathological negation common both to Boris' nihilism and to Dada is indicative of the acute crisis afflicting contemporary Western culture. However, when the force of absence and negation threatens to overwhelm him the White Queen once again refuses to relinquish all value, reverting to a

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<sup>4</sup>Pascal 105.



stubborn affirmation of the positive energies of association ("love") and resilience ("courage");

It is this Nothingness and nothing else  
Throbs in the blood. Nothing is no little part  
Of time's huge effort in the human heart.  
There's love. There's courage. And that is all.  
And the *itus et reditus* of Pascal. (p.27)

Yet the capacity of love to oppose the vision of endless futility implied in Pascal's "*itus et reditus*", ('coming and going') is immediately questioned. The 'Satyrae' section closes with another description of a failed relationship between estranged, isolated Europeans. Boris "reads"

His damp-stained *Pensées* on their double bed.  
The Nothingness! Lisa—she couldn't stand  
The boredom and packed off for Switzerland.  
She sends him a postcard of a snowblown slope:  
*Boris, ich bin frei...und friere.* He can't cope  
Here alone. There's nothing for a sick M.O.  
Sick of savannah, sick of inselberg,  
Sick of black Africa, who cannot go  
Ever again to white St Petersburg. (p.27)

Interjected immediately after the description of Boris alone and abandoned "on their double bed", the cry of "the Nothingness!" (again) projects the Europeans' anguished sense of divorce from each other, and the ontological predicament of fallen man described by Pascal, onto the African environment. Boris dramatises his life in post-lapsarian terms: he inhabits a fallen, "black Africa" and is eternally exiled from the mythically pure "white St Petersburg", (where he "cannot go/Ever again").

Yet the poetry has already undercut this "black" and "white" antithesis by disrupting the connotations of "white". In the Alpine imagery of the postcard, "white" implies coldness, frigidity and desolation. Lisa has chosen the picture of the "snowblown slope" to depict her loneliness. This

message is reinforced by the description of herself on the postcard, which also appears to be an imploring invitation; "Boris, I am free...and freezing!". The reference to the African "inselberg" parallels the image of the Swiss Alp. 'Inselberg', a word of Germanic origin which in German means literally 'island-mountain'<sup>5</sup> suggests, through associations with (Northern European) Romantic paintings of 'lonely peaks', a lofty, paralytic solitude which Boris is now weary of and debilitated by: "sick of". The same connotations, and the paradoxical opposition of liberty and constraint contained in the deflating progression, "free...and freezing", contradict Lisa's claim "I am free". Whether in Africa or Europe Boris and Lisa employ the same landscape symbol to express their condition of isolation; the implication is that Europeans carry the 'fallen environment' within themselves.

## **ii. Travesties: Distant Ophir**

Harrison responds with sympathy to the grimly inclusive pessimism evinced by Pascal in passages such as this;

I myself admit that as soon as the Christian religion reveals the principle that human nature is corrupt and separated from God, it opens our eyes so that wherever we look we discover evidence of the truth of its teaching; because nature is such that it bears witness to a lost God, both in man and outside him, and a fallen nature.<sup>6</sup>

However, precisely by locating the notion of "a fallen nature" in the specific instance—that is, finding "evidence" of it almost "wherever" he looks—Harrison historicizes the myth and in the process transforms and secularizes (or at least de-Christianizes) its significance. In 'Allotments', for example, the specific details of the 'fallen' landscape of Leeds invoke the particular industrial, military and commercial histories which have shaped this

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<sup>5</sup>'Inselberg' denotes specifically "a steep-sided mount...rising above the general level of the plain...often found in the semi-arid regions of tropical countries". Chambers Dictionary

<sup>6</sup>Pascal 144.



urban environment. The descriptions of the "fallen nature" of Africa, on the other hand, are located in Western cultural history in so far as they are exposed as projections of the Europeans' own repressions and anxieties. These internal and external 'fallen environments' are the products, the outcomes, of the long and ongoing 'fall' of patriarchal history in the West. This history is 'falling' or 'fallen' to the extent it is constituted by recurring transgressions against the "precious idea" of universal affiliation. Such a view of history makes possible a secular rendering of the mystical notion central to The Fall: what Pascal terms "the mystery of the transmission of sin"<sup>7</sup>;

...there is no doubt that there is nothing that shocks our reason more than to say that the sin of the first man was the cause of the guilt of those who were so far removed from the source of infection that it seems impossible that they could have been contaminated by it...yet without this mystery, which is the most incomprehensible of all, we should be incomprehensible to ourselves. The tangled knot of our condition acquired its twists and turns in that abyss; so that man is more inconceivable without the mystery than the mystery is to man.<sup>8</sup>

To suggest that the "tangled knot" of the Loiners' "condition acquired its twists and turns in (the) abyss" of Leeds', Britain's, Europe's history is not only to re-emphasize their cultural and historical constructedness. It is to recognise the factual, material continuities between the Loiners' conditions of existence and the vast catalogue of oppressions and atrocities contained in their historical inheritance. The location of the present generation within this history leads to the awareness of "contamination" which pervades the poetry of *The Loiners*.

This historicized apprehension of The Fall illuminates both the repeated metaphor of disease in the volume and the images of voids, holes and absences. There are significant occasions in each of these lines of imagery

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<sup>7</sup>Pascal 170.

<sup>8</sup>Pascal 170.



where the same conceit combines allusions to past transgressions with representations of present debilitation or existential loss. The apparently innocuous phrase at the close of 'The Songs of the P.W.D. Man', for example, "look at the hole/ You've made falling" (p.53), carries biting puns on "holes" as well as on "falling". The progress that the P.W.D. Man, emblem and representative of the British Empire, has made through life has been a 'fall'. The "hole he's made" refers in part to the 'fallen' abyss of Britain's recent imperial history; it is also the 'sum' of the ethical and existential absences in his personal life. Similarly, the "British Isles Disease" and the fevered delirium of the White Queen in the fourth section of the sequence, 'Manica', each figure as imperial or historical contamination. At the same time, as the infections are in both cases venereal diseases, they also connote the emotional anguish of the corruption, breakdown and divorce of Western love relationships.

The implicit connection between past transgressions and present suffering is elaborated explicitly in 'Distant Ophir', the first poem of the third section of 'The White Queen', 'Travesties'. 'Distant Ophir' is an adaptation of a section of the poem 'Syphilis sive Morbus Gallicus' by Hieronymus Fracastorius (1483-1553). The title translates as 'Syphilis or the French Disease', a slur which is understandable given the fact that Fracastorius lived through the series of French invasions of Italy which occurred between 1494 and 1528. The full title is also significant as syphilis will form part of the divine retribution inflicted upon the hubristic transgressors who are addressed in the translation simply as "Westerners". In *The Loiners*, of course, the "Westerners" are the inheritors of the culture and history of the West, and in particular of European colonialism;

'Westerners, who laid the Sun's fowl low,  
the flocks of Apollo, now stand and hear  
the dreadful sufferings you must undergo...' (p.31)



The profanity specified here, the killing of "fowl" sacred to Apollo, is juxtaposed with parallel, secular acts of violence and transgression (as is often the case in the narratives of Homer and Greek mythology). The second and third stanzas of 'Distant Ophir' introduce the Westerners' secular offences; imperial conquest, exploitation and oppression;

'This land, where you are now, is that Ophir  
your flashy maps show off like jewellery  
but not yet yours to own nor domineer

its quiet peoples until now quite free;  
cities and new sacraments you wont impose  
until you've suffered much by land and sea...' (p.31)

The implacable speaker of these lines is an enigmatic messenger of the Gods whose identity and authority are disclosed in the final lines of the poem;

And away behind the crags the dark bird flew.

And everything it prophesied came true. (p.32)

Appropriately, as a herald of Apollo, the prophecy which "the dark bird" delivers is expressed in a highly concentrated and ambiguous style reminiscent of the ancient oracles. The import and the tone of the poem also echo the note struck by the epigraph to 'The Death of the P.W.D. Man', the Abakuá proverb, 'the goat who breaks the drum pays with his own skin'<sup>9</sup>. The prophecy pronounced in stanzas five to ten of 'Distant Ophir', however, is more expansive, portentous and resonant;

You'll war with strangers, bloodily, destroy  
or be destroyed, your discoveries will cost  
destructions greater than the siege of Troy,

worse wanderings after with more thousands lost,

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<sup>9</sup>Quoted in Romana Huk, 'The Leeds Renaissance', *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies 1: Tony Harrison*, ed. Neil Astley (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991) 81.

comrades you fitted out search parties for  
hutches of bleached ribs on our bare coast.

You'll go on looking, losing more and more  
to the sea, the climate, weapons, ours *and* yours,  
your crimes abroad brought home as civil war.

And also *Syphilis*: sores, foul sores  
will drive you back through storm and calenture  
crawling like lepers to our peaceful shores.

The malaise of the West will lure  
the scapegoats of its ills, you and your crew,  
back to our jungles looking for a cure.

You'll only find the Old World in the New... (p.32)

These lines combine descriptions of archetypal experiences of colonial expansion and disintegration with images of fall, corruption and decadence. Western history is reduced to the dual themes of continuous political violence and existential degeneration. The cataclysms of the twentieth century are both located and circumscribed within this continuity. Surveying Western history in these terms, the "discoveries" referred to in the second line of the fifth stanza are those which have fuelled and enabled Western colonial expansion. These are not only the 'discoveries' by explorers of 'new' lands, but also technological discoveries, especially weaponry. The rising destructive capacity of military technology, which culminates in the development of nuclear weapons, informs one interpretation of the statement "your discoveries will cost/ destructions greater than the siege of Troy". The image of the burning city of Troy prefigures the carnage of total war which is repeated through the centuries, and which links most emphatically with the allusions, elsewhere in *The Loiners*, to the Second World War. (The use of "civil war" in the seventh stanza can be considered, from the wide scope of the prophecy's perspective, to intend wars between "Westerners", in particular between competing Western colonial



powers.) At the same time, the destruction of Troy can be seen to symbolise the annihilation of an individual civilization. From this perspective the fall of Troy figures as a symbolic precedent for the extinction or suppression of native cultures, and for the acts of genocide or the vast displacements of populations which have followed the Westerners' "discoveries" of other continents and their inhabitants.

The Homeric allusion extends into stanza six: the Westerners' "discoveries" will not only "cost/ destructions greater than the siege of Troy" but will also lead to "worse wanderings" than those endured "after" the fall of Troy. On one hand such "wanderings" are suggestive of the flight of Aeneas and the other Trojan survivors of the war; and so of the future sufferings of displaced peoples and refugees. More central to the themes of 'Distant Ophir', however, is the reference to the fate of the victors of the war, to 'the wanderings of Odysseus' in particular, but also to the "thousands lost" amid the devastation and dispersal of the Greek fleet (wreaked by an angry and offended god, Poseidon), on its return from the siege of Troy. Within 'Distant Ophir' these post-war (or post-colonial) "wanderings" are depicted as further punishments for the transgressions committed by the Westerners. The poem implies a mythic structure underlying the Homeric epics which is comparable to the Christian story of The Fall. In the aftermath of 'the fall' of Troy the victors (and also the vanquished) are forced to wander because they are excluded from, or denied a return to, their homes. Also, if the fundamental moral transgression of the "Westerners" is defined as the denial of 'universal affiliation', then it is analogous to the sin of Cain. On one level the line in stanza seven, "your crimes abroad brought home as civil war", contains a similar correspondence: the refusal to recognise connections and responsibilities to the cultural Other leads to the same denials at home. (In this way the fundamental crime is



"brought home" in another sense—that is, exposed, highlighted.) Perhaps contained in the allusion to 'the wanderings of Odysseus', therefore, is an echo of the darker, more explicitly retributive 'wanderings of Cain'.

According to the prophecy of 'Distant Ophir' this state of "wandering" is the existential inheritance of the (contemporary) Westerner. The symptomatic aimlessness, restlessness, and essential incoherence connoted by 'wandering' is reflected both in the nature of the White Queen's "tours of Africa", "half-blind and half-pissed", and in Pascal's account of the human condition. The wandering Loiner is deprived of a physical and a metaphysical home, condemned to "go on looking, losing more and more/ to the sea, the climate". These lines refer ostensibly to the search for missing "comrades" mentioned in stanza six, and in part they may be interpreted as signifying a disintegration of social identity and the individual's growing isolation as "more and more" companions are "lost". Yet, like the desolate image of the dead comrades ("hutches of bleached ribs on our bare coast"), these lines also depict an enveloping, hostile environment. This evokes Pascal's "terrifying spaces of the universe which imprison me" and the Loiners' projection onto Africa of their own radical estrangement from Self, Other, the landscape, and so on. Wandering, adrift, rootless, the Westerners lose not only comrades "to the sea, the climate" but also, like Pascal, meaning, identity, purpose, and, unlike Pascal, belief.

The third of the "dreadful sufferings" listed in the prophecy, following the "destructions greater" than Troy and the "worse wanderings after", is "*Syphilis*". One function of the metaphor of syphilis in the poem is to conflate the ancient Greek idea of 'pollution' and the Christian doctrine of original sin. The reference to syphilis in 'Newcastle is Peru' again carries this significance. There Harrison recalls Loiner "William Hey, the first to show/



syphilis *in utero*" (p.83), that is, 'in the womb'. Syphilis is "the malaise of the West" and those who are contaminated today are described appropriately as "the scapegoats of its [syphilis', the West's] ills" as they both assume the burden of past transgressions and endure the consequences. To translate this metaphor into the actual historical experiences of the Loiners/Westerners: these consequences include the physical and psychological suffering caused by the repressive alienation which pervades the West's authoritarian culture(s), suffering which the poetry of *The Loiners* recounts obsessively.

Venereal disease, as outlined earlier, often figures in the volume as a metaphor for the failure of Western love relationships. The punishment of "*Syphilis*", therefore, connotes in particular the anguish of such divorce. As modern pharmacy hunts in "jungles looking for a cure" for Western diseases, so the Loiners "like lepers" seek in Africa for a human connection which is 'untainted', 'pure'. In the first part of 'Satyrae', for example, the White Queen "walks past leprosarium.../Begging for pure sex" (pp.20-1). 'Distant Ophir', however, repeats the fatalistic position, implied elsewhere in the volume, that the Westerners' attempt to escape from their pathological inheritance is futile as they are constituted by it. Inevitably, the prophecy proclaims, they cannot perceive any "cure" but will "only find the Old World in the New".

## CHAPTER FIVE

### **The Railroad Heroides**

The theme of the Europeans' failure to achieve a healing contact with the cultural Other in Africa saturates the four poems which comprise the second section of 'The White Queen', 'The Railroad Heroides'. The speaker of these poems, or rather the 'author' of these 'epistles', is a Loiner addressing an African woman who is his ex-lover. The poetry is permeated by the emotional aftermath of his separation from her and all the incidents and details described in the poems have to be read with reference to his fixation upon the end of their affair. Yet the fact that the narrative is addressed to a specific person is not actually signalled until half-way through the second poem ("I flung your zig-zag/ Tuareg ring...into the sea" (p.29)). It is the allusion to the *Heroïdes* of Ovid, as much as the poetry itself, which discloses the presence of the psychological 'frame' to the poems. Ovid's *Heroïdes* is a sequence of verse epistles in which famous heroines (taken mainly from Greek mythology) write to their absent lovers. The gender inversion, from female personae in Ovid's sequence to a male voice here, is, as has already been noted, a favourite device of the White Queen. The name of the first section of the sequence, 'Satyrae', for example, appears to be a word invented by the White Queen to denote the plural of 'satyra', a nineteenth century coinage meaning 'a female satyr'. ('Satyrae' also makes a pun on 'satires'.) 'Heroïdes', in Ovid's usage, means 'heroines'. Yet it may be argued that the word 'heroides' is employed by the White Queen simply as the plural of 'heroid', a heroid being the epistolary verse form which, though it derives its name from Ovid's *Heroïdes*, can accomodate



the sentiments of a male or a female persona.<sup>1</sup> The connections and overlaps established with the *Heroides*, though, suggest irresistably that a specific, if complicated and ironic, allusion to Ovid is intended, and that the switch from female to male protestation is a significant reversal.

If in some ways the male persona echoes the concerns of his female antecedents, in other crucial ways his status is closer to the absent heroes whom they address. Drawing attention to "something that strikes every reader of the *Heroides*: the similarity of the heroines and their situations", classicist Sara Mack points out that "all have been deserted or left behind by their lovers, eight (Phyllis, Oenone, Hypsipile, Dido, Deianira, Ariadne, Medea and Sappho) by men who have sailed off never to return"<sup>2</sup>. The Loiner travels away from his African lover. Most of the Greek heroines are geographically static or confined. This difference is emphasised, of course, in the title, 'The *Railroad Heroides*'. In fact railway settings only feature in the third and fourth poems of the section. The specific designation of 'railway' in the title locates in the modern period the theme of lovers separated. Also, as in 'The Death of the P.W.D. Man', trains and the railways are associated with the phallic energy of the industrial North and with the steam technology which fuelled nineteenth century European imperial expansion.

In the first two poems, however, the persona is not on a train, but water-borne. The second poem finds him on a ship travelling between Africa and Europe. Half-way through the first poem, still in Africa, he "lie(s) back" in a canoe feeling "like a corpse Valhalla bound" (p.28). The Nordic allusion is

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<sup>1</sup>The O.E.D. defines 'heroid' as "A poem in epistolary form, expressive of the sentiments of some hero or heroine: from the *Heroides* of Ovid, which take the form of letters to heroes from their wives or sweethearts...[ad. L. *Heroides*, the title of the Epistles of Ovid...a. Gr. ηρωιδες, plur. of ηρωις heroine.]".

<sup>2</sup>Sara Mack, *Ovid* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1988) 71.



appropriate in one sense as his destination will indeed be Northern Europe. At the same time the reference to Valhalla—the heavenly palace, in Scandinavian mythology, for the souls of fallen heroes—is suffused with bitter irony. Firstly, as his treatment of the African women in the opening lines of the poem emphasises, this Loiner is not a noble Northern 'hero'. The behaviour of the imperial Northern raiders of the Southern Hemisphere (the "Westerners" of 'Distant Ophir') does, however, highlight the presence of an ideological continuity with the patriarchal 'warrior virtues' of both the Norse 'heroes' and those of Greek legend. In fact one of the significant overlaps between 'The Railroad Heroides' and Ovid's epistles is their mutual rejection of received epic notions of heroism. Mack highlights the way in which Ovid, by retelling epic narratives from the perspective of the often marginal and disregarded female characters, subverts the patriarchal values of the epic. She illustrates this idea in her discussion of 'Heroides 3', in which princess Briseis, one of Achilles' spoils of war, writes to him after being seized by Agamemnon. In the *Iliad* Briseis is simply a name, a pawn within the action that enthralls the reader, the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon. Here Briseis is a rounded personality, abjectly in love with Achilles. A kind of dramatic irony is established by the contrast between Briseis' representation of events and the depiction of those same events as they appear in the *Iliad*. Out of this ironic textual interplay, Mack argues, Achilles emerges as "a poor excuse for a lover and a poor excuse for a hero; his only heroic feat is the destruction of Briseis' home and family"<sup>3</sup>. Mack suggests that comparable subversions of the heroic pervade all of the epistles. "In the *Heroides*", she concludes, "Ovid seems to question the whole notion of heroism".<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Mack 76.

<sup>4</sup>Mack 76.



Riven with a sense of guilt and inadequacy, the speaker of 'The Railroad Heroides' participates consciously in the ironies generated by the Ovidian frame to the poems. The allusion to Valhalla, like much of the poetry of this section, burns with caustic self-disgust. The Loiner perceives himself as an existentially and ethically 'fallen hero', and this is partly why he feels mortified, "like a corpse". Fallen in this sense, the Valhalla he is "bound" for, Leeds, will not be a place of blissful rest. Instead, like the P.W.D. Man, as he approaches 'home' his feverish torment increases and he "find(s) sleep impossible" (p.29). In fact, again like the P.W.D. Man, this illness discloses an alienation from and aversion to his former home. The fever is also a further example of the imagery of disease which, like syphilis in 'Distant Ophir', denotes his complicity with the transgressions of the "Westerners". The poems of 'The Railroad Heroides' can be seen as another dramatisation of the state of 'wandering' referred to in 'Distant Ophir'. There the crimes which led to the punishment of restless wandering were compared implicitly to those committed by the classical heroes during the Trojan War. Here they are compared with the guilt which the Greek heroes incur by their disregard not of the cultural Other, but of the sexual Other. It is notable, however, that many of the deserted women in the *Heroides* are foreigners. The classical crimes alluded to in 'Distant Ophir' and 'The Railroad Heroides' commit the same fundamental ethical transgression as colonialism: the refusal to recognise one's responsibilities to the (cultural/sexual/racial) Other.

The predicament of the Loiner in 'The Railroad Heroides' can be likened to that which confronts the "Westerners" at the close of 'Distant Ophir'. In Africa he has been "looking for a cure", an 'untainted' love relationship, to relieve the existential corruption which is the legacy of Western culture and history. Yet he brings "the malaise of the West" with him and is unable to



forge a satisfying personal bond with the Other. His status remains that of the fallen, homeless wanderer. Worse, this latest failure may be interpreted as compounding the crimes of his colonial inheritance—if, that is, we read the rather ambiguous, submerged narrative of this section to be implying that the Loiner has abandoned his African lover.<sup>5</sup> On the level of political/historical symbolism, 'The Death of the P.W.D Man' was shown to dramatise the contraction of the British Empire. Although the poetry is not as overtly rhetorical as the P.W.D. Man poems, 'The Railroad Heroides' can be seen to pass implicit comment on the nature of the British/European withdrawal from its (African) colonies. Europe's disengagement from Africa is conducted in a manner which does not revise but continues the European exclusion of the colonial Other from equal ethical consideration. The lover, like Africa, is abandoned to the economic vulnerability, social fragmentation and civil discord which are products of Europe's cataclysmic colonial intervention in African

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<sup>5</sup>The poetry of 'The Railroad Heroides' is extremely elliptical. As a result it is possible to render an alternative interpretation of the hidden narrative. In this 'version' the Loiner has been rejected by his African lover. She has chosen to stay with her tribe. Such a reading would transform dramatically the mood and significance of the poems. In the absence of clear textual signals it is difficult to present a decisive case for either reading. However, perhaps the most persuasive textual evidence for the 'version' which I have chosen to articulate occurs at the end of the third poem, which is the emotional climax of 'The Railroad Heroides';

My throbbing ear  
Bangs on the pillow with an angry thud—  
It's you, it's you, with a sound like blood,  
After the bloodshed, if your tribe survives,  
Pounding a big man's yams among young wives. (pp. 29-30)

Here it is not only his ear banging on the pillow which evokes the vision of his lover "pounding... yams"; the Loiner also associates the anger of "angry thud" with her. If his lover has rejected him it is difficult to see why he should envision her as being angry. Also, the image that he conjures up for himself—of her angry, vulnerable ("if your tribe survives"), and socially subjugated—seems far more like the product of a mind consumed by guilt than one filled with resentment. It is possible, however, to argue that these lines do not necessarily suggest that the lover *is* angry. Perhaps the thought process from "angry thud—" to "it's you" should be read as 'I'm angry and I know it's the thought of you that causes this anger'. It may seem like a nice distinction on which to hinge the whole interpretation of 'The Railroad Heroides' but personally I find the first reading, where "it's you" signifies 'it's you angrily thudding', to be the more convincing. (In fact this is not the only point at which the reading of the poetry is somewhat strained by the 'alternative' narrative. Perhaps, though, it is the most obvious.)



history. The Loiner himself appears implicitly to locate his personal act of betrayal in this wider context.

The attempt to indicate the situation and state of mind of the speaker, which has taken up the last few pages, is necessary because of the extremely elliptical nature of the poetry. In order to offer an adequate reading of the verse an appreciation of the searing emotions and ironies underlying the poetry is required. The narrative moves rapidly through often contradictory emotions, all of which remain true to the situation. The second epistle describes a fancy dress party on board the French ship;

Off Teneriffe

French soldiers from Gabon dressed up as sheiks  
Waltzed amidships and blackamoors cut cakes  
Iced thick with tricolours. The *Marseillaise*  
Boomed from the tannoy and the easy lays  
Beamed at the officers. I flung your zig-zag  
Tuareg ring and the red, goat-leather bag  
I'd bought for our swimming things into the sea  
Placating nothing. (p.29)

The details of the fancy dress evoke the colonial past and, at the same time, indicate the complacent continuation of colonial ideology in the present. The soldiers are located suggestively by their Arabic costumes (of, specifically, "sheiks") atop a hierarchy of patriarchal authority. Similarly, although "blackamoor" may be an obsolete word, and the Negroes playing the blackamoors may be dressed in obsolete clothes, their subservience continues. The "blackamoors" are occupied with literally 'serving' the French flag (in the form of cakes). The pervasive influence of imperial culture on the scene is highlighted by the emphatic representation at the party of two of the symbols of French nationalism: the cakes are extravagantly 'draped' or, rather, unwholesomely coated, with the national flag ("iced thick with tricolours") and



"the *Marseillaise*/Boom(s)" loudly from the ship's tannoy. The use of "Boomed" produces connotations of gun or cannon fire which evoke the violence of the colonial enterprise. Further, the parallelism in the verse which juxtaposes "Boomed from the tannoy" with "Beamed at the officers" subtly associates the implied violence of "Boomed" with the sexual attraction of "Beamed". The associations between sex and domination are also latent in the Europeans' stereotype of the sadistic and virile Arab "sheik". It is the connection between sex and colonial domination which provokes the Loiner's dramatic response to the scene. In the pause between "officers" and "I flung..." his mind has switched obsessively towards contemplation of his own conduct. The casualness of the incipient relationships, underlined by "easy lays", contrasts with the token of mutual commitment, her "zig-zag/Tuareg ring". He attempts to dignify the act of throwing the ring and the bag into the sea by depicting it as a desperate gesture of atonement or sacrifice. If the atavistic gesture "placat(es) nothing" this is partly because he, unlike the heroes of the *Heroides*, does not believe that there are any gods to placate and also, perhaps, because he perceives immediately that the action is an unconvincing, inadequate response. The anger and impatience connoted by "flung" (which undermines the religious pretensions attached to the moment) suggests a further level of motivation. Beneath the desire for atonement is a less elevated wish simply to relinquish and be rid of his guilt and anguish. Neither goal, however, is attained. The epistle continues;

Placating nothing. A little lighter, free  
 To saunter in fancy dress the festooned decks,  
 In the midst of plenty, hungry for good sex,  
 I found a lonely woman. I got you off my chest... (p.29)

The sense of contradiction between "placating nothing" and "a little lighter" reflects two conflicting impulses. His conscience presses him to confront his



guilt. A "lighter" self longs to evade this confrontation. In the caesura after "placating nothing" there is another sudden, but more subtle, switch in attitude. His conscience is suppressed. He persuades himself that the jettisoning of the ring and the bag has broken or eroded his lingering sense of commitment to his lover, easing the burden of guilt and leaving him "a little lighter". At the same time, this phrase refers to the shift in his demeanour and dignity, denoting a self-conscious retreat from moral seriousness. He dons a costume and his perceptions of the festivities alter. The brief descriptions of the ship's "plenty", and the phrase "good sex", ignore pointedly the associations of imperial ideology established in the earlier depiction of the party. By joining the party he participates implicitly in the collective self-delusion that Europe maintains concerning its colonial history and identity. His assumption of fancy dress dramatises his complacent embrace of a European heritage of economic dominance and material "plenty" and, further, of a contemporary Nationalist/Imperialist European culture indifferent or inimical to the (cultural/colonial) Other.

This complacency is reflected, on the level of personal/sexual relationships, by his adoption of an attitude of masculine bravado: he will get the painful memory of his lover "off (his) chest" by sleeping with another woman. Yet, if "hungry for good sex/ I found a lonely woman. I got you off my chest" seems to indicate that he does precisely this, the next lines describe the collapse of his machismo;

I found a lonely woman. I got you off my chest,  
But had to have my hand held and I lay  
All night with my confessor, fully dressed,  
Afraid of my terror, longing for the day. (p.29)

The phrase 'get it off your chest' usually refers to the alleviation of an emotional burden through a verbal articulation of pent-up feelings and in fact it



is a verbal release that the phrase refers to here: a confession. Sexually mortified (he remains "fully dressed"), by the overwhelming resurgence of guilt, the "lonely woman" becomes his "confessor" not his lover. The clothes that he wears through the night are, presumably, his costume. However in the intimacy of sexual contact he is unable to sustain the self-deception which the costume dramatised or continue to deny the intensity of the bond which links him to his African lover. The earlier desire for atonement is given a poignant, secular expression by his confession although the confession does not provide relief and the second epistle closes with the image of the Loiner prone and helpless, paralysed by anguish.

The first and third epistles contain strikingly similar images to this —of the Loiner horizontal and passive as he is conveyed away from Africa to Leeds. This movement begins at the end of the first epistle;

I lie back like a corpse Valhalla bound  
And sleep. Only a wet, withdrawal sound  
Sucks at my ear. I dream. I dream the sun  
Blackens my bare balls to bitumen. (p.28)

The irony of the Nordic allusion has been observed earlier. The "withdrawal sound" does not have a clear local reference; perhaps it alludes to the boatman's oars or pole in the lake. However the phrase "sucks at my ear", combined with the simile which likens the Loiner to a slain hero being rowed to the afterworld, evokes the idea of the sound sucking away his spirit or vitality. In view of the incident on the lake which precedes these lines, this process of mortification can be interpreted as representing creeping shame and another wave of guilt. This reading is given added weight by the connotations of the word 'withdrawal' which recall the fact of his own withdrawal from his lover. In his drunken, disturbed sleep the "wet, withdrawal sound" may even figure his act of betrayal as a sexual, genital withdrawal. This association helps to illuminate



the dream image of genital destruction. The dream projects an apposite punishment in which the Loiner's sexuality is erased.

In the first epistle, however, there is no explicit reference to the lover. The Loiner's mortification at the end of the first epistle, like his paralysis at the close of the second, is a reaction to the immediate events of the poem's narrative. In both cases, though, his responses to these events are mediated by an underlying fixation on the continuity between his individual act of betrayal and the transgressions of the West. The lake scene in the first epistle exposes, in terms more graphic and squalid than the fancy dress party, the corruption inherent in colonial relationships;

A lake like lead. A bar. The crowding, nude  
Slack breasted, tattooed girls made lewd,  
Lascivious gestures, their bald groins  
Studded with wet francs, for my loose coins,  
I'm surrounded by canoes. *Cadeau! Cadeau!*  
I fling out all my change, but they won't go. (p.28)

The description of sexual commodification, "bald groins/ Studded with wet francs", presents a grotesque image of colonial subjection which suggests pointedly the relationship between political and economic subjugation and personal debasement. "*Cadeau*" means 'gift' or 'present'. The Loiner is trapped in the claustrophobic role of the paternalistic/authoritarian colonist. His behaviour conforms to this dual role; firstly, by throwing his loose change to the group and then, panicking that they expect more money from him, by crushing the knuckles of one of the girls, "yell(ing)" at her "*Tu, vache noire!*", ('You black cow!'), (p.28). His shame, we can infer, is intensified by the comparison between this intercourse and his recent love affair. The scene forces him to confront the degrading conditions of colonial relationships which he and his lover had had an opportunity to defy and transcend, but which his treatment of her has, instead, reinforced.

The Loiner's Ovidian role models are Western mythic heroes such as Odysseus, Aeneas and Theseus, who abandon foreign lovers but who are also archetypal examples of the Wanderer figure invoked in 'Distant Ophir'. The reference in the Loiner's dream to the sun hints at the notion of divine displeasure which later, in the second epistle, informs his desire to "placate" the sea. (It also prefigures the allusion to a wrathful sun-god, Apollo, in the opening line of 'Distant Ophir', "Westerners who laid the Sun's fowl low", (p.31).) The form of divine retribution which his guilt-ridden psyche envisages is the scorching reduction of his "bare balls to bitumen". While the depiction of exposed ("bald") female genitals represents the subjection and defilement of the colonial Other, the corresponding male image of uncovered "bare balls" contains associations of phallic power which recall the closing lines of 'The Pocket Wars...', "His last wish/ Bequeathed his gonads to the Pentagon", (p.15). The imagery of male testes also carries connotations of the idea of lineage. Such connotations are foregrounded in 'Allotments' when the adolescent Loiner cries "for the family still pent up in (his) balls", (p.17). The past as well as the future of the West is figured as being contained, "pent up", in the Loiners' genes. The sun's obliteration of the 'hero's' genitals in the dream, therefore, may also project the termination of a polluted continuity.

The description of the dream closes the first epistle. Self-destructive impulses are still haunting the Loiner at the beginning of the second, however, which opens with the memory of a childhood suicide attempt. His recollection of the ridiculous failure of the attempt provokes a moment of affirmation;

Suicide—  
 The noose's love bites and a bruised backside.  
 I laughed a long time and was glad I fell. (p.28)



The rhythm of the last line glances back to the adolescent intonation which was associated, in the childhood poems, with either confident rebellion ("We knew those adult rumours just weren't true", 'The Pocket Wars...', p.14), or a pre-lapsarian innocence. This evocation of a now lost vitality and innocence, underlined perhaps by the post-lapsarian connotations of "I fell", informs the desolate mood of the succeeding lines which return to the present. He is aboard the French ship;

The white wake swabbing at the woundless swell,  
The swashing, greasy pool, the spindrift fine  
As *Shelltox* seasoning my lips with brine  
Makes sadness shoreless and shakes sullen grief  
Apart like gobs of spittle. (pp.28-9)

This description of an unclean, fallen environment externalizes his own sense of corruption. The conceit in the first line, which depicts the ship's "white wake swabbing" or cleansing the swelling of the ocean, reflects a mind obsessed with infection and injury. Even though the ocean is "woundless" it still appears to him to require disinfection. (Notably, the "woundless swell" of the ocean contrasts with the swollen bruising, described two lines earlier, which the Loiner suffered during his 'fall'; "the noose's love-bites and a bruised backside".) The water in the ship's "greasy" swimming pool and the sea-spray "fine as *Shelltox*" are also tainted. On board the ship all that the Loiner can see is an endless panorama of liquid pollution and this perspective "makes sadness shoreless". He dramatises his condition as that of the homeless, rest-less Wanderer who can find no 'port' or relief from his suffering. Appropriately, therefore, it is the motion of sea-travel which is presented as 'causing' the emotional disintegration depicted in the final images: the swaying ocean "shakes sullen grief/ Apart like gobs of spittle" and the blowing "spindrift...season(s)" his lips with salty "brine". Here the implied metaphor,



linking the associations of salt and spittle, is of a collapse into violent sobbing. The connoted tears and the spittle simile are the culmination of the liquid imagery which, collectively, evoke the Loiner's sense of existential dissolution.

The idea of the insidious and baleful effect of the rhythm of travel (the Wanderer's curse), upon the Loiner, is developed more explicitly in the third epistle. The opening line offers a terse summary of the rest of his journey ("Bordeaux—Paris—London—Leeds", (p.29)), in which the metre reinforces the sense of unrelenting movement. He is still unable to rest: the rhythm has permeated his consciousness and "with weeks of travel thudding in (his) brain,/ Bilges, ship's engine, and the English train...sleep (is) impossible", (p.29). Here the oppressive motion is associated with the (specifically nineteenth century) Western technology of sea and land transport which facilitated the expansion of empire. The Loiner again locates himself in this history. The "thud" of travel becomes indistinguishable from his own pulse "throbbing" in his ear and this "angry thud" turns his mind, finally, to an imagined scene in which his lover is "pounding...yams". This line of imagery, therefore, links the suffering of the fallen Wanderer with the transgression(s) that initiated the curse;

My throbbing ear  
Bangs on the pillow with an angry thud—  
It's you, it's you, with a sound like blood,  
After the bloodshed, if your tribe survives,  
Pounding a big man's yams among young wives. (pp.29-30)

The loud banging in his ear constitutes an amplified return of the insistent voice of conscience which, in the first epistle, "sucks at (his) ear", (p. 28). There he hears a "wet, withdrawal sound", (p.28). Here it is "a sound like blood". Both of these ambiguous sounds, though, contain similar associations; firstly, of a sexual bond, and secondly, of the betrayal of that bond. The blood imagery



suggests not only sexuality, but also anger—and it is the anger of "angry thud", as well as the banging pulse, which informs the vision of his lover. He conflates the "angry thud" in his head with her anger and resentment towards him. The "sound like blood", however, also connotes another type of bond—the bond of blood relation, of 'universal affiliation' (which is also implied in 'The Railroad Heroines', of course, by the sexual bond). His transgression against this bond has left his lover vulnerable to parallel ethical denials; tribal war and the social subjugation of women.

These are the closing lines of the third epistle. The Africa which the Loiner has left behind haunts him as a site of political instability, violent conflict and continuing oppression. The couplet which comprises the fourth epistle, partly as a result of its juxtaposition with this depiction of Africa, is coated with a grim irony which mitigates the sense of arrival or closure;

Leeds City Station and a black man sweeps  
Cartons and papers into tidy heaps. (p.30)

The social and political upheaval of Africa contrasts with the civic order of Europe which the "black man" in Leeds, working at the bottom of the social hierarchy, continues to preserve. The passion unleashed in Africa by the overthrow of imperial power has left the political order in Europe, and the European psyche, ostensibly untouched. The couplet acquires further ironic implications, however, if it is linked to those images of rubbish in *The Loiners* which symbolise the far reaching effects, the 'fall-out' or 'debris', of global shifts of power. The reference to Leeds' waste disposal recalls, in particular, the imagery which opens the volume; Thomas Campey's "scattered paper" which "whirled around the town" (p.11), dispersed on winds generated by the earth's "sharp"(p.12) revolution. While these consequences cause devastation in Africa, Europe is able to contain them; in this couplet, pointedly, through the

continued repression of an African. The implication of this imagery is that, just as the "black man" in Europe is left to deal with the local rubbish of Western culture, so the populations of the former colonies in Africa are left to 'pick up the pieces' of the historical detritus of Western colonialism. Europe, like the Loiner in relation to his lover, flees from responsibility and strives to keep its own sense of breakdown in check. However, the psychological, spiritual fragmentation and disorder experienced by the Loiner on his journey from Africa perhaps enables him to find in the "tidy heaps" of rubbish a grotesque image of an illusory order, of an evasion by Europe of the abyss of its history. A similar desire to escape the pressure of this abyss can be seen to inform the fourth section of 'The White Queen' sequence, 'Manica'.



## CHAPTER SIX

### i. Manica

After the extended and intense focus upon the theme of the Westerner's inescapable, *essential* guilt in the second and third sections of 'The White Queen'—'The Railroad Heroides' and 'Travesties'—the 'response' of the White Queen in the second poem of 'Manica', 'The Elephant and the Kangaroo', is to engage in a desperate attempt to evade considerations of responsibility. His method is not to embrace a delusory, myopic orderliness but, more radically, to try to abandon his status as a culpable human being. Of course this fails, and in the succeeding poem, 'The Foreign Body', he is overwhelmed by the 'return' of the repressed knowledge of Europe's transgressive history.

The 'Manica' section (more particularly, the first poem of the section, 'The Origin of the Beery Way'), resumes the first person narrative of the White Queen himself, which was last employed in the third poem of 'Satyrae'. The poems of 'Manica', as the title would suggest, disclose a mental deterioration in the White Queen, which eventually leads to a collapse. The exploration of the theme of Europe's fallen history in the intervening poems undoubtedly contributes to this change. It is also, though, a consistent development of the state of mind expressed in the closing lines of the third poem of 'Satyrae', in the passage which begins "Now life's as dizzy as the Book of Kells" (p.24) and ends with the tableau depicting his humiliation during imprisonment.

The poetic forms employed in 'Manica' reflect this alteration. The poems of 'Satyrae' assault the poise of the heroic couplet with vigorous conversational rhythms, providing, perhaps, a literary parallel for the twentieth century attack on eighteenth and nineteenth century *political* forms of

organisation, specifically colonialism. However, a comparison with the poems of 'Manica' highlights the fact that the verse of 'Satyrae' often retains a degree of the balance and restraint associated with the heroic couplet. This is particularly apparent during expressions of meditation or argument; for example, the lines where the Medical Officer, Boris, broods on "Nothingness";

He knows with his firm finger on a pulse  
It is this Nothingness and nothing else  
Throbs in the blood. Nothing is no little part  
Of time's huge effort in the human heart. (p.27)

or the sexual and ethical self-justification of the 'Wyatt passage';

You'll call it filthy, but to me it's love,  
And to him it was. It *was*. O he could move  
Like an oiled (slow-motion) racehorse at its peak,  
Outrageous, and not gentle, tame or meek— (pp.21-2)

By contrast, the agitated rhythm and repetitive rhyme in 'The Origin of the Beery Way' reflects compulsive sexual activity, a connection which is wittily observed in the line, "My sex-life's manic like a bad rondeau" (p.35). At this point the poem is itself reminiscent of a rondeau, like the rondeau employing only two rhymes;

Reports put down 'futility and worthlessness'—  
I'm just a big *colon*: kick, kick, caress,  
Administer, then murmur *beau, beau, beau*  
Like some daft baby at your Mandingo.  
From *dashi, dashi* to *cadeau, cadeau*,  
Armed with my *Dettol*, my *Od-o-ro-no*,  
My *African Personality*, I go  
For a bit of the old Français finesse,  
Not work at your ballocks like a kid's yo-yo,  
Then buck you off them like a rodeo.  
With prudish pansies I am passionless.  
My sex-life's manic like a bad rondeau. (p.35)

These lines are "like a *bad* rondeau" partly because they do not in fact conform to the rondeau form which has thirteen, usually octosyllabic lines, plus two



refrains. Here there are only twelve (mainly) ten-syllable lines and no refrains. The rhyme scheme is also different; a "manic" *aabbbbabab* as opposed to the rondeau's (usual) *aabba aabR aabbaR* (where *R*=refrain). The use of rhyme therefore, as in "a bad rondeau", is grossly exaggerated. The 'O' rhyme ends eight of the twelve lines and is often sounded more than once at the end of an individual line. The repetition of rhymes (which is in its most intense form in these lines, but which is repeated in a looser form throughout 'The Origin of the Beery Way'), and the breathless rhythm, contribute to the depiction of a "sex-life", and, further, a (way of) life, which is spinning out of control.

The conflation of sexual and political metaphor in this passage is disclosed by the pun on "*colon*". One of the uses of italicisation in *The Loiners* is to indicate the employment of foreign languages. In French 'colon' means colonist. Primarily, the pun offers a pointed representation of the colonist, and the process of colonial administration (glossed as "kick, kick, caress, / Administer"), in terms of a compulsive sexuality. The White Queen enjoys the satirical transformation of the figure of the macho colonist, "a big *colon*", into a physiological symbol of homosexual desire and pleasure. On the other hand, the pun also qualifies and 'contaminates' the account of sexual enjoyment. One interpretation of the pun might be that the White Queen sees himself as reduced to "just a" destructive sexual appetite. He no longer perceives sexuality as a site where colonial relationships can be challenged, where "things can be so much better", (p.21), which is how it appeared to him in the Wyatt passage.

He still tries to view himself as a sexual/cultural rebel but this self-image is even more strained and compromised than it was earlier in the sequence, as the prevailing mood of this passage, and the rhythm and rhyme, indicate. Importantly, the phrase "I'm just a big *colon*" begins the White Queen's response to the pervasive experience, recorded in colonial "reports", of



"futility and worthlessness". This reference to a widespread emotional emptiness recalls the themes associated with Pascal's spiritual abyss. The White Queen's manic sexual excesses can be seen as an attempt both to fill the emotional void with physical sensation and, further, to seek in sexual sensation a kind of oblivion; a refuge from selfhood, cultural identity, and the contemplation of guilt. His efforts to achieve such an evasion in these lines are, as elsewhere, profoundly ambivalent. In a paradox typical of the sequence, the poetry (through the pun on 'colon'), describes an attempt to avoid the knowledge of transgression in terms which at the same time highlight and restate obsessively that very knowledge. Reduced to "just a" colon, that is, nothing more than a sexual appetite or sensation, he gains relief from the burden of culpability and guilt; as "just a *colon*", however, he is nothing more than a culpable, guilty colonist.

While the pun on "*colon*" disallows his desperate desire for moral evasion, this desire continues to pervade the verse and reappears immediately in the simile "like some daft baby". "Mandingo" is a Nigerian language and so the simile likens his expression of sexual reverie, "*beau, beau, beau*", to the pre-verbal response of an infant to an adult's speech. Here, therefore, sex is a means of attaining a pre-linguistic, hence pre-cultural, state. He does not seek this condition, however, in order to overcome cultural divisions and achieve a bond of communion with the cultural Other. Instead, the simile reflects the White Queen's longing to shed the moral burden of his cultural identity and inheritance. Yet the fact that such a wish is itself expressed in poetry is clearly self-defeating; even the infantile-sounding "*beau, beau, beau*" is, inescapably, a verbal and cultural construct. This point is emphasised a few lines later when "beau" is employed in wordplay which, along with the punning "Buckaneer",



("A real Beaubarian and Buckaneer that's me, Yo Ho", (p.35)), highlights the exploitative nature of the White Queen's manic sexual adventures.

The description of his sex-life as "manic" contains sinister connotations of the violent, destructive behaviour associated with mania. One of the characteristic progressions of mania, from euphoria to destruction, occurs in the second half of the poem, where the sexual metaphor becomes a familiar representation of phallic violence. The White Queen's drunken bluster, though, is an explicit response to his, and Europe's, feelings of castration. We recall that the closing lines of the third section of 'Satyrae' conflated imagery of political revolution and castration, of a phallic victory for the oppressed over their former rulers; ("butch nurses with stiff hoses mock/ As we grow limp, *Roundheads and Cavaliers,*/ Like King Charles bowing to the chopping block" (p.25)). In 'The Origin of the Beery Way' the White Queen's thoughts are still on the castration of Europe. He recalls a legend from the nineteenth century in which a native leader, a Moslem, "Changed the Commissioners' bullets into water" (p.36). The White Queen's resentment and Europe's fury in the face of their contemporary emasculation is disclosed by the poet's response to this story. Goaded by the experience of castration, he produces a show of bravado which provides perhaps the crudest, most explicit representation of his sexuality as a destructive, phallic force;

A century later, full of *Guinnesses* and *Stars*,  
I'm God's own Heaven, and as I slash I shout:  
*The white man's water turns back into fire!*  
Braving castration at their scimitars,  
And single-handed put Islam to rout,  
And vanquish the missions with my bent desire,  
Spouting a semen capable of slaughter. (p.36)

Despite the reference to the (possibly) Christian "missions" as well as to Islam, these lines do not express the sort of cultural rebellion that the PWD Man



evinces in his rejection of the asceticism common to Islam and Christianity (when he declares his preference for "the bottle" and "living to all your Heavens" (p.55)). Alcohol, for the White Queen, appears here in a Western, commodified form ("*Guinnesses and Stars*" (p.36)), and is a source of virility which enables him to reverse Europe's defeats, "braving castration" but surviving in order to "put Islam to rout". This feeling of invulnerability, almost of omnipotence ("I'm God's own Heaven"), is characteristic of mania. European colonialism was also, of course, informed and energised by the colonizers' conviction that they were protected, and their actions legitimised, by God. In fact this passage contains possibly the clearest expression in the sequence of the suggestion that the whole European colonial enterprise was the product of a pervasive cultural mania. His "bent desire" is not simply, perhaps not even primarily, a reference to his homosexuality, but to the idea of a Western sexuality twisted by authoritarian repression into a destructive force. The phrase recalls the epigraph to 'The Pocket Wars of Peanuts Joe', "Poor old sport/ he got caught/ right in the mangle"(p.14) and connects with that poem's exposure of the phallic energies underlying authoritarian culture: "the cock/ That could gush Hiroshimas"(p.15) is echoed here in the line "Spouting a semen capable of slaughter".

At the same time, the White Queen is acutely aware that his behaviour is ridiculous and his bravado futile. Despite his increasingly desperate mood the poetry continues to be suffused with the black, self-deprecating irony typical of his utterances. Such irony informs the grotesque mock-heroic humour of these lines. The images of combat, "I slash" and "single-handed put Islam to rout", refer to the acts of urination and masturbation respectively. Similarly, the phrase "I'm God's own Heaven" is part of a conceit which ironically deflates its own hubris. He is "God's own



Heaven" because, like a heaven, he is "full of...*Stars*". However these "*Stars*" are actually pints or bottles of beer. Being "full of *Guinnesses* and *Stars*", therefore, it is not religious but alcoholic intoxication which expands his ego to fill "God's own Heaven".

The language of this passage also echoes some of the 'imagery of Western transgression' which was developed in 'Distant Ophir' and 'The Railroad Heroides'. These echoes produce a further layer of irony. The description of "a semen capable of slaughter" reinvokes the notion of a fallen genetic/historical continuity. Combined with the cultural associations of "bent desire", the "semen" image symbolises a perverted Western phallic force but also represents the past, present and future generations of the West. This conflation, implicitly, defines those generations (and the White Queen himself), as incarnations and agents of this force, and therefore "capable of slaughter".

The White Queen's cry, "*The white man's water turns back into fire!*", again evokes previous images of Western violence. It recalls, for example, the victory bonfires at the close of 'Allotments', and the implicit image of the burning city of Troy in 'Distant Ophir'. The White Queen's exultation announces, ostensibly, a reclamation of phallic power. However a different, deflating insight into its significance is provided by the final couplet of 'The Origin of the Beery Way' (which succeeds immediately the passage under discussion): "Flat on my back, beneath the Galaxy, I fear/ This burning in my groin is gonorrhoea" (p.36). It becomes clear that "*the white man's water*" seems like "*fire*" because of the "burning" pain, caused by venereal disease, which the White Queen feels when he urinates. The consuming phallic energy of "*fire*", therefore, "*turns back*" upon "*the white man*" himself.

After the crescendo of phallic hyperbole in the previous lines, the collapse and anxiety depicted in the final couplet is reminiscent of earlier



expressions of fear about divine retribution. Resembling the Loiner at the close of the first epistle of 'The Railroad Heroides' who dreams the sun burns his "bare balls to bitumen" (p.28), the White Queen is supine and experiences a "burning in (his) groin". The suggestion that the cause of the "burning...is gonorrhoea", however, produces perhaps the main echo from the earlier themes of retribution: the punishment of syphilis described in the prophecies of 'Distant Ophir'.

While the sun represented a divine or transcendent source of judgment and wrath in 'The Railroad Heroides' and 'Distant Ophir', here the White Queen lies "beneath the Galaxy". This subjection to the damning judgment of "the Galaxy" informs his earlier desire to be "God's own Heaven". In the first two poems of 'Manica' the White Queen longs to escape such condemnation; in this instance by avoiding the anxieties and responsibilities of a moral subject by assuming the immaculacy of divine status. In the second poem of 'Manica', 'The Elephant and the Kangaroo', he attempts the same evasion of moral responsibility, this time trying to relinquish his human status for that of an animal.

'The Elephant and the Kangaroo' describes the first onset of the tropical rains. The rhythm of the opening lines, after the 'manic' rhythm and rhyme of 'The Origin of the Beery Way', captures the sense of relief engendered by the arrival of the rainy season;

The first rains slap the leaves like slow applause.  
My nerves are soothed by it.  
The insects constant grind has been put down.  
It means a night indoors (p.36)

The "applause" simile contains connotations of the feeling of release which occurs after, perhaps (as his "nerves are soothed"), a tense public performance such as a tragedy. In fact Harrison employs the same conceit near the close of



his adaptation of Racine's *Phedre*, *Phaedra Britannica* (which he sets in India). The following passage from the play compares interestingly with the themes of 'The Elephant and the Kangaroo'. The lines are spoken by Phaedra as she is dying;

there's poison in my veins, and beat by beat  
the heart that once was blazing loses heat.  
It's all as if I saw you through dark gauze,  
through rain beginning like a slow applause.  
I hear it starting now, the rain, cool rain  
giving the blood-red earth new life again.  
Rain. Rain. Like purdah curtains. When I die  
the dawn will bring you all a clearer sky.<sup>1</sup>

(Indeed the last words of Harrison's adaptation are the stage instructions "*The sound of rain like slow applause*".) The comparison with the African poem is interesting because the themes and associations which are dominant in the speech are only latent and muted in the poem. The notion that the rains might potentially cool a burning sexual heat is implicit in the White Queen sequence—the final line of 'The Origin of the Beery Way' describes the "burning in (his) groin", (p.36)—but the idea is not developed explicitly. The theme of the rain as a bringer of new, fresh life, however, does inform the poem and adds a political/historical nuance to the following lines (in which the phrase "stage-scene gauze" has, again, been re-worked for the *Phaedra Britannica* speech);

So the world comes back into its own  
and all the houses through a stage-scene gauze  
of wavering, driven rain and drunkenness. *It*  
goes on spinning and will not run down. (p.37)

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<sup>1</sup>Tony Harrison, *Phaedra Britannica*, *Dramatic Verse 1973-1985* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1985) 124.

The White Queen interprets the rains as an act or symbol of repossession; "the world comes back into its own". The houses, seen through the "stage-scene gauze" seem as impermanent and flimsy as a stage backdrop. Running through the poem is the White Queen's sense of the elemental force of the rain and storm dwarfing and overturning the signs of human (especially Western) achievement and agency. The storm leads to a "power failure" (p.36). This loss of electricity disrupts commercial activity by accelerating decay and putrescence; "The imported apples begin to look like shit.../ Chops will be rotting in the Lebanese Cold Stores" (p.36). In contrast to the "run down" electrical technology of the West, the World, (*"It"*), "goes on spinning". Underlying this imagery is the White Queen's obsession with the decline of Empire. The planetary time-scale of the Earth transcends the history of Empire. The Earth "goes on spinning" while transient Empires "run down". At the same time the "spinning" world, as in 'Thomas Campey and the Copernican System', symbolises global historical changes, specifically the end of the era of European colonialism. The force of the storm reminds him of the limitations of Western power and he sits, static, passive (and drunk), "feeling the world spinning" (p.37).

The White Queen's perception of a fundamental struggle or competition between the power of the elements and human agency reflects the authoritarian desire to master and dominate which is at the root of Western culture. It highlights the Westerners' radical alienation from the natural environment. By contrast, the native "rainmaker wraps away his amulet/ and hugs his gods to see the great downpours" (p.37). The fact that the rains signify welcome renewal to the native but decay and a loss of mastery to the White Queen is clearly appropriate to the underlying political and historical metaphor. For the African the storm also indicates divine goodwill. However



the White Queen, after contemplating the transcendent power of the elements, becomes paranoid. At the close of the poem he sees the rain as another manifestation of supernatural wrath and retribution;

This is Noah's weather. All will drown—

But I'll escape by crawling on all fours. (p.37)

The title of the poem, 'The Elephant and the Kangaroo', alludes to the childrens' song about Noah's ark, 'The Animals Went in Two by Two'. The White Queen's witty but desperate response to his fear of an impending apocalypse is to assume the posture and embrace the status of a guiltless animal. In doing so he also, of course, relinquishes his responsibilities as a moral agent. Ironically, it was just such a dehumanising reduction that the poetry of 'Satyrae', earlier in the sequence, protested against. In the first poem of 'Satyrae', for example, his confinement within the repressive culture of the West is expressed by the simile that depicts him as "like an elephant/ That bungles with its trunk about its cage" (p.21). Similarly, in the fourth poem of 'Satyrae', in another image of entrapment, he insists that he "must"

Never again be locked away or trussed  
Like a squealing piglet because my mind  
Shut out all meaning like a blackout blind. (p.24)

In 'Satyrae' he is struggling to break free of the inhibitions and definitions imposed upon him by authoritarian ideology. He strives to sustain his own sense of humanity and recognise the humanity of the colonial Other. In 'Manica', however, he *chooses* to be like 'The Elephant (and the Kangaroo)'. He tries to "shut out all meaning" from his mind rather than confront the implications of his social, cultural identity and inheritance. This attempt to deny his culpability and erase his cultural identity backfires in the third poem of 'Manica', 'The Foreign Body'. The psychic pressure caused by his repression

of the knowledge of transgression informs the fever and delirium in which his personal identity first fragments and then collapses. He is reduced to nothing more than a dehumanised product of Empire, "the one red thing" (p.39).

The title 'The Foreign Body' contains various meanings, each of which can be seen to relate significantly to each other. On the one hand it refers to a collective, social/cultural identity, to 'the foreign body politic'; for example, to the colonists in Africa, or to the West as a whole. The White Queen's body, as elsewhere, represents these collective identities. On the other hand, 'The Foreign Body' signifies an alien intruder. In Africa this is the Westerner. However this reading of the title also refers to the imagery of insects, germs, and viruses in the poem. This imagery, in turn, is part of the recurring symbolism in the sequence (and the volume), in which depictions of disease are linked to the fallen history and inheritance of the West. The White Queen, though, wishing to deny this inheritance, attempts to dissociate himself from this diseased legacy: to insist that the 'germs' of his inheritance are 'foreign bodies'. In fact this pun in the title is similar to the pun on "*colon*" (p.35) in 'The Origin of the Beery Way'. Both register a consciousness of being entirely absorbed and defined by one's cultural inheritance at the very moment of seeking to evade it. Here, however, the despair provoked by this self-contradiction only intensifies the White Queen's need for dissociation. In this poem the whole of his body, which in 'Satyrae' was the potential site of subversion and cultural rebellion, is now 'foreign'. Perhaps primarily, then, the title alludes to the radical alienation and detachment from the body which characterises the poem's images of a disintegrating selfhood.

The final line of 'The Elephant and the Kangaroo', "but I'll escape by crawling on all fours", can be seen to illuminate the ambiguous opening of



'The Foreign Body', which may be read as a description of the White Queen "crawling" horizontally across the earth;

Each blue horizontal thrust  
into the red, rain-spattered dust  
brings my tachycardia back.  
My heart's a thing caught in a sack.  
Lashes of tall grass whip  
at my genitals, the thick ears flip  
hard insects from sprung stalks  
and the fraying lightning forks. (p.37)

As in 'The Railroad Heroides', the language is concentrated and allusive and needs to be interpreted in the light of the White Queen's established concerns, obsessions and fears. Many of these, of course, overlap with those of the White Queen's 'fictional' speaker in 'The Railroad Heroides'. The extremity of the White Queen's excitation leads to "tachycardia" (which is an abnormally rapid heartbeat), as it does for the Loiner in the third epistle of 'The Railroad Heroides'. In both poems this heart condition is linked to overwhelming anxieties about 'issues of blood'; of love, sex, affiliation and transgression. Here the image of panic and constraint which depicts his experience of "tachycardia", "my heart's a thing caught in a sack", is expressive of his overwrought psyche's thrashing efforts to cope with these issues. It is also another, but perhaps more disturbing, example of the imagery of entrapment found in 'Satyrae': his aspirations 'of the heart', for love, have been utterly thwarted.

These opening lines also connect with the theme of the rains bringing new growth (and political change). The phrase "red, rain-spattered dust" contains the notion, expressed explicitly in *Phaedra Britannica*, of the "cool rain/ Bringing the blood-red earth new life again"<sup>2</sup>. However the sexual

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<sup>2</sup>Tony Harrison, *Phaedra Britannica* 124.

connotations of "thrust" in the previous line complicate the idea of germination— if, that is, we take "thrust" to refer ostensibly to the White Queen's manic "crawling on all fours", a physical exertion which "brings (his) tachycardia back". In this reading his body's movement, despite the attempt to abandon his cultural identity, still represents, implicitly, a phallic incursion into the land. His apprehension of this inescapable symbolism again contributes to the onset of his tachycardia.

The main question-mark against this interpretation, however, is that the use of "blue" to describe the White Queen's body seems incongruous. This colour is not associated with him elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> An alternative reading of the first two lines would be that "each blue horizontal thrust" is a gust of rain, blown "horizontal" by the storm. This conceit is closer to the image in *Phaedra Britannica* (the "cool rain" would be the 'cold' colour "blue"), and depicts a violent elemental germination of the land which connects with the overthrow of European colonialism and *therefore* adds to the White Queen's agitation. However these readings are not incompatible.

Another of the White Queen's obsessions discernible in this passage is the theme of divine retribution. Again the specific physical focus for punishment is his genitalia, the site of phallic sexuality and collective genetic identity. The local natural environment, in the form of "lashes of tall grass whip/ at (his) genitals". This detail, though, is located in the wider representation of transcendent anger, the rainstorm, which is "Noah's weather" (p.37). The White Queen perceives the storm as the arrival of that apocalyptic wrath which has been fearfully anticipated in the sequence since 'The Railroad Heroides'. On one level this fear expresses the colonists' terror of the end of

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<sup>3</sup>Except, perhaps significantly enough, later in this poem where the veins on his wrist are figured as "worm(s) as blue as amethyst", p.38.



empire and, in so far as the storm also symbolises the overthrow of European colonialism, the apocalyptic mood is politically apposite. However, as in 'The Railroad Heroides' and 'Distant Ophir', the poem's imagery apprehends a much larger and wider history of transgression. When the apocalyptic "lightning forks", therefore, it is the fallen patriarchal history of the West which is illuminated;

Boom! The flame trees blaze  
out the ancientest of days.  
All the dead in running shoes!  
A bootless marchpast of dead Jews!  
Boom! Bad blood cells boom  
in unison for *Lebensraum*.  
Burst corpuscles and blood cells spray  
the dark with fire and die away.  
The brief glares strewed  
flamboyants in my face like blood. (pp.37-8)

The "flame tree" is presumably the tropical flamboyant tree, "named after its flame coloured flowers"<sup>4</sup>. The flashed tableau of the vivid trees appears to the White Queen as a moment of revelation, announced by the first "boom!" of thunder, and representing, but with an angry intensity ("blaz(ing) out"), the beginnings of (human) history. The connection between trees and origins evokes the idea of a 'family tree', but this is a burning, blood-red lineage. As elsewhere, the (implied) conflation of blood and fire conjures up the fallen history of recurring transgression against the blood-bond of affiliation, here referring back to the earliest of humankind's transgressions in "the ancientest of days".

On one level, the White Queen bears witness to the 'fruits' of this tree as "all the dead", the individual victims and victors of this history, pass

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<sup>4</sup>*The Chambers Dictionary*. The entry indicates that various species of tree are called 'flame trees'. The others cited, though, are Australian, Indian and North American respectively. Also, Harrison uses "flamboyants", possibly to refer to the petals of the tree, nine lines later.



before him. The "spray(ing)" blood which lights "the dark with fire" may be viewed as a vast emblematic evocation of the violence and destruction which pervades his inheritance. At the same time, the combination of blood and fire echoes the imagery of *The Book of Revelations*<sup>5</sup>, and the White Queen's vision of "all the dead in running shoes" can be read as a parodic representation of the universal resurrection on Judgment Day. The irony of "running shoes" perhaps derives from the idea that, if he is to see "all the dead", they would have to pass before him very rapidly. In the next line the humour darkens in the ghastly evocation of a mock military "marchpast" of Jews. Not soldiers, they are "bootless"; but the word also alludes to the piles of boots belonging to Holocaust victims. Perhaps more important here, though, is the etymology of 'bootless'. The modern usage, as in Shakespeare's "bootless prayers"<sup>6</sup>, means "to no purpose, unprofitable" (O.E.D.<sup>7</sup>). The original meaning of 'bootless' is "not to be expiated by a bote". 'Bōt', an Old English legal term, denotes "compensation paid for injury or wrong-doing; amends", but also "expiation of sin, sin-offering, penance". Implicitly, therefore, the "marchpast of dead Jews" is "bootless", "unprofitable" or futile, because the sin of the Holocaust cannot be expiated or atoned for.

The conceit in the succeeding couplet ("Boom! Bad blood cells boom/ in unison for *Lebensraum*"), contains multiple meanings. The "boom!" of thunder is now merged with the urgent beat of the White Queen's "tachycardia". Each "bad", that is, infected, fallen, "blood cell" is shaken (they "boom"), by the terrible thunder/violent heart-beat. They are afflicted in this way "for", because of, the transgressions of "*Lebensraum*". "*Lebensraum*"

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<sup>5</sup>Such as *Revelations*, 8,7: "The first angel blew his trumpet, and there followed hail and fire, mixed with blood, which fell on the earth; and a third of the earth was burnt up, and a third of the trees were burnt up, and all green grass was burnt up."

<sup>6</sup>*Merchant of Venice* III,iii,20. Cited in the O.E.D.

<sup>7</sup>The definitions of 'bootless' and 'bote' which follow are all from the O.E.D.



refers specifically to the Nazi justification for seizing territory "as necessary for economic growth"<sup>8</sup>; but this policy can be seen as paradigmatic of the ideology of colonial expansion. Read another way, therefore, the "bad blood cells boom/ in unison", like the chant of massed ranks at a nationalistic rally, "for", in support of, "*Lebensraum*".

These diseased "blood cells" are those of the White Queen's body, each cell containing and embodying his collective identity. Yet the original meaning of the word 'lebensraum' is "room to live" or "space inhabited by living things"<sup>9</sup>. Perhaps, continuing the representation of the Last Judgment, the "bad blood cells" are also those of "all the dead", the White Queen's resurrected ancestors, who "boom/ in unison" their desire for life. The wordplay on "*Lebensraum*", though, indicates that their urge to life is inescapably contaminated by the urge towards destruction and domination. "Boom" acquires yet another connotation, of cannonfire—but, primarily, the sound dramatises the thunder which signifies the imminence of divine judgment. The annihilation of the blood cells which follows, therefore, might be seen to parallel "the second death", by fire, promised to "the polluted" in *Revelations* (21,8)<sup>10</sup>. In the poem the description of the explosive incineration of blood evokes suggestively the wrathful lightning bolts of the storm. While the lightning "forks" and 'frays', the "burst corpuscles...spray/ the dark with fire and die away". The phrase in the next line, "the brief glares", certainly describes flashes of lightning, but also suggests the notion of an angry, divine stare and, perhaps, the momentary consumption of mass in fierce fire.

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<sup>8</sup>*The Chambers Dictionary*.

<sup>9</sup>*The Chambers Dictionary*.

<sup>10</sup>"But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, as for murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their lot shall be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death" *Revelations*, 21,8.



The unexpected, and temporary, shift into the past tense (at the word "strewed") possibly denotes the end of the White Queen's apocalyptic vision. He becomes aware again of the natural environment around him. Instead of being sprayed with blood, his face is only "strewed/ (with) flamboyants...like blood"; that is, "strewed" with the blood-coloured petals of the flame trees' flowers. Yet this image is ominous. It carries the connotation of petals strewn across a grave. It also evokes a sense of him receiving the 'mark' of this "bad blood" on his face, an image which is again reminiscent of *Revelations*<sup>11</sup>.

As his "bad blood" betokens damnation it is unsurprising that, in the next lines, the White Queen refuses to recognise the pulsing blue veins on his wrist as part of his own identity. Instead, in a delirious hallucination, he transforms them into, significantly, "bloodless" 'foreign bodies';

Boom! Boom! And at each wrist  
a worm as blue as amethyst  
burrows its blunt head in my palm  
to keep its bloodless body warm. (p.38)

The descriptions of some of the 'foreign bodies' in the poem (such as the "Cantharides" and the "tampan" later), evoke specific cultural connotations. This conceit appears to pass implicit comment on his Christian inheritance. In the imagery of blood, particularly in the image of the blood-coloured flame trees, one association notable by its absence is that of the Cross and the redemptive blood of Christ. Here, the "bloodless body" of the worm is pointedly devoid of redemptive blood. The White Queen's characteristic perception of Christianity as a source of repressive asceticism also appears to

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<sup>11</sup>For example; "(Then I saw another beast (13,11))...it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark..."(13,16-17) or "Also I saw the souls of those...who had not worshipped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads and hands"(20,4).



inform the ambiguous description of the blue worm. The bloodless worm, like a lifeless phallus, seems an apposite emblem of sexual repression. On one level, the image of stigmata produced by its parasitic "burrow(ing)" into his "palm", figures the White Queen as a victim of the pervasive existential denial which he finds in Christian culture.

In the next section of the poem the White Queen is indoors, in bed. However the theme of the poetry remains his anxiety about "bad blood". In this section the Westerners' phobia of the transmission of tropical diseases is conflated with the White Queen's terrified fixation upon the transmission of sin within his fallen inheritance;

And in my bed I hear the whine  
of soliciting anopheline  
and diptera diseases zoom  
round and round my foetid room... (p. 38)

His horror of contagion is expressed by the paranoid depiction of the insects and "diseases" which "whine" and "zoom" above him like predatory fighter planes. "Diptera" is the "genus of two winged insects or flies"<sup>12</sup>. The idea of a flying "disease" conjures up a picture of one of Bosch or Breughel's infernal demons. The anthropomorphism of "whine" also adds subtly to the sense of paranoid delusion. He depicts himself as a passive victim of the agents of infection. Whereas, previously in the sequence, he solicited prostitutes and spread venereal disease, now the "anopheline", or mosquitoes, "solicit" and infect him.<sup>13</sup> The repetitive, circular motion of the "diptera diseases", which fly "round and round" the claustrophobic and repugnant "foetid room", suggest implicitly his sense of entrapment within a polluted identity. In the imagery

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<sup>12</sup>*The Chambers Dictionary*.

<sup>13</sup>The conventional conceit of sexual intercourse as 'mingled blood', in particular its use by Donne in 'The Flea', informs the imagery of insects in this section. In this poem, however, the notion of infection is necessarily added to the conceit as it is a fallen sexuality that is being described.

which follows, this idea becomes explicit; "and randiness, my life's disease,/ in bottle green Cantharides" (p.38). He figures his manic sexuality as a disease carried, appropriately, by "Cantharides", an insect "formerly used as an aphrodisiac"<sup>14</sup>: (The associations of "bottle green" evoke wittily the close connection between his sexual and alcoholic consumption). The next insect cited, the "bloody tampan", represents, to begin with at least, the culture of imperial Europe;

and the bloody tampan, that posh louse  
plushy like an Opera House,  
red as an Empire, or lipstick,  
insect vampire, soft-backed tick—  
all females, the female womb  
is stuffed with blind trypanosome. (p.38)

The "plushy" coated "tampan" is a mordant symbol of the opulent high culture of Europe('s upper classes); a beautiful surface sustained by a venomous, parasitic and "bloody" (colonial) economy.

In the extremity of his paranoia the White Queen then makes a sudden and telling outburst of revulsion against the fundamental Other of authoritarian culture, women. The "soft" comfort of the mother and the "womb" is depicted as a vicious illusion, like the "soft-backed" allure of the "tampan", and the womb is perceived as the ultimate metaphor of claustrophobic confinement within a pestilential and debilitating inheritance. The reference to "trypanosome", which is a disease-causing protozoon, "parasitic in the blood of man and other animals" (O.E.D), underscores his increasingly hysterical apprehension of inescapable, all-pervasive pollution. Protozoa are the simplest and most primitive of animal life-forms, so "the source of infection" (to use Pascal's phrase), or original sin, seems to reach

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<sup>14</sup> *The Chambers Dictionary*.



deep into the evolutionary origins of human beings, pre-dating consciousness and culpability. "Trypanosome" reproduces and perpetuates disease "blind(ly)", without recourse to reason or conscious reflection, just as a child grows "blind(ly)" in the womb. The violent, vulgar pun on "stuffed", which suggests both 'sexually penetrated' and 'impregnated', as well as 'filled', conflates human semen, and the unborn, with "trypanosome". The White Queen's repugnance is informed by his sense of helpless subjection to (inimical) cultural/biological causes and forces which are beyond his control.

This passage can be seen to continue the dramatisation of the contradictory tension within the White Queen's consciousness which was observed earlier in the discussion of the title 'The Foreign Body'. On one level his manic representations of the transmission of disease disclose his fixation on his own infection. At the same time he attempts to dissociate himself from the moral pollution of his inheritance. In his employment of the imagery of 'foreign bodies' he enacts a reflex ideological strategy of authoritarian/imperialist culture. He projects disturbing and unwanted parts of his identity onto the Other: Africa (in the form of African insects and germs), and "all females". The imagery enables him to deny responsibility for his own infected condition;

Which of your probosces made  
my heart fire off this cannonade,  
or is its billion gun salute  
for lover or for prostitute? (p.38)

Here, ostensibly, the White Queen asks if the cause of his fever is a tropical or venereal disease. Either way he has been "made" 'to fall' by external agents (the "lover" and "prostitute" are also Other, African). In a perverse reversal of culpability the Other is presented as having "made" the colonist "fire off" his phallic "cannonade". The "lover" and "prostitute" are even figured as monarchs

or leaders who receive the "billion gun salute". However, the military imagery also suggests a parallel between the manic fever of his "tachycardia" and the destructive mania of Western colonial expansion, and these connotations repudiate the implied evasion of responsibility.

The repetition of "Boom!" in the succeeding line now combines several meaningfully interrelated associations; the transgressive phallic power of the history of the West, the thunder of divine judgement (and the rain of "Noah's weather", (p.37)), the terminal explosions of the Apocalypse, and the contemporary crisis of Western 'disease' and 'breakdown';

Boom! Boom! And now here comes  
the endless roll of danger drums,  
and the death-defying leap  
jerks me panicking from sleep. (p.39)

The "endless roll of danger drums" is primarily an image from the circus or the music hall: the drum-roll which precedes the "death-defying leap". Here the roll of drums and their cessation (implied by the initiation of the "leap", which takes place in silence), is a conceit depicting the White Queen's heart-failure. The "leap" to death evokes the common nightmare experience of the sensation of falling, where the sleeper awakes just before the point of impact. The White Queen's "panic", though, is not only in the face of death but in the face of damnation which awaits at the end of 'the fall'. Continuing the theme of judgment, these lines also contain associations of an execution, a hanging; after the drum-roll, the fall is terminated by a "jerk", the point of death at which the White Queen regains consciousness.

The image of the drum has a further connotation, however, which connects with the conceit of the heart/drum beat in 'The Death of the P.W.D. Man'; "Nay! Come on, Julius Seizure, you black, buck bastard come./ I can hear those muffled heartbeats like a Yoruba drum", (p.57). "Danger



drums" alludes partly to the tribal drum and the Westerners' fear of a Black uprising. The drumbeat of revolt which prefigures the end of empire is also the convulsive heartbeat of the heart-attack which, like the death of the P.W.D. Man, symbolises the imperial demise. In fact, unlike the P.W.D. Man, the White Queen does not actually die, but is treated in an American or missionary hospital;

Boom! Boom! Bonhomie!  
America's backslapping me.  
Starchy Baptist cherubim  
give me tests at the S.I.M.,  
and swallowed U.S. tracers trace  
my body's Cuban missile base.  
Boom! Boom! World War 3's  
waging in my arteries. (p.39)

On this occasion the "Boom! Boom!" can be read as both the restart of the White Queen's heartbeat and the sound of the huge "backslap" from America which jolts his heart back to life. In terms of the political and historical irony of the passage these "Booms" reflect the post-war military and political alliance, the "Bonhomie", between the U.S. and Britain/Europe. This is the new axis of power in the West which supports Britain during its imperial decline. However it is, pointedly, the U.S. which now holds the "Boom(ing)" phallic firepower of the West.

Yet the White Queen, in his alternative role as anti-authoritarian rebel (as opposed to emblem of the Empire), is still paranoid. The medical "tests" which are conducted on him by austere angelic "starchy Baptist cherubim"<sup>15</sup> are suggestive of the 'examination' on Judgment Day: "tests" for ethical and existential 'infection', which can be passed or failed. Similarly, the

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<sup>15</sup>"S.I.M." possibly refers to the protestant Sudan Interior Mission.

"tracers", which are medical devices for exploring the body<sup>16</sup>, look for disease which (as they are "U.S. tracers"), is figured as Communism. The "U.S. tracers" are further examples of 'foreign bodies' and the "Cuban missile base" is also 'foreign'. Even so, they inhabit the White Queen's body and are a part of his fallen inheritance. The internecine phallic struggle of patriarchal history (the beginnings of which were alluded to earlier in the poem by the image of the bloody "flame trees", (p.37)), appears to reach its logical dénouement in the Cold War, and its inevitable conclusion in the Apocalypse of nuclear holocaust; "Boom! Boom! World War 3's/ waging in my arteries".

The anticipated world-wide annihilation parallels the White Queen's fear of his own physical breakdown and death as his pulse-rate and temperature rise. His fevered imaginings of the Apocalypse are also informed, however, by the political changes, in particular by the end of the British Empire, which are demolishing the old Eurocentric World order. The fall of European imperialism is symbolised in the succeeding lines by the dissolution of the imperial "map" (of Africa but also, implicitly, of the World);

Desperately I call these app-  
rehensions Africa but the map  
churns like wet acres in these rains  
and thunder tugging at my veins. (p.39)

The third and fourth lines here present two different attitudes to the obliteration of the "map". The first is positive; the "rains" are those of renewal for Africa and the Africans, and "the map/ churns" (in the sense of "turns over"<sup>17</sup>) like fertile soil in "wet acres". On the other hand, as the process of churning separates liquid from substance (fat, in the case of making butter), "churns"

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<sup>16</sup>There are two possible medical references for 'tracer'; "a probe for tracing a nerve", and "a radioactive isotope introduced into the body to study physiological processes by tracing the radiation it produces". (both *The Chambers Dictionary*).

<sup>17</sup> *The Chambers Dictionary*.



also suggests waterlogged "wet acres". As the process is ultimately productive, though, the word still carries connotations of a creative transformation. A further meaning of 'churns' is "to agitate violently"<sup>18</sup>. The Imperial order succumbs partly to the pressure of violent struggle and the rainstorm which promises new growth for the Africans is terminal for the British Empire. The White Queen's inner fabric also "churns" in this way, and feels as though it is being pulled apart, the "thunder tugging at (his) veins".

The "map" can be seen as a metaphor for the internal divisions, borders, and oppositions by which Europe and indeed patriarchal culture has constructed its own identity. The cultural and psychological structures which sustain the Loiner's selfhood collapse. In particular, these lines begin the description of the final failure of the White Queen's attempt to project his own fears and guilt, his "app-/rehensions", onto the continent of the Other, "Africa". He tries "desperately" to avoid confronting the darker areas of his identity by designating them Other, or "call(ing)" them "Africa"—but now the representation of Africa on Europe's "map", and the distinction between the two continents, "churns" and disintegrates;

That Empire flush diluted is  
pink as a lover's orifice,  
then *Physical, Political* run  
first into marblings and then one  
mud colour, the dirty, grey,  
flat reaches of infinity. (p.39)

The "Empire flush" refers of course to the blood-red colour which was used on British imperial maps of the World to indicate the dominions of the British Empire. The word "flush" insists on the connection between this red and blood, and also evokes several emotional and physical states associated

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<sup>18</sup>*The Chambers Dictionary*

elsewhere in the sequence with British imperialism; shame and exhaustion, for example. Most pointedly, "flush" conflates sexual lust (the White Queen, in the third poem of 'Satyrae', writes "I flush with defiant lust", (p.24)), with the destructive, manic anger of conquest. On the other hand, maintaining the tone of historical irony, the "Empire flush" suggests the notion that the British Empire is being flushed down the toilet of history. Primarily, however, the image describes the Empire-red of the map which is being "diluted" and dissolved in the rains of renewal/ the Flood of divine wrath.

This blood-red has been employed repeatedly in the imagery of 'The Foreign Body' to signify the (colonial) violence of the past, and the inheritance of a history of transgression. As this red is "diluted", so are the borders, distinctions and differences between nations, cultures and races which patriarchal ideology exaggerates and exploits. The moment when the "Empire flush" becomes "pink as a lover's orifice" can be viewed as a moment of illumination, exposing the common physical origins, the mutual pleasures and the shared experience of the bonds of love which lie beneath cultural difference. Similarly, the details of the "*Political*" map, which highlight the human organisation of the World into cities, nations, empires, and so on, merge and "run...into" the natural features and forms depicted on a "*Physical*" map.

On one level, however, the rapid dissolution of the World map, of both the "*Political*" and the "*Physical*" structures of the Earth, continues the representation of the Apocalypse or nuclear holocaust. Now that the thunder and lightning is over, though, the apocalyptic mood is expressed in terms of the myth of the Flood, and draws on images of the flooding which follows the tropical rains. The "dilution" of the red to "pink" is only the first stage of the descent into the "one/ mud colour" of limbo or the Void, a "dirty...infinity". At the same time, this bleak fall is a metaphor for the White Queen's psychological



and emotional disintegration. Underlying the sequence of colour changes is the notion of the mixing of (for example), watercolour paints. The various colours of the "*Physical, Political*" and Imperial maps, "run(ning)...into" each other, produce only the dull colours of the "flat reaches" of a muddy, flooded landscape. The White Queen's psyche is similarly overrun by too many tones, emotions and ideas. The ethical implications of the insight afforded by the image of the "lover's orifice" leads him to abandon, at last, the moral distinctions that he has tried to hold on to between his personal, sexual exploitation of the Africans and the political exploitation of colonialism. An alternative interpretation of the conceit of "dilution" from red to "pink" is simply that it exposes the sexual repression and displaced phallic energies underlying the colonial enterprise. Either reading informs the White Queen's final devastating recognition that "*Physical, Political*", the personal and the political, "run...into" one another. The distance he has been attempting to sustain between his individual identity and his consciousness of himself as one of the transgressive, cursed "Westerners" (p.31) of 'Distant Ophir' erodes away. What he discovers, beneath the defensive constructions of his cultural Self, is a residual sense of pollution, an undifferentiated landscape which is "dirty, grey,/ flat" .

This imagery is also suggestive on yet another level of 'historical' metaphor. The flood has washed away the old order, but has not 'cleansed' the landscape. Rather, in disclosing the presence of a "dirty...infinity", it seems to have uncovered an unredeemed, perhaps unredeemable realm. The "map" of Empire has disintegrated, but its history cannot be effaced; colonial acts of transgression, past experiences of oppression and suffering, remain, "dirty" traces of infection, unarticulated, un-negotiated, unlimited presences.



In the final couplet of the poem, the weight of this history descends on the White Queen and overwhelms his identity. Confronted by the monochromatic post-colonial landscape, bereft of the "map" of imperial ideology, he is no longer able to project the symbolic blood-red of Empire onto the Other of the African environment. He can only locate the "Empire flush" on himself: "The one red thing, I squat and grab/ at myself like a one-clawed crab", (p.39). However, the "dirty...infinity" of guilt and culpability that he assumes in this moment cannot be borne by the human psyche and the result is utter self-alienation. He defines his entire identity as Other, perceiving himself no longer as a person but a "thing". The intention he evinced at the close of 'The Elephant and the Kangaroo' to relinquish his human status ("But I'll escape by crawling on all fours", (p.37)), has backfired. Rather than joining the ranks of innocent animals in the Ark, the pun on "thing" condemns him as an embodiment of the displaced phallic energy of colonialism: he is the Imperial phallus, "the one red thing".

This couplet also depicts the utter defeat of the White Queen as a cultural, sexual rebel. In 'Satyrae' sexuality had appeared to him to be a potential means of subverting the binary oppositions of authoritarian ideology, of 'crossing the borders' of the imperial map and connecting with the cultural Other on the shared space of erotic pleasure. It was a site where one aspired to overcome the psychological and political repression of the "Policeman" and "Priest", (p.21). This grotesque image of masturbation, however, presents a self-consuming, imploded sexuality. He is reduced to two exaggerated physical features, a penis and a hand. Both of these features are dehumanised; the penis is a "thing", his hand is a "claw". The violence of "I squat and grab/ at myself" and the sharpness and hardness implied by the simile of the "one-clawed crab" emphasise the self-destructiveness of the action. The phrase "red



thing" acquires the connotation of torn and bleeding flesh. While this closing image condemns him as a red emblem of the British Empire, therefore, he is at the same time connected with the blood-red that has been associated earlier in the poem with the victims of patriarchal history.

The collapse of identity described in the final twelve lines of 'The Foreign Body' ought perhaps to be viewed as the climax of 'The White Queen' sequence. Although 'Manica' is the penultimate section, the underlying narrative of the sequence is effectively terminated here. The fifth section, '*from The Zeg-Zeg Postcards*', is a compilation of twenty-seven short poems and epigrams which, according to the fictitious editor of the sequence, "are from a collection written on the backs of postcards and gradually accumulated over the years in a card-index cabinet", (p.46).<sup>19</sup>

## ii. *from The Zeg-Zeg Postcards*

The placing of 'The Zeg-Zeg Postcards' at the end of the sequence has an interesting effect in so far as it mitigates the sense of defeat which terminates the narrative. He has been unable to articulate a position, discover or sustain a way of life, which would enable him to escape the debilitating confines of his cultural/historical inheritance. Yet, even though the preceding dramatisation of decline and disintegration casts a veil of pathos over the whole section, these poems "gradually accumulated over the years", 'restore' and 'commemorate' the White Queen's humanity and, in particular, his subversive impulses.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, the fragmentary form of this section acknowledges implicitly the inadequacy and incompleteness of his rebellion.

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<sup>19</sup>It is worth noting in passing that the the breakdown of the poet described in 'Manica' perhaps informs the presence of the 'editor'.

<sup>20</sup>Romana Huk makes a similar point to this in relation to 'Postcard XVIII'. She connects the function of its wit with Harrison's discussion of the subversive role of humour in his preface to the Jirásec catalogue. The poem, she argues, "celebrates something irreducible not in the image but in the laughter and recognition itself: 'The thing at the point of the gun speaks, reasons, and is man again'".



The tones and themes of 'The Zeg-Zeg Postcards' are diverse and echo many of the sentiments expressed elsewhere in the sequence. One of the poems, number XXIII, suggests an ominous awareness of being increasingly subject to forces of repression, and a growing inability (or unwillingness), to defend and "justif(y)" his existence;

I have justified my life  
with lengthening silences  
and cut-short cries. (p.45)

Another (IX), also hints at doubts about his life-style; "What begins in honest lust can end/ with innocent blood on its hands" (p.41). This couplet can be seen to allude to his anxieties about the relationship between his personal sexual behaviour and the conditions of colonial exploitation. (The transition described in these lines parallels the progress of the White Queen's self-image between the "begin(ning)" and the "end" of the sequence's narrative.)

On the whole, however, the poems are confident and affirmative. There is much defiant satire. Perhaps the most notable of the 'Postcards', though, are those which deal with a theme barely touched upon elsewhere in the sequence (except, briefly, in the 'Wyatt passage')—the celebration of sexual, sensual pleasure between the White Queen and his Black lover(s)<sup>21</sup>. These poems (especially number XVII) in a sense 'resurrect' the theme of sexuality as a subversive site for the overturning of authoritarian hierarchies. Postcards XVI, XVII and XVIII are the most striking examples. Interestingly, each has as its central metaphor a description of the lover in terms of a Western (food or drink) commodity. In the P.W.D. Man poems such imagery exposes

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(Romana Huk, 'The Leeds Renaissance', *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies 1: Tony Harrison*, ed. Neil Astley (Newcastle upon Tyne: BloodaxeBooks, 1991) 82.)

<sup>21</sup>I would not characterise the account of his "manic" "sex-life", (p.35), in 'The Origin of the Beery Way' as a celebration of sexual pleasure. The tone is too desperate. The whole 'rondeau' passage is closely associated with the feelings of "futility and worthlessness" (p.35).



the Westerner's authoritarian reduction and sexual exploitation of the colonial Other. Here, although the connection established with Western commerce and imperialism is clear and pointed, the effect of the imagery is more ambiguous.

It also differs in each poem. Number XVI is the shortest of the three;

The shower streams over him  
and the water turns instantly  
to cool *Coca-Cola*. (p.43)

Here, because of the lack of immediate contextual information<sup>22</sup>, the main impact of the poem derives from the success of the simple but evocative visual image which it presents. The metaphor of the brown "*Cola*" figures the play of light between the water and the flesh-colour of the bather and suggests that the water is sparkling and bubbling. The description conveys the notion of (sexual) desire and appetite through the associations of the quenching of a thirst (the "*Cola*" is "cool"), and the sweet taste of the drink.

On the other hand, while the presence of a political/historical context is suppressed by the ostensible 'detachment' of this moment from a wider narrative, the poem still inhabits the colonial setting of the sequence and the discernible, if incomplete, 'narrative' of the White Queen's experiences and personality. In this context the reference to an icon of consumer capitalism such as "*Coca-Cola*" is inescapably associated with the history and culture of Western imperialism. The allusion to "*Coca-Cola*" emphasises subtly the fact that the viewer possesses a Westerner's gaze—and, by extension, that the sight satisfies, like "*Cola*", a Western appetite (the alliterative "cool *Coca-Cola*" contains the hint of an advertising slogan).

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<sup>22</sup>For example, the reader does not know if the man in the shower is the White Queen's lover, a prostitute or a stranger. If he was a prostitute, this would undoubtedly affect the reading of the commodity image.

Even so, it is not obviously the case that the presence of the commodity image indicts the White Queen for an act of sexual commodification. Another significant feature of the poem is the implicit suggestion of a miraculous transformation, as "water turns" to not wine but "*Coca-Cola*". The poet's gaze can be interpreted as one of delight and wonder rather than authoritarian reduction. On balance, it is the celebratory tone which seems strongest in this poem. Yet it is significant that both readings are plausible; the poem registers the tension between the two types of gaze.

One effect of the imagery of Western commodities in these poems is to highlight the pervasiveness of both ideological construction and historical division. The imagery undercuts the White Queen's attempts to reach beyond cultural difference to the Other. In poem XVIII the reductive side of the White Queen's perception of the African is stressed. Indeed on the level of political metaphor, as Romana Huk has observed, the commodity 'transformation' in this poem presents a "figurative demonstration...of imperialistic hunger...as horrific as only cartoon can stand"<sup>23</sup>;

Buttocks. Buttocks.  
 You pronounce it as though  
 the syllables rhymed: *loo*; *cocks*.  
 I murmur over and over:  
 buttocks . . . buttocks . . . BUTOX,  
 marketable essence of beef—  
*négritude*—dilute to taste! (pp.43-4)

In poem XVI the White Queen's attention is focused primarily upon the sight of his lover in the shower. Here, by contrast, he in a sense 'turns away' from his lover and attends only to himself. Read one way, the subject of the poem is the poet's wit. The verse depicts the progress of the commodity conceit, from the lover's pronunciation of "buttocks", through the White Queen's brooding over

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<sup>23</sup>Huk 82.



the sound and his search for a connection ("I murmur over and over:/ buttocks... buttocks... "), to the inception of the pun and the elaboration of the conceit. This representation of the development of the word-play exposes the reflex spontaneity of the Westerner's sexual and racial reduction of the African.

At the same time the expression is not entirely 'unguarded'. In fact the poem may be interpreted as satirising the idea of the commodification of 'Blackness'. The reference to "*négritude*" is ambiguous. Elaborated by a group of Black writers in Paris in the 1930's (notably Aimé Césaire and Leopold Senghor), the concept of negritude attempted to establish a positive definition of 'negro-ness'. The concept has been seen, however, as reductivist, 'essentialist', as it subsumes the characteristics of a huge diversity of cultures under a single definition. The literary masterpiece of the Negritude movement is Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (which Harrison presents as his 'model' for *The School of Eloquence* sequence in the poem 'On Not Being Milton'). In the 'Introduction' to the most recent English translation of *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (*Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*), Mireille Rosello quotes Sartre's Hegelian interpretation of 'négritude';

Negritude appears as a weak stage of a dialectical progression: the theoretical and practical affirmation of white supremacy is the thesis; the position of Negritude as antithetical value is the moment of negativity. But this negative moment is not sufficient in itself, and the Blacks who employ it well know it; they know that it seems to prepare the way for the synthesis or the realisation of a human society without racism.<sup>24</sup>

Rosello adds that "'a human society without racism' may now sound like a rather hopeless if not naive dream"<sup>25</sup>. It may not be unreasonable, however, to suggest that the White Queen also views the term '*négritude*' with a scepticism

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<sup>24</sup>Jean Paul Sartre, quoted in Mireille Rosello, introduction, *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*, by Aimé Césaire, trans. Mireille Rosello with Annie Pritchard (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1995) 47.

<sup>25</sup>Rosello 47.



that derives from his own 'naive dream' of the possibility of a non-racist, non-hierarchical connection between African and European.

The reference to "*négritude*" in the Postcard, though, may be read as a response to the specific employment, or appropriation, of the concept as a marketing tool—used particularly for the selling of poetry. 'Negritude' is a "marketable essence". The European Cultural appetite for 'the Black experience' is fed by anthologies of 'negritude' writing which reduce the power and significance of the individual works by suppressing their cultural specificity. The concept of negritude, therefore, facilitates an editorial watering down of Black experiences to a 'strength' more palatable to Western readers: "*négritude*—dilute to taste!".

Despite the presence of satire, however, the poet himself is not detached from the moral implications of the commodity imagery which he employs in the poem. The reduction of Black cultural production ("*négritude*"), to a sexual/food commodity ("BUTOX"), which the White Queen himself relishes is disturbing. The complex tone of the final lines includes a certain bravado which appears to relate to the flaunting of his forbidden sexual "taste"—and to his celebration of it as a satisfyingly 'strong' "taste"—as much as to his enjoyment of the satirical flourish. Notably the poem, despite the "you" in the second line, appears by the end to be addressed either to the poet himself or to a Western (poetry) audience. The lover is forgotten and effaced.

We are reminded of the 'editor's' comment that "*it is curious that those (postcards) which were actually posted are addressed to a completely illiterate lover*" (p.46). On the other hand, this apparently futile gesture towards communication may contain more subtle significance. The 'editor's' notes also disclose that "*the Postcards are all from, or of, places in Europe*



visited by the 'White Queen' on leaves from Africa, and the poems on them are, almost without exception, about Africa" (p.46). Perhaps the act of posting the cards, of linking Europe and Africa in this way, is symbolic in itself. The idea of sending a picture of Europe, and a poem, to his "illiterate lover" suggests not only a recognition of the limitations and divisions imposed by language, but a desire to effect a connection which defies these barriers.

Throughout the volume sexuality is offered as a potential site for the establishment of subversive pre- or non-linguistic bonds. 'Postcard XVII' can be viewed as an attempt to present a sexual union in terms which overcome linguistic/cultural borders;

We shake baby powder over each other  
like men salting a spitroast,  
laughing like kids in a sandpit,  
childish ghosts of ourselves,  
me, puffy marshmallow, he,  
sherbert dusted liquorice,  
licked back bright,  
and leading into *Turkish Delight*. (p.43)

Here the allusions to pre-adolescence, "baby powder", "laughing like kids" and "childish ghosts", invoke a pre-lapsarian experience of sexuality. This connects with the depictions of sexuality in the childhood poems (in Part One of the volume), before 'the fall' into authoritarian culture and the knowledge of patriarchal history. It is notable that the strikingly anomalous simile in the second line diverges from the identifications with childhood. The brief reference to adulthood, "like men salting a spitroast", contains a dark hint of cannibalism, of the dehumanisation of the Other (the "spitroast" they are "salting" being "each other"). On this occasion, though, this subtle reminder of a fallen patriarchal history only serves to highlight the lovers' divergence from the established oppositions of authoritarian culture.

Perhaps the most interesting line is the description of the lovers as "childish ghosts of ourselves". The longed-for communion is made possible not by the negotiation of cultural constructions of self and difference, but by the suppression of these areas of identity. Adult layers of self are removed to reveal the compatible, less culturally determined, "childish ghosts". The lovers' physical differences are perceived, through the metaphors of children's sweets (and, implicitly, through the lens of sexual desire), as signs of a delicious variety. In the P.W.D Man poems the imagery of sweets and confectionary connote an immature and unwholesome sexual appetite. Such associations are barely perceptible here. This is partly due to the brevity of the poem and the momentariness of the scene (such a diet is acceptable in small amounts). Also, it is because the mutuality of the lovers' actions, and their shared experience of "childishness" is stressed. They laugh together and "shake baby powder over each other".

The evocation of a pre-lapsarian union is broken in the final line, however, by the use of the Western commodity name. The reductive cultural associations of an exotic sexual Otherness contained in "*Turkish Delight*" contaminate the individual celebration of sensual pleasure which is, nevertheless, also registered by the image. Perhaps the visual conceit of "*Turkish Delight*" (which represents the lover's pink anus and is also a euphemism for gay sex), can be connected with the line from 'Manica', "as pink as a lover's orifice", (p.39). The shared colour of the interior of the human body figures the shared experience of sexual pleasure and the common physical identity of the species. Even so, the implicit appearance of cultural prejudices and hierarchical oppositions in the commodity name suggests irresistably the idea of an inescapable 'fall' (back) into the knowledge of authoritarian, patriarchal ideology which is inscribed in language.



The sexual metaphor in 'The White Queen', as this reading of the sequence has hopefully highlighted, makes the point repeatedly that authoritarian ideology infiltrates desire itself. Those images which attempt to figure the subversive potential within sexuality, therefore, are almost always qualified and undermined by some irony or ambivalence within the text. It is rare for a sexual image, such as that in 'Postcard XX', to appear free of such qualification. 'Postcard XX', however, expresses only an aspiration or an appeal towards a subversive, 'equal' union;

*Mon égal!*

Let me be the Gambia  
in your Senegal. (p.44)

The sexual conceit here is based on the shape of the borders of the two countries. The Gambia is a thin corridor which, from the coast, penetrates into Senegal. Of course it could be argued that, as the 'political' map of Africa is a product of European imperial history, this image is, again, undercut. Yet the poem's political complacency—the easy assumption of equality, "*Mon égal!*" ("My equal!"), and the representation of the European and African as two *African* countries—is essentially unchallenged. The simple translation of bodies into nations bypasses the problems of cultural construction which introduce the tensions into the sexual metaphor in Postcards XVI, XVII, XVIII and elsewhere in the sequence. Such a politically fastidious reading of this epigram may seem overly interpretive. The point is worth noting, however, as several longer poems in the volume—as we shall see in the next chapter—are weakened by a similar oversimplification of the sexual/political metaphor.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### i. The Cold War Poems

'The Curtain Catullus' and 'The Chopin Express' (each from Part Three of *The Loiners*), have as their theme the actual or desired sexual union between two cultural Others within a historical context of profound division and opposition. Set in Eastern Europe, the political backdrop is no longer colonialism but the Cold War. Again such a sexual union is offered as a political metaphor, an act of rebellion against the mutual alienation of the cultural Other, dehumanised on both sides as 'the enemy'. The effect of the sexual imagery in these poems, however, is curiously empty and inadequate. Several reasons may be advanced in support of this view. The first derives from the fact that the speakers' contacts with the cultural Other—the Russian woman in 'The Chopin Express' and the communist woman in 'The Curtain Catullus' ("this gorgeous red bird", (p.67))—are presented as unproblematic, 'uncontaminated' by cultural construction. Consequently, as in Postcard XX, the lover is complacently considered as a neutral, equal political Other. The sexual metaphor in these poems, therefore, is bereft of those ambivalences which undermine the representation of 'sexual union as subversion' in most of 'The White Queen' sequence. One result of this is that here the sexual/political symbolism becomes *politically* reductive.<sup>1</sup>

A further and significant reason why the 'call to subversion' in these poems is unconvincing involves the issue of sexism. In 'The White Queen' sequence, the persona's attempt to use sexuality as a liberal gesture

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<sup>1</sup> Luke Spencer makes a stronger charge in his impatience with these poems when he complains that they are "politically naive; for, as Orwell's Winston Smith realised, it takes more than a fuck to resist repression". Luke Spencer, *The Poetry of Tony Harrison* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994) 33.



towards subversive connection with the colonial Other is repeatedly undermined by the exposure of a deeply embedded racism. In these poems set in Europe a similar gesture can again be seen to be undercut by reductive attitudes towards the Other, on this occasion not racist but sexist. The striking difference between the two cases, though, is that in the Cold War poems it is not clear whether the poet is aware of the problem. It is tempting, as some of the instances of sexism are so crude, to conclude that he is. However, the overall impression is that the development and progression of the theme of 'political subversion' is unhindered by any sense of equivocation about the poems' representations of the female Other.

In both poems the personae, like the White Queen, approach sex in a state of spiritual exhaustion which is caused partly by their acute apprehension of an enveloping and ongoing 'fallen' history. The speaker of 'The Curtain Catullus' is shown around the historical sights of Prague by the unnamed communist woman;

...your peach neck cranes  
At some Church soldier launching a gold spear  
Against the Turk. One lurking Infidel  
Is herded by Christ's army into Hell.  
I'm tired. Natasha! Olga! Masha! Come  
To my bugged bedroom. Leave mausoleum,  
Church, museum be. Leave your clothes there—Cold War  
Bashing its dead torches on our door. (p.67)

In these last lines of the poem the persona is not only physically "tired" but emotionally wearied by the relentless history of division and dehumanisation of the Other which the tour discloses. Here, in a shift in tone reminiscent both of the White Queen and of Catullus himself, the anti-authoritarian bravado which characterises the rest of the poem cracks to reveal an underlying desolation. The room behind the "door" represents both their private lives and individual

consciousness, haunted by the fear of political repression which threatens, with its "dead torches", to extinguish personal desire and vitality. The speaker invites the woman (or women) to resist these life-denying forces with him behind "our door". This space, though, is vulnerable. The "bedroom" is already invaded, "bugged". Also the image in the final line, read one way, presents a sinister interruption of their lovemaking by authoritarian forces even before it has begun.

Similarly, in 'The Chopin Express', the U.S. "conshie" (p.70)—or conscientious objector, presumably from the Vietnam War—is gripped during love-making by thoughts of violent punishments which he imagines as being inflicted on himself and his lover for their defiance of Cold War oppositions. The punishments are figured in language which combines symbols of national identity—the Soviet and U.S. flags—with dehumanising food imagery; for example, "Let no iron hammers crush/ our tender parts to butcher's mush" (p.69). Whereas the dead-weight of authoritarian history is evoked in 'The Curtain Catullus' by the reference to the "mausoleum" and "museum", here the speaker's life-affirming orgasm is inhibited by a vision of the world as a global "crematorium". Following this image, the orgasm is described in a conceit which juxtaposes implicitly two alternative kinds of sublimation of phallic energy;

Relieve my tension. I can't come.  
The world's a crematorium.  
Hold me! Hold me! Eyes screwed tight  
against the sizzling of the light.  
I'm coming! Count-down! 3–2–1–  
Zero! Earth! Moon! Sun!  
The Constellations! Look, I spurt  
my seed into her Russian dirt. (p.70)



The "sizzling of the light" is the incinerating light of the destruction of the world, the reduction of the contents of the global "crematorium" to ashes. The image evokes, in particular, the devastation of a nuclear war. The "conshie", however, "eyes screwed tight/ against" the destructive light, attempts to affirm life in the face of this drive towards annihilation. The "count-down" to his orgasm, therefore, does not parallel the count-down to the launch of a nuclear missile. Instead he aligns his own phallic energy with the human drive towards discovery, in the form of space exploration. Of course the race between the Soviets and the U.S. to put a man on the Moon highlights the tendency of authoritarian culture to appropriate this urge for exploration. The 'flight' of the "conshie", however, reaches past the Moon. As he 'soars' out to "the Constellations" in the rising crescendo of orgasm, the Superpowers, and the planet, are located in a much larger 'home', the Universe. The Earth, from this vantage point, would appear as unitary as a star. From this perspective he invites the reader to observe the symbolic moment of cross-cultural germination, "Look, I spurt/ my seed into her Russian dirt".

Despite the wit and skill of this rhetoric, however, the metaphor of political union remains unsatisfactory because the voice and experience of the Other, the Russian woman, is utterly absent. The persona concludes, "I felt the broken world all come/ together then" (p.70), but, on the literal, sexual level, there is no indication in the poem that the woman has reached orgasm too. If anything, the representation of her at the point of his orgasm ("her Russian dirt"), suggests an unmoved passivity. In fact, while the male body and consciousness is a site of struggle between opposing phallic energies, the woman's body is characterised by an absence of conflict. It is "neutral", "Breasts and thighs/ the colour of clear, neutral skies/ like Africa's" (p.69). After the African poems, which are so pervasively informed by an awareness of



anti-colonial movements, the characterisation of African skies as "neutral" might be supposed to be ironic. The description carries connotations of the reductive colonial idealisation of Africa as a blank, passive female body, inviting exploration. Irony does not seem to be present, however, and the word 'neutral' is seized on by the speaker to make a further implicit contrast between a "barbed", aggressive/defensive Europe and North America and a peaceful, quiescent Africa; "Neutrality! Brave cocks and cunts/ belong to no barbed continents" (p.69).

As with the Black lovers' experiences of sexuality in 'The White Queen', the females' viewpoints in these poems are ignored. The reduction of the female, cultural Other in 'The Curtain Catullus' is emphasised at the close of the poem by the fact that the communist women appear interchangeable as sexual partners; "Natasha! Olga! Masha! Come/ To my bugged bedroom" (p.67). Perhaps the most telling moment of effacement in these poems, however, occurs in the final stanza of 'The Chopin Express';

The whole globe or the Bering Straits  
divide the Soviets from the States.  
They didn't then. Can they put walls  
between a father and his balls,  
a Russian and a Yankee gene? (p.70)

The image of an indivisible "Russian and...Yankee gene" is intelligible as part of the political metaphor of cross-cultural unification. The reference to genetics also clarifies, to an extent, the import of the previous line: a father and his offspring are inextricably linked by their shared genetic characteristics. Still, the conceit of placing barriers "between a father and his balls" is oddly inappropriate and illogical both from a biological perspective and in the context of the political metaphor. Authoritarian culture would not need to place "walls" there as, alone, "a father and his balls" cannot effect the subversive



'cross-fertilization'. The implied effacement in this line of the role of the female in procreation is all the more startling because it echoes the argument of Apollo in *The Oresteia*—which Harrison's translation works so insistently to highlight and expose as the decisive expression of patriarchal ideology in the trilogy;

Apollo: The mother of what's called her offspring's no parent  
but only the nurse to the seed that's implanted.  
The mounter, the male's the only true parent...  
The womb of the woman's a convenient transit.<sup>2</sup>

Of course Harrison's line in 'The Curtain Catullus' cannot be reduced to this position. The line might be seen to be symptomatic, though, of what Luke Spencer terms Harrison's "complacent masculinity"<sup>3</sup>. Yet Spencer uses this phrase not during his consideration of the 'Cold War poems', but in his discussion of the last stanza of 'Newcastle is Peru'. Indeed his view is that a "complacent masculinity" pervades the whole of *The Loiners*. I would disagree with this and argue that the evident complacency of 'The Curtain Catullus' and 'The Chopin Express' is in fact exceptional.

The various male personae, the Loiners, do undoubtedly share and exhibit viewpoints which are severely limited by their gender construction. In describing these limitations Marilyn Hacker is perhaps nearer the mark with her phrase "masculine myopia",

This maculine myopia characterises Harrison's earlier work, full as it is of various more or less well realised male characters. For all of them half of humanity seems to consist of a series of breasts, bellies and buttocks, of various shades and in various states of undress, all depersonalised...faceless exotics with no separate existence evoked by the poems, equally

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<sup>2</sup>Tony Harrison, *The Oresteia, Theatre Works 1973-1985* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986) 283.

<sup>3</sup>Spencer 37.

objectified. The prevalence of this makes the *male* personae hard to tell apart!<sup>4</sup>

This fundamental similarity between the male personae (in fact all of the speakers, except one<sup>5</sup>, are male), offers a hint towards a more subtle and appropriate reading of the widespread examples of the reduction of the Female in the volume. This reading appeals to the concept and common identity of 'the Loiner', viewing the term not primarily as a reference to 'the citizens of Leeds' but as signifying a shared cultural constructedness. A Loiner is a particular (male) product of (Western) history and culture (this is why it is possible to describe the American "conshie" as a Loiner). He is therefore always constrained by the limitations and prejudices of his ideological heritage, even though he may, like the White Queen or 'Tony Harrison', struggle against them.

One of the most fundamental of these prejudices, of course, is sexism. Some of the Loiners, such as the P.W.D. Man, may be virtually unaware of their sexism. The White Queen seems not to consider it a problem, and even consciously indulges it. I would argue that the first-person speaker, 'Tony Harrison', however, is deeply concerned and troubled by the limitations of the construction of masculinity which he has inherited, and by his relationship to women, and to Femaleness. As he *is* subject to these limitations, it may be accurate to ascribe to him a "masculine myopia"; but his own anxious apprehension of the problem refutes the idea of a "masculine complacency".

Whether or not we need to place the inverted commas around 'Tony Harrison' when discussing the first-person speaker of 'Heart of Darkness', 'Newcastle is Peru', 'Ghosts: Some Words Before Breakfast' and so on, is

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<sup>4</sup>Marilyn Hacker, 'Eloquent Ingloriousness', *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies 1: Tony Harrison*, ed. Neil Astley (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books 1991) 252.

<sup>5</sup>The exception is Isabella, the speaker of 'The Nuptial Torches'.



debatable. One way of looking at these poems is to suggest that, as Harrison is presenting himself in the 'autobiographical poems' as a Loiner, the speaking voice of the poems represents only a part of his identity. In other words, these poems, as much as 'The White Queen' or the P.W.D. Man poems, need to be interpreted through the reading conventions of the dramatic monologue. Harrison the poet ironically places and undercuts 'Harrison' the Loiner.

On the other hand, as the speaker 'Harrison' is so acutely conscious and critical of his own constructedness (as a Loiner), it is uncertain how helpful the separation of 'speaker' and 'poet' would be in this instance. Rather, what we have in these poems is a complex speaker/poet who observes and explores his own identity with a profound degree of ironic detachment. Interestingly, half of the volume is 'composed' by a fictional poet whose verse might be seen to exemplify just such a stance: the White Queen. As the White Queen is so 'knowing' and self-conscious, a confusion arises in relation to those ironies in the sequence which castigate or undermine the speaker: is it Harrison or the White Queen himself being ironic? The conventional distinction between 'speaker' and 'poet' in the dramatic monologue form has therefore already been questioned, and to an extent eroded, in *The Loiners*.

## **ii. Newcastle is Peru and The Heart of Darkness**

In fact it usually makes no practical difference to an interpretation of the poems whether we choose to read 'The White Queen' or the 'autobiographical poems' as dramatic monologues or not. The crucial issue is that the reader must be aware of the ironic detachment and self-criticism which the speakers/poets exhibit in the verse. If such implicit self-criticism is missed the results can be disastrous, as in Luke Spencer's discussion of the final two stanzas of 'Newcastle is Peru';

My fingerprints still lined with coal

send cold shudders through my soul.  
Each whorl, my love-, my long life-line,  
mine, inalienably mine,  
lead off my body as they press  
onwards into nothingness.  
I see my grimy fingers smudge  
everything they feel or touch.

The fire I laid and lit to draw  
you downstairs to the second floor,  
flickers and struts upon my bed.  
And I'm left gazing at a full-page spread  
of aggressively fine bosoms, nude  
and tanned almost to *négritude*,  
in the Colour Supplement's *Test*  
*Yourself for Cancer of the Breast*. (p.87)

Spencer finds some evidence of self-criticism in these lines, but it is only marginal, attained by the poet's semi-conscious "imaginative grasp";

The image of fingers begriming everything they touch offers a starting point for a critique of male egoism, but the chance is not taken. Again, in the last stanza, there is the image of the fire "strutting" upon the bed as if to focus the arrogance with which Harrison has enticed the woman into it; but once again the imaginative grasp exceeds the ideological understanding, and the narcissistic display of the firelight is promptly transferred to the "aggressively fine bosoms" which so confuse Harrison's complacent masculinity.<sup>6</sup>

In fact these stanzas constitute a profoundly negative appraisal of the poet's own selfhood, including an implicit critique of his masculinity. The image of "grimy fingers" is the culmination of the conceit of personal identity which begins with the reference to his "fingerprints". The contours and lines on his fingers and hands are located implicitly within a long evolutionary inheritance—they are "still lined with coal"—which is fallen, dirty. However, while the allusion to palmistry (which suggests the notion of pre-determination), opens the way for a disavowal of personal responsibility, this

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<sup>6</sup>Spencer 37.



path is refused. Though his "fingerprints", his identity, may be in part the product of his inheritance, they are also uniquely his. Unlike the White Queen, he does not try to dissociate himself from the polluted, 'unclean' body (which figures his fallen cultural inheritance), and attempt to project it as 'foreign'. Instead he recognises, precisely, that his "love-" and "life-line(s)", and by extension the responsibilities which "love" and "life" involve, are "inalienably" his. These existential demands are intensified by the finitude of mortality: "love" and "life" are surrounded by "nothingness". This "nothingness" does not only signify death, however. It is also the value-less, absurd universe in which the human individual must choose and affirm ethical values, must "love" and "live". Observing his own behaviour, though, he "see(s)" his "grimy fingers" dirty and contaminate "everything" they come into contact with. It is this apprehension which "sends" mortifying "cold shudders through (his) soul".

This mood of self-disgust informs the imagery of the final stanza. It is the phrase "everything they feel or touch" which returns the speaker's thoughts to his lover. The image of the "strut(ting)" fire presents the male in sexually frustrated isolation. At the same time, the fire conceit connects with other representations in the volume of a destructive phallic sexuality. Therefore, as well as connoting, in Spencer's phrase, "narcissitic self-display", the fire imagery also contains damning associations which reflect the speaker's feelings of self-reproach.

Spencer's failure to appreciate fully the self-critical tone of these images leads him to miss the profoundly significant ironies in the poem's last lines;

Harrison is left looking at a colour supplement photograph of 'aggressively fine bosoms' which mimic '*négritude*' with their expensively acquired suntan, and are displayed not for sexual arousal but as an aid to self-examination for breast cancer. In other words, what might have been a



celebratory image of female eroticism turns out to be a sobering reminder of malignant growths and possible mastectomies. How sharply is Harrison's gender position thus revealed! For whose interest does the photograph serve but that of women themselves...?<sup>7</sup>

The most important irony that Spencer overlooks lies precisely in the notion of "self-examination" which he mentions here. The "*Cancer of the Breast*" is, to the rueful speaker, a metaphor for a self-destructive, 'diseased', Western cultural heritage which corrupts "*the Breast*", the heart, love relationships. The speaker is "left" therefore to assess the state of his own 'heart', which, on one level, means to acknowledge and mourn the limitations of his masculine identity. The earlier negative image of phallic sexuality implies that it is particularly the male "*Breast*" which is infected. The fact that the "bosoms" are "aggressively fine", though, suggests a 'barbed' relationship between the lovers here, and between the sexes (which, in the Cold War poems, had been conspicuously wished away).

The second significant metaphor which Spencer's reading ignores is that of "*négritude*". The designation in the poem of the female lover as part of a generic Otherness, ("you also are Peru", (p.86))—linked, and in some way an equivalent, to the cultural and colonial Other—is reinforced by this reference to "*négritude*". Throughout the volume the sexual and colonial Other are implicitly or explicitly aligned, both being defined by the binary oppositions of authoritarian culture as submissive or 'lower'. Here, however, the parallel between the two contains further significance. Not only is the repression of the Other invoked, but also the rebellion of the Other. The negritude movement promoted a positive Black identity and opposed colonialism. The description of the photographs of female breasts as "aggressively fine" carries similar connotations of (female) affirmation and

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<sup>7</sup>Spencer 36.



revolt and can be seen to evoke the impact of the womens' liberation movement on the poet's consciousness. Although the male "gaze" here is potentially reductive—another of Hacker's examples of the representations of women in the volume as a "series of breasts, bellies and buttocks"—the female images in fact appear to the poet to possess an assertive kind of strength and beauty which he finds threatening. Spencer is correct, therefore, in registering the male discomfiture at the fact that the photographs are designed for female rather than male consumption. The vital point which he misses, however, is that Harrison is also aware of this problem and makes it central to his complex depiction of the predicament of 'the Loiner'.

In 'Newcastle is Peru' the poet approaches his lover in a spirit comparable to the White Queen's attitude towards his Black lover in 'the Wyatt passage'. Both are looking for a healing, affirmative union with the Other. However, the connection established at the close of 'Newcastle is Peru' between the Womens movement and the Negritude movement highlights the fact that the Loiners' sexual relationships with women are, like the Europeans' relationship with the African Other, fraught with cultural and political tensions. The desire for union and mutual sensual enjoyment is repeatedly 'contaminated' by the repressive attitudes of the Loiners' authoritarian psychological inheritance. Much poetic effort is expended in 'The White Queen', as the discussion of the sequence has highlighted, to maintain this ambivalence within the poems' sexual imagery. The same scrupulous care can be seen to continue in the depictions of sexual contact between men and women in the 'autobiographical poems'. (It is the absence of such care which makes the 'Cold War poems' exceptional in this regard.)

This tension at the centre of most of the volume's sexual imagery is perhaps wrought most intensely in 'The Heart of Darkness'. One of the



meanings of the poem's title can be seen, like the image of the "*Breast*" which closes 'Newcastle is Peru', to carry a reference to the male speaker's failure or inadequacy in love relationships. The "Darkness" depicted in the poem is not simply an absence or a lack. It is, like the metaphor of "*Cancer*" and the fire imagery in the final stanza of 'Newcastle is Peru', a destructive, corrosive force. The poem opens with the image of the body's shadow, which is that 'darkness' which is inescapably and permanently attached to the poet. The language first used to describe his shadow imbues it with associations of a brittle machismo, a masculinity in crisis, which is part of the Loiners' debilitating authoritarian inheritance; "gigantic first, then noonday blob/ my shadow staggers, lurches, reels" (p.47). The juxtaposition in the first of these lines glosses one of the Loiners' familiar and repeated patterns of breakdown; the transition from manic bravado (feeling "gigantic"), to emotional collapse (a formless "blob"). This cycle of behaviour is also often associated with alcoholic intoxication, as is the "stagger(ing), lurch(ing), reel(ing)" motion of the shadow here.

This volatile disorientation of the shadow acquires further significance as the poem progresses. The second stanza considers the modern loss of Christian faith in Europe; more precisely, its gradual erosion since the Renaissance. An allusion to "Chartres/ Cathedral windows" (p.47), and a search for a "Christmas candle" (p.47), to provide some illumination in the darkness, provokes the thought:

...coloured light  
evoking Europe till Twelfth Night  
and aspirations from our dust  
with no repository but lust. (p.47)

Europe's spiritual beliefs and yearnings have been transferred not to the earthly love of our fellow human beings, but to sexual "lust" (and, implicitly, to political "lust" for dominion.) Yet the allusion to *Twelfth Night* evokes Orsino's



expression of dissatisfaction with romantic love in the play's opening speech ("If music be the food of love..."<sup>8</sup>). In this speech love, like a good tune, is only briefly distracting and then "falls into abatement and low price/ Even in a minute"<sup>9</sup>. The fifth stanza will underline the point implied by this association—that personal love as a modern substitute for an overarching belief-system is superficial and unfulfilling;

Novelties! Good drummers come  
miles to hear a different drum  
as men go to adulteries. Sounds!  
Women! It's the same. Our ground's  
stamped and rutted, so we choose  
either to hog it in squelched ooze,  
or get resurrection and find sties  
most radiant with novelties. (p.48)

The connection between this passage and the existential crisis of Europe is made clearer by reference to Pascal's *Pensées*. In his bleak vision of man divorced from the Divine, *diversion* is a kind of wretched blessing;

No state is pleasant without fun and noise, and every state is agreeable in which we can enjoy some sort of distraction. But think what sort of happiness it is that consists in being diverted from thinking about ourselves!

For we either think of miseries which are ours, or of those which threaten us. And even if we found ourselves adequately protected all round, boredom would, of its own accord, soon come welling up from the depths of our heart, where it has its natural roots, and fill the mind with its poison.<sup>10</sup>

'The Heart of Darkness', therefore, is on one level this poisonous unfulfilment, repression or "boredom" at the centre of European identity. The modern European distracts himself from this inner abyss with "novelties" which include sexual sensation. Harrison's description of this fundamental boredom presents

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<sup>8</sup>See *Twelfth Night* I.i, 1-14.

<sup>9</sup>*Twelfth Night* I.i, 13-4.

<sup>10</sup>Blaise Pascal, *Pascal's Pensées*, trans. Martin Turnell (London: Harvill Press, 1962) 178.

it as a male experience. "Women!" are merely another distraction or novelty; no more or less important, as such, than "Sounds!".

The image of the shadow can now be seen to figure not only Europe's 'dark heart', but also spiritual or existential need. In the first stanza there is a suggestion that the "stagger(ing)", "blind" and dumb shadow is engaged in a desperate search: "stretch(ing) out with his blind reach/ way beyond the gasp of speech", (p.47). When the shadow does finally find a 'voice', in the sixth stanza, it is in order to make an ecstatic public and quasi-religious affirmation:

My shadow's back as if it could  
smell lust steaming off my blood:  
Fee, Fi, Fo, Fum,  
this is my *Praeconium*.  
Paging angels set down this  
fastidious and human kiss;  
and this; and this; and this; and set  
down this, my *Exultet*:

Everything in this rich dark  
craves my exclamation mark.  
Wife! Mouth! Breasts! Thigh! (p.48)

The shadow's call to "paging angels" to record each "*human* kiss" insists on a secular, humanist testimony. The "rich dark" connects the couple to the "dark" and the rain of the poem's final stanza, and to the unconquerable primal energy of the River Niger (which recalls Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*); "Nigeria's Niger is not yet/ harnessed to our wireless set", (p.49). At the same time, the life-bringing rain at the close of the poem, like the rain in 'The Elephant and the Kangaroo', figures revolutionary change that brings only destruction for the colonists. Here, as in 'The Elephant and the Kangaroo', the rains wreck European food produce, (on this occasion in the form of the couple's vegetable patch), "flattening down ten rows of beans/ a bed of radishes" (p.49). Further,



while the Niger is independent of the "wireless set" and the existential enervation of the West which it disseminates, the implication is that the speaker *is* "harnessed" to it.

While the 'shadow's outburst' of momentary existential fulfilment carries a genuine sense of release and celebration, these lines constitute, ultimately, another example of the spurious "resurrection" (p.47), mentioned in stanza five. It is, after all, the smell of "lust" which 'awakens' the shadow. The conceit which introduces 'the voice' of the shadow reemphasises the negative associations of it as manic, sinister, "gigantic". Indeed, the allusion to the story of 'Jack and the Beanstalk' casts the poet as Jack and his shadow as the giant who "smell(s)" the "blood" of the 'Englishman'. On one level, therefore, the giant's apparent appropriation of the poem's speaking voice in the line "Fee, Fi, Fo, Fum" (p.48), figures a kind of 'possession' of the poet. The effect of this conflation of roles in the one voice of the poem is to expose the ideological construction of the poet's sexual desire. The 'Englishman's' "lust" arouses his repressive, authoritarian "shadow".

It is essential to recognise this slight shift of perspective and voice as it informs the reading of the following expressions of "exult(ation)". If the ironic self-criticism implicit in the allusion to 'Jack and the Beanstalk' is not registered, then these lines may be interpreted as a straightforward celebration of the sexual moment.<sup>11</sup> In fact the ambivalence which informs the characterisation of the "shadow" is maintained throughout the 'shadow's declaration'. A "*Praeconium*", for example, can be a eulogy and celebration or a public proclamation communicating (imperial) legislation. Similarly, while the reference to a "human kiss" discloses the desire to subvert the authority

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<sup>11</sup>It is the final three lines of this quotation which Marilyn Hacker cites as an "unfortunate" example of the reduction of the Female in the volume, (Hacker 252).



which Christianity asserts through the idea of a divinely inspired and legitimated text, the poet still wishes to claim this authority for his own speech. "*Exultet*" carries the ambiguous connotations of 'exult', which can mean not only 'to rejoice', but 'to rejoice in triumph'. The poet's expression of celebration, therefore, is again 'contaminated' by authoritarian impulses which infiltrate his sexual desire. The poem repeatedly undercuts his affirmation and the force of his "exclamation mark". There is enough qualification to suggest that the poet recognises the reduction of the Female in the line, "Wife! Mouth! Breasts! Thigh!"—and after orgasm both of their bodies are seen in a more sober light (observed by "Tuareg guards" (p.49)); "breasts; thigh; bum" (p.49). Yet it has to be reiterated that the description of the wife does contain a genuine sense of celebration. Even though the poet seems to be aware of the limitations of his cultural construction, he still feels compelled to make the flawed affirmation. At the moment of orgasm the European transformation of Christian humility and love into a lust for power is figured through the image of 'a wolf in sheep's clothing'; "O Superlamb/ grown lupine, luminous" (p.49). If his desire is rapacious though—"lupine"—it also retains a "luminous" radiance which is not only destructive, like the imagery of fire elsewhere, but a potentially positive, creative force. The word "luminous" holds out stubbornly against the "Darkness" which the poem locates in the poet's love or desire, in the "Heart".

### **iii. Ghosts: Some Words Before Breakfast**

The image of the shadow in 'The Heart of Darkness' provides a good illustration of the way in which a critique of masculinity is implicit in the wider examination of the Loiners' authoritarian (psychological) inheritance. At the same time the emphasis on the exposure of the ideology of colonialism in 'The Heart of Darkness' does blur the critique. In 'Ghosts: Some Words Before



Breakfast' (which, like 'Newcastle is Peru', is set in the north-east of England), it is more clearly visible. The poem dramatises Harrison's traumatised consciousness during one emotionally turbulent night. His young daughter has been involved in a serious road traffic accident which has left her critically ill in hospital. The writing is highly elliptical, reflecting the poet's extreme agitation and anxiety. However all his thoughts are informed by, and must be read in relation to, his central, overriding concern with his daughter's plight.

The critique of masculinity in this poem can be seen to arise because the poet refuses to view the incident fatalistically, as an 'accident'. Instead his response to the event locates it, implicitly, in a particular history and culture—whose driving energies are presented as unambiguously male. Immediately after a description of the girl's "crushed legs" (p.94), the poem shifts from the hospital setting to the dangerous "black spot crossing" (p.94) where, it appears, the accident occurred. Harrison has returned to the place at night. Presiding over the "black spot" is an ambiguous and sinister male image;

The black spot crossing; on both sides  
a blank male silhouette still strides  
off the caution and just keeps  
on striding, while Newcastle sleeps,  
between the Deaf School and the Park,  
into his element, the dark. (p.94)

On one level this "silhouette" is a personification of Death, whose "element" is "the dark" of oblivion. On another level, though, the "blank male" might be seen to represent a pathological, manic masculinity which here seems to be gripped by a kind of death-drive. He "strides/ off the caution" signs towards "dark(ness)" with a blind recklessness that perhaps evokes the march of patriarchal history towards nuclear or ecological self-destruction. The "blank male silhouette" echoes the images of absence elsewhere in the volume (especially that of the shadow in 'The Heart of Darkness' and the reference to



"blank mind" (p.47) in the same poem), which figure the existential crisis underpinning this mania. In fact the passage highlights the pervasiveness of this cultural pathology by suggesting how deeply it infiltrates or informs the social system. The organisation of the transport system ignores the needs of vulnerable groups such as deaf children who might want to visit "the Park"—for the accident "black spot", Harrison observes pointedly, is "between the Deaf School and the Park". While the malevolent "male silhouette...strides" through the "dark(ness)", however, "Newcastle sleeps". The implication of this detail is that the dangers inherent in contemporary forms of social organisation, such as traffic 'accidents', are accepted by a quiescent, ignorant or resigned public.

The "male silhouette" is associated in the next lines of the poem with the "Scottish drivers" (p.94), whose lorries Harrison observes passing over the "black spot" (and a few lines later with the personification of the Englishman, "John Bull" (p.94)). The vehicles of the "Scottish drivers", moving through the night, also seem like 'creatures' of the "dark";

each lashed, tarpaulined hulk  
groaning borderwards: *Blue Circle Bulk*  
*Cement; Bulk Earthmoving; Bulk Grain;*  
Edinburgh and back again.  
And up the Great North Road in twos  
great tankers of Newcastle booze... (p.94)

The repeated emphasis on the massive "*Bulk*" of the "tankers" is juxtaposed inescapably, through the emotional logic of the poem, with the image of the small girl in hospital. This 'bulk transportation', though, especially of "Newcastle booze", also contrasts with the description of the horse and cart in the poem's opening lines, the "anachronistic dray" (p.91), that belongs to the brewers "*Scottish and Newcastle*" (p.91). One effect of this contrast is to insist on the contingency of the 'accident'; that is, on the specificity of the culture in



which such 'accidents' occur. Another effect is to highlight the rapidity of economic expansion in recent history. The suggestive phrase "*Bulk Earthmoving*" might also be seen, in combination with the image of the "silhouette", to evoke the 'recklessness' of contemporary global economic expansion.

The implicit allusion here to the vast alcoholic consumption of contemporary Britain leads into another vivid image of the emotional debilitation afflicting the Western male;

great tankers of Newcastle booze,  
returning empty, leaving full,  
swashing with comfort for John Bull  
and John Bull's bouncing babes who slug  
their English anguish at the bottle's dug. (pp. 94-5)

As elsewhere in the volume, though, Harrison recognises that, like "John Bull" and the "Scottish drivers", he is himself caught up in the existential crisis which informs the destructiveness of the "male silhouette". He declares that "I too could drown/ this newest sorrow in *Newcastle Brown*" (p.95). This thought, formulated only as a possibility, seems to be realised immediately—as in the next line he is drunk; "I thrash round desperately. I flail/ my arms at sharks in seas of ale" (p.95). These lines, though, complicate the underlying cliché of 'drowning one's sorrows'. The implication of "drown" is that he would like to use alcohol as a means of escaping and avoiding the pain of his "sorrows". In fact he refuses to 'drown' in this way. The alcohol only intensifies his struggle to deal with his responses to the event. The image of his "desperate" "thrash(ing)" could be seen as an apt metaphor for the style, tone and organisation of the poem; he "thrash(es)" outwards from the specific anger and grief caused by the 'accident', "flail(ing)" against "the sharks", the destructive

forces that prey on the vulnerable, which he finds evidence of everywhere in the contemporary world.

Even in the waiting room of the hospital, for example, he discovers childrens'—boys'—comics which present role models that perpetuate authoritarian cultural constructions of masculinity;

The waiting room's an airless place  
littered with comics...  
STONE BOY of the planet Zwen  
who turns to stone and back again...  
and MATTER-EATER-LAD resist  
the mad, moon-exiled scientist—  
Dr MANTIS MORLO! Will he smash  
our heroes into lunar ash?  
Air! Air! There's not enough  
air in this small world. I'll suf-  
focate. Air! Air!— (p.93)

The names of the two male "heroes", "STONE BOY" and "MATTER-EATER-LAD", are depressingly evocative of a pitiless patriarchal psyche. The ability of the first, "who turns to stone and back again", is suggestive of the moral and existential petrification that enables the oppression of the dehumanised Other. The name of the second, similarly, connotes a blindly destructive consumption of life or lives regarded merely as brute "MATTER". The comics' acclamation of these qualities seems to answer the question concerning potential annihilation: will the conflicts of patriarchal history lead inevitably to Earth's reduction to barren "lunar ash"? At the beginning of the passage the poet's anxiety and sense of helplessness makes the "waiting room" seem "airless". At the point of "lunar ash", though, it is not the "room" but the condition of the planet which provokes his attack of claustrophobia. "This small world" is, on the one hand, Earth in the late twentieth century, made to seem "small" and vulnerable by the technology of mass destruction. At the same time "this small



world" refers to the choking confinement, the limited horizons, of patriarchal culture, which are laid bare in the "small world" of the comics' stories.

Harrison's desire for "air", and his wish to 'step outside' of not only the room but this "world", are curiously 'granted' in the succeeding lines;

...Air! Air!—In each black  
PVC disposal sack,  
I see two of my dimensions gone  
into a flat oblivion.  
Weightless, like a stranger caught  
loosely flapping on my mother's grate,  
down corridors, a shadow man,  
I almost sleepwalk, float past *An-*  
*aesthesia, X-Ray, Speech*  
*Therapy* and, come full circle, reach  
again the apparatus where you lie... (pp. 93-4)

One way of reading the imagery in these lines, particularly "shadow man", is to connect it with the "blank male silhouette" and the "shadow" of 'The Heart of Darkness' to find evidence of a sinister identification with the 'dark' and destructive male forces that have already been shown to preoccupy the speaker elsewhere in the poem. Yet the tone of this passage, and the associations developed in it, do not encourage this interpretation. Also, the 'transformation' occurs immediately after the poet expresses (implicitly), an urgent need to escape his sense of entrapment within patriarchal culture. Perhaps, therefore, the disappearance of "two of (his) dimensions" might be seen to represent not his identification with a destructive masculinity but, on the contrary, a momentary shedding of some of the layers of cultural construction in which he feels personally trapped. The notion of the "shadow" as an image of existential absence can still be applied here, although in a slightly different way. He has slipped the noose of his constructed masculinity but, as a result, is "like a stranger" to himself, barely able to characterise what is left of his identity. He is depicted as hardly conscious of himself, "almost sleepwalk(ing)";

"weightless", ethereal, without substance, he "float(s)". All that he can articulate, therefore, is that he is an absent man, a non-man, "a shadow man". I will come back to this point shortly.

On one level these lines can be seen as dramatising that part of the experience of shock or trauma in which the mind becomes numb, blank and virtually blacked-out. The ghost-like imagery here, though, compels further attention because of its suggestive relationship with the seemingly crucial reference to the unidentified "ghost" in the poem's final sentence, which begins; "Mother, wife and daughter, ghost—/ I've laid, laid, laid, laid/ you..." (p.96). Notably, both this final sentence and 'the "stranger" passage' contain allusions to the poet's mother. One reason why the curious and obscure image of "the stranger caught...on my mother's grate" is striking is because it is bereft of the acrimony which up to that point the references to his mother have contained—particularly the first reference to her in the poem's opening section. There the current threat to the life of his daughter informs Harrison's memory of the death, the "stillbirth", of his first child. As the child had been conceived out of wedlock, he recalls bitterly, his mother had "(thought) the stillbirth just/ retribution for our filthy lust" (p.91). Her Victorian values he describes as "venomously anti love" (p.91). The tone of the memory of his "mother's grate" is entirely different. To begin to grasp the tone, though, one needs to understand the particular use of the word 'stranger' in the simile. The relevant definition of 'stranger' in the O.E.D. is: "any of those things which are popularly imagined to forebode the coming of an unexpected visitor, e.g. a piece of soot flapping on the bar of a grate". These lines, therefore, evoke the warmth of the family hearth, the poet's relationship with his mother in childhood, and perhaps the memory of her passing on folklore to him.



Yet the significance of the association in the poem between the "ghost" and the mother still remains obscure. It is perhaps worth noting, though, that the daughter, as well as the mother, appears both here and in the final lines of the poem. While "weightless like a stranger" Harrison, in a sense, "float(s)" from his mother to his daughter; from his "mother's grate" to "the apparatus where (his daughter) lie(s)". In both passages, therefore, the "ghost" is connected to significant female presences in the poet's life. In fact, "Mother, wife and daughter" can be seen as an invocation of Femaleness itself, as symbols of 'the three stages of woman'. Perhaps—although the identification is far from clear—we can see the "ghost" as representing the submerged 'stranger', the Otherness of Harrison's own femaleness, the feminine half of his personality. The conceit of Harrison as himself the "stranger" of folklore—an unnamed but in a sense already discovered and 'known' presence—might be seen to suggest the notion that these lines allude to a repressed part of the poet's identity. The evocation of childhood in the 'stranger' simile is apposite as this links his consciousness with a period which pre-dates his acquisition of the identity of the Loiner (which is dramatised in the poems of adolescence in Part One of the volume). The imposition of an authoritarian construction of masculinity in adolescence requires the repression of the feminine, and the designation of the female as Other. Even now, he is unable to represent this area of his personality to himself. He can only apprehend it as a 'shadow', an absence, a non-maleness—and only perceive dimly its connection with his mother, wife and daughter.

The discussion of *The Loiners* has highlighted repeatedly how authoritarian self-definition is maintained through the unremitting repression of what is culturally defined as Other. The fundamental Other of patriarchal history is of course femaleness. The authoritarian male psyche guards itself



vigilantly against the 'external' threat of women and the 'internal' one of its own feminine side. In the closing lines of 'Ghosts: Some Words Before Breakfast' (which are also the final lines of the volume), the play on the phrase 'to lay a ghost' suggests that mother, wife, daughter and ghost are all perceived by the poet as a persistent and still unresolved threat;

Mother, wife and daughter, ghost—  
I've laid, laid, laid, laid  
you, but I'm still afraid,  
though now Newcastle's washed with light,  
about the next descent of night. (p.96)

On one level, the continuing fear referred to here is of the femaleness which he "still" would like to repress and dominate; "the next descent of night" will bring another round of a struggle which he can never finally win. Alternatively, these lines can be viewed as expressing the realisation that his repeated repression of the female has not alleviated or solved his problems. He is "still afraid" of the 'darkness', the absence, the existential crisis which authoritarian repression, far from solving, in fact produces and perpetuates. At the same time, the "descent of night" also connotes that terrifying externalisation of this private 'darkness'—the last "night" of world-wide annihilation which patriarchal history seems to move towards relentlessly, and which has haunted the Loiners throughout the volume.

The emphasis in the discussion of this poem on trying to uncover the import of the singular "ghost" in these final lines has rather ignored the significance of the plural "Ghosts" in the title.<sup>12</sup> There are a number of 'ghostly' presences within the poem. One is the stillborn child. Another is Queen Victoria, who appears near the beginning and the end of the poem. From a wider perspective, "Ghosts" invokes the way that the culture of the past

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<sup>12</sup>The earlier, widely differing variant of the poem does not illuminate this problem.



(especially the Victorian period, but also the whole of patriarchal history), continues to haunt the present. The sense of a diseased inheritance, which permeates the volume, is possibly underlined, in this poem, by the title's echo of Ibsen's *Ghosts*. One of the boys' comics in the waiting room is named, suggestively, "*Spectre*" (p.93). In fact the final "ghost" can be seen, paradoxically, to represent on one level the poet's problematic authoritarian masculinity, and to be connected therefore with this "*Spectre*", with the "blank male silhouette" (p.94), and so on. (The "ghost" of his repressed femaleness, of course, inheres within this 'darkness', a ghost within a ghost.)

Another literary ghost attending the poem is Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The allusion to Coleridge's 'Frost At Midnight' in the image of the 'stranger' adds further connotations to those lines in which Harrison loses "two of (his) dimensions" (p.93). For Coleridge, as for Harrison, the 'stranger' conceit is connected both with early childhood and with a sense of release;

How oft, at school, with most believing mind,  
Presageful, have I gazed upon the bars,  
To watch that fluttering *stranger*! and as oft  
With unclosed lids, already had I dreamt  
Of my sweet birth-place...<sup>13</sup>

Coleridge escapes from the confining connotations of "bars", which are associated with a dreary present and with the school, through the agency of memory and the imagination. It is not simply the motions of the soot in the fire, but the particular reference to the knowledge of folklore (as opposed,

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<sup>13</sup>S.T Coleridge, *Coleridge: Poems*, ed. John Beer (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1963) 138. The allusion to 'Frost at Midnight' is also apposite, of course, because in that poem Coleridge depicts himself writing beside the cradle of his sleeping child. The peacefulness of the rural scene which Coleridge sketches and the description of his infant's gentle breathing establishes an implicit, agonising contrast with Harrison's situation:

I will her breaths. Again! Again!  
my daughter heaves in oxygen  
and lives, each heaved breath  
another lurch away from death... (p.92).



perhaps, to the knowledge dispensed at school), which arouses immediately the recollection of infancy, of his "birth-place". Harrison also strives for release from an oppressive mental regime—not of school specifically, but the 'education' of the boys' comics which he perceives as reinforcing the constricting constructions of the dominant culture. In contrast to Coleridge, though, who expresses without inhibition the joy which the memory of home provokes in him, Harrison's poetry half-buries these feelings and barely acknowledges them.

If the poet finds it difficult to evince such emotion, however, the final lines of 'Ghosts: Some Words Before Breakfast' suggest that Harrison is, again, aware of the problem, and is able to relate it to a degree of understanding about the limitations of the cultural construction of masculinity which he has inherited. Yet the ambivalent attitudes shown towards his mother in this poem might also be seen to provide a glimpse of a different source of anxiety for the poet. The evocation of childhood in the 'stranger' image may reflect a dimly apprehended desire to reclaim not only his repressed femaleness, but also his former bond with his family and his connection with his working-class background. The persistent problem of self-definition, of self-repression, which he recognises at the close of *The Loiners*, perhaps involves not only the struggle to 'lay the ghost' of his femaleness. He also suppresses his working-class identity, which is another subjugated Other in the symbolic order of authoritarian culture. In *The Uses of Literacy* Richard Hoggart chooses the same phrase, "to lay one's ghosts", when he describes the feelings which the 'Scholarship Boy' brings to a consideration of his working-class origins;

I discovered a tendency in myself, because the subject is so much part of my origins and growth, to be unwarrantedly sharp towards those features in working-class life of which I disapprove. Related to this is the urge to lay



one's ghosts; at the worst, it can be a temptation to 'do down' one's class, out of a pressing ambiguity in one's attitudes to it.<sup>14</sup>

In *The Loiners* such ambivalence towards his working-class background is submerged beneath the pervasive, horrified location of self in the diseased inheritance of the West. In *The School of Eloquence* sonnets, however, Harrison's "pressing ambiguity" towards his class identity emerges from the 'shadows' of his self-dramatising verse and into the spotlight.

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<sup>14</sup>Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958) 18-9.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### On Not Being Milton

Although the earliest *School of Eloquence*<sup>1</sup> sonnets were written in 1971, one year after the publication of *The Loiners*, they diverge sharply in tone and style from the previous volume. The opening sonnet of the sequence, 'On Not Being Milton', discloses—in fact announces—a radical and pivotal shift in Harrison's poetry which can now be seen clearly as a seminal moment of transformation. The crucial difference between *The Loiners* and *The School of Eloquence* lies in the poet's locations of self. The speaker/poet of *The Loiners* strives to break free from the 'diseased' selfhood of the transgressive 'Westerner', but feels inescapably confined within it. This entrapment, or irremediable 'infection', confounds his subversive desire to 'bond' or affiliate with the colonial Other. In 'On Not Being Milton', by contrast, it is significant that Harrison is able to make this connection. The poet claims an affinity with the colonial Other. What makes this possible is the fact that in *The School of Eloquence* the poet no longer identifies himself (primarily) as an inheritor and emblem of the authoritarianism which characterises the dominant culture and history of the 'Westerner'. Instead, he views himself as a representative of a collective identity which is one of the politically subjugated Others of the West's patriarchal history of conquest and oppression; that is, as a representative of the (English) working-class.

Yet, if the poet's 'present', adult locations of self have altered fundamentally, a degree of thematic continuity is exhibited in the 'childhood poems' of each volume. The concerns of poems such as 'Me Tarzan' and 'Them

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<sup>1</sup>When I refer to *The School of Eloquence* I will intend the limited version of the sequence which appeared in *Continuous* in 1981.



& [uz] I' can be likened to those of 'Ginger's Friday' and 'Allotments'; all aim to dramatise the processes by which the developing mind assumes a patriarchal cultural inheritance. However, if Ginger and the youth from 'Allotments' share, essentially, the same cultural and historical inheritance with T.W.<sup>2</sup>, the adult poet of *The School of Eloquence* views this legacy with a greater degree of critical distance than the anxious speaker/poet of *The Loiners*. An article for the *London Magazine*, published in 1972, shows Harrison's new sense of detachment from this heritage. Entitled 'Black and White and Red all over: the fiction of Empire', the article is partly a review of two literary critical studies of 'the Imperial imagination', but most of its space is taken up with Harrison's own thoughts on the subject. After a reference to the Victorian "code of the plucky fellow, conquering the dark places of the earth, 'the schoolboy master of the world'"<sup>3</sup>, he digresses to recall how this mentality survived "even in the 'fifties"<sup>4</sup> to inform the P.T. lessons which he endured at school;

...clapped or drummed out sergeants...spoke of Empire building. To make us manly...we were made to do extra running round Woodhouse Moor, where...I ducked behind the pedestal of a huge Queen Victoria for a furtive drag. At her draped feet Africa and India did obeisance, the very stone kow-towed, and I, exhausted and bent double, was more or less slumped in a like posture of devotion.<sup>5</sup>

This memory enables him, in the next sentence, to align himself with Africa and the sub-continent, invoking a startling "us"; "I think that all of us, Africa, India and me in my Empire red rugger jersey..."<sup>6</sup>. What is held in common is

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<sup>2</sup>The appellation assigned in 'Them & [uz]' to the young Harrison, the culturally 'trapped' scholarship boy.

<sup>3</sup>Tony Harrison, 'Black and White and Red all over: the fiction of Empire', *London Magazine*, August/September 1972: 92.

<sup>4</sup>Harrison, 'Black and White' 93.

<sup>5</sup>Harrison, 'Black and White' 93.

<sup>6</sup>Harrison, 'Black and White' 93.



an experience of revulsion endured "there at the feet of Victoria Regina".<sup>7</sup> A few sentences later this retrospective meditation is alluded to as one of

...those moments of awakening solidarity with the oppressed of the Empire, together, 'the internal and external proletariat'...I felt only triumph as the Empire fell to pieces, and felt a greater sense of despair among the rubble and crumbled plaster *putti* of the Empire (Leeds) when it was demolished.<sup>8</sup>

The representation of the working-class Loiner as himself a victim of the Imperial political order, and a rebel against that order, is a recurring feature of *The Loiners*. What is different here is that the "Empire red rugger jersey", which is a visual symbol of his authoritarian educational/cultural inheritance, no longer defines or confines his identity, and does not prevent him from allying himself with "the oppressed of the Empire". His class identity as a member of the "proletariat" is distinguished from, and given priority over, his identity as a 'Westerner'. This distinction is underlined by the pointed opposition between "the Empire" and "the Empire (Leeds)". In *The Loiners* the decay and pollution of Leeds (and the industrial North of England), is associated clearly with the decline of the Empire. However the "rubble" of the

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<sup>7</sup>Harrison, 'Black and White' 93. I have omitted the substance of this 'common experience' for the sake of brevity and because it is not necessary for the purposes of my argument. The significance of the 'experience' described is also fairly obscure when removed from the context of the article. The whole sentence reads, "I think that all of us, Africa, India and me in my Empire red rugger jersey must have had an experience quite as nasty as Miss Quested's in the Marabar Caves, there at the feet of Victoria Regina", and is followed by the exclamation, "Those podgy little hands!". The allusion to the Marabar Caves refers back to an earlier passage in the article; "the British imagination in its imperial phase...projected its fear of...its own Id onto the Dark Continent or into the Ancient Night of the Marabar Caves, where everything uttered by man...comes back as BOUM, or the darkness takes flesh as Dr Aziz or an anonymous lecherous groper" (p.91). This "BOUM" becomes a tirelessly recurring motif in the article, symbolising an "all-annihilating" (p.95), contempt for, or effacement of, the colonial Other. Harrison's later allusion to the Marabar Caves, therefore, implies a facetious new take on Miss Quested's experience of an overwhelming repression/projection. The "darkness" of the British "Id" here "takes flesh"—in the imaginations of the *victims* of Empire—not in the form of "an anonymous lecherous groper" but Queen Victoria's "podgy little hands". This image represents, implicitly, the political oppression of the British "imperial phase" as a ghastly sexual assault (which emphasises, satirically, the sexual repulsiveness of Victoria, and of course enjoys depicting/exposing the respectably repressed Queen as an 'abuser'). This 'mock' projection of political repression is, therefore, the 'nasty experience' suffered by "all of us, Africa, India and me".

<sup>8</sup>Harrison, 'Black and White' 94.



demolished Music Hall, the "Empire (Leeds)"<sup>9</sup>, is contrasted emphatically with the crumbling "pieces" of the British Empire. One demise is welcomed, the other mourned.

The details of this autobiographical digression highlight the shift that has occurred in Harrison's self-perception. One way of reading the opening four lines of 'On Not Being Milton' is to see in them another expression of this relocation of self. The terms used in the *London Magazine* article help to illuminate this reading. Also suggestive is the wordplay in the title of the article, the pun on 'red'/'read'. The title is derived from an old joke: 'What's black and white and red all over?—A newspaper'. Harrison adds to this pun the ideological significance of Empire red. 'The fiction of Empire' is saturated with British imperial ideology—'red all over'— and disseminates this ideology by being 'read all over'. The same pun can be seen to be present (in reverse), in the first line of 'On Not Being Milton';

Read and committed to the flames, I call  
these sixteen lines that go back to my roots  
my *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*,  
my growing black enough to fit my boots. (p.112<sup>10</sup>)

These lines are remarkable for their studied ambiguity. They compress a number of alternative meanings, all significant, and extensive discussion will be required to unpack them. I will begin by considering a reading which emphasises the pivotal role of the poem as a bridge between *The Loiners* and *The School of Eloquence*. If the pun on 'read'/'red' is accepted, then these lines

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<sup>9</sup>This is presented in the article as an alternative 'Empire' whose culture celebrates Otherness without the desire to conquer or repress it. Harrison reminisces, "There I had seen a 9ft 8½ in Belgian giant, Laurel and Hardy in the flesh, and the black Bobby 'tables' Davis who leaped over the orchestra pit tap-dancing with three tables clenched between his teeth, upon which a lady in a ballgown reposed", (p.94).

<sup>10</sup>As there are no page numbers in *Continuous*, the page numbers cited for all quotations from the sequence are taken from the 1987 edition of the *Selected Poems*.



can be viewed as describing the transition in Harrison's self-concept from the identification with the symbolic imperial 'red' to an affiliation with a generic "black" Otherness. In this reading the pun invokes his assumption—through his education, his "read(ing)"—of the authoritarian cultural and historical legacy of the British Empire and, more generally, of the 'Westerner'. The one word, "read" ('red'), therefore, functions here as shorthand for his 'fall' into the patriarchal inheritance which the Loiners struggle against. This 'fall' brings guilt, shame and the sense of inescapable condemnation which leads to the White Queen's obsessive fear, in 'Manica', of the apocalyptic fires of Judgment Day. The first clause, "Read and committed to the flames", can be interpreted as glossing succinctly the experience and fate of the Loiner(s). In this reading the clause can be paraphrased: 'I read—acquired my cultural/historical inheritance—and thereby became part of that transgressive continuity, became 'red'. Like this culture/history, I have been judged and condemned—"committed to the flames"'.

The context of colonial political oppositions (which inform the implicit 'red'/"black" dichotomy in these lines) is invoked explicitly by the allusion to Aimé Césaire's long poem *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* ('*Notebook of a Return to my Native Land*'). This literary allusion underlines the political significance of "growing black" in the fourth line. One of the main concerns of Césaire's anti-colonial poem (first published in 1939), is to establish a collective 'Black' identity which is united by the experience of (European) colonial oppression. Césaire coins a new word for this identity, 'négritude'. Mireille Rosello, one of the translators of the most recent English version of the poem, emphasises the point that, in the *Cahier*, the concept of negritude signifies, primarily, a political, as opposed to racial, affiliation;



...blackness is not so much a skin colour as a political solidarity, the union of human beings who [in the words of the *Cahier*] 'know all the nooks and crannies of the country of suffering'.<sup>11</sup>

On one level, it is the generic political category of those subjugated by authoritarian culture that Harrison invokes with the word "black". These opening lines of 'On Not Being Milton' imply a parallel between colonial history and the history of class struggle and express a feeling of alliance, of "awakening solidarity with the oppressed of the Empire, together, 'the internal and external proletariat'".<sup>12</sup> More precisely, they imply a growing recognition of comparable historical experiences of collective oppression and collective rebellion. Césaire's poem is invoked as a model for a (post-colonial) process of personal, political (and poetic), liberation; "these sixteen lines" of 'On Not Being Milton' or of the Meredithian sonnets of *The School of Eloquence* will be, Harrison declares, "my *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*".

Harrison does not merely allude to Césaire's poem, then, but makes an identification with it. It is unsurprising, therefore, that there are many significant points of comparison to be noted between the concerns of the *Cahier* and those of *The School of Eloquence*. One of the most obvious is the autobiographical emphasis upon a personal return to one's social and cultural origins, of "go(ing) back to my roots". Both poets are responding to experiences of social deracination. In each case this uprooting was the result of educational achievement. Césaire, like Harrison, was a 'Scholarship Boy'; his educational success eventually led him from his home in Martinique to Paris, to the École Normale Supérieure. In the *Cahier* Césaire recognises and rejects the process of cultural assimilation, engendered by his education, which has alienated him from his social origins and from himself. In *The School of*

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<sup>11</sup>Mireille Rosello, introduction, *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*, by Aimé Césaire, trans. Mireille Rosello with Annie Pritchard (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1995) 26-27.

<sup>12</sup>Harrison, 'Black and White' 94.



*Eloquence* Harrison enacts a similar re-evaluation of his education. This is reflected, in the opening lines of 'On Not Being Milton', by an implicit contrast between reading and writing: if, through his past reading, he acquired an identity passively, then in his present writing, in "these sixteen lines", he chooses and articulates a selfhood.

In their poetry Césaire and Harrison publicly reclaim the attachment to their cultural origins which was broken by their education. This reclamation produces powerful emotions, and the exuberant tones evinced in the *Cahier* are echoed in the ebullience of 'On Not Being Milton'. Both poems register the fact that this enthusiasm and excitement derives partly from a sense of release from the psychologically debilitating condition of the socially isolated, self-estranged 'Scholarship Boy'. It is significant that, just prior to the first passage in celebration of negritude, Césaire focuses on his own feelings of guilt and on his awareness of having betrayed his race by 'conniving' with European judgments of them. He recounts a vivid example. Recalling an enervated black man whom he once saw on a Paris tram, the poet details at length the devastating effects of poverty upon the man's physique, but concludes the description through the lens of European stereotypes;

I must tell how far I carried cowardice.  
One night in a tram in front of me, a nigger...  
...everything had abandoned him...even his negritude which was fading  
under the action of a tireless tawing. And the tawer was Poverty...  
...(Poverty) had unhinged his heart and bent his back...  
Overall it was the picture of a hideous nigger, a grumpy nigger,  
a gloomy nigger, a slumped nigger...A nigger who was comical and ugly,  
and behind me women were looking at him and giggling.  
He was COMICAL AND UGLY.  
COMICAL AND UGLY, for sure.  
I exhibited a wide smile of connivance...<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*, trans. Mireille Rosello with Annie Pritchard (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1995) 107-9.



This confession is followed by passages of self-recrimination ("I was hiding behind a stupid vanity..."<sup>14</sup>), which modulate into bitterly self-mocking expressions of fatalism about the subjugation of his race (referring to "my natural obsequiousness"<sup>15</sup> and "our docile blood"<sup>16</sup>). He laments his ancestry in terms which compare implicitly his people's history of defeat and oppression with Europe's conquest and domination. During this lament his feelings of inferiority gradually give way to anger and outrage as he returns to the main theme of the first half of the *Cahier*, the sufferings inflicted by European colonialism. He characterises his forebears as,

Those who have invented neither gunpowder nor the compass  
those who have never known how to subdue either steam or electricity  
those who have explored neither the seas nor the sky but those who  
know all the nooks and crannies of the country of suffering  
those whose only voyages have been uprootings  
those who have become flexible to kneeling  
those who were domesticated and christianised  
those who were inoculated with bastardisation...<sup>17</sup>

Despite the anger, though, this view of his ancestry still emphasises collective degradation and servitude. Immediately after this list, however, a moment of transformation occurs which can be seen as the major turning point in the *Cahier*;

overboard with my peregrine riches  
overboard with my authentic lies  
But what strange pride suddenly illuminates me?<sup>18</sup>

These lines are followed by an invocation to a variety of wild animals and to the sun—all of which are then aligned with a positive vision of his ancestry,

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<sup>14</sup>Césaire 111.

<sup>15</sup>Césaire 111.

<sup>16</sup>Césaire 111.

<sup>17</sup>Césaire 111.

<sup>18</sup>Césaire 111.

and his negritude. Western, patriarchal estimations of worth and achievement (specifically those scientific and technological advances which highlight the ability to control and "subdue" nature, and are associated with the rise of European imperialism), are rejected;

my negritude is neither a tower nor a cathedral...

Eia for those who have never invented anything  
for those who have never explored anything  
for those who have never subdued anything...<sup>19</sup>

In the second half of the *Cahier* the emphasis is upon confident self-affirmation. The poet looks to the future and ends with an invocation to the 'winds' of historical change to embrace his poem and use it to engender collective action and revolutionary change;

devour, wind  
I give you my abrupt words  
devour and coil around me  
and coiling embrace me with a wider shudder  
embrace me into furious we...<sup>20</sup>

In relation to the first four lines of 'On Not Being Milton', the most interesting comparison to be drawn here is with the moment at which Césaire is lit up with "strange pride". Psychologically, Césaire 'clears the decks' for this emotion by throwing "overboard" his perception of himself as a man of cosmopolitan experience and learning (of having gained, that is, a specifically Western cosmopolitanism). Such a self-image is implicit in the phrase "peregrine riches". 'Peregrination' refers to "the action of travelling in foreign lands" and "the systematic going through a subject, course of study" (O.E.D.). The use of "riches" suggests, in the context of the poem, an irony which passes judgment both on his learning and on his own vanity concerning the acquisition of such

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<sup>19</sup>Césaire 115.

<sup>20</sup>Césaire 133.



"riches". The following line, "overboard with my authentic lies", implies a similar dual judgment—on the knowledge he has received and espoused, but also, perhaps more pointedly, on his self-deception concerning his sense of having acquired a Western cultural identity. Of course this consciousness of difference, of superiority, is also pervaded by the guilt and self-loathing which is laid bare in the memory of the black man on the tram. In the renunciations of his "peregrine riches" and "authentic lies", this guilt is sloughed off too, and the release from guilt contributes to the upsurge of the positive feeling of belonging which "illuminates" him.

In 'On Not Being Milton' a similar rejection of Harrison's former learning, and of the cultural assimilation effected by his education, can be seen to be indicated by the opening clause, "Read and committed to the flames". One of the readings of this clause which has already been offered suggests that the read/red pun evokes the process of the cultural construction of the Westerner (and the Loiner). A slightly different version of this reading might find in the clause the expression of a renunciation of his past self: this former cultural construction is voluntarily and self-consciously cast "to the flames", and he now embraces a new identity. The moment of illuminating pride (that is, the epiphanic moment of reaffiliation), which Césaire describes, seems to have occurred before the start of 'On Not Being Milton'.<sup>21</sup> Yet traces of newly shed feelings of guilt are discernible in the imagery of the poem. As well as the opening clause there is the telling wordplay in the fourth line, "my growing

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<sup>21</sup>Perhaps this notion of the poem being written amid the excited aftermath of a recent, emotionally charged epiphany might help to explain a curious feature of the opening of the poem, which Rick Rylance notes; "it...has the rather odd effect of having started belatedly, as though the poem had already been written and the poet was now giving his retrospective introduction. This...develops a mood of persisting meditation, as though a problem has obsessed the poet for some time to which he keeps returning". Rick Rylance, 'On Not Being Milton', *Bloodaxe Critical Anthology 1: Tony Harrison*, ed. Neil Astley (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991) 117.



black enough to fit my boots" (p.112). As Rick Rylance notes<sup>22</sup>, the complexity and resonance of this image is increased by the interplay with the northern working-class phrase 'too big for your boots' which lies beneath it. This colloquial expression of censure against those who are deemed to act or consider themselves 'above' their class position might be said to haunt the line like a painful memory. The phrase evokes the accounts of the friction between the 'Scholarship Boy' and his working-class family and friends which Richard Hoggart presents in Chapter 10 of *The Uses of Literacy*<sup>23</sup>. The structure of feeling at the beginning of 'On Not Being Milton', though, echoes Césaire's homecoming; the trace of 'too big for your boots' in the fourth line not only hints at the memory of other people's judgments but also suggests, like "Read and committed to the flames", retrospective self-accusation. It connotes the guilt of the educated working-class grammar school boy who has been encouraged to believe that he has risen socially above his class, and to feel shame about his lowly origins. At the same time, the references to colonial struggle at the start of 'On Not Being Milton' (the dedication of the poem to two members of the Mozambique liberation movement, FRELIMO, and the allusion to Césaire), imbue the phrase with other associations. Harrison's education taught him to align himself with the history and 'achievement' of the West (again as in the case of Césaire, but perhaps more emphatically). In *The Loiners* the guilt of this transgressive inheritance debilitated the poet. Now, however, Harrison rejects these former locations of self. In changing from

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<sup>22</sup> Rylance 123. Here he connects the phrase 'too big for your boots' with the allusion to the *Cahier* but concludes that Harrison's intention is to "impl(y) that he is too assuming in aligning himself with Césaire's black predicament" (123). This essay is excellent for its awareness of the social, historical and literary contexts drawn upon in 'On Not Being Milton' and for its sensitivity to the relationship between allusion and wordplay in the poem. Occasionally, though, even when Rylance has assembled most of the relevant 'pieces', his final interpretations miss the mark.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958) 291-317. In writing his own *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, Harrison draws on Hoggart's work as a source which clarifies his personal, historically particular experience of cultural deracination.



imperial 'red' to the "black" of the generic political Other he revives his working-class affiliation. The conceit of 'fitting into' his boots indicates that this recovered affiliation is his correct, 'true' social identity. His guilt-ridden association with the 'Westerner' was inappropriate as—he has now realised—European imperial history has been driven by ruling social and political elites who have in fact oppressed and exploited his social class, his forebears. This realisation is registered by the wordplay in line four too. The mistaken identification with the political victors of Western history, which was foisted on him by his education, constituted another case of being, in terms of social class, 'too big for his boots'.

In the first lines of 'On Not Being Milton', then, Harrison, like Césaire, is released from the guilt and shame he experiences as a result of his estrangement from his social origins. He also relinquishes the historical guilt of the 'Westerner' which—by turning the moral outrage that he feels in relation to patriarchal history inwards, and translating it into self-loathing—paralyses the speaker/poet of *The Loiners*. The relief of being able to ally himself with a collective inheritance bereft of such overwhelming guilt informs the ebullience of 'On Not Being Milton'; like Césaire he has gained a sense of belonging which is a source of defiant pride. The release from such guilt also unties the tangled, self-destructive moral fury found in the poetry of *The Loiners*; and the conceit of "growing black" registers this through the connotation, as in 'black looks', of anger. The poet is now able to express the anger and indignation which is "black enough to fit"—to match or be appropriate to—his "boots". Here the 'blackness' of his "boots", which carries another meaning of 'black' ('heinous', 'sinful'), figures the atrocious history of suffering contained in his reclaimed working-class inheritance.



The next lines of the poem describe the first exploding words/sounds of this angry poet, released from the bitter psychological confines imposed on him by an authoritarian education; "The stutter of the scold out of the branks/ of condescension..." (p.112). A 'scold' is an angry denouncer, "a woman (rarely a man), addicted to abusive language" (O.E.D.), who is suppressed by patriarchal society by being placed in 'branks', "an instrument of punishment for scolds...consisting of a kind of iron framework to enclose the head, having a sharp metal gag or bit which entered the mouth and restrained the tongue" (O.E.D.). At the same time, 'scold' derives from the Old Norse word for poet, 'skald'; and 'to brank' can also mean "to strut...to prance" (O.E.D.). As Rylance points out, therefore, "branks/ of condescension" suggests the "swaggerings typical of the condescending ruling class"<sup>24</sup>. More specifically, the phrase might be associated with the insensitive and harmful verbal displays of (witty) condescension inflicted on students by educators—such as the disparaging interventions attributed to Harrison's former English teacher in 'Them & [uz] I'. Harrison can be seen, therefore, to connect the physical pain of the forced silencing of the scold with the psychological suffering of the 'Scholarship Boy' who is silenced by ridicule and rebuke. (Again this is dramatised in 'Them & [uz] I', where the teacher corrects the young Harrison's pronunciation, "'We say [ʌs] not [uz], T.W.!' That shut my trap" (p.122)).

Furthermore, the etymology of 'scold' links these acts of repression, implicitly, with a long history of political defeat, of silencings and suppressions. As the image of the "scold" is, primarily, a self-referential description of Harrison's own poetic activity in this poem, a pointed contrast exists here between the use of 'scold' and the absent word, 'poet'. The

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<sup>24</sup>Rylance 126.



etymology of 'poet', with its roots in Greek, Latin and Old French, belongs to the dominant cultural tradition of Western Europe and, via the Norman conquests, the dominant cultural tradition of post-medieval Britain. The etymology of 'scold', on the other hand, could be perceived as a symbol or reflection of the marginalisation of both the old Northern European civilisations in Western culture and the cultural traditions of Northern Britain. The O.E.D., writing on the etymological development from 'skald' to 'scold', mentions "the probability of a sense 'lampooner' as an intermediate stage", but also comments (displaying, perhaps, a certain political naivety, or lack of imagination), that "the sense-development postulated is strange". The transition from 'poet' to 'lampooner' to railing, abusive female describes a process of declining status attached to the word(s) 'skald/'scold'. This, together with the increasing importance of anger, protest and powerlessness in relation to the definition, is at least suggestive of a growing political marginalisation of the cultural tradition with which the word is associated. At the same time, though, 'scold' is also connected with a subversive energy of resistance; with the figure of a woman—the fundamental Other of patriarchal culture—who refuses to submit to male authority. Harrison identifies himself, therefore, as a poet—a skald, a scold—who belongs to this marginalised and suppressed tradition of subversive protest.

In fact in referring to "*the* scold", rather than using the demonstrative pronoun, "this scold", the poetry combines (temporarily<sup>25</sup>), the portrayal of Harrison's personal release from "the branks" with a generalised description of the liberated, "stuttering" utterance of historical scolds. In this way, the poet's own identity overlaps with that of scolds from the past, and the

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<sup>25</sup>Until the reference, in line 10, to "the frames of Art" (p.112), the poetry could, arguably, be said to be providing an account both of the articulation of Harrison's poetry and/or of "the Leeds stress" (p.112), of a female Loiner scold of the past.



poetry emphasises that a wider historical issue is involved in Harrison's personal extrication from "the branks" of his authoritarian education. His is, on one level, a representative voice which has broken "out of the branks" of a long history of silenced tongues. This perspective has already been invoked, implicitly, by the allusion to the *Cahier*. Harrison's personal emancipation and reaffiliation leads, as for Césaire, to the desire to address this historical silence, to the need to commemorate and protest against the history of suffering and oppression ignored or distorted by the official histories of the Western Academy, and forgotten by the collective memory.

In reassessing their collective histories, though, Harrison and Césaire are also concerned to emphasise those acts of rebellion and resistance which the dominant, official histories have misrepresented. Further, they invoke these past energies of revolt and self-affirmation as sources of inspiration for their own subversive writing. Césaire looks back to the rejection of white rule in Haiti, in 1800, by the black leader Toussaint Louverture, who was born into slavery but became the first president of Haiti<sup>26</sup>. Césaire writes in the *Cahier* of "Haiti where negritude stood up for the first time and said it believed in its humanity"<sup>27</sup>. Louverture was caught and imprisoned by soldiers despatched by Napoleon. Césaire, describing him in his cell in the French Jura, stresses heroic, solitary defiance and claims Louverture as a vital and inspiring part of his inheritance;

What is mine too: a small cell in the Jura...

What is mine  
a man alone, imprisoned by whiteness  
a man alone who defies the white screams of a white death

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<sup>26</sup>The details of Louverture's life have been taken from the note on him in the glossary provided by the editors of the Bloodaxe translation (see Césaire 150).

<sup>27</sup>Césaire 91.



(TOUSSAINT, TOUSSAINT LOUVERTURE)<sup>28</sup>

In *The School of Eloquence* Harrison locates his identity and his poetry in the traditions of working-class political activism. He finds rich sources of inspiration in the writing of the historian E. P. Thompson. In *The Making of the English Working Class* Thompson aims to uncover the lives and struggles of those neglected or misrepresented by the dominant versions of history;

I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the 'obsolete' hand-loom weaver, the 'utopian' artisan...from the enormous condescension of posterity.<sup>29</sup>

Thompson's work, then, is concerned to dignify with remembrance the lives of those classes of people who were 'casualties of history'. It does not view them merely as passive victims of political repression, however. Its main interest is, on the contrary, with the energies of resistance that Harrison has already invoked with the use of 'scold'.

In the Preface to *The Making of the English Working Class*, Thompson begins by commenting on the book's title; on 'making' and 'class' in particular. What he explains here is that the subject-matter of the book is the history of the birth and development of a particular social and political cohesion, of the growth of a collective identity. On 'class' he writes;

By class I understand a historical phenomenon, unifying a number of disparate and seemingly unconnected events, both in the raw material of experience and in consciousness.

...And class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Césaire 91.

<sup>29</sup>E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968) 13.

<sup>30</sup>Thompson 9-10.



Thompson stresses therefore that 'class' comes about not as the result of a 'classification' imposed on a social group from the outside, but depends upon the agency and consciousness of those individuals concerned and involves their recognition and expression of a common, shared identity. This emphasis also informs the use of 'making' in the title;

*Making* because [the book] is a study in an active process, which owes as much to agency as to conditioning. The working-class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making.<sup>31</sup>

The book presents a complex historical record of this "active process". The detailed narrative contains inspiring collective acts of resistance against oppression and individual acts of sacrifice (and 'martyrdom'), but it is the overarching momentum of a growing, "active process" of enlightenment and mobilisation by a 'class' of politically repressed people which leaves the most lasting impression.

Harrison's location of his own work within this tradition of collective affirmation is underscored by the first epigraph to the volume, a quotation from *The Making of the English Working Class* which is the source of the sequence's title;

'In 1799 special legislation was introduced "utterly suppressing and prohibiting" by name the London Corresponding Society and the United Englishmen. Even the indefatigable conspirator, John Binns, felt that further national organisation was hopeless...When arrested he was found in possession of a ticket which was perhaps one of the last "covers" for the old LCS: *Admit for the Season to the School of Eloquence*.' (p.109)<sup>32</sup>

Here the name of *The School of Eloquence* can be seen to symbolise a subversive energy of (working-class) resistance which refuses to be "utterly suppressed". The attribution of a feeling of hopelessness to John Binns is

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<sup>31</sup>Thompson 9.

<sup>32</sup>See Thompson 191.



contradicted by Thompson's conjecture on the significance of the ticket. The general idea suggested by this conjecture is that those struggling against political repression will continue to find new forms in which to express their collective will. By adopting this title, then, Harrison implies that his *School of Eloquence* is another manifestation of this resolute energy of opposition and affirmation.<sup>33</sup> The link with the London Corresponding Society is of particular significance because it connects the sequence with the origins of that process of enlightened articulation which Thompson describes as the formation of the English working-class. In fact, Thompson begins *The Making of the English Working Class* with an account of the first meeting of the London Corresponding Society, in 1792. The first words of the first chapter of the book, entitled 'Members Unlimited', quote the democratic, egalitarian principle which is the basis of the London Corresponding Society's motivation—an Enlightenment principle of 'universal affiliation' which Harrison can recognise readily and unequivocally as one of his own ideological roots;

'That the number of our Members be unlimited.' This is the first of the 'leading rules' of the London Corresponding Society, as cited by its secretary when he began to correspond with a similar society in Sheffield in March 1872.<sup>34</sup>

The main goal of the London Corresponding Society was parliamentary reform, specifically universal suffrage. As membership of the Corresponding Societies grew, however, they began to fulfil a wider role: to effect what Thompson calls "the first stages in the political self-education of a class"<sup>35</sup>. He quotes a

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<sup>33</sup>It may be, therefore, that Harrison stages a pun on the word 'covers' in the quotation. While the presumably fictional *School of Eloquence* mentioned on Binns' ticket was "one of the last 'covers' for the old LCS", Harrison's *School of Eloquence* provides new 'covers' for the political legacy of the London Corresponding Society, book 'covers'.

<sup>34</sup>Thompson 19.

<sup>35</sup>Thompson 170.



contemporary assessment of some of the consequences of working mens' participation in the London Corresponding Society;

The moral effects of the Society were very great. It induced men to read books...It taught them to think, to respect themselves, and to desire to educate their children. It elevated them in their own opinions.<sup>36</sup>

The importance attached here to improving the self-image of the working-class evokes a connection with Césaire's cultural and political agenda in establishing the positive black identity of Negritude. A further link might also be made with the dedicatees of 'On Not Being Milton', Sergio Vieira and Armando Guebuza, who, as Rylance points out, were both

...leading members of FRELIMO, the Marxist governing party of Mozambique...and poets [with] a particular concern for education. This is the subject of Vieira's best known poem, '4 Parts for a Poem of Education Left Incomplete because education is for all of us to build'.<sup>37</sup>

The thread which draws these different experiences together, the emphasis upon literacy and education, on language as a medium of personal and collective liberation, is of course connoted in the title *The School of Eloquence*. The knowledge and articulacy gained at this '*School*', however, contrasts with, and contradicts, much of the learning received by Harrison at Leeds Grammar School. This '*School*' provides a 'counter' education which challenges the assumptions of the established authoritarian cultural and political order. Harrison's sense of the continuities between British working-class and post-colonial histories, and his adoption of the identity of a generic "black" political Otherness, is consistent of course with the spirit of the London Corresponding Society's "leading rule", "that the number of our Members be unlimited".<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>Thompson 170.

<sup>37</sup>Rylance 120-21.

<sup>38</sup>The parallels that Harrison draws between post-colonial history and the history of British class conflict are also made by Thompson. Further, Thompson intimates the possibility of continuities



In 'On Not Being Milton' Harrison's succinct statement of the theme of language as a medium of political engagement—that "Articulation is the tongue-tied's fighting" (p.112)—is juxtaposed tellingly with the reference to the Cato Street Conspiracy, and the quotation from the conspirator Richard Tidd (which is again taken from *The Making of the English Working Class*). The significance of this juxtaposition can be clarified by a consideration of Thompson's discussion of the Cato Street Conspiracy. Thompson divides the working-class reform movement of the period into two wings, 'the constitutionalist' and 'the revolutionary'. His sympathy is clearly with the constitutionalists;

...the working-class reform movement after 1817 [had] a determined but constitutional outlook. 'Peaceably if we may' took precedence over 'forcibly if we must'...Only the shock of Peterloo (August 1819) threw a part of the movement back into revolutionary courses; and the Cato Street Conspiracy (February 1820) served to reinforce the lesson of [the inefficacy of violent insurrection]...<sup>39</sup>

Thompson depicts the conspiracy as an irresponsible and devastating failure. Likening it to earlier, similar affairs, he adds "but it was more violent, more pathetic"<sup>40</sup>. His portrayal of the leader of the conspiracy, Arthur Thistlewood, "a gentleman...whose courage was three parts foolhardiness"<sup>41</sup>, reflects his attitude to the episode. Thompson quotes a report in which Thistlewood

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between post-war political problems in Britain and the struggles described in *The Making of the English Working Class* (continuities which Harrison, of course, explores in *The School of Eloquence*);

Our only criterion of judgment should not be whether or not a man's actions are justified in the light of subsequent evolution. After all, we are not at the end of social evolution ourselves. In some of the lost causes of the people of the Industrial Revolution we may discover insights into social evils which we have yet to cure. Moreover, the greater part of the world today is still undergoing problems of industrialization, and of the formulation of democratic institutions, analogous in many ways to our own experience during the Industrial Revolution. Causes which were lost in England might, in Asia or Africa, yet be won. (Thompson 13).

<sup>39</sup>Thompson 735.

<sup>40</sup>Thompson 771.

<sup>41</sup>Thompson 769.



appears as a Quixotic hero; "...'one of the excellent swordsmen of Europe'. He had 'never unsheathed his sword but in defence of the feeble and the insulted—he was kind and open-hearted, but of too great simplicity...'"<sup>42</sup>. His "simplicity" is emphasised by the account (Thistlewood's own), of the manner in which he was won over to the scheme by one George Edwards. It was Edwards who devised the plan: to attack the Cabinet while at their dinner, kill them, and place on pikes the heads of those ministers considered responsible for ordering the massacre at Peterloo. Edwards, it transpired, was an agent provocateur in the pay of the Government;

The plan had, of course, long been known to those heads which it was proposed to carry on pikes through the streets. Even the advertisement, in the *New Times*, announcing the cabinet dinner was a hoax. The conspirators were duly apprehended...The arrests created the sensation which the Government required to justify the Six Acts<sup>43</sup>, and also to help them through a General Election.<sup>44</sup>

It is clear from other comments of Thompson's, though, that his disapproval of the conspiracy does not derive primarily from the fact that the participants were dupes of the Government, or from the disastrous consequences it entailed for the reform movement of the time: he disapproves of the violence itself. He quotes from the defence which Thistlewood gave at his trial; Thistlewood declared that

'...high treason was committed against the people at Manchester...Brutus and Cassius were lauded to the very skies for slaying Caesar; indeed, when

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<sup>42</sup>Thompson 770. Later Thompson quotes a passage from a diarist who witnessed the executions of the conspirators. Even here Thistlewood's dignified stoicism is presented with a hint of irony;

"The men died like heroes. Ings, perhaps, was too obstreperous in singing 'Death or Liberty', and Thistlewood said, 'Be quiet, Ings; we can die without all this noise.'" (Thompson 774).

<sup>43</sup>The Six Acts contained a range of repressive laws designed to clamp-down on the civil unrest in the country including, for example, the prohibition of "meetings exceeding fifty in number" (Thompson 768), and changes to ease prosecutions for libel: "thereafter the Government launched upon the most sustained campaign of prosecutions in the courts in British history" (Thompson 768), as a result of which most of the leaders of the reform movement around the country were imprisoned.

<sup>44</sup>Thompson 772.



any man, or set of men, place themselves above the laws of their country, there is no other means of bringing them to justice than through the arm of the private individual'.<sup>45</sup>

Thompson's 'reply' to this reflects his aversion to the violence of the proposed action: "Thistlewood had overlooked Shakespeare's ironic comment, set in the mouth of Brutus:

Stoop, Romans, stoop,  
And let us bathe our hands in Caesar's blood  
Up to the elbows, and besmear our swords:  
Then walk we forth, even to the market-place,  
And, waving our red weapons o'er our heads,  
Let's all cry, 'Peace, freedom and liberty'.<sup>46</sup>

Thompson's main quarrel with Thistlewood lies in the latter's claim that "there is no other means of bringing" the corrupt or criminal legislator "to justice than through the arm of a private individual". The other means is through the law and the constitution, and constitutional change will be effected through a mobilisation of collective opinion, not the might of an individual.

The imagery at the close of 'On Not Being Milton' is clearly influenced by Thompson's discussion of the Cato Street Conspiracy. Harrison also sides with the constitutionalists. Collective expression, depicted as an act of political struggle and empowerment, is juxtaposed with the violence of the Cato Street Conspiracy which is alluded to via the quotation from Tidd and invoked as a symbol of powerlessness and defeat;

Articulation is the tongue-tied's fighting.  
In the silence round all poetry we quote  
Tidd the Cato Street conspirator who wrote:

*Sir I Ham a very Bad Hand at Righting.* (p.112)

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<sup>45</sup>Thompson 774-75.

<sup>46</sup>Thompson 775.

In *The Making of the English Working Class* the quotation from Richard Tidd occurs, notably, not during Thompson's account of the Cato Street Conspiracy, but during his discussion of levels of literacy amongst those involved in the reform movement.;

All the Cato Street prisoners, it seems, could write after some fashion. Brunt, the shoemaker, salted some sardonic verses with French...Richard Tidd, another shoemaker, on the other hand, could only muster 'Sir I Ham a very Bad Hand at Righting'.<sup>47</sup>

These were the only words that Richard Tidd issued from his prison cell before he, along with four other of the conspirators, were executed. After the executions "the heads of the victims were displayed"<sup>48</sup>. Tidd is present in the poem, then, not only as a failed revolutionary, a representative of an alternative form of "fighting" to "articulation", but also as one of the silenced victims in Harrison's working-class inheritance. In fact the poetry might also be seen to cast Tidd as an emblem of all those silenced in patriarchal history. The capitalised "Ham" connects this final line, through an association with the dark skinned sons of Ham referred to in Genesis<sup>49</sup>, with the imagery of a generic "black" Otherness developed at the beginning of 'On Not Being Milton'.

Whilst, of course, the pun on 'writing'/"Righting" links illiteracy with political ineffectiveness and historical defeat, this notion is also invoked by the paradoxical conceit of the 'quotation' of Tidd "in the silence round all poetry". The sentence from Tidd 'quoted' "in the silence" combines pointedly

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<sup>47</sup>Thompson 786-87.

<sup>48</sup>Thompson 774.

<sup>49</sup>This association can be seen, in fact, to forge a more precise link with the colonial imagery at the start of 'On Not Being Milton': "According to Genesis...Noah...cursed Ham's son Canaan, pronouncing him a slave to his brothers...This passage has more recently been used to support...racism. Because some of Ham's descendents...are black (see Genesis 10.6-14), the "curse on Ham" has been interpreted as black (Negroid) skin colour and features in order to legitimate slavery and oppression of people of African origin.", Steven L. McKenzie, entry on 'Ham', from *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (Oxford: OUP, 1993), 268.



a humble-sounding apology for a poor level of literacy with an admission of political failure. His statement 'fills' and informs the emptiness of "the silence" and characterises its political significance. The image of "the silence round all poetry" also suggests, though, the idea of the 'edges' or 'limits' of "articulation", limits which define the extent of past and present political success. In this way the poem ends with an implicit injunction that the "fight" for "articulation" must be unremitting. Rylance, correctly locating Harrison's position that "articulation is the tongue-tied's fighting" within a particular historical perspective on the advances and achievements of collective working-class agitation, emphasises appropriately that this process is ongoing;

the argument...connects interestingly with writers such as E.P. Thompson and Raymond Williams...'the long revolution' in education, material conditions, cultural access, and so forth is, though always difficult and bordered by defeat, a developing and participatory process.<sup>50</sup>

Included in this process of 'advancement' is Harrison's experience as a working-class Scholarship Boy. It is important, therefore, not to oversimplify the connection established in 'On Not Being Milton' between eloquence and power. The danger for the Scholarship Boy in his acquisition of education and literacy is the pit-fall of political and cultural assimilation. Bearing this in mind, our reading of the line "articulation is the tongue-tied's fighting" must be alert to the crucial puns on "tongue-tied". On the one hand, the line refers to the struggle of the unconfident, uneducated and inarticulate individual or group—"the tongue-tied"—to find a voice and thereby empower themselves. At the same time, "the tongue-tied" refers to those social groups who are "tied", 'bound' together by their culture and language. On this reading, then, the act of articulation invoked in the line is the collective expression of a

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<sup>50</sup>Rylance 126-27.



particular (politically repressed), cultural group, enunciated in their specific (marginalised), shared language. The conflation of the description of an individual and collective act of "articulation" in this line makes a further point: each individual utterance, if it employs the marginalised language of the suppressed group, is in itself a political statement because it affirms the cultural identity of the group.

The dual emphasis here on political and cultural identity is crucial. In the imagery of 'On Not Being Milton' Harrison overlays the notion of the 'making' of a political solidarity or class—the process of recognition and self-articulation of shared interests, goals and opponents which Thompson emphasises—with the post-colonial experiences of formerly subjugated nations and peoples who are striving to recover and affirm their cultural identities. The poet observes the centrality of language to each enterprise and interlinks the themes of cultural and political "articulation" through the employment of highly concentrated conceits which combine linguistic and political images. This returns us to the stuttering utterance of the liberated scold;

The stutter of the scold out of the branks  
of condescension, class and counter-class  
thickens with glottals to a lumpen mass  
of Ludding morphemes closing up their ranks. (p.112)

The discussion earlier of the etymology of 'scold' suggested that the use of the word here evoked a view of British history which stressed the marginalisation of the language and culture of Northern Britain. The relationship of Harrison's 'native' northern English cultural inheritance to the dominant culture of southern England can be seen therefore to parallel the power relationship between the cultures of the coloniser and the colonised in situations of imperial rule. In breaking out of "the branks" of this oppressive relationship Harrison, the scold, will assert himself in the language of his native culture. It was also



observed that the imagery of "the branks of condescension" are suggestive of those incidents (such as the ones detailed in 'Them & [uz] I'), in which Harrison's working-class speech was ridiculed and corrected by his grammar school teachers. Harrison's sensitivity to the vital role that language and speech play in the formation and maintenance of collective identities can be seen to be informed by the experience of cultural assimilation which he suffered at school. Ken Worpole highlights well the critical significance of language in the battle between working and middle-class cultures which took place at the grammar schools;

The issue around which these conflicts most sharply focused was that of language: spoken language. It was the first and major article of faith that the working-class child could not speak 'correct' English: the pronunciation was wrong, and the grammar too. 'Standard English' and 'Received Pronunciation' ('form of speech used by the majority of cultured people', *Concise Oxford Dictionary*), were the two main criteria by which working-class children were judged in the grammar schools - and found badly wanting.<sup>51</sup>

The scold/skald has laboured therefore in "branks" which have attempted to suppress the speech of both his region and his class (and, in fact, 'Standard English' and 'Received Pronunciation' are products of not only middle-class culture, but the dominant English cultural traditions of the southern upper/middle classes). Now, though, the scold is "out of the" dual "branks" of a repressive history and an authoritarian education, and the poetry conflates technical linguistic terms with imagery of political opposition to characterise the rebellious nature of his articulation. To begin with the linguistic description; "class and counter class" refers to the concept of 'word class', which is "a category of words of similar form or function" (O.E.D.), simple

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<sup>51</sup>Ken Worpole, 'Scholarship Boy', *Bloodaxe Critical Anthology 1: Tony Harrison*, ed. Neil Astley (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991) 65.



examples being nouns, verbs, and so on. On this level, then, "class and counter class" denotes the grammatical juxtapositions of the scold/skald's first "stutter(ing)" utterance. The pronunciation of this speech is indicated by "thickens with glottals"; the "glottal" is a 'heavy' guttural "sound produced by the sudden opening or shutting of the glottis with an emission of breath or voice" (O.E.D.). Most importantly, the glottal can be seen as a socio-linguistic measure: glottals pervade most English working-class accents, especially those of Northern England. (In Received Pronunciation, on the other hand, glottals are relatively rare.) As the poetry continues the account of the scold/skald's speech, the first words ("class and counter class"), become a torrent, " a...mass/ of...morphemes" (a 'morpheme' being a simple linguistic building block, like 'a linguistic atom'<sup>52</sup>).

At the same time, the process of articulation, the "thicken(ing)" linguistic 'coalescence' of the scold/skald's utterance, is expressed in metaphors which characterise the speech as an act of emergent social/political solidarity. For example, while "lumpen mass" suggests Marx's category of the 'lumpen proletariat'—for him the 'lowest' of the proletariat, people such as criminals and vagrants, who do not feel class loyalty—in the poem the "lumpen mass/ of Ludding morphemes", pointedly, 'close ranks'. Harrison's word-coinage, "Ludding", informs this idea of the radicalisation of the working-class through the historical allusion to the Luddites. The precise signification of "Ludding" is unclear, but the term seems to imply the sense of a subversive, oppositional 'gathering', 'massing' or even 'marching'—of words in this case. The notion of a heightening of political consciousness can also be seen to be invoked by the earlier description of the "thicken(ing)" of "class and counter class". Here

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<sup>52</sup>"Morpheme': a simple linguistic unit that has meaning and cannot be divided into smaller units." *Chambers Dictionary*.



"counter class" carries the connotation of "counter culture", "a mode of life opposed to the conventional or dominant" (O.E.D.). The conceit implies a process in which the working-class becomes more than just a particular socio-economic group: the social "class", in a movement of political enlightenment, "thickens" into an oppositional, revolutionary "counter class". In terms of language, "counter class" can be seen to denote a word or part of speech—such as working-class diction, pronunciation and non-standard grammar—which also "opposes the conventional or dominant". Both "counter class(es)" and conventional classes of words, though, together "thicken...with glottals" in the scold/skald's northern English working-class voice.<sup>53</sup> In fact, within the linguistic/political conceit developed in these lines, the glottal, the badge of working-class pronunciation, is the crucial 'unifying agent': each type of 'class' "thickens with glottals".

The allusion to the Luddites, begun with "Ludding morphemes", extends into the imagery of the succeeding lines in which linguistic Luddite 'sledge-hammers' "of Leeds stress" (p.112), are depicted as "smash(ing) apart" "the looms of owned language" (p.112). This imagery, in particular the reference to the name of the Yorkshire Luddites' hammers, the 'Enochs', derives from *The Making of the English Working Class*; and again a consideration of Thompson's depiction and appraisal of the Luddite movement helps to clarify the import of the allusion in the poem. In the passage quoted earlier in which Thompson lists some of those he wishes to "rescue...from the enormous condescension of posterity", one of those named is, notably, "the Luddite cropper"<sup>54</sup>. In his discussion of the movement, in a chapter entitled 'An Army

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<sup>53</sup>On the level of linguistic analysis, "closing up their ranks" is suggestive of (one of) the movement(s) of the glottis (that is, the "shutting of the glottis" (O.E.D.)), that occurs during the execution of a glottal. The description of the production of a glottal, therefore, is conflated with the act of solidarity, of "closing...ranks".

<sup>54</sup>Thompson 13.



of Redressers', Thompson strives at length to repudiate the dominant perception of the Luddites as an ignorant mob standing in the way of an 'inevitable' 'progress'. Harrison's allusion does not invoke Luddism as a mindless energy of destruction which rejects 'learning' or 'knowledge'. Thompson depicts the Luddite movement, rather, as a highly organised, disciplined and thoughtful expression of working-class culture and political will<sup>55</sup>.

He also emphasises the importance of community support for the success of the Luddites, and this feature of Thompson's account of the (Yorkshire) Luddite movement is of particular relevance to the imagery of 'On Not Being Milton'. In the poem the word-coinage "Ludding" is juxtaposed pointedly with "lumpen" in so far as it alludes to the experience of intense community solidarity and cohesion underpinning the Luddite movement<sup>56</sup>. It also refers to the collective action of a politically engaged and enlightened community. The image of "Ludding morphemes closing up their ranks" against a common enemy carries both military and social connotations. Each of these

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<sup>55</sup> Further, he does not present the movement as in opposition to the fight for Parliamentary reform, but as continuous with it; "...we may see the Luddite movement as transitional. We must see through the machine-breaking to the motives of the men who wielded the great hammers. As 'a movement of the *people's own*', one is struck not so much by its backwardness as by its growing maturity. Far from being 'primitive' it exhibited, in Nottingham and Yorkshire, discipline and self-restraint of a high order. One can see Luddism as a manifestation of a working class culture of greater independence and complexity than any known to the eighteenth century. The twenty years of the illegal tradition before 1811 are years of a richness at which we can only guess; in particular in the trade union movement, new experiments, growing experience and literacy, greater political awareness, are evident on every side. Luddism grew out of this culture...In the three counties [Yorkshire, Lancashire and Nottinghamshire], the agitation for Parliamentary reform commenced at exactly the point where Luddism was defeated" (Thompson 658). Thompson's final point here is that many of those involved in Luddite activity were probably the same people who subsequently agitated for constitutional reform. Harrison's advocacy of "Articulation [as] the tongue-tied's fighting" is not compromised therefore by his invocation of the Luddites.

<sup>56</sup> Thompson contrasts political organisations, including the London Corresponding Society, whose susceptibility to infiltration by Government spies greatly reduced their effectiveness, with the successes of working-class industrial traditions, particularly the Luddites; "...in Nottinghamshire and Yorkshire the Luddites resisted permeation by spies with extraordinary success. Here the authorities were faced with a working-class culture so opaque that...it resisted all penetration. When two experienced London police magistrates were sent down to Nottingham, they reported to the Home Office: 'almost every creature of the lower orders both in town and country are on their side'" (Thompson 540).



connotations are echoed in Thompson's account of a "legendary"<sup>57</sup> attack by the Luddites on Rawfolds Mill in Yorkshire, in 1812 (Harrison appears to have this confrontation in mind in his description of Luddite conflict in 'The Rhubarbarians I'). The attack was repelled. The Luddites scattered in retreat leaving two of their number<sup>58</sup> dying. In his discussion of the aftermath of this defeat Thompson stresses a remarkable incidence of a communal 'closing of ranks' behind the Luddites;

In the middle-class myth, Cartwright [the mill owner] and Roberson [his associate, a clergyman] were not only the heroes of the day, but the relentless pursuers of 'evil-designing men'...In popular folklore, however, Cartwright and Roberson were simply the 'bloodhounds'. The community closed against them in an extraordinary way...For months, despite the presence of 4,000 troops in the West Riding and the widespread employment of spies, not one of the Rawfolds attackers was clearly identified. Thousands must have known one or another of the participants.<sup>59</sup>

If this passage underscores the evocation of class solidarity in the image of "Ludding morphemes", the context of defeat seems inappropriate to the belligerent tone of the imagery. The notion of "Ludding morphemes" as an aggressive coalition, and the quasi-military connotation of a marching 'Army of Redressers' "closing up their ranks", connects more readily with the following passage from *The Making of the English Working Class* (from which Harrison derives his footnote to 'On Not Being Milton' on the import of 'Enoch');

According to tradition, the Luddites drilled frequently at night...pride of place, in popular legend, went to the hammermen, who wielded enormous iron sledges called 'Enochs', to break open doors and smash the frames. These frames (as well as hammers) were made by Enoch Taylor of

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<sup>57</sup>Thompson 612.

<sup>58</sup>"Perhaps 150 Luddites took part" (Thompson 612).

<sup>59</sup>Thompson 615.



Marsden, a blacksmith turned machine-maker, and the Luddite cry was: 'Enoch made them, Enoch shall break them'.<sup>60</sup>

In 'On Not Being Milton' the image of the hammermen swinging their 'Enochs' in tandem "to break open the doors and smash the frames" is used to describe the subversive Northern English rhythms and sounds of the poet's verse which are presented as "smash(ing) apart" the 'cultural machinery' employed by one dominant social class to suppress working-class expression and identity;

Each swung cast-iron Enoch of Leeds stress  
clangs a forged music on the frames of Art,  
the looms of owned language smashed apart! (p.112)

In fact these conceits can be seen to imply a more subtle and complex argument concerning the subversive poetic strategies employed by Harrison in *The School of Eloquence* to resist cultural assimilation. Before examining this argument, though, it will be useful to consider the ways in which the invocation of the Luddites' industrial struggle helps to make concrete the political stakes involved in the abstract issues of language and culture which Harrison raises. Part of Thompson's discussion of the Luddite movement highlights the extent to which they were also engaged in a fight against a process of cultural assimilation. He stresses that the arrival of the machines in the wool and cotton industries marked the beginning of a new organisation of labour which threatened (and would destroy), a range of diverse cultures and communities;

It is easy to forget how evil a reputation the new cotton-mills had acquired. They were centres of exploitation...above all, they reduced the industrious artisan to 'a dependant State'. A way of life was at stake for the community, and, hence, we must see the croppers' opposition to particular machines as being very much more than a particular group of skilled workers defending their own livelihood. These machines symbolised the encroachment of the factory *system*.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup>Thompson 611.

<sup>61</sup>Thompson 599.



The Luddites' resistance to the reductive, uniform culture engendered by a system of mass production informs Harrison's rejection of the homogenising technology of dominant linguistic forms such as Received Pronunciation and Standard English. One of the interesting effects of the emphasis on the separate components of speech in the extended linguistic metaphor of 'On Not Being Milton' is to lay bare the fact that language is itself a technology. The images of "the looms of owned language" and "the frames of Art" (there is a pun here on 'knitting frames' or 'shear frames' which, like looms, were machines targeted by the Luddites), underline this point further, and also invoke, via the Luddite context, the notion of competition between technologies. In 'Them & [uz] I' Received Pronunciation is presented as a particular linguistic technology which, promoted by the dominant cultural elite as the 'correct' version of English, threatens to replace the technologies of other English dialects, rendering those idioms obsolete and 'putting them out of business'. This notion is expressed in the teacher's metaphor (enunciated in the accent of Received Pronunciation), of commercial bankruptcy; "please believe [ʌs]/ your speech is in the hands of the Receivers" (p.122). However just as, for the Luddite croppers, "a way of life" was dependent upon their existent technology, so specific cultural identities are intimately bound up with particular English dialects.

The authoritarian notion of a single, 'superior' or privileged dialect which ought to supersede and assimilate other dialects, and therefore 'take over' the (English) language, is one of the meanings that Harrison intends with the phrase "owned language". The reference to (capitalist) ownership here invokes a general awareness of the connection between social structures of



power and the dissemination of culture<sup>62</sup>. However 'On Not Being Milton' (like other poems in *The School of Eloquence*), is concerned with two forms of cultural dissemination in particular: education and art, especially poetry. The image of "the frames of Art" can be seen to allude again to the proprietorial impulses of the dominant social classes, who wish to claim exclusive possession of 'High Culture'. Reading the word "frames" in the sense of picture frames surrounding works of "Art", the image is of an ideological barrier encompassing "Art" which admits or excludes forms of cultural expression according to the prejudices of a controlling social elite. As Rylance points out, though, there is a pun on "frames" here: for to 'frame' is also to fashion or fabricate, and so "the frames of Art" connotes the idea of a particular cultural construction of art.<sup>63</sup> Further, in a modern colloquial use of 'framing' (as in 'framing' someone for a crime, for example), the act of framing involves a 'construction' which is a deceitful and malicious fiction. The relevance of this connotation of "frames of Art" is clarified in 'Them & [uz] I' where Harrison puts in the mouth of the Grammar School English teacher an account of the way in which the cultural elite have 'translated' the diverse dialects and idioms employed by poets of previous generations into the uniform accents of Received Pronunciation: "All poetry (even Cockney Keats) you see/ 's been dubbed by [ʌs] into RP" (p.122). The original voices of individual poets have been muted, like the dialogue of a foreign film, and a different spoken language, Received Pronunciation, has been "dubbed" over the printed verse. The effect of this assimilation is to deny or suppress the cultural and linguistic variety contained in the literary heritage of the English language. Also, as a

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<sup>62</sup>Rylance makes this point in discussing "the frames of Art"; "Art" here is "related to the dominant economic interests, the owners of the means of production, the knitting-frames" (Rylance 118).

<sup>63</sup>Rylance does not spell out these puns, but clearly implies them when he writes, "'Art' is 'framed'. It is constructed, it is false and exclusive..." (Rylance 118).



consequence of this linguistic appropriation, the study of the great literature of the past becomes a means of legitimising and promoting the dominant dialect in the present. At school Harrison is ridiculed for reading Keats aloud in his Northern working-class accent, and he is encouraged not only to speak in Received Pronunciation himself, but also to view this idiom as 'the language of poetry and learning'.

Now, however, "out of the branks/ of condescension", Harrison's own poetry will confront this 'construction' of "Art". His verse highlights self-consciously its own Northern working-class language in a manner which resists assimilation. The "music" of "Leeds stress/ clangs" discordantly on the ears of its middle-class readership; it is a consciously 'shocking'<sup>64</sup> challenge to the currently dominant expectations and conventions of 'poetic language'. The working-class voice, by "occupying"<sup>65</sup> the medium of poetry, dismantles contemporary ideological assumptions underlying the 'production' and 'consumption' of poetry. Caught up in the enthusiasm of the poet's relocation of self, the Luddite conceit presents an image of triumph, "the looms of owned language [being] smashed apart" by the verse. At the same time, the subsequent reference to Tidd can be seen to qualify this representation of 'victory'; the image of "the silence round all poetry" situates the poem in a

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<sup>64</sup>Harrison's model for this strategic use of language can again be seen to be Césaire. In a 'Translator's Note' to the Bloodaxe edition of the *Cahier* Mireille Rosello writes of what she describes as Césaire's tactic of "poetic shock": "For me, Césaire's *Notebook* [*Cahier*] is the experience of the constant shock generated by the difference between the language used by the poet and what I usually identify as 'standard' French...As readers of twentieth-century poetry, we may be used to this astonishing reinvention of our own language by creators of new images and phrases, but Césaire's case is further complicated by the fact that the margin created by his writing is both linguistic and cultural...[Césaire's poem] is also a Martinican poem, which exposes our lack of cultural familiarity with the Caribbean. In a sense, the poetic shock is also a metaphor for the narrator's position: a self-identified Black poet keeps reminding us of what it means to be both inside and outside, both part of a culture and constantly excluded by its dominant voices" (Césaire 139).

<sup>65</sup>As in the imagery of industrial action in the opening lines of 'Them and [uz] II', "So right, yer buggers, then!/ We'll occupy your lousy leasehold Poetry." (p.123), where the Northern working-class voice is, pointedly, at its most unassimilable.



wider context of suppression and defeat—the representative experience of Tidd. Implicit within this conceit is the obvious recognition that the ideology of "owned language", and the wider political and cultural authoritarianism of which it is a symptom, remain dominant. What the poem celebrates is its own political enlightenment, its own participation in the ongoing struggle for political and cultural 'articulation' by those emerging from the margins of the oppressive history of the West.

However, the triumphal tone of ebullient affirmation, which is the predominant mood of 'On Not Being Milton', reflects one of the functions of the poem (as the first sonnet in *The School of Eloquence*), as a kind of literary manifesto. This discussion has already emphasised some of the ways in which the poem delineates the poet's interlinked political and linguistic relocations of self. Equally fundamental is the poem's declaration of a particular literary (re)location. The political, linguistic and literary thematic strands of the poem are closely interwoven; and this can be seen in the exclamation which follows immediately after the description of the poet's—the scold's—angry, 'unbridled' verse. The cry, "Three cheers for mute ingloriousness!" (p.112), which is isolated by two line-breaks, lies between the celebration of the scold's subversive 'articulation', and the abstract statement of the theme that "Articulation is the tongue-tied's fighting". Ostensibly, therefore, this salute to "mute ingloriousness" may appear contradictory, or paradoxical—especially as the image, two lines later, of "the silence round all poetry", is symbolic of suppression and defeat. This apparent contradiction can be resolved however, by a consideration of Harrison's treatment of the allusion to Thomas Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' which is contained in this line. Gray, meditating on the graves of country swains, contemplates the theme of unfulfilled potential, of lives trammelled by social and cultural constraints. He



considers the various kinds of 'glorious' achievement that the villagers have been barred from attaining, including literary greatness: "some mute inglorious Milton here may rest"<sup>66</sup>. The allusion to Gray, therefore, connects with, and informs, the title of the poem. On one level, the condition of 'Not Being Milton' is that of those kept silent—uneducated and inarticulate—as a result of social and political conditions. From this perspective, Harrison's salute is a declaration of solidarity with those oppressed throughout history, the climactic expression of his statement of political reaffiliation.

At the same time, the tone and significance of this line may be more complicated. As was observed earlier, "Three cheers for mute ingloriousness!" might be seen to echo Césaire's refrain, "Eia for those who have never subdued anything"<sup>67</sup>. Césaire's acclamation of his ancestry was shown to involve a reassessment of the past which subverts dominant values and categories. Harrison's exclamation here can be viewed in a similar light. He rejects Gray's vision of the working-class as quiescent victims of social and political conditions, as he rejects Gray's tone of sympathetic resignation. In this reading of "mute ingloriousness" its relationship to Gray's line is barbed and ironic—perhaps even sarcastic, following, as it does, the invocation of submerged histories of working-class 'articulation'. In these histories the working classes have not necessarily been "mute" victims, but their voices have been muted and distorted in the official historical records; their actions have not necessarily been "inglorious", but 'glory' is assigned according to the interests and values of the dominant culture. This salute is not only to 'the silent', then, but also to those voices which have been silenced, and it involves a recognition and celebration of marginalised traditions of 'articulation'. For both

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<sup>66</sup>Gray, 'Elegy', l. 59.

<sup>67</sup>Césaire 115.



Harrison and Césaire, though, this acclamation of their ancestry is, at the same time, an expression of solidarity with their contemporary collective identities. The reassessment of the past is caught up with emergent political activism in the present. Therefore the transition in the poem's 'argument' from the tribute to "mute ingloriousness" to the implicit observation about an ongoing and continuous process of political struggle, "Articulation is the tongue-tied's fighting", is not paradoxical, but intelligible and consistent.

The condition of 'Not Being Milton', it follows, far from being simply one of silence, absence, non-participation, is also, and crucially, one of marginalised but subversive (and emergent), 'articulation'. The extended description of the utterance of the scold invokes submerged histories of political activism and also forges a connection, a continuity, with suppressed linguistic and literary traditions. It has already been observed how the use of the word 'scold' discloses implicitly Harrison's location of himself as a 'poet'—a skald—who belongs to the marginalised Northern English linguistic and literary traditions. In fact this literary relocation might be considered to be the central theme and subject of the poem. The poem's title signifies, primarily, Harrison's positioning of himself outside the literary canon of English Literature. Rylance explains well the particular linguistic significance of Harrison's choice of Milton as the symbolic canonical figure.<sup>68</sup> Rylance refers to the use of Milton by linguistic 'propagandists' as a touchstone for the continuity between English

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<sup>68</sup>It is essential to delineate the *particular* significance of this self-definition by contrast with Milton. Elsewhere Harrison has gone out of his way to emphasise the importance of Milton as an influence on his poetry, especially *The School of Eloquence*. In the brief, untitled statement at the beginning of the *Bloodaxe Critical Anthology* Harrison refers to only one individual writer as an influence on his own work: Milton. In particular, Milton's sonnets. He writes; "I think how Milton's sonnets range from the directly outward to the tenderly inward, and how the public address of the one makes a clearing for the shared privacy of the other". Tony Harrison, (untitled statement), *Bloodaxe Critical Anthology 1: Tony Harrison*, ed. Neil Astley (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991) 9.



language and culture and the languages and cultures of ancient Greece and imperial Rome. During the First World War,

...in response to international rivalries, patriotic linguists and critics were keen to stress the 'Mediterranean' (southern) rather than Germanic (northern) origins of English, and Milton's work became representative of the rule, as Arthur Quiller-Couch put it, that 'always our literature has obeyed, however unconsciously, the precept *Antiquam exquisite matrem*, "seek back the ancient mother"; always it has revealed itself, kept pure and strong, by harking back to bathe in those native - yes native - Mediterranean springs'.<sup>69</sup>

Rylance also highlights the fact that Received Pronunciation, with its emphasis on southern English idioms, as opposed to the more northern European inflections of the English speakers of northern Britain, was formalised 'officially' during the same period as this linguistic elevation of Milton.

In this sense, Milton has a special place in the linguistic and literary ideology which Harrison imbibed at Grammar School. When Harrison, rejecting this linguistic prejudice, describes 'On Not Being Milton' as "these sixteen lines that go back to my roots", one of the meanings of "roots" here can be seen to be etymological "roots". The implied linguistic contrast with Milton is underscored by the juxtaposition of Harrison's Meredithian sonnets (especially 'On Not Being Milton'), with the sixteen line epigraph to *The School of Eloquence* taken from Milton's Latin poem, 'Ad Patrem'. (To those many modern readers who have not received a Classical education the presence of sixteen incomprehensible lines of Latin provides a pointed demonstration of the experience of cultural exclusion.) To contrive the sixteen line 'sonnet' from 'Ad Patrem' ('To His Father'), which is 120 lines long, Harrison joins the first eleven and the last five lines of the Latin poem. The following, 'literal' prose translation of the sixteen extracted lines can be used to discuss the significant

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<sup>69</sup>Rylance 119.



contrasts and juxtapositions with 'On Not Being Milton' which are suggested by the themes and imagery of the epigraph;

Now I wish the Pierian fountains would turn their refreshing waters through my heart, and pour through my lips the whole stream that flows from the twin summit, so that my Muse, forgetting her trifling strains, might rise on spirited wings to serve my revered father. This poem, a small work, however acceptable it may be, she meditates for you, excellent father. And yet I do not myself know what I can give more fittingly in return for your gifts to me, though even my greatest gift could not repay you, much less could the meagre gratitude offered in vain words ever equal your gifts...[And you, my youthful verses, my pastimes,]<sup>70</sup> if only you dare hope for endless years, and outlive your master's funeral pyre, and look upon the light, and if dark oblivion does not drag you down to crowded Orcus, perhaps these praises, and the name of my father chanted here, you will preserve as an example to a distant age.<sup>71</sup>

The main contrast invited by the juxtaposition with 'On Not Being Milton' can be seen to be between the two poets' cultural locations of self. The opening of 'Ad Patrem', rather than making a conventional invocation to the Muses, appeals to the inspirational "fountains" of their birthplace, Pieria, and to the "stream that flows from the twin summit" of their favourite haunt, Mount Helicon. These are, precisely, metaphors for 'sources'—of inspiration and of tradition. Milton's imagery emphasises, therefore, a continuity between his own writing and the origins of (the dominant tradition of) Western poetry, learning and culture. He asks to be inspired to produce poetry of a quality which, matching the great writers of the ancient world, will be "preserved" and

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<sup>70</sup>These bracketed words translate line 115 of 'Ad Patrem', which Harrison does not quote. I have included them to help to clarify the significance of "you" in "if only you dare hope", which addresses the poem itself. (In the epigraph Harrison leaves three dots and a line-break between lines 11 and '12' (116)—sufficient to prevent a competent reader from thinking that it is still the father who is being addressed. Still, his omission of line 115 may make it unclear 'who' is being addressed in these final five lines. If so, the ambiguity may be fruitful, opening the possibility that the "you" may refer to a representative of the coming generations or to future generations collectively—imbuing "dark oblivion" with connotations of the Apocalypse. On the other hand, this ambiguity may not exist in the Latin.)

<sup>71</sup>John Milton, *John Milton: The Complete Poems*, ed. B. A. Wright and G. Campbell (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1980) 534-35. Latin trans. by M. Campbell.



passed down "as an example to a distant age"—just as the work of the ancients has been passed down to him. The "refreshing waters" of the poetic inheritance which he has imbibed will flow through him to produce verse which, in turn, will give succour to future generations. Milton's hope that his work may survive is based, then, on his sense of belonging to the dominant tradition of Western culture.

The opposing attitudes of Milton and Harrison to the cultural inheritance of the West are reflected in the juxtaposition between the imagery of water at the beginning of 'Ad Patrem' and the reference to fire which opens 'On Not Being Milton'. While Milton finds solace in his perception of a continuing "stream" of history, Harrison sees a conflagration: loss, extinction, suffering. Milton's imagery highlights his untroubled sense of a continuous flow between the "Pierian fountain" and himself. In one sense, "the whole stream" that he calls on to "pour through his lips" is "the refreshing waters" of a shared language (or shared languages, Latin and ancient Greek), as well as a 'common' culture. (Milton's employment of Latin is pointed, reflecting his view of this language as an enduring link between the ancient and modern worlds.) Harrison's use of this extract from 'Ad Patrem' as an epigraph to *The School of Eloquence* exposes, of course, the ideological content in the water imagery. The ideological assumptions of Milton's imagery are more clearly visible in the language of Arthur Quiller-Couch (quoted by Rylance above<sup>72</sup>). Rylance highlights the political agenda—that is, the aversion to Germanic northern Europe—underlying Quiller-Couch's emphasis upon "those native - yes, native - Mediterranean springs" of Latin and Greek as the true 'sources' of English. In affirming the primacy of the Graeco-Roman tradition Quiller-Couch's rhetoric

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<sup>72</sup>(As) Rylance adds, immediately after the quotation from Quiller-Couch, "Harrison, of course, is aware of this history" (Rylance 119).



invokes hierarchical oppositions in a manner typical of authoritarian constructions of identity. English Literature has "kept pure and strong" by "bath(ing) in those...springs", cleansing itself of the dirty, impure, and weak (northern) Other. This authoritarian exclusion of the Other can be seen to be implicit in Milton's invocation of the idealised, inspirational waters and tradition (and languages, especially Latin) of the dominant Classical cultures.

The idealisation of origin, evinced in 'Ad Patrem', is a recurrent feature of patriarchal culture(s). Another is the desire for transcendence. The sacred waters of origin—which for Milton represent the font of poetic utterance—are also a source of immortality. At the close of 'Ad Patrem', though, hope is mingled with anxiety that the poem may not be one of those few chosen works selected for 'immortality', but will be "drag(ged) down" by "dark oblivion" to be lost, with the majority of works, in "crowded Orcus". In the Latin the phrase "dark oblivion" is "oblivia nigra". This description of the historical fate of disappearance, loss, absence, provokes striking echoes, through the etymological continuity between 'nigra', 'negro', 'négre' and 'Négritude', with the imagery and themes of 'On Not Being Milton'. Harrison, "growing black enough to fit (his) boots", rejects his affiliation with the dominant literary tradition of the 'Westerner'. Following the example of Césaire, he recognises his affinity with those languages and voices outside of this tradition, and with those individuals and cultures submerged in the "crowded Orcus" of history.

In contrast to Milton's assumption that the language of his poetry will survive down "to a distant age", Harrison writes with a consciousness of the vulnerability of all languages, but especially of languages on the cultural and political margins of history. Far from hoping for literary immortality, Harrison embraces the knowledge of his poem's transience; the "sixteen lines"



of 'On Not Being Milton' are "read and committed to the flames". There is a sense of ritual here. The poet burns (a symbolic copy of) the poem in order to accept its, and his own, mortality. (This interpretation reflects the ambiguity in the first two lines over what is "read and committed to the flames"—the "sixteen lines" or the immediately following "I"? It is both: the verse and the poet's lasting fame.) This sense of ritual also, perhaps, solemnises his affiliation with (his "commit(ment) to"), those cultural traditions which have been lost in the flames of history. These flames are connected to the imagery of the destructive, phallic fire of patriarchal history found in *The Loiners*. At the same time, Harrison's view of history in 'On Not Being Milton' is not fatalistic or defeatist; the fire imagery of *The School of Eloquence* has a dual significance, used to represent forces which are potentially destructive and/or creative. Each of the two Promethean 'technologies', fire and language, supply us with power—which can be used for baleful or beneficial ends. In the histories of suppressed cultures, alongside loss and defeat, there are also the 'affirming flames' of 'articulation', of resistance. The two Promethean technologies are combined in the Pentecostal image of the gift of 'tongues of fire', which symbolises eloquence. This image recurs in a number of sonnets in *The School of Eloquence* (and will be discussed at greater length in the next chapter.) Another reading of the first clause of 'On Not Being Milton', then, is that Harrison's verse, itself 'red' ("read"), like fire, is "committed" (dedicated), to the "flames" of eloquence—of language understood as a form of power. Harrison's poetry, aligned with the creative, affirming fire of (collective) 'articulation', confronts and resists the destructive flames of history.

In contrast to Milton's metaphor of the "stream" of "refreshing waters" which "pour through (his) lips", the image of 'tongues of fire' imbues the act of articulation with connotations of pain. This can be related to the



poet's avowed task of giving voice or witness to the sufferings of those lost or suppressed in history. It also reflects the concern, which will come to the fore in Section II of *The School of Eloquence*, with the painful confrontation of more personal experiences of loss, division and exclusion. Harrison's presentation of his relationship with his parents there highlights another way in which his 'heritage' is unlike Milton's. One of the striking similarities between Harrison, Césaire and Milton is that each of them, in their formal education, trained primarily as Classical scholars.<sup>73</sup> For both Harrison and Césaire, however, education led to an estrangement from their social, cultural and family backgrounds. Milton, on the other hand, is able to address his father in a formal Latin poem. He expresses gratitude for the "gifts" of knowledge and learning which the father has provided for him, and also pays tribute to the father's own "gifts". By contrast, Harrison's address to his "dad", in 'The Rhubarbarians II', discloses an ironic consciousness of the father's alienation from his son's craft; "Sorry, dad, you wont get that quatrain/ (I'd like to be the poet my father reads!)" (p.114). At the same time, in the second epigraph to *The School of Eloquence*, the four-line poem 'Heredity', Harrison locates in the inarticulacy of his family and forebears a positive source of energy which is juxtaposed with Milton's celebration of his inheritance from his father. Harrison's poem can be seen to pit two different forms of 'inheritance' against each other;

*How you became a poet's a mystery!  
Wherever did you get your talent from?  
I say: I had two uncles, Joe and Harry-  
one was a stammerer, the other dumb. (p.111)*

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<sup>73</sup>At the École Normale Supérieure Césaire "was trained as a teacher of French, Latin and Greek" (Rosello, in Césaire 20).



Underlying the wonder of the anonymous first speaker are prejudices concerning the innate abilities of the working-class. This is underlined by the emphasis on "talent" rather than learning. The notion of biological inheritance is also implicit in 'Ad Patrem'; in this respect Milton's admiration of his father's "gifts" is partly self-congratulatory. Harrison's reference to blood relatives—his uncles—plays ironically with the assumptions of the speaker and is designed, partly, to perplex. His comment might be taken to be a rude refusal to speak about himself. However his bitter, enigmatic reply actually does answer the question; it invokes the influence of a certain kind of cultural, rather than genetic, inheritance. Put simply, Harrison's childhood observations of his own family's inarticulacy has engendered in him a profound desire to master language. At the same time, a further resonance is added to 'Heredity' by the juxtaposition with 'Ad Patrem'. His uncles' relationships to language are symbolic of those experiences of frustrated silence, or of (suppressed) struggles for articulation, which pervade his cultural inheritance. In the histories of his forebears the existential need for personal and collective 'articulation' has been repressed.<sup>74</sup> While Milton is inspired by contact with the "refreshing waters" of a richly articulate tradition, then, Harrison's pursuit of eloquence is impelled, invigorated and informed politically by the 'residual energy' of his ancestors' unfulfilled desire for expression.

This chapter has discussed at length the nature and the terms of the relocation of self which occurs in 'On Not Being Milton'. The sonnets from *The School of Eloquence*, written after this turning-point in 1971, are markedly different from the poetry of *The Loiners*. At the same time, many of the themes which recur obsessively in *The Loiners* continue to pervade the sonnet

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<sup>74</sup>This notion can be connected with the depiction in the *Cahier* of the history of Césaire's ancestors as a reservoir of unexpressed suffering and repressed fury; "stranded hurricanes...chained volcanoes, badly rooted dead..." (Césaire 123).

sequence. The next chapter will consider the extent to which Harrison's new location of self alters his treatment of these fundamental preoccupations in the poetry of *The School of Eloquence*.



## CHAPTER NINE

### Continuous

In observing the continuities between the concerns of *The Loiners* and *The School of Eloquence*<sup>1</sup> it is useful to begin with a very broad perspective by re-emphasising a feature which permeates so much of Harrison's work. That is the extent to which the sonnets of *The School of Eloquence* are written under the pressure of the poet's unremitting consciousness of the destructive and dehumanizing forces of authoritarian culture and patriarchal history. As in *The Loiners* even the most personally and historically particular details in the poems can be seen to possess, on one level, a general significance which connects with the poet's response to this history. Occasionally, though, the imagery of *The School of Eloquence* apprehends explicitly this overarching context; for example, the following quatrain from the last sonnet of the sequence, 't'Ark',

Not only dodo, oryx and great auk  
waddled on their tod to t'monster ark,  
but 'leg', 'night', 'origin' in crushed people's talk,  
tongues of fire last witnessed mouthing: *dark!* (p.189)

In order to highlight the bitter ironies underlying the use of both "tongues of fire" and "witnessed" in the final line here, it is necessary to consider the source of the image of 'tongues of fire'—the biblical story of the gift of tongues in *The Acts of the Apostles*. The irony on "witnessed" derives from the last words of Christ to the Apostles, delivered immediately before the Ascension, where he tells them that they are to be given 'power' by the Holy Ghost;

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<sup>1</sup>When I refer to *The School of Eloquence* I will intend the limited version of the sequence which appeared in *Continuous* in 1981 (as I indicated in the note at the beginning of the last chapter).

And ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.<sup>2</sup>

The 'power' which descends upon them at the feast of Pentecost is the power of eloquence, of glossolalia—"the gift of tongues";

And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting.

And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them.

And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven.

Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language.<sup>3</sup>

Harrison's emphasis on exclusion from the (Christian) salvation of "t'Ark" contrasts strikingly with the inclusive embrace of "the uttermost part of the earth" and "every nation under the sun". There is an edge of implicit anti-Christian satire in Harrison's conceits, then, which is also reflected in the play on "witnessed". The Apostles receive the gift of tongues so that they can be Christ's "witnesses", spreading the news of his deeds and of the promise of immortality and salvation through him. In 't'Ark', though, the image of "tongues of fire" evokes the suffering of the last bearers of a language and culture as they are (all) "crushed" to extinction. What these "tongues of fire last witness", or 'bear testimony to', is not 'the light', but "*dark!*"—a word which evokes both the moment at which the 'flames' of their language are extinguished and the notion of their terminal experience, the confrontation with oblivion. Yet in one sense they cannot 'give testimony', as no-one is left to understand their language. The ambiguity of "last witnessed" can be seen to suggest the

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<sup>2</sup>Acts, I, 8.

<sup>3</sup>Acts, II, 2-6.



sight of their faces as they appeared to their killers, "mouthing" rather than 'speaking' something which, understood by no-one, is not a word but an absence, "*dark!*". The historical fate of annihilated cultures is juxtaposed bitterly, therefore, with not just a Christian but a general notion of transcendent, immortal salvation.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, the Pentecostal image, here as elsewhere in *The School of Eloquence*, refers implicitly to a positive, secular rendering of 'the gift of tongues'. The apprehension of language as a source of power can be seen as the central theme which unites the sequence. Harrison is drawn to the idea, described in *The Acts*, of inspired eloquence which is able to cross cultural (and, implicitly, temporal), boundaries and give 'witness' to experiences of universal significance. The 'tongues of fire', then, represent not the one truth of a divinely sanctioned voice, but the potential for inspired expression and communication contained in all languages; the unifying potential, that is, of poetic eloquence. (The inclusive address of 'the tongues of fire' in the quotations from *The Acts* echoes Harrison's story of "what drove (him) into poetry...(the) precious idea (of) 'that affection that...widens out the boundaries of our being and unites all living things'"<sup>5</sup>.)

The use of "tongues of fire" in 't'Ark' is just as bitterly ironic, of course, in relation to this secular conception. It was noted towards the end of the last chapter that the Pentecostal metaphor can be connected with the imagery of fire in *The Loiners*, which figured there the destructive energies and historical atrocities of patriarchal history. In 't'Ark' fire is again associated with histories of conquest, oppression and genocide. It is the annihilating fire

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<sup>4</sup>This theme connects with Harrison's rejection of Milton's desire for 'immortality' through poetry expressed in 'Ad Patrem'; and indeed 't'Ark' considers poetry, and in particular Harrison's own poems, "these poems" (p.189), as 'endangered species'.

<sup>5</sup>Tony Harrison, 'The Inkwell of Dr Agrippa', *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies 1: Tony Harrison*, ed. Neil Astley (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991) 32.



caused by the exclusion of the Other which ignites and consumes the "tongues" of the "crushed people", not the fire of an inclusive eloquence.

In fact the implicit critique of patriarchal history in the poem refers beyond a consideration of the baleful effects of the ethical exclusion of the human Other and is written with a consciousness of the rapid dwindling of "the numbered species" (p.189), on the planet. At the same time, though, the relentless reduction of bio-diversity mirrors the decline of linguistic and cultural diversity; and Harrison's use of a marginalised (Northern English working-class), language leads him to view his own sonnets as 'endangered species'. His final injunction to the reader to "translate these poems into *cynghanedd*" (p.189), that is, into "a language near extinction (which) best preserves/ the deepest grammar of our Nothingness" (p.189), provides a grim conclusion to the sequence. This mood is barely lightened by his already rather chastening appeal a few lines earlier to "celebrate" species on the point of extinction "before things go too far" (p.189).

While this tone is not typical of the sequence, 't'Ark' highlights the historical backdrop of 'darkness'—of suppression, exclusion and effacement—against which all of the poems of *The School of Eloquence* must be seen. Rather than bowing to the pessimism of this overview, though, most of the poems are engaged in a struggle against the 'darkness'. A more positive representation of the poet's 'affirming fire' of resistance occurs in 'Fire-eater'. This poem connects directly to the themes of 'On Not Being Milton' and 'Heredity'. It begins with a visual image which depicts the awkwardness and difficulty of Harrison's father's and uncle's speech. They are likened to circus "conjurers",

pulling bright silk hankies, a scarf, a flag  
up out of their inwards...



Coarser stuff than silk they hauled up grammar  
knotted together deep down in their gut. (p.168)

The effort and pain involved in their use of language is emphasised by the image of "haul(ing) up" "coarse" material through their mouths and throats. Similarly, the conceit of his father's and uncle's sentences being formed, "knotted together", in the "gut" figures their anxiety through the connotation of a 'knotted stomach'. At the same time, "knotted together" also suggests the idea of being joined in solidarity through suffering and struggle. As Harrison dwells on his relationship to his family's experiences of inarticulacy it becomes clear that his father and uncle are emblems of a much longer 'lineage' of frustrated expression;

Theirs are the acts I nerve myself to follow.  
I'm the clown sent in to clear the ring.  
Theirs are the tongues of fire I'm forced to swallow  
then bring back knotted, one continuous string  
igniting long-pent silences, and going back  
to Adam fumbling with Creation's names,  
and though my vocal chords get scorched and black  
there'll be a constant singing from the flames. (p.168).

The circus imagery here locates his heritage amidst the marginal, 'low'—rather than dominant, 'elevated'—traditions of cultural expression. The pun on "the acts", therefore, juxtaposes implicitly the 'low', awkward, linguistic "conjur(ing)" of his family' speech with *The Acts (of the Apostles)*, their inspired 'witnessing' and dissemination of Christ's words. His family's experiences of frustration and pain have, like circus "acts", left 'the ring' littered or 'blocked' with an emotional aftermath. Harrison views his role as having to "clear the ring", the ring which is, on the one hand the arena of history, but also symbolises the relationship, the continuities, between past, present (and future) generations. In the lines which describe the poet's adoption of this role the imagery moves from a depiction of him as the 'low' figure of "the clown" to an



elevated position in which he possesses the Pentecostal fire of eloquence which transcends cultural and temporal boundaries. This transition in status is effected by Harrison's personal 'sacrifice' of his individual identity; in a symbolic act of 'suicide' he "swallow(s)" "the tongues of fire" of his forebears—that is, he confronts their suffering and adopts both their language and the role of spokesman for their experience. The conceit in which Harrison's own poetic utterance consists of the "knotted" tongues of his ancestors produces an image of their collective suffering—each individual experience of frustrated or suppressed expression tied together—and of their collective articulation, the language of the Northern English working-class which Harrison employs. The phrase "one continuous string", though, links this particular idiom with a much longer history by evoking the idea of an etymological continuity which reaches back to the earliest human struggles for articulation—"Adam fumbling with Creation's names". At the same time, "tongues of fire", as a symbol of language consumed and annihilated, connects the notion of a residual pressure of frustrated expression which Harrison perceives in relation to his immediate cultural inheritance with the "long pent silences", suppressions and absences in human history.

In the last lines of the poem the psychological pain and danger inherent in Harrison's role of poetic 'fire-eater', confronting and "ignit(ing)" the suffering of the past, is indicated by the image of his "vocal chords get(ting) scorched and black". However, after the symbolic suicide of "swallow(ing)" "the tongues of fire", the process of the poetic creation of "one continuous string" of 'flaming' words, enables him to survive the harrowing confrontation with the past. Further, giving voice to the legacy of "long pent silences", he is a steadfast witness; his singing is "constant" (not only 'continuous', that is, but also 'faithful', 'regular' and 'resolute'). The sense of a fluent "singing from the



flames" in the final line contrasts with the earlier images of laboured and painful articulation. This image of fluency is mitigated of course by the description of his "vocal chords (as) scorched and black". Even so the poem finishes with an intimation that the 'eloquent testimony' of verse is a means by which Harrison can begin to release the "pent up" energy of past suffering; begin, that is, "to clear the ring"—the circular "ring" of human history, continuity and regeneration.

The nature of Harrison's concerns in this poem—his desire to confront, and find a way to address, the debilitating legacies of patriarchal history—highlights the fact that the scope of the historical and existential themes of *The Loiners* are still apparent in *The School of Eloquence*. Yet most of the sonnets in the sequence are, ostensibly at least, focused upon more personally and culturally specific concerns: Harrison's relationship with his parents in particular. If the thematic structure of 'Fire-eater' clearly uses Harrison's family members as emblems, though, as starting-points from which to move out to a much wider reference, this structure is not repeated in most of the 'personal' poems of Section Two. The answer to this problem, of course, lies simply in the form of the sequence; the larger themes established in some poems apply implicitly to others. Even so, the important issue is to try to understand the nature or substance of these implicit connections—and it may not be immediately clear how poems such as 'Timer', 'Continuous' or 'Next Door' link up with the themes developed in, for example, 'On Not Being Milton', 't'Ark' and 'Fire-eater'.

I will try to shed some light on this issue by emphasising some of the underlying thematic continuities between *The Loiners* and *The School of Eloquence*. The approach to the 'private', 'personal' themes of some of the poems will follow the suggestive advice of John Lucas;



Harrison is an immensely gifted playwright and it probably makes best sense to see in the tensions, connections and disconnections, between father and son a working through of *typical* issues. As such, the sequence will survive the local occasion of its writing...<sup>6</sup>

In this discussion, then, the emblematic significance of the personae, the setting—the 'drama'—presented in the sequence will be highlighted.

At the beginning of the previous chapter I noted that one of the thematic overlaps between *The Loiners* and *The School of Eloquence* lay in the 'childhood poems' of each volume. As in 'Allotments' and 'Ginger's Friday', these poems portray the young Harrison's assumption of an authoritarian cultural construction of self. In the earlier volume this process is dramatised in terms of sexual experience. Here the transmission of an authoritarian cultural inheritance is located in the boy's education.

The imagery of the poem 'Me Tarzan', though, links the acquisition of this identity with the repression of the body involved in the self-restraint and discipline required for the Scholarship Boy's academic study. The poem begins with a description of one such movement of agonising repression;

Outside the whistled gang-call, *Twelfth Street Rag*,  
then a Tarzan yodel for the kid who's bored,  
whose hand's on his liana . . . no, back  
to Labienus and his flaming sword. (p116)

The "Tarzan yodel" from the local "*Twelfth Street*" "gang" represents the uninhibited adolescent release of masculine sexual energies. The boy reaches for "his liana" as if to escape from the isolation of the attic work-room and 'swing down' into the 'urban jungle'. Perhaps the "liana" can be seen as a phallic symbol; it is associated with a raw expression of maleness which is linked with the male-bonding of teenage gangs. After the moment of self-

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<sup>6</sup>John Lucas, 'Speaking for England?', *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies 1: Tony Harrison*, ed. Neil Astley (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991) 360.



denial, though, he returns to an alternative phallic symbol, one mediated by the constructions of authoritarian culture, Labienus' "flaming sword". The young Harrison is working on "*a Latin prose*" (p.116), Julius Caesar's *Commentarii de bello Gallico*, a memoir of the Gallic War in which Caesar glorifies his own victories over the Germanic tribes of Northern Europe. Labienus was Caesar's "most senior and trusted officer during...the campaigns in Gaul"<sup>7</sup>. While the colloquial use of "flaming" registers, on the one hand, the boy's expression of annoyance, the phrase "flaming sword" also evokes the sort of conventional metaphor, drawn from epic poetry, which may have been employed in the "*Latin prose*" to depict Labienus' 'heroic' acts of slaughter on the battlefield. The metaphor also invokes, of course, the destructive phallic fire of patriarchal history.

The intensity and frustration of the boy's physical self-denial is highlighted again in the third quatrain. Here the first words, "it's only", emphasises the fact that all of the muscles of his body are inactive except for "his jaw muscles" which "tense" to express his suppressed rage;

It's only his jaw muscles that he's tensed  
into an enraged *shit* that he can't go;  
down with polysyllables, he's against  
all pale-face Caesar's, *for* Geronimo. (p.116)

The use of 'Hollywood Red-Indian' diction, "pale face", evokes the patriarchal tradition of European, 'white' imperialism and at the same time suggests the 'bloodless' asceticism of Roman stoical repression. Geronimo, like Tarzan, symbolises a rebellion, expressed in the popular culture of "t'flicks" (p.116), which "all the boys" (p.116) are going to see, against authoritarian psychological (as well as political), repression. In the movies both Geronimo

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<sup>7</sup>From entry on 'Labienus' in *The Concise Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*, ed. M. C. Howatson and Ian Chilvers, (Oxford: OUP, 1993) 303.

and Tarzan share a stilted, 'primitive' inarticulacy which is consistent with their role as representatives of (male) physicality and sexuality. The title of the poem, 'Me Tarzan', suggests the boy's desire to claim and affirm these areas of his identity. He is consciously opposed to "polysyllables" and "*for* Geronimo". Even so, the conclusion of the poem highlights the fact that through the process of his education he is adopting the repressive psychological constructions of authoritarian culture;

He shoves the frosted attic skylight, shouts:

*Ah bloody can't ah've gorra Latin prose.*

His bodiless head that's poking out's  
like patriarchal Cissy-bleeding-ro's. (p.116)

The final conceit on Cicero's decapitation is the culminating image of the theme of the denial of the body. The use of "patriarchal" underlines the connection between this process of alienation and the repressive psychology of patriarchal culture. As with "flaming" earlier, "bleeding" here combines a colloquial expression—of complaint or contempt—with the literal invocation of the displaying of Cicero's head, after his execution, "in the Rostra"<sup>8</sup> ("the platform in the Forum from which speakers addressed the people"<sup>9</sup>). The allusion to Cicero's death in the final visual image, which symbolically decapitates the boy too, adds to the depiction of the young scholar as a cultural victim.

One effect of the play on 'Cicero' and "Cissy" is to highlight the equivocal nature of the poem's attitude to constructions of masculinity. This wordplay develops implicitly the parallels already established in the poem between inarticulacy or taciturnity and masculinity: the dismissive attribution of effeminacy to both the Roman orator/poet and the scholar is associated with

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<sup>8</sup>From entry on 'Cicero', Howatson and Chilvers 125.

<sup>9</sup>From entry on 'Rostra', Howatson and Chilvers 474.



their mutual commitment to language and eloquence. It is clear that the dominant tone of the poem 'sides', or sympathises, with both the boy's judgment concerning "polysyllables" and with the assessment, made by his male peers, of the lad as a "Cissy" (the wordplay provides an echo of their taunts). Even so, there is a gap in the poem, indicated partly by the childish diction, between the child's approval of the construction of masculinity symbolised by Tarzan and (Hollywood's) Geronimo, and the poet's position. The presence of a degree of ironic detachment from the youth's perspective is hinted at in the title's partly parodic rendering of Tarzan's primitive affirmation of identity. Elsewhere in the sequence (and this will be discussed later), the restrictive construction of a taciturn, monosyllabic maleness is challenged.

The use of "Cissy" in the final line of 'Me Tarzan' can also be seen to function in a different way; it symbolises the boy's alienation from his social peers (and their rejection of him). His physical distance from them at the close of the poem, looking down from his elevated position, emphasises the 'social elevation' which his education is effecting. At the same time, "frosted attic skylight" suggests his estrangement from the 'warmth' of the social interactions of the "gang". Socially isolated, his workroom is associated, through the classical connotations of "attic" (which also signifies 'of Attica or Athens'), with the 'lofty', but 'cold', 'dead' cultures of ancient history, rather than the 'warm', earthy, living culture of his working-class peers.

We are now in a position to compare the conflation of concerns which occur in the childhood poems of *The Loiners* and *The School of Eloquence*. In both 'Me Tarzan' and 'Allotments' the repression of the young Harrison's physicality and sexuality—which forms part of his assumption of a debilitating authoritarian construction of identity—is connected with the 'knowledge' he acquires of patriarchal history. In 'Me Tarzan' the subtle



evocation of the scholar's gradual exposure to imperial history and authoritarian ideology, through the values and learning he is taught at school, parallels the depiction of the horrific understanding which the youth of 'Allotments' gains concerning the atrocities of World War II. The destructive energies produced by the psychological repression of patriarchal culture, symbolised by the victory bonfires in 'Allotments', is present here in the "flaming sword" of Labienus. Most interestingly, the assumption of the transgressive cultural inheritance of the West is accompanied in both sets of childhood poems by an invasion and fracturing of personal and social bonds of identity. The use of "us" in "V.E. and J. burn us like lights"<sup>10</sup> was shown, in the discussion of 'Allotments' at the close of Chapter Three, to be imbued with a new awareness of a 'fallen' human continuity, an awareness which made fraught, and disrupted fundamentally, any notion of a social or collective identity. A similar concern with the idea of a disrupted 'us' occurs in *The School of Eloquence*, in 'Them & [uz]'. Here, though, the transition described is no longer from a pre-lapsarian to a fallen 'us'. Imagery of the Fall is replaced by that of entrapment; "'We say [^ s] not [uz], T.W.!' That shut my trap." (p.122). Harrison is 'trapped' by his education into aligning himself with the dominant culture and history of the West. In 'On Not Being Milton', though, he is able to liberate himself from this affiliation and recover the "[uz]" of his working-class identity. Similarly, the affirmations of class solidarity, in 'On Not Being Milton' and elsewhere in the sequence, reclaim the connection with those working-class peers from whom the scholar is alienated at the close of 'Me Tarzan'.

On one level, as was emphasised in the discussion of 'On Not Being Milton', this "[uz]" is located within the symbolic category of a generic Other: that is, a category defined against the dominant traditions and values of

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<sup>10</sup>*The Loiners*, 17.



authoritarian culture. Césaire, in the *Cahier*, establishes the values and properties of negritude in opposition to the dominant culture of the West. In *The Loiners* Harrison views working-class culture as irretrievably entangled and complicit with the exclusions and repressions of authoritarian ideology (as highlighted in 'the P.W.D. Man' poems, for example). However, I wish to indicate the extent to which Harrison, in his characterisation of the reclaimed "[uz]" of *The School of Eloquence*, attempts to delineate and emphasise features of working-class culture which are, implicitly, antithetical and alternative to authoritarian cultural constructions. At the same time, in tension with this emphasis, there is a continuing awareness of the influence of authoritarian ideology on the culture of the Northern English working-class. This tension will be discussed shortly.

It might be argued that the 'non-authoritarian' values (they are not anti-authoritarian), are 'marginal' presences in the poems. This is partly because the poet's representations of 'positive' and 'negative' aspects of working-class culture are so closely interwoven in the sonnets. Also, though, the poet apprehends the 'positive' features as part of a tradition of working-class culture which is disappearing, and being replaced by a new, more brutalized culture. The emphasis in the poems is usually more firmly upon this culture.

In the four poem sequence 'Next Door', Harrison presents symbolic elements of what he considers the last vestiges of the communal values of a strong collective identity which he attributes to the 'old' working-class. These values, though, while located in working-class Beeston, Leeds, are emblematic of communal structures of thought and behaviour which resist the impulses of authoritarian culture towards division and alienation. One way in which 'Next Door I' highlights the consciousness of community amongst the working-class of Beeston is by detailing their respectful attention to their dead.

The following lines refer, firstly, to the funeral of Harrison's next door neighbour, Ethel Jowett, and then to the funeral of his mother;

Mi mam was 'that surprised' how many came  
to see the cortege off and doff their hats—  
All the 'old lot' left gave her the same  
busing back from 'Homes' and Old Folk's Flats. (p.129)

The fact of his mother's "surprise" intimates the sense that this 'old' community is conscious of its steady erosion but, at the same time, this awareness only serves to underline the resilience of the old bonds. This resilience is underlined further, in the last line, by the emphasis upon the dispersal of the "old lot".

The pleasant surprise expressed by the mother in relation to the respect accorded Ethel Jowett feeds subtly into the tone of the poet's record of the same public recognition for her. He notes the trouble taken to "bus...back" to Beeston, and the pathos of his evocation of a dying tradition ("all the 'old lot' left"), is mingled with an understated hint of gratitude for the 'gift' of respect (the 'old lot' "gave her the same"), she 'receives'.

In the 'Next Door' poems Harrison's childhood neighbours, the Jowetts (we only hear of Ethel and her brother), are presented as belonging to the more genteel end of demarcations within the working-class. The opening lines of 'Next Door II' suggest that they might be perceived by some as 'posh', "la-di-dah";

Their front garden (8 x 5) was one of those  
the lazier could write off as 'la-di-dah'.  
Her brother pipesmoked greenfly off each rose  
in summer linen coat and Panama. (p.130)

The representation of Ethel's brother is juxtaposed by more brutal male figures later in the poem (the wife-beater, Mr Sharpe, and the Jowett's "distant relative" (p.130), Harrison's mother calls a "*Spiv!*" (p.130)). Similarly, the setting of this memory of the past in a gentle "summer" will be contrasted with the symbolic



images of winter in 'Next Door III'. Here, as in the two 'Clearing' sonnets, the care taken over the small patch of "front garden" highlights the pride taken in that part of the home which is also—in the sense of it being visible to passers-by—a public, communal space. This care indicates a concern to be a part of the social identity of 'the street'. The general notion of 'nourishing' the soil also figures the idea of a respect for human and social 'roots', an association which is again apparent in the poet's mother's 'nurturing', in her front garden, of "pale spring shoots" ('Clearing I', p.144). By contrast, the subsequent neglect of these gardens connotes the social alienation which now pervades 'the street'. In 'Next Door II' the new neighbours who move into the Jowett's house are "the Sharpes", whose harsh-sounding name reflects the viciousness of Mr Sharpe;

The Sharpes came next. He beat her, blacked her eye.  
Through walls I heard each blow, each *Cunt! Cunt! Cunt!*

The Jowett's dahlias were left to die. (p.130)

The description of the Harrisons' front garden, following the death of the poet's mother, is also imbued with associations of a more brutalized and 'defeated' ("beaten" (p.145)), social environment. Harrison, addressing his (dead) mother, writes of "the front" that "had a show of flowers till you died", but has since become "as flat and as bare as the back yard,/ a beaten hard square patch of sour soil" (p.145). It is a "hard" environment in which healthy growth seems impossible. In 'Next Door III' this imagery of 'hardness' is combined with a metaphor of extreme cold, of winter, to suggest a contemporary culture which is 'frozen', ethically and existentially 'petrified'. 'Next Door III' continues the narrative of 'Next Door II'. Not only is Harrison's father "the only one who keeps up his front" ('Next Door II', p.130), he is "also the only one who shifts the snow" ('Next Door III', p.131). That is, his father clears the snow from the path outside his house—another symbolic act which reveals a resilient sense of

communal responsibility. That his act of clearing the flag-stones, the paving stones, is also a public sign and affirmation of this identity, is indicated in the poem by the pun on "flags": if any of the 'old lot' "shuffle past/ they'll know from (his) three clear flags that (he's) alive" (p.131). The snow which surrounds his clearing, though, in a sense symbolises the pervasive presence of the 'new' culture. This depiction of winter contrasts with the memory in the previous poem which evoked the 'summer' of the 'old' culture; Mr Jowett in his Panama hat. This winter is the 'terminal season' of the 'old' culture, and if the father's clearing away of the snow represents, on the one hand, his attempt to resist the passing of that culture, it also figures the fear of his own death;

Outside your clearing your goloshes slip.  
The danger starts the moment you're next door—  
the fall, the dreaded 'dislocated hip',  
the body's final freeze-up with no thaw. (p.131)

The various associations attached to the imagery of ice and snow inform the poet's ambiguous, brooding meditations which close the sonnet;

This winter's got all England in its vice.

All night I hear a spade that scrapes on stone  
and see our street one skidding slide of ice. (p.131)

The observation on the state of the nation highlights the fact that the characterisation of the shifting social conditions of Beeston is symbolic of wider changes. This line contemplates the "vice", the 'transgressions', of a numbed and hardened authoritarian culture. The haunting vision of the final two lines, then, might be seen to conflate a description of the father trying to clear the snow with the idea of him digging a grave—for himself, his 'dying' community, and the nation. The emblematic "street", hardened with ice, is a death-trap for his father, and his community. At the same time, England is also



'sliding' into an existential decline of ethical 'petrification', a "final freeze-up with no thaw".

Connected to this perspective on the condition of England is the presentation, in the 'Next Door' and the 'Clearing' poems, of Britain's post-colonial transition to a (more) multi-cultural, multi-racial society: one which is intolerant and divided. 'Next Door I' highlights the continuing presence in post-colonial Britain of imperial ideology. The observation, in the final lines, that "*it wont be long before.../ t'Town Hall's thick red line sweeps through t'whole street*" (p.129), refers to racial prejudices underlying the actions of the British civic authorities which lead to an 'unofficial policy'—reminiscent of colonial administration—in which (black) immigrants are 'contained' in certain areas. This idea is suggested by the allusion to the imperial image of 'the thin red line' of British soldiers who maintain the 'borders', the dividing lines between the 'civilisation' of Empire and the 'barbarians' beyond.

Harrison's father shares these prejudices. In imagery which echoes that of the P.W.D. Man poems, the father's failing heart is figured as a drum—on this occasion an imperial, military drum; "his dicky ticker beats a quick retreat:/ *It wont be long before Ah'm t'only white!*" ('Next Door I', p.129). The P.W.D. Man's heart-attack symbolised the demise of the British Empire; the image of the "dicky ticker" here conflates this association with a representation of the loss of the 'old' working-class culture, whose time is also up. This conflation highlights the limitations of the community values of this culture, and indicates the extent to which it is also caught up in the constructions of authoritarian ideology.

In *The School of Eloquence* Harrison exposes these contradictions within his working-class inheritance without attempting to resolve them. The same is true of his depiction of his relationship with his

parents. He highlights both his alienation and estrangement from them, and his profound attachment to them. At the same time, the emphasis in the sequence is again upon his need to confront the disruption of the personal bond with his parents which was caused by his experience of social deracination. In *The Loiners*, the failure of the personal, sexual bond between individuals—or the fracturing of that bond by the divisive pressures of authoritarian cultural constructions—is connected to, and employed as a metaphor for, wider social, political and historical denials of affiliation. The Loiners' various strivings to affirm the personal bond is linked with aspirations for a larger 'healing' of political divisions and exclusions. On one level, the poet's attempt to reclaim and rejuvenate the personal bond between himself and his parents in *The School of Eloquence* can be seen to possess a similar relationship to wider perspectives invoked in the sequence. Harrison's desire to "clear the ring" (p.168) of human continuity and regeneration in 'Fire-eater', for example, can be linked with the efforts of the poet, in the poems of grief for his parents' deaths, to establish a kind of 'reconnection' with them. His wish to overcome, on a personal level, the alienation between himself and his parents is linked, implicitly, to the desire to resist the pervasive social and political division effected by authoritarian culture.

In *The Loiners* the social and political settings of the British Empire and the Cold War are the two most prominent 'dark backdrops' against which the attempted acts of personal connection are lit. The main social and historical contexts in *The School of Eloquence* are the divisions and exclusions of English class conflict, the decline of the 'old' working-class culture, and the rise of the new, brutalized advanced industrial culture of England. In the two 'Illuminations' poems, though, the historical backdrop of authoritarian denial is World War II. In the first poem Harrison invokes the horror of the war through



the conceit of the macabre slot-machines, "*The Long Drop* and *The Haunted House*" (p.146), which, as a child on holiday in Blackpool just after the War, he had played with incessantly. In the poem these frivolous 'machines of death' are associated with the technology of destruction employed during the War. The father's impatient rebuke to his son reflects a post-war desire to affirm life rather than lingering on death; "*Bugger the machines! Breathe God's fresh air!*" (p.146); and the poet's retrospective meditation on this incident completes the association between the slot-machines and the 'machine-age' War;

I see now all the piled old pence turned green,  
enough to hang the murderer all year  
and stare at millions of ghosts in the machine... (p.146)

The mass deaths and destruction of the War inform the affirmation of human (family) bonds, and human continuity, which occurs in 'Illuminations II' (although the first line of this poem locates the family within the War culture of division, "We built and bombed Boche stalags on the sands" (p.147)). Again a pleasure beach 'machine' provides the central conceit of the poem. This one, however, supplies a more positive 'illumination'; the poet remembers how the family

...some days ended up all holding hands  
gripping the pier machine that gave you shocks.  
The current would connect. We'd feel the buzz  
ravel our loosening ties to one tense grip,  
the family circle, one continuous US! (p.147)

The family's "ties" are "loosening" because "that was the first year on (his) scholarship" (p.147), and already his cultural alienation from his family is beginning ("I lectured them on neutrons and Ohm's Law" (p.147)). Nevertheless these lines present a celebratory image of not only family unity, but also—through the precise, insistent rhyme on "buzz" and "US" (uz)—social, class solidarity. Here the electricity of the "machine" symbolises an energy

which opposes the cultural, psychological and technological forces of destruction which pervade the War. This energy is, on the one hand, the love of family and social bonds, and also, linked to this, the urge towards life, the energy of loving human reproduction and continuity.

The notion of Harrison's relationship with his parents as emblematic of human continuity is underlined in the final lines of the poem;

Two dead, but current still flows through us three  
though the circle takes for ever to complete—  
eternity, annihilation, me,  
that small bright charge of life where they both meet. (p.147)

After the first description of "the family circle" Harrison goes on to note that "I'd be the one who'd make that circuit short" (p.147), through his lecturing of the family. In this final image, though, the "circuit" is restored. In the language of 'Fire-eater', Harrison has "cleared the ring" (p.168), which had been 'blocked'. One of the ways in which this "circuit" is 'reconnected' is through Harrison's effort in the poems to negotiate the past, to go over old conflict and try to understand his parents' position, and to confront his own feelings towards them. This process, enacted in the poems of grief in Section Two of the sequence, enables him to acknowledge and celebrate the love he feels and has received from his parents. One way of reading this final image is to see in it a recognition by the poet that the parental love that a child receives is a permanent and continually nourishing gift: this is suggested by the conceit of the "current still flow(ing) through (all) three" of them even though the parents are dead. The conceit of Harrison as a "small bright charge of life" (which evokes the image of a small light bulb in a science-lesson circuit), also suggests the idea of Harrison as a living 'sign' or 'proof' of the ongoing conjunction of the parents' own lives and love. In both cases the important aspect of the image is the notion of a continuity, a chain, an energy, which



'reaches over' "annihilation" from the "eternity" of death and absence, to the living present (and, implicitly, the future). The word "annihilation" seems slightly incongruous in relation to the description of the deaths of individuals: the connotations of the word do, however, pick up the earlier references to the mass destruction of the War. This association highlights the emblematic significance, then, of the 'personal' affirmation of life and regeneration at the close of 'Illuminations II'.

There are other important ways in which Harrison's retrospective renegotiation of his relationship with his parents is representative of wider cultural and historical issues. Most obviously, in "the fact that...Harrison's parents are 'emblems' in the poet's dramatic presentation of class and underprivilege"<sup>11</sup>. Also underlying the poems of grief, though, is the less easily visible theme of Harrison's attempt to disentangle himself from the limitations of the construction of masculinity which he has inherited. This is one of the concerns addressed in the opening sonnet of Section Two, 'Book Ends I'. The emphasis in this poem on 'the silences' and absences which haunt Harrison's 'private history' is again suggestive of the relationship between the 'personal poems' and the political and historical concerns of the sequence. The poet's desire to invoke and affirm, through recognition and remembrance, the human dignity and worth of those suppressed or forgotten in human history, is linked with the need for him to confront his own silences and evasions.

In 'Book Ends I' the central image highlights the estrangement and distance between the father and son;

...in our silences and sullen looks,  
for all the Scotch we drink, what's still between 's  
not the thirty or so years, but books, books, books. (p.126)

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<sup>11</sup>Lucas 360.

The stress is again upon the divisive impact of Harrison's education. At the same time, the poem intimates that the distance between father and son is also partly caused and perpetuated by a cultural inheritance which they share: the cultural construction of an emotionally repressed masculinity. The poem's depiction of the estrangement between the two incorporates the mother's perception of them as 'the same'. She rebukes them both for their taciturnity; "*You're like book ends, the pair of you, she'd say,/ Hog that grate, say nothing, sit, sleep, stare...*" (p.126). Her image of the book ends here is employed to represent their similarity rather than their difference, and her insistence on this struggles poignantly through the poem with their experience of separation. On the one hand, the poet responds that "only our silence made us seems a pair" (p.126); yet his own yearning to connect with his father informs his exclamation, "A night you need my company to pass/ and she not here to tell us we're alike!" (p.126). These lines convey the agony of grief through a representation of the now disrupted family dynamics: it was the mother who had to break the silence between the two men and ease the tension, and their inability to unlock that same tension now only intensifies their awareness of her absence.

Harrison's sustained effort, in the poems of Section Two, to re-examine the past and attempt to reclaim the bond with his parents, requires him to confront and express a range of emotions which he has hitherto repressed in his verse. The poet has to overcome, therefore, the fears and evasions of the masculinity which confines his father and himself in 'Book Ends I'. One of the ways in which Harrison is able to negotiate the problem of his own masculinity is through his intense retrospective meditation upon his father. In the process of seeing beyond his father's attempts to conceal emotion, Harrison discovers his own feelings. 'Long Distance I', for example, exposes the vulnerability and



need of the father after his wife's death. Unable to accept his absolute loss, the father consoles himself with the pretence that she will return, that "very soon he'd hear her key/ scrape in the rusted lock and end his grief" (p.134). In order to maintain his wife's presence in his life, therefore, he "kept her slippers warming by the gas,/ put hot water bottles her side of the bed" (p.134). He tries, however, to keep this behaviour, and these emotions, hidden—especially from the insensitive and uncompromising 'rationalism' of his son;

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

He couldn't risk my blight of disbelief... (p.134)

The phrase "still raw love" evokes the notion of the 'fresh wound' of the father's recent loss, and the intensity of the pain and vulnerability of his grief. His compulsion to hide this emotion, as if it "were such a crime", reflects his deep awareness of the authoritarian, repressive 'laws' of masculine behaviour. The word "blight" suggests the notion of the poet as a carrier of this diseased authoritarianism, which tries to wither and destroy natural emotions such as those the father is experiencing. In the final quatrain of the sonnet, though, in which Harrison meditates on his father's and mother's deaths, the poet has begun to escape the influence of this cultural "blight";

I believe life ends with death, and that is all.  
You haven't both gone shopping; just the same  
in my new black leather phone book there's your name  
and the disconnected number I still call. (p.134)

Here the first sentence expresses baldly his 'rationalist', materialist belief in mortality. At the same time, the phrase "and that is all" can be seen to reflect the masculine desire to evade the emotional consequences of the experience of loss. In the final lines, however, Harrison displays his new understanding of

the 'irrational' need to 'hold onto' or 'reach after' the dead. More importantly, he is able to acknowledge these feelings to himself: one of the recurrent features of the poems of grief in Section Two is the poet's narrative device of addressing his dead parents directly, as he examines and explores his own emotional need to have a continuing relationship with them.

These poems refuse to accept the reduction of the dead to a mere absence, but recognise and affirm the fact that, after death, the beloved remain as significant presences in our lives. In 'Timer' this affirmation struggles against the forces of material annihilation symbolised by his mother's cremation, "the fire that's hot enough/ to make (her) ashes in a standard urn" (p.167). It also strives against the 'cultural annihilation' of the dead—reflected in the anonymity of "standard urn", and in the dehumanizing indifference of the bureaucracy surrounding death;

I signed for the parcelled clothing as the son,  
the cardy, apron, pants, bra, dress—

the clerk phoned down: 6-8-8-3-1?  
*Has she still her ring on?* (Slight pause) *Yes!* (p.167)

The most striking symbol of the 'erasure' of his mother's identity is her reduction to a number. The list of her clothing, however, combines subtly contrasting associations. To begin with, the colloquial "cardy", and "apron", evoke a domestic image of the mother in the kitchen or around the house. The tone changes, though, with "pants, bra", which suggest her loss of the dignity of 'personal space' which the living possess. This notion is underlined by the significant gap in the narrative, "(Slight pause)", during which time the son is aware that a stranger is approaching and observing the body of his mother.

However the wedding ring which she is wearing symbolises the forces of continuity and love which resist both the material and cultural



'annihilation' of her identity. This opposition is highlighted in the earlier juxtaposition: "an envelope of coarse official buff/ contains your wedding ring which wouldn't burn" (p.167). It is the father who has asked the son to check that she will be wearing the wedding ring for her cremation; for the husband, the ring, "That 'eternity' inscribed with both their names is/ his surety that they'd be together, 'later'" (p.167). The symbolism attached to the ring here—of it as a representation of "eternity" and the marriage bond between Harrison's parents—informs the expression, in the closing lines, of the poet's own, more ambiguous sense of his mother's continuing presence;

It's on my warm palm now, your burnished ring!

I feel your ashes, head, arms, breasts, womb, legs,  
sift through its circle slowly, like that thing  
you used to let me watch to time the eggs. (p.167)

One of the effects of the "coarse, official" procedures described in the poem is to begin to alienate the living from the dead; to begin, that is, to erode and undermine the personal bond between Harrison and his mother. In these closing lines the evocation of the intimacy of the primal bond between mother and child opposes that denial. Harrison's vulnerability in the face of death is suggested by his assumption of a child-like persona, indicated by his 'ignorance' of the name of "that thing", the egg-timer. The fear of death implicit in the conceit of his mother's ashes passing out of time through the "ring" of "eternity" is balanced by the intimation, in the 'memory' of watching the egg-timer, of a comforting maternal presence. As well as this allusion to the consoling closeness with his mother in childhood, the associations of "breasts, womb", invoke the earlier intimacy of infancy and their pre-natal physical union. These connotations of birth and origins also connect with the final phrase, "to time the eggs", to suggest the notion of his own growth and

maturity. The "burnished ring" which the poet holds in his living, "warm palm", symbolises eternity, but also the love of his parent's marriage. Overall, the final conceit evokes and affirms the enduring love of the family bonds, but especially the mutual love of the mother and son, which survives as a continuing force within his life.

The emotional self-exploration conducted in these lines highlights the poet's emergence, in *The School of Eloquence*, from the confinement of his inherited cultural construction of maleness. The affirmations enabled by his release from this repressive masculinity can be seen to parallel the celebration of his recovered collective identity in 'On Not Being Milton', following the shedding of his identity as a transgressive 'Westerner'. In both cases of 'cultural relocation' he is freed to assert values of human connection and solidarity which oppose authoritarian denial, exclusion and division. Harrison's location of the themes of continuity and regeneration within his close examination of the bonds of family love underpins his invocation, elsewhere in the sequence, of an inclusive human identity. The urgency of his personal need to 'hold onto', to commemorate and affirm the value and importance of these ties is, implicitly, emblematic of the human need to experience and express such love. Yet the exclusions of authoritarian culture and patriarchal history—the repeated placing of the cultural Other outside of "the family circle, one continuous US" ('Illuminations II', p.147)—leads to the violence and repression which denies and destroys such expressions of human connection. The passionate intensity of Harrison's experience of grief and love, therefore, provides substance to the emotional content of the "tongues of fire", lost in history, which are referred to in 't'Ark' and 'Fire-eater'.

I have attempted in this chapter to highlight the thematic links and continuities between the personal, autobiographical poems of Section Two



and the wider political and historical concerns of the sequence. At the same time, there are also, clearly, conflicts between Harrison's cultural location of self in the northern English working-class, and the wider affiliation which he assumes in relation to the oppressed and silenced Other of patriarchal history. Whereas Harrison's expressions of solidarity with the working-class are usually framed in terms which bank on wider affiliations and connections, the working-class communal solidarity of Beeston is entangled in the exclusions and denials of authoritarian ideology. While the poet, in 'On Not Being Milton', forges continuities between the experiences of the English working-class and those of the (black) colonial Other, therefore, the 'old' working-class culture of Leeds depicted in the poems is complicit with the racism of the British Empire. The 'new', brutalized working-class culture, on the other hand, bereft of the communal values of the older tradition, is perceived to be locked even more firmly into the trap of authoritarian repression. Equally, alongside the poet's efforts to recover and affirm the bonds with his parents, there is a recognition that his education has opened unbridgable gaps between them. In 'Bringing Up', for example, Harrison recalls his mother's response to *The Loiners*;

It was a library copy, otherwise  
you'd've flung it in the fire in disgust.  
Even cremation can't have dried the eyes  
that wept for weeks about my 'sordid lust'. (p.166)

She would have liked to have committed her son's 'eloquence' ("those poems of mine that you'd like banned" (p.166)), to the flames of oblivion. The image of the mother's eyes crying after cremation highlights the poet's agonising consciousness of enduring division. He feels that this is a rift which cannot be 'healed' retrospectively.

The tension between Harrison's dual sense of connection and estrangement from his family and class pervades *The School of Eloquence*.

The sonnets are forged within the pressure of these conflicts and contradictions, and the emphasis in the sequence is upon exposing rather than resolving them. While this pressure simmers through much of *The School of Eloquence*, it explodes elsewhere; in the long poem v.



## Conclusion: v.

It has been observed how, in the verse of *The School of Eloquence*, Harrison's relocation of self enables him to begin to shed the debilitating guilt and repression of his authoritarian inheritance. The reclamation of his working-class affiliation in 'On Not Being Milton' is accompanied by a new, empowering sense of pride in his collective identity and a commitment to oppose, in his poetry, the exclusions and transgressions of patriarchal history. At the close of the last chapter, though, attention was drawn to the tensions which exist between his working-class identity and the ideal of 'universal affiliation' which can, in different guises, be seen to underlie both *The Loiners* and *The School of Eloquence*. In this conclusion I will consider the ways in which these tensions are confronted and, to an extent, negotiated, in v.

In the opening stanzas of v. Harrison's affiliation with his working-class forebears is affirmed. The working-class inheritance which he claims here, though, invokes implicitly the strength, stability and values of working-class communities of previous generations.<sup>1</sup> Harrison, like his forefathers, has a clearly defined occupation and generates a clearly defined product. He lists his own traditional occupation, "bard", alongside theirs;

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<sup>1</sup>The emphasis upon defining this inheritance in terms of the occupations or crafts of his ancestors evokes, also, the cohesion and solidarity of former working-class communities. One is reminded of a passage from *The Making of the English Working Class* in which Thompson lists the membership of one division of the London Corresponding Society: "Of the social composition of the society there need be no doubt. It was, above all, a society of artisans...The register of one division, with ninety-eight members, shows 9 watchmakers, 8 weavers, 8 tailors, 6 cabinet-makers...2 merchants, ribbon-dressers, *butchers*, hosiers, carvers, bricklayers...and one stationer, hatter, *baker*, upholsterer, locksmith..." (my italics), E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968) 170-71. Harrison's inclusion of "publican" here, though, invokes as well a less sober form of working-class solidarity.

"butcher, publican and baker, now me, bard" (p.236)<sup>2</sup>. Whereas they supplied society with bodily nourishment, he gives sustenance to the mind or the soul; "adding poetry to their beef, beer and bread" (p.236). This attempt to produce a comfortable sense of continuity might be seen to be broken, though, when he claims as two of his "peers" (p.236), "Byron...and Wordsworth" (p.236). It transpires, however, that this 'Byron' and 'Wordsworth' were, respectively, a tanner (of leather) and a "buil(der of) church organs" (p.236). Yet, of course the names also allude to the Romantic poets. The coincidence of discovering these names on gravestones near his "family plot" (p.236), therefore, enables him to maintain a dual affiliation: both sets of Wordsworths and Byrons are his "peers".

If the play on these names as a means of achieving this dual affiliation seems a little awkward and contrived, his later attempt to impose an alternative signification on the word 'UNITED' is acknowledged by the poem to be 'dishonest', "cheating";

Though I don't believe in afterlife at all  
and know it's cheating it's hard *not* to make  
a sort of furtive prayer from this skin's scrawl,  
his UNITED mean 'in Heaven' for their sake... (p.239)

Even though he "know(s) it's cheating", he makes the "furtive prayer" anyway. This compromise of his integrity is soon to be highlighted by the intervention of the skinhead voice. The skinhead also challenges the ease with which he makes his identification with the working-class. The intervention is triggered ostensibly by a small example of Harrison's linguistic cosmopolitanism, his use of "*cri-de-coeur*" (p.241). The skinhead's retort emphasises the 'bard's' alienation not just from the working-class, but from his own mother; "*Can't you*

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<sup>2</sup>The page numbers provided refer to the 1987 edition of the Penguin *Selected Poems*.



*speak/ the language that yer mam spoke*" (p.241), and, a few lines later, "*She didn't understand yer fucking 'art'!! She thought yer fucking poetry obscene!*" (p.241).

As the argument between the 'skin' and the 'skald' proceeds it can be seen that the skinhead's language, imagery and personality echo features which, in Harrison's earlier verse, have been associated with patriarchal psychology and an authoritarian construction of masculinity. His threat to the 'skald' is expressed in terms of phallic confrontation (that is, implicitly, castration); "*Ah'll boot yer fucking balls to Kingdom Come*" (p.242). The language might even be seen to undercut the skinhead by the association with an authoritarian Christianity, with the Judgment Day, "*Kingdom Come*". Although the 'skin' is intelligent and witty, he is also nihilistic. The 'skald' complains to him; "*all these Vs: against! against! against!*" (p.241). The 'skin' is not 'for' anything; he dismisses the value of the word, "*A book, yer stupid cunt, 's not worth a fuck!*" (p.242). He also attacks poetry as effeminate, "*Who needs/ yer fucking poufy words. Ah write mi own*" (p.244). The example he gives of his own work, though, is the offensive symbol of aggressive nihilism, the 'UNITED' sprayed on the headstone of Harrison's parents' grave.

The nihilistic, sexually aggressive masculinity depicted here was, in *The Loiners*, the 'diseased' selfhood which belonged to Harrison, the Loiner, and which he struggled against. In the division of identity in v., however, into 'skald' and 'skin', it is the 'skald', the poet, who represents Harrison's now pluralised, verbally and emotionally expansive selfhood. The skinhead, his doppelgänger, is now Other. This is obvious enough in view of the marginal, or framed and contained position of the skinhead voice in the poem. Harrison makes the point explicitly, though, through the reference to Arthur Rimbaud; "the skin and poet united fucking Rimbaud/ but the *autre* that *je est* is fucking



you" (p.242). The quotation from Rimbaud is slightly contorted to suit Harrison's own ends. Rimbaud writes "Je est un autre"<sup>3</sup>, 'I is an other'—it has been translated 'I is someone else'—but Harrison's splitting of the quotation makes 'an other' become 'the other'; "the *autre* that *je est*". (Harrison's version, interestingly, also makes the grammar seem incorrect, 'the other that I is', linking the Other with inarticulacy.) Rimbaud's employment of the phrase can be interpreted as signifying a distancing from the 'I' which enables a detached, self-conscious depiction of Self (in verse) in which the 'I' is able to represent a wider identity. This, of course, is Harrison's practice in *The Loiners* and *The School of Eloquence*—and Harrison's slight adaptation of the quotation, from 'an other' to 'the other', emphasises the symbolic category of the repressed, the subjugated, in this self-dramatisation. Rimbaud, he argues, was able to "unite" both the social outcast, the outsider, and the "poet" within his poetry: he was able to give expression to both sides of his identity. Yet, Harrison observes with some anguish, "the *autre* that *je est* is fucking you": how far does the poet want to give voice to the nihilistic, authoritarian masculinity that he has struggled so long to relinquish?

Harrison's use here of "the *autre*", '*the Other*', though, reinforces the identification of the skinhead as a *political Other*, a representative of the 'subjugated', 'inarticulate' working-class. There has been a shift in the poem's perception of the working-class. The skinhead's nihilism has ousted the earlier evocation of the 'craftsmen' and the "butcher, publican and baker" (p.236). The force and character of Harrison's old authoritarian selfhood has been grafted onto the voice of the contemporary, disaffected young working-class male. In

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<sup>3</sup>"For *I* is someone else...I witness the unfolding of my own thought: I watch it, listen to it: I make a stroke of the bow: the symphony begins to stir in the depths, or springs onto the stage", Arthur Rimbaud, 'Letter to Paul Demeny', *Rimbaud: Selected Verse*, ed. & trans. Oliver Bernard (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962) 9.



recoiling from his old self, therefore, Harrison also seems to withdraw, to an extent, his working-class affiliation. This is reflected in the striking statements which announce a kind of self-imposed exile from Leeds, the city which is the symbolic cultural and social centre of *The Loiners* and *The School of Eloquence*. The first expression of an emphatic 'turning his back' on Leeds occurs when he abandons his attempt to tidy his parents grave. He "throws the aerosol, the HARP can, the cleared weeds" (p.246), back onto the grave and "then turn(s) with not one glance behind, away from Leeds" (p.246). On the bus back to the train station (that "goes by routes that I don't recognise" (p.246)), he states his intention "never to return" to the city;

Home, home to my woman, never to return  
till sexton or survivor has to cram  
the bits of clinker scooped out of my urn  
down through the rose roots to my dad and mam. (p.247)

Paralleling this break with Leeds is the symbolic 'laying to rest' of the "skin half" (p.244), of his identity. After the skinhead has 'signed his work', "the UNITED sprayed where mam and dad were buried" (p.244), and is revealed as the poet's "*alter ego*" (p.248), Harrison continues; "One half of me's alive, but one half died/ when the skin half sprayed my name among the dead" (p.244). The voice of the skinhead can be seen to be related, paradoxically, to the scholarship boy, 'T.W. Harrison', who is laid to rest, in *The School of Eloquence*, in 'Them & [uz] II', "RIP T.W." (p.123). What connects them is their shared acceptance of authoritarian attitudes and values. The "ghost" of 'Ghosts: Some Words Before Breakfast', which, on one level, represented Harrison's authoritarian construction of self, can also be linked to the skinhead. v. can be interpreted, therefore, as suggesting that this "ghost" is finally "laid" (to rest). This would be too simplistic, however. Although, after he has signed his "name among the dead" (p.244), the skin seems to vanish, his



voice reappears again near the end of the poem when it yells a derisive "Wanker!" (p.248), at the poet. The force of authoritarian denial and aggression, which is still a part of his psyche, cannot be repressed or wished away but will need to be accommodated and controlled.

After the confrontation with the skin, though, Harrison turns away from this narrow, authoritarian identity to an alternative 'location of self', a new "home", which is associated repeatedly with femaleness through the refrain, "home, home to my woman" (p.247). This "home" is a place where a maleness and a femaleness can co-exist without either being repressed, where binary oppositions, "all the versuses of life" (p.238), are not hierarchical or intractable, where "opposites seem sometimes unified" (p.246). The anecdote which Harrison relates to his skin half underlines his repudiation of a repressive, authoritarian masculinity. In the anecdote the young Harrison sprays the "wobbly soprano warbling" (p.243), and the "orchestra and audience" (p.243), with the phallic fire extinguisher ("I hit the...ON knob", (p.243)). His nihilism rejects the affirmation, "an uplift beyond all reason and control" (p.243), which he finds in the singing—in art, which he perceives as female and deceptive, "a sort of prick-tease of the soul" (p.243). Now, however, the "woman" he returns "home" to is herself an opera singer, Theresa Stratas, and the couple listen together to a recording of her singing.

Towards the end of v., alongside the repeated expressions of affiliation with his new "home" (which in a sense replaces Leeds and his family bonds; "the one's we choose to love become our anchor/ when the hawser of the blood-tie's hacked, or frays" (p.248)), there is an emphasis upon wider locations of identity. The logo of the television news program which seems "in one spin/ to show all" (p.248) reminds him of the world outside his home, and especially of ongoing conflicts, "old violence and old disunity" (p.248). More



radically, there is an evocation of evolutionary origins (and the transience of life), in the imagery of coal burning in their hearth, "perished vegetation from the pit" (p.247). This reference to "the pit" alludes implicitly to the specific, local source of "old disunity" which frames the poem, the Miner's Strike of 1984, which is described earlier in the poem in the following terms;

class v. class as bitter as before,  
the unending violence of US and THEM,  
personified in 1984  
by Coal Board MacGregor and the NUM... (p.238)

In this poem, however, unlike *The School of Eloquence*, Harrison does not affiliate himself with a working-class "US", or with either side. He rises above the binary oppositions of "US and THEM" and, in a sense, sides with the 'unifier', coal. The working-class battle-cry of that time—'Victory to the Miners'—is undercut by Harrison's question, "victory?" (p.249). From his overarching perspective he affirms that the true victory is "for vast, slow, coal-creating forces/ that hew the body's seams to get the soul" (p.249).

Yet Harrison does not ignore the conflict of the "old disunity". The skinhead voice's explosive cry of "Wanker!" provokes another meditation on the word 'UNITED'. The skinhead's 'UNITED', which represents division and exclusion, (only '*Leeds* United'), becomes a symbol for the principle of authoritarian opposition. The poem relates this 'UNITED' to the poet's 'UNITED', the pun which Harrison made earlier and was presented as "cheating" (p.239). Now the aggressive intent of the skin's 'UNITED' is shown not to undermine the poet's imposed call for unity, but to validate it; "the skin's UNITED underwrites the poet,/ the measures carved below the one's above" (p.248). It is the presence of conflict and exclusion which "underwrites"—'insures the value' and the necessity, the meaningfulness, of the poet's insistence on 'universal affiliation'. In this way the destructive energies



of Harrison's 'skin half' are contained, 'written over', by the controlling poetic voice, but still acknowledged and apprehended in the verse.

The skinhead's 'UNITED', the forces of authoritarian opposition, are also 'placed' by the invocation of a perspective wider than that of patriarchal history, the "vast" perspective of "coal creating forces" (p.249). In the final two stanzas of the poem, Harrison's working-class identity and affiliation can be seen to be 'placed' in a comparable way;

If, having come this far, somebody reads  
these verses, and he/she wants to understand,  
face this grave on Beeston Hill, your back to Leeds,  
and read the chiselled epitaph I've planned:

*Beneath your feet's a poet, then a pit.  
Poetry supporter, if you're here to find  
how poems can grow from (beat you to it!) SHIT  
find the beef, the beer, the bread, then look behind.* (p.249)

The first thing to notice, though, is the return to the earlier positive representation of the working-class. The use of "SHIT" here refers to the social prejudices which he anticipates the future "poetry supporter" to possess. If the "poetry supporter" "wants to understand" Harrison's verse, and to understand how someone from his class background could produce such work, "he/she" is invited to abandon these prejudices. Therefore "he/she" must examine not just the surface of this culture, but explore it in depth, "look behind"; the reader of the epitaph must "find" what is strong and sustaining in working-class culture, "the beef, the beer, the bread". Yet "look behind" is also a literal injunction. The instructions to the reader of the epitaph are precise: "face this grave on Beeston Hill, your back to Leeds". "Look behind", therefore, is an invitation to turn around and survey the city of Leeds. The view is described earlier in the poem. It contains Leeds Grammar School and Leeds University, "the places I learned Latin and learned Greek" (p.236), and also the football "ground where



Leeds United play" (p.236): symbols of his complex and divided cultural inheritance. The epitaph therefore affirms the importance of the poet's specific, local cultural origins. It locates him firmly in Leeds.

At the same time the epitaph can be seen to contain a different (but compatible), set of references. The question of "how poems can grow from...SHIT" also involves, implicitly, a wider concern with evolution. The "pit" beneath the "poet" perhaps invokes all the millennia of 'silence' before the arrival of consciousness, the ages of "vast, slow coal-creating forces" (p.249). The "pit" also represents, though, the same vast time periods after death—for the "coal-creating forces/...hew the body's seams to get the soul" (p.249). "The beef, the beer, the bread" may be taken to signify, therefore, the materiality of human existence, the physical nourishment that enables and sustains human life. "Look behind" this immediate source of nourishment, though, and a material continuity is revealed which stretches back through evolution. This continuity, which invokes, again, the idea of 'universal affiliation', provides another explanation of how human consciousness and culture and "poems can grow from...SHIT". Finally, if the "poetry supporter" turns around to survey Leeds, he sees not only the city but a series of 'locations'; "Beeston, Leeds, West Riding, Yorkshire, England, Great Britain, Europe, The World, The Universe"<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup>Tony Harrison, interview, John Haffenden, 'Interview with Tony Harrison', *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies 1: Tony Harrison*, ed. Neil Astley (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991) 230.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

The bibliography is divided into four sections. The first lists the works by Harrison—poetry, drama, film/poems, and miscellaneous prose works—that have been read. The most important published interviews with Harrison are cited in the second. The third section lists the most significant criticism on Harrison's work that has been consulted. The fourth section lists all the other publications that have been cited in the thesis.

### 1. Works by Harrison

#### i. Poetry

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