"Clear[ing] a Space for a New Verse Drama": Harrison, Prosody, and Theatricality

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Abstract: Harrison is often presented as a hyphenated poet: poet-dramatist, poet-translator, poet-adapter, poet-librettist, poet-(stage) director who resists traditional categories. Many critics have indeed underlined Harrison's uniqueness among contemporary writers. "[U]ndoubtedly the most prolific and ambitious [of] contemporary poet-dramatists" (Morra: 209), his fascination for verse drama is the product of paradoxical influences. Thus, in his adaptations from French or Greek classics, Harrison reinterprets canonical texts as well as dramatic conventions, often walking on a tight rope between iconoclasm and elitism. If "the imitation of the great masters" (Astley: 33) has been a starting point in his career and has legitimised his use of verse on the stage, he has also imprinted his own originality in the canon, combining modernisation and traditional prosody. Far from being gratuitous, rhymes and verse are enlisted in the socio-political and cultural debates Harrison's plays generally tackle. At the core of these plays is the author's faith in an aesthetic and ideological continuum between high and low culture: Harrison's use of verse might be seen as rebellious but it also craves for social, linguistic and historical reconciliation.

Résumé : Harrison est souvent présenté comme le poète aux multiples traits d'union qui défie les catégories traditionnelles : poète-dramaturge, poète-traducteur, poète-adaptateur, poète-librettiste, ou encore poète-réalisateur ou poète-metteur en scène. De nombreux critiques ont d'ailleurs souligné sa singularité parmi les auteurs contemporains et en particulier parmi les auteurs de théâtre en vers. La fascination de Harrison pour ce genre est le fruit d'influences paradoxales. Ainsi, dans ses adaptations des classiques français ou grecs, l'auteur réinterprète les textes canoniques, ainsi que les conventions dramatiques, œuvrant souvent en funambule entre iconoclasme et élitisme. Tandis que l'imitation des anciens par le biais de la traduction lui a permis dans un

premier temps de faire ses armes et de légitimer l'emploi du vers au théâtre, Harrison a également imposé son propre style en combinant la modernisation des textes avec une prosodie traditionnelle. Les vers et les rimes ne sont pourtant jamais pur ornement formel mais sont toujours convoqués dans les débats sociopolitiques et culturels soulevés par ses pièces. L'auteur a en effet une foi inébranlable dans la complémentarité des cultures savante et populaire : si son emploi du vers au théâtre peut être perçu comme idéologiquement subversif, il se veut pourtant outil de réconciliation sociale, linguistique et historique.

Keywords: verse drama, Tony Harrison, dramatic adaptation, poet-dramatist, high and low culture

Mots-clés: théâtre en vers, Tony Harrison, adaptation dramatique, poète-dramaturge, culture savante et culture populaire

In her 2016 book entitled *Verse Drama in England*, Irene Morra considers Harrison as "undoubtedly the most prolific and ambitious [of] contemporary poet-dramatists" (209). From his first published verse play in 1966 to his last in 2017, Harrison wrote some 20 plays, exclusively in verse. His fascination for verse drama is the product of paradoxical influences. It owes as much to the "slow-burning revenge" (Astley 437) of the scholarship boy who wanted to make his mark amongst the literati as to his faith in an aesthetic and ideological continuum between the popular theatre of his childhood and Greek tragedy. Because he famously claimed "Poetry is all I write" (Astley 9), Harrison is often presented as a hyphenated poet who resists traditional categories: poet-dramatist, poet-translator, poet-adapter, poet-librettist, poet-(stage) director. His plays indeed range from the translation of the classics (Euripides, Aeschylus, Aristophanes, Molière, Racine, Hugo) to original creations in which the use of "unnatural verse" cannot be taken for granted in an age of prose (Hinchliffe 2). In this essay, I propose to explore the influences that led Harrison to consider

verse and prosody as a vital dimension of his plays. This will then allow me to analyse the development of Harrison's poetics throughout his dramatic career, from verse adaptations to original creations.

Harrison's influences and formative years

In his youth during the 1940s and 1950s, Harrison was fascinated by music hall theatre.

He particularly admired the storytelling techniques of comedians who could captivate their audience and create a feeling of shared intimacy:

> The kind of theatre I saw most often was late music hall, or 'variety', and panto, and though it was in proscenium theatres like the Empire, the fourth wall was broken down by the direct address of the comics I saw there: Norman Evans, Frank Randle, Old Mother Riley, Albert Modley, Robb Wilton, and even Laurel and Hardy live on stage (Harrison 2007: ix).

These comedians had a great influence over Harrison who considered them as his theatrical mentors. He even gratified one of them, Leon Cortez, with the title of "Professor" in the dedication of his poem "Them & [uz]" (*SP* 122), the other dedicatee, Professor Richard Hoggart, being a real academic whose seminal work on the British working-class, *The Uses of Literacy* (1962), vindicated Harrison in his crusade to reconcile popular and elitist cultures.

Deeply ingrained in the popular culture of the North of England, pantomime plays gave Harrison his first taste for verse in the theatre. At Leeds Grammar School, the young scholarship boy also discovered the classics and he developed "a voracious appetite for language", to use the words of Harold Pinter on the back cover of *Selected Poems*.[1] He later studied Latin and Greek at Leeds University, and started a doctoral dissertation on the verse translations of Virgil's *Aeneid* in the early 1960s. At the same time, translation allowed Harrison to discover international drama often performed in English for the first time, thanks to the new campus theatre. He was very active in the bustling local cultural life,[2] as a spectator, an actor, a critic, and even

an author. With Barry Cryer, he wrote successful *rag revues*, i.e. comic pieces that included music, songs and dance routines.[3] Harrison then broadened his dramatic horizons in Nigeria. Teaching English literature at Ahmadu Bello University, he grew aware of the absurdity of the colonialist education system that imposed British classics upon young Africans. He consequently set up an African literature seminar which led to a collaboration with Irish poet James Simmons, and the creation in 1965 of *Aikin Mata*, a Nigerian adaptation of Aristophanes's comedy, *Lysistrata*. In 1966, Harrison moved to Prague where he went to the theatre almost every night for a year, rediscovering the subversive potential of the classics in a context of political oppression. The following year, at the age of 29, he was the recipient of a joint Fellowship at the Universities of Durham and Newcastle, which allowed him to stop teaching and devote his whole life to writing.

Although he felt drawn towards the style and subject matter of Joyce's *Dubliners*, Harrison decided to earn a living by writing exclusively in verse. He ascribed this choice to "the whole weight of the Protestant Ethic in its death agonies, a monstrous North of England millstone grit, that made [him] pit [himself] against the most difficult traditional verse forms" (Astley 33). This was partly out of filial loyalty to his father, a baker "worn out on poor pay" (*SP* 126), partly as the result of the influence of W.B. Yeats, his spiritual father: "I learned by what Yeats called 'sedentary toil and the imitation of great masters'. I still find it almost impossibly difficult, but the difference is now that, again in the words of Yeats, 'difficulty is our plough'" (Astley 33). Nonetheless, Harrison's experience of the theatre (whether as an author in Leeds or Nigeria or as a spectator in Prague) taught him that verse should not be restricted to the printed page. On the contrary, he viewed verse as giving the theatre its highest form of eloquence.

"Sedentary toil / And […] the imitation of great masters" (Yeats 158): Harrison's adaptations

Indeed, Harrison "always had the idea that the best poetry […] was in the theatre" (Astley 237). After the critical success of his

second collection of poems, *The Loiners* (1970), which was awarded the Geoffrey Memorial Prize, Harrison was commissioned to write a verse translation of Molière's *Le Misanthrope* for the Royal National Theatre. This marked the start of a fruitful collaboration between the Royal National Theatre and the poet-translator. Irene Morra notes that today the use of verse for the adaptation of the classics is generally accepted and acclaimed. However, in the early 1970s, when Harrison took his first tentative steps on the London stage, verse drama presented two major challenges: firstly, previous translations of Molière in rhyming verse on the English stage had been received unfavourably;[4] secondly, Harrison himself was very critical of Eliot's and Fry's verse drama. Harrison therefore had to question the intrinsic *raison d'être* of Molière's rhyming verse. He concluded that it should be approached as dramatic potential.

In his own version of 1973, *The Misanthrope*, Harrison accommodated Molière's French alexandrine (12-syllable lines or hexameters) into traditional English pentameters. He gave great flexibility to this form and found a characteristic rhythm for each protagonist.

For example, Célimène's satirical repartees are conveyed by end-stopped lines that highlight the couplet rhymes:

> Am I to blame if men can't keep away?
> I'm not the one who's leading them astray.
> They're sweet. They visit. What do you suggest?
> A mounted sentry, or an entrance test? (*Plays 2*: 49)

On the contrary, Arsinoé speaks long sentences with frequent enjambments that make her sound long-winded:

> I've always thought true friendship shows up best
> and puts sincerity to the surest test
> in matters of most importance, such as things
> touching on a friend's good name, which brings
> me here in haste and genuine concern
> to do you and your honour a good turn. (*Plays 2*: 71)

Whereas some protagonists appear as dramatic types, characterised by an idiosyncratic style, Alceste's complex character is expressed by

a greater prosodic range that varies according to his different moods. The protagonist's rhythmical inflexions make him sound more natural than the others. Sometimes, enjambments subdue the rhyming couplets so that the lines sound conversational and modern; at other times, the couplet is emphasised by the end-stopped lines to create a comic epigrammatic tone for a particular speech, as in the following example: "Glittering praise can lose its brilliance / when we see it shared with half of France" (*Plays 2*: 29). Verbal contractions abound to create the impression of orality as in the following lines: "No! No! Not one right-thinking man, not one / 'd want such ten-a-penny honours done" (*Plays 2*: 29). Although "would" at the beginning of the second line would have made this line a perfect iambic pentameter, the text was finally published with the verbal contraction, thus reflecting how the line was actually spoken by the actor (Alec McCowen played Alceste in the original production of *The Misanthrope* at the Old Vic in 1973). Indeed, Harrison repeatedly explained that the stage came first, and publication of dramatic texts came second: "The 'text', as Tarkovsky said of the film script, gets 'smelted' into performance" (*Plays 4*: 197). It did not matter to him in the least if his dramatic text looked "messy on the page" as the *Times Literary Supplement* critic noted on March 16, 1973, commenting on the line "Surely I'd've thought it wouldn't've mattered" (*Plays 2*: 51). It may seem challenging for the reader to speak this line as a trochaic pentameter; however, it worked well on the stage when Célimène (alias Diana Rigg), delivered the line. The accumulation of consonants and elisions on the page only mirrored everyday common speech. The style of Harrison's *Misanthrope* is therefore characterised by a mixture of formal prosody and flexibility, thanks to the poet's natural gifts for oral language and conversational diction. *The Misanthrope* was very successful and led to other commissions for verse drama.

Two years later, Harrison again used rhyming pentameters, or heroic couplets, in his second adaptation of a French classic for the National Theatre. Unlike in *The Misanthrope*, the rhyming pentameters in

Phaedra Britannica (Harrison's version of Racine's *Phèdre*) produce a heavy, serious tone:

> My hell is India, always at high noon,
> with no relief of night, and no monsoon,
> and under that red sun's remorseless stare
> mankind's grossest secrets are laid bare. (*Plays 2*: 194)

Harrison's adaptation worked as an exegesis of Racine's text. By transferring the Greek myth to 19th century India in the British Raj, Harrison clarified mythological references and sexual tensions in a cultural context that was closer to the British public. *Phaedra Britannica* was a critical success: "together he and Miss Rigg have brought *Phaedra* back from the living death of French classical drama to an accessible theatrical reality – an achievement roughly comparable to that of animating all the statues in the Louvre", as Sheridan Morley wrote in *Punch* 1975 (quoted in Astley 194). It established Harrison's reputation in the theatre, secured him a position as resident dramatist at the National Theatre between 1977 and 1979, and ensured several international collaborations.

While this verse adaptation of Racine led to another National Theatre commission for a tragedy (Aeschylus's *Oresteia* created in 1981), Harrison concomitantly started working on a modern adaptation of the medieval Mystery plays, which gave him yet another opportunity of perfecting his verse techniques for the stage. Harrison drew on his native Yorkshire dialect to pay tribute to the Northern, vernacular origins of a genre that came to prominence towards the middle of the 14th century. Mystery plays were dramatizations of biblical episodes often produced by the cities' guilds and performed in vernacular language by craftsmen on the streets.[5] He also recreated a medieval atmosphere by resorting to an alliterative style reminiscent of Anglo-Saxon poetry:

> Ego sum alpha et omega,
> Vita, via, veritas
> Primus et novissimus.
>
> (*Fanfare*)

I am gracious and great, God withouten beginning;
I am maker unmade, all might is with me.
I am life and way unto wealth winning;
I am foremost and first; als I bid shall it be.

Since I am maker unmade, and most high in might,
And aye shall be endless, and nought is but I,
Unto my dignity dear shall duly be dight
A bliss all-abundant about me. (*Plays 1*: 11)

In Harrison's *The Mysteries*, God's Biblical Latin is rewritten into a variety of English reminiscent of the Middle English of the original text.[6] Yet, the resulting style is a hybrid of different aesthetic traditions: Anglo-Saxon alliterative poetry mixed with quatrains in alternate rhymes. In his own version, Harrison uses dialectal words (such as "als", "aye", "nought", "dight") borrowed from the Wakefield Cycle.[7] His semantic choices again show a superposition of different time periods and cultural references. Although "nought" is still in current use in Yorkshire, archaic words such as "als" (unknown origin) and "dight" (from the Old English, meaning to equip or adorn, especially for battle) contribute to creating the illusion of the medieval atmosphere. The expletive "aye" conjures up the popular theatre of Leon Cortez in the 1930s and 1940s, an idiosyncratic feature that Harrison reprised in the first line of "Them & [uz]" – αίαι, ay, ay! … stutterer Demosthenes / gob full of pebbles outshouting seas" (*SP* 122) – but only for the reader, the theatre audience probably hears it as the pronoun "I". Nonetheless, even if this is lost on the stage, the end-stopped quatrains in alternate rhymes evoke the comic atmosphere of the pantomime.

Harrison was thus more than "a Yorkshire poet who came to read the metre", as he claimed to be in the preface to *Plays 1*. He also reminded the audience and critics that verse drama was once a popular genre that fused linguistic registers and performed a social function of paramount importance. The actors were dressed as workers in overalls performing Mystery plays, and Hell was represented as a gloomy, silent space only lit by miners' lamps. Right in the middle of the Miners' Strike, in 1985, the reference to Thatcher's industrial policies

needed no commentary. Another, more subtle way of stepping into the political arena relied on a juxtaposition between the sacred and the profane, poetry and the demotic. Indeed, Harrison made creative use of a form borrowed from the Wakefield pageants, consisting of four lines rhyming together with an additional rhyme at the hemistich (ab ab ab ab), followed by five lines rhyming cdddc:

> GOD
> I repent full sore that ever I made man;
> By me he sets no store, and I am his sovereign.
> I will destroy therefore both beast, man and woman:
> All shall perish, less and more. Their bargain may they ban
> That ill did do.
> On earth I see right nought
> But sin that is unsought;
> Of those that well ha' wrought
> Find I but a few. (*Plays 1*: 32)

The apparent restrictive constraints of this form paradoxically allowed for some flexibility as the rhyme scheme was also distributed over the speeches of several protagonists. Harrison even inserted Latin and made it rhyme with English. This exacting verse form was coupled with a sung interlude for Noah's tableau using Bob Dylan's "When My Ship Comes In". Thus, Harrison proved that the national dramatic tradition had once accommodated vernacular language and popular culture on an equal footing with poetry and the sacred. *The Mysteries* ironically circumvented the limitations usually associated with verse drama, according to Irene Morra:

> [Verse plays] also implicitly liberate the modern poet-dramatist from any direct engagement with the social, political and aesthetic expectations of the contemporary naturalist stage. […] In adapting or invoking earlier dramatic traditions, today's mainstream verse dramatists are more likely to eschew such settings entirely – along with their social connotations – in favour of dramatic forms and traditions whose "natural" nonrealism mirrors that of poetry itself. (204-205)

To a certain extent, Harrison managed to combine his rejection of naturalism with his social, political and aesthetic agenda.

As a dramatist, Harrison foregrounds the performance as a privileged medium of communication between actors and audience. Regardless of the distinction between verse and prose, Harrison eschews naturalistic drama and the fourth wall. In his essay "Fire & Poetry", he comes close to formulating his definition of theatricality as "a live exchange" between actors and public:

> When I first saw a play in a proscenium theatre like the old Theatre Royal in Leeds, with actors only addressing each other and pouring drinks and smoking cigarettes, I felt bored and excluded. But I could enter the realism of cinema because it was not a live exchange. The actors didn't know I was there. (2007: ix)

In "Egil and Eagle-Bark", his introduction to the text of *The Oresteia*, Harrison elaborates on his conception of theatricality:

> One of the things that attracted me to the Olivier space was that it was inhospitable to the clichés of naturalistic drama that have become the norm on TV and in most theatrically anaemic modern drama. It seemed a space ready for poetry, a verse drama that was public and presentational and owed nothing to that of T. S. Eliot, who, perhaps apart from *Murder in the Cathedral*, forced verse theatre into anorexia in order to squeeze it into the proscenium drawing-room, and made it so discreet and well bred in its metrical gentility you wondered why it bothered to go public at all. (*Plays 4*, 3-4)

For Harrison, the vitality of drama lies in its ability to communicate directly with the audience. Otherwise, its theatricality is weakened ("anaemic", "anorexia"), its "public" dimension denied by the pretence that the audience is eavesdropping on a "drawing-room" scene. In this definition, Harrison implicitly associates "naturalistic drama" with prose, and "verse drama" with theatricality. Besides, "naturalistic" and "theatrical" are mutually exclusive. However, verse alone does not guarantee theatricality. Further on in his essay, Harrison becomes more specific: "In the unashamed coupling of 'high' and 'low' the theatrical poet finds his most persuasive voice" (*Plays 4*: 5). The emphasis is no longer on "verse" but on "theatricality". The focus shifts from form to effect: theatricality is something to be achieved, verse only a possible medium. By defining himself as a "theatrical poet" rather

than a verse dramatist, he reiterates this idea: verse is but a medium, a mere form that can be used without necessarily achieving aesthetic value. Likewise, the dramatist writes for the stage, but his/her text may not necessarily be theatrical. By contrast, the "theatrical poet" would be, according to Harrison, the *poiētēs* (ποιητής) or maker of theatricality. Although Harrison's definition remains vague, it points into two directions: Greek tragedy and Shakespeare (as the paragon of "the unashamed coupling of 'high' and 'low'") in whose plays the use of verse is rarely accused of being "naturally unrealistic" to paraphrase Irene Morra's words (quoted above).

Verse on the stage becomes "naturally unrealistic" only when it strays from natural speech. Everyday conversation provides numerous examples showing that verse can be as realistic as prose. As the persona ironically notes in "Confessional Poetry":

> *But your father was a simple working man,*
> they'll say, *and didn't speak in those full rhymes.*
> *His words* when *they came would scarcely scan.*
>
> Mi dad's did scan, like yours do, many times! (*SP* 128)

Here, the use of italics signals the presence of ordinary (prose) language. The spoken words are incorporated into the poet's own verse so that his voice, in Roman type, is almost superseded by natural speech. The ordinary language in italics is representative of the verse praised by John Dennis as "nearer to common use, […] more fit for action and dialogue. Such verse we make when we are writing prose; we make such verse in common conversation" (Southern 307). Incidentally, John Dennis was describing Shakespeare's blank verse and praising it for what Harrison would call its "built-in *performability*" (Astley 444). So, when Harrison adapts Molière, Racine, or the medieval Mystery Plays, he "invoke[s] earlier dramatic tradition" in which the use of verse was no less "natural" than prose (Morra 204-205). Like Molière and Shakespeare, Harrison embraces the "direct engagement with the social, political and aesthetic expectations", giving the lie to the general assumption that "nonrealism mirrors that of poetry itself" (ibid.).

Harrison, theatricality and metadrama

At the same time as he was working on *The Mysteries*, he used alliterative verse and Northern voices for a very different production, also commissioned by the National Theatre: a version of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*. Working from the original Greek text, Harrison noted that Aeschylus's Greek was highly alliterative. Thus, the style he had developed for *The Mysteries* seemed well suited for a modern rendition of Aeschylus in English. Moreover, the short vowels and percussive consonants of the Northern dialect proved to be the appropriate medium to convey speech clearly through the tragic masks that director Peter Hall intended for the performance. During workshops, the actors and director noticed that the masks designed by Jocelyn Herbert and worn by actors on the stage tended to blur the words. Vowels especially resonated too much behind the masks, whereas consonants helped the words reach the audience clearly. With its strong aspiration of plosives and many shortened vowels (compared to Received Pronunciation), the accent of Northerners allowed the text to sound distinctly through the masks:

> The clans and the clanchiefs clamour for sea-calm
> The god-sop that gets it makes their guts sicken
> The cure for the stormblast makes strong men craven (*Plays 2*: 47)[8]

Here, the [æ] that chimes after the consonantal cluster in "clan", "clanchiefs", and "clamour" is also heard in "calm", and "blast" when spoken with the Yorkshire accent in which the trap-bath split does not exist. The blank space separating the lines into two parts stands for the silent break in the actors' delivery (made necessary for the intelligibility of the text through the mask). Each line is rhythmically marked by strong alliterative consonantal clusters (2+2 beats). The possibilities of phonemic repetitions are multiplied by the frequent use of hyphenated words and compounds, a device Harrison borrowed from Robert Browning's translation (*Agamemnon*, 1877), as it is in keeping with the structure of the Greek original. Harrison's choice of diction results in a very rhythmic text that is close to oratorio, half-way between spoken speech and singing. Indeed, it was accompanied by music

composed by Harrison Birtwistle for percussions, wood instruments, and the harp, and performed at 92 beats per minute. The use of an isochronic beat (each beat has the same duration, regardless of the number of unstressed syllables it contains) stands for the irresistible motion of tragedy. Clearly, this type of delivery takes away any impression of natural conversation, and Harrison's verse does not claim to be naturalistic in effect. On the contrary, it is highly stylised, like the actors' choreographed movements.

In his definition of *The Oresteia* as "a rhythmic libretto" (Harrison 1986: 187), Harrison underlines the theatrical dimension of his version, its performability. To understand the impact of Harrison's strong, relentless verse on the stage, one may compare it with MacNeice's version:

> But the money-changer War, changer of bodies,
> Holding his balance in the battle
> Home from Troy reined by fire
> Sends back to friends the dust
> That is heavy with tears, stowing
> A man's worth of ashes
> In an easily handled jar.
> And they wail speaking well of the men how that one
> Was expert in battle, and one fell well in the carnage –
> But for another man's wife.
> Muffled and muttered words;
> And resentful grief creeps up against the sons
> Of Atreus and their cause.
> But others there by the wall
> Entombed on Trojan ground
> Lie, handsome of limb,
> Holding and hidden in enemy soil. (MacNeice: 27)

MacNeice's verse translation in modern English is very close to Aeschylus's text. There are alliterations reminiscent of Aeschylus's style. The elaborate syntax (with an accumulation of clauses that delay the delivery of information for the spectator) make it, however, a literary

translation rather than a theatrical one. Its style is narrative rather than theatrical. Harrison's version of the same passage is very different:

> Geldshark Ares god of War
> broker of men's bodies
> usurer of living flesh
> corpse-trafficker that god is –
>
> give to WAR your men's fleshgold
> and what are your returns?
> kilos of cold clinker packed
> in army-issue urns
>
> wives mothers sisters each one scans
> the dogtags on the amphorae
> which grey ashes are my man's?
> they sift the jumbled names and cry:
>
> *my husband sacrificed his life*
> *my brother's a battle martyr*
> *aye, for someone else's wife –*
> *Helen, whore of Sparta!*
>
> whisper mutter belly-aching
> the people's beef and bile: *this war's*
> *been Agamemnon's our clanchief's making,*
> *the sons of Atreus and their 'cause'.*
>
> Where's my father husband boy?
> where do all our loved ones lie?
> six feet under near the Troy
> they died to occupy. (*Plays 4*, 54-5)

These words call for a direct audience to whom they must be spoken, almost thrown at. They are the collective voice of the chorus. Here, the speech starts with the energetic reiteration of the apostrophe (four lines, four different definitions of Ares). This is followed by rhetorical questions and the insertion of reported speech to suggest female confusion and despair. Moreover, the many blank spaces and dashes in the text function as rhythmical annotations guiding the actor's delivery, while the use of italics indicate a change of tone or

voice. Harrison's text is less rewarding for the reader than MacNeice's since it requires public performance. This extract was however published in 1981 as "The Ballad of the Geldshark" and later included in *Selected Poems* (104) as one of the three ballads of "The Bonebard Ballads", positioned just before Harrison's major sequence of sonnets. This illustrates the impact working in the theatre had for Harrison, allowing him to find a dramatic language to use in his poetry for the page. This extract announces the heteroglossic combination of Roman characters and italics, so crucial in the sonnets. In Harrison's version of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, the text's raw energy itself becomes meaningful, so that the prosody participates in the play's message, i.e. the critique of patriarchal society. The play was performed by an all-male company. Originally, Harrison had thought of dividing the audience between men and women in order to exacerbate the tragedy's tensions, but the idea was later abandoned. However, he invited many feminist groups to debate with the actors during workshops. Irene Morra opposes Harrison's apparent formal conservatism to the progressive content voiced in his plays "where – as in Jane Arden's play[9] – the contemporary presence of Furies, masks and choruses could be associated as much with social argumentation and political statement as could the more naturalist tirades of the Angry Young Men" (Morra 205-206). I would add that, by foregrounding the verse form in *The Oresteia*, Harrison makes it the locus of socio-political and aesthetic debates.

For Harrison, verse is the very embodiment of the tragic principle. It is as if he endowed the verse form with cratylic potential: the prosody conjures up the relentless motion of the play towards the tragic peripeteia. It suggests, or even signifies, the sense of tragic inexorability. Paradoxically, the other crucial function of verse is to conjure up the heartbeat, the sense of life and hope overcoming despair at the end of the tragedy. Verse should help the imagination (of the poet and the audience) cope with horrors (on the stage and in real life). This is Harrison's radical reaffirmation of the necessity of poetry after the Holocaust.

When Harrison later moved away from the translation of the classics (in which the use of verse is generally accepted and acclaimed) to the creation of original modern verse plays (in which verse is not historically legitimised and is consequently greeted less favourably), the idea that verse encapsulated the life instinct remained strong with him. In *Square Rounds*, a verse play about the development of military weapons throughout the 20th century, Harrison combined verse pantomime and magic with a tragic theme. He felt justified to use verse because one of the main protagonists, Hudson Maxim, was in real life a poetry enthusiast.[10] Besides, at the Imperial War Museum in London, Harrison discovered an advertisement in verse singing the praises of a new machine gun invented by Mikhail Kalashnikov. Then, an article from the *New York Post* dated March 18, 1981 mentioned Luciano Pavarotti's attributing his sense of rhythm to the sound of automatic weapons in his childhood. This led Harrison to the conclusion that "Meter, rhythm and ballistics seemed ineluctably bonded" (*Plays 5*: 157-8).

In *Square Rounds*, verse is used to create pathos. Its rhythms denote the coughing of World War I soldiers, as well as the fire of machine guns:

> He invented an inhaler hailed (pun! pun!)
> though never quite as much as was his gun,
> by Harley Street, and inhaled by those who'd been
> gassed at Ypres by lung-ravishing chlorine. (*Plays 5*: 159)[11]

The alliterations and consonances in [h] echo the protagonist's struggle for breath, and, more generally, that of World War I veterans. The self-referential mention of the wordplay on "inhaler" / "hailed" at the end of the first line brings together the comic ("(pun! pun!)") and the tragic (sound of machine guns, evocation of the ravages caused by gas in the trenches). Black humour is also present in the rhyme ("pun" / "gun"). The meter alternates trochaic and iambic lines. The trochees of lines 1 and 4 that seem to jar against the iambs of lines 2 and 3 also evoke the puffing delivery of the gassed soldier. I would argue that such prosodic gesticulations draw the attention to the verse form. It is

as if the verse form itself was centre-stage. In fact, this is announced right at the beginning of the play in a metadramatic prologue:

> HUDSON
> Just to show you that versified speech
> is within every competent man's reach
> I shall address the audience, impromptu,
> in poetry the entire night through. (*Plays 5*: 157)

As in his feature-length film *Prometheus* (1998), verse is both a medium and the subject of *Square Rounds*. It participates in the play's metatheatrical dimension.

Sometimes, it seems that the metatheatrical dimension takes over the progress of the plot. In such instances, the dramatic action is suspended while the protagonists discuss aesthetic form. Although such verbal duels make for comic interludes that defuse the play's tragic tension, they nevertheless bring forth ethical questions. When Fritz Haber, the German scientist who was instrumental in helping the Nazis build their bombing arsenal, insists on everyone having to "obey the rules", there emerges an ambiguous metaphor bringing art (here the versified form of the play) and totalitarianism together. Although spectators may admire Sweeper Mawes' witty repartees, they may feel uncomfortable with his idiom when he claims that "No *Bosch* defeats heirs of Byron and Keats" (my italics):

> SWEEPER MAWES
> Just cos' my bronchia get wonkier and wonkier
> don't think that I can't recite.
> For a poetical scrap you've picked the right chap…
> Once I've got enough wind for the fight.
>
> No Bosch defeats heirs of Byron and Keats
> Shakespeare makes us all Prosperos.
> So square up for rounds of metrical sounds –
> How about that? That's not prose! (*Plays 5*: 186-187)

Paradoxically, in these apparently light, comic interludes that foreground form rather than content, Harrison raises serious socio-political issues. As in the rest of his works, he questions cultural prejudice.

Obsessed with what he perceives as a division between popular and elitist culture in contemporary arts, Harrison seeks to reconcile different cultural traditions in *Square Rounds*. He plays with language and images, like the conjurer on the stage: the role of Sweeper Mawes was performed by Arturo Brachetti in the original 1995 National Theatre production. Rhymes and rhythm are reminiscent of the almost naïve simplicity of nursery rhymes while biographical anecdotes tragically collide with history. In his reply to Fritz Haber (quoted above), Sweeper Mawes complies with the stylistic requirements of the play and devises one of the meters that dominate *Square Rounds*. It is a quatrain rhyming abcb where an internal rhyme on the first and third lines makes the stanza sound like a sestet rhyming aabccb. This intricate rhyming scheme is recited isochronically, i.e. with a regular beat, regardless of the number of unstressed syllables. This makes the verse form very conspicuous, unlike natural conversation. For Harrison, this is a major advantage in a tragedy: verse is cathartic. It maintains a distance between the audience and the disturbing content of the play. Furthermore, verse and its relentless beat throughout the play embody the heartbeat, the life instinct that carries the audience across the tragedy being performed, as well as across the tragedies of our own age that the play echoes. Therefore, verse becomes more than an aesthetic peculiarity; it is granted metaphysical significance because, for Harrison, writing and dramatic performance especially are means of resisting nihilism and entropy. Indeed, Harrison has an acute awareness of the transience of the theatrical performance, as opposed to the cinema: "Theatre can only celebrate its presented moments by embracing its own ephemerality. In that is the glory of performance" (*Plays 4*: 187). For him, the regular beat of the verse on the stage is in itself an affirmation of the triumph of life over death and tyranny. In his attempt to create "a new poetic theatre" (*Plays 5*: 170), however, Harrison disconcerted the audience. The baroque style resulting from the mixture of magic, music hall comedy, song, tragic chorus and metadrama in *Square Rounds* proved too exuberant and the play faced hostile reviews.

"[V]ery much his own man in contemporary British poetry, having little in common with any recognizable school or movement" (Riggs 443), Harrison reinterprets canonical dramatic texts as well as dramatic conventions, often walking on a tight-rope between iconoclasm and elitism. Amongst contemporary verse dramatists, "Harrison is relatively alone […] in his critique and creative engagement with a diversity of poetic forms and traditions" (Morra 210). If "the imitation of the great masters" (Astley 33) was a starting point in his career as a playwright and legitimised his use of verse on the stage, he imprinted his own originality in the canon, combining modernisation and traditional prosody. Far from being gratuitous, rhymes and verse are enlisted in the socio-political and cultural debates Harrison's plays generally tackle. The very use of verse in an age of prose draws attention to the ideological nature of language. Harrison's verse may be seen as rebellious, but it also calls for social, linguistic and historical reconciliation. Although his plays often defy categorisation, Harrison has nonetheless paved the way for other artists, such as Glyn Maxwell, who are willing to embrace verse drama on the contemporary stage.

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1 Throughout this article, Harrison's *Selected Poems* is referred to as *SP*, *Plays. Volume 1* as *Plays 1*, *Plays. Volume 2* as *Plays 2*, *Plays. Volume 4* as *Plays 4*, and *Plays. Volume 5* as *Plays 5*.

2 Romana Huk has termed this period "The Leeds Renaissance" (Astley 75-83) due to the flourishing of the arts in this industrial working-class Northern city.

3 In fact, they were so successful that Barry Cryer (who later became a script-writer for comic duo Morecambe and Wise) invited Harrison to do stand-up comedy with him.

4 In his introduction "Molière Nationalised", Harrison notably alludes to a review of the Royal National Theatre's production of *Tartuffe* in 1968 which claimed that "Molière rarely works in English" (*Plays 2*: 6).

[5] Originally, clergymen performed biblical episodes in Latin but they supported the performance of Mystery plays in everyday English.

[6] Of course, all this was spoken in a broad Yorkshire accent.

[7] Of the different cycles of Mystery plays that have survived, the York cycle is one of the longest and most exhaustive, consisting of 48 plays. The Wakefield cycle (also known as Towneley) could be an earlier version of the York cycle with which it has some plays in common. It is mostly known for its six plays written in Yorkshire dialect in a highly elaborate rhyming style that Harrison chose to reproduce.

[8] I have underlined the stressed syllables.

[9] Irene Morra here refers to Jane Arden's play, *Vagina Rex and the Gas Oven*, 1969.

[10] Hudson Maxim is the author of two books: *The Science of Poetry* (1940) in which he criticises the pacifism, sentimentalism and lack of scientific culture of poets, and *Hudson Maxim: Reminiscences and Comments* (1924) in which he reveals his interest in poetry. His brother, Sir Hiram Maxim, is the inventor of the "Maxim Gun" (a type of machine gun).

[11] These lines are quoted in the introduction to the play in the Faber edition but they are omitted from the published play.