



## GRAAT On-Line issue # 17

### **Tony Harrison's *V.* and the Miners' Strike**

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This paper analyses Tony Harrison's poem *V.* within the context of the Miners' Strike (1984-85). We first give a brief outline of the history of the strike and then proceed to analyse the poem with particular regard to antagonisms (the primary significance of "*V.*" is "Versus") expressed through two voices: Harrison's cultured, poetic voice and his alter ego, a foul-mouthed skinhead. Second, we analyse Graham Sykes's atmospheric photographs that accompany the text and show how these enrich the reader's interpretation of the poem. We will proceed to look at images of surface and depth: the surface of the skin and the depth of the mine, which will have implications for the depth of culture he has "made mine". And we conclude with Harrison's achievement in re-appropriating the word "United" –scrawled on his parents' grave by the Leeds United skinhead –but recovered by the poet to refer to his hope for a united society, a united country, and above all his own united relationship with his partner, in the face of Thatcher's onslaught and abandonment of the Miners' society. In genre the poem is an elegy and the union is achieved on his return home after a final visit to his parents' grave.

*V.* was first published in *LRB* and subsequently appeared in book form, with the addition of photographs, published by Bloodaxe, in 1985. The poem has four movements: the first 15 pages deal with the graveyard and the pit, the history of the mines and his family in the past, contrasted with

vandalism in the present; the centre of the poem (pp. 15-21) is a confrontational dialogue with an imagined skin-head vandal, which ends with Harrison's identification with the skinhead; the third movement (pp. 21-33) is a return from the graveyard to be re-united, home with his "woman"; and the final *envoi* (pp. 35-36) introduces the poet's own witty epitaph.

Harrison is an unusual figure in British Poetry: a working class boy from Leeds, who studied classics and thus gained access to a sophisticated world and its language. A poet who has achieved fame in the theatre and television for his translations of the classics, and performances of poems such as *V.* which express working-class hostility to the establishment. However, the very poetic abilities with which he expresses the working-class voice are, in fact, that which excludes him from his roots. His poetry is oral: his "work insists that it is speech rather than page-bound silence" (Hamilton, p. 215), an orality perhaps gained from Greek and Latin classical literature, and also from his frequent use of dialect. His poetry invariably employs classic forms of rhyme and rhythm; and his classic forms, combined with dialect and politically engaged subject matter, make his voice distinctive; and perhaps this combination has also kept him aloof from the poetic establishment, so that, for example, he is excluded from Hulse's influential anthology entitled *New Poetry*.

The paradox in Harrison's character, expressed in the poem, is mirrored in the macrocosm of the political events that inspired *V.* For example one may see a similar paradox in Margaret Thatcher, who emerged from the same class as Harrison's tradespeople ancestors, and someone who promulgated Victorian values of hard work, self-sufficiency and family, but who also embraced big business methods and liberal, capitalist economics. In contrast, the striking miners, portrayed as Marxists by Thatcher's government, were, in fact, expressing the traditional values of their own community: "the strike was a deeply conservative defence 'of the known against the unknown, the local and the familiar against the remote and the gigantesque'" (cited in Edgar, p. 19).

Harrison's *V.* reflects the rage and bitterness of the manufacturing North against the onslaughts of Thatcherism particularly seen in the Miners' Strike. Indeed, the epigraph to the poem is a statement taken from the miners' leader, Arthur Scargill: "My father still reads the dictionary every day. He says your life depends on your power to master words." As Corcoran writes: "The poem is a central document of the remnants of the industrial working-class North of England in the mid-1980s [. . .]" (Corcoran, *EP*, p. 162).

Recently released cabinet papers show that in September 1983, the Thatcher government was drawing up plans to enlist the army to quell an anticipated strike by the miners, and break, once and for all, the National Union of Miners (NUM). Thatcher's visceral distrust, and her ignorance of the history and value of the Unions, motivated this confrontational approach. With the lessons of the failure of the 1971 Industrial Relations Act, Work to Rule by the NUM (1973-74), the debacle of the Heath Government's "Three Day Week" (1974) and "The Winter of Discontent" of the Callaghan Government (1978-79) clearly in mind, the Thatcher Government planned ahead to massively stockpile Coal, in order to avoid another crisis.<sup>1</sup> Keith Joseph's papers contain a confidential annex to the Final Report of the Nationalized Industries Policies Group: "We should seek to operate with maximum quantity of stocks possible, particularly at power stations . . . [and] make such contingent plans as we can to import coal at short notice."<sup>2</sup> Although her government found itself in a critical position, in the end Thatcher did *not* mobilize the army, because it would have been a public relations disaster. However, the behaviour of the police, with its newly instituted command centre, the connivance of the National Coal Board (NCB), led by Ian MacGregor, and the dissimulation of Margaret Thatcher, created scars that have still not been healed thirty years later. Young writes that: "In the record of Margaret Thatcher, therefore, the miners' strike of 1984-5 is an episode which reveals certain dual capacities." On the one side relishing the struggle with the miners, on the other dissembling that the government were merely spectators of MacGregor's management of the NCB, whereas in fact

the government was extremely interventionist. (Young, p. 369). And of course we remember that Macgregor had been specifically recruited from British Steel by Thatcher to head the NCB to break the power of the NUM and crush any strikes. While Thatcher delighted in MacGregor's abrasive tactics, "the only man who is my equal" (Young, p. 369), he was a poor communicator with the media. However, his shortcomings in this regard were amply compensated for by the minister in charge of the operation, Peter Walker - the one political survivor from Heath's government and a cunning manipulator of the media. Walker had been primed by Thatcher to expect a strike, orchestrated by Scargill, to achieve his "Marxist objectives" (Milne, p. 15).

It has been argued that some of what Thatcher achieved during the 1980s was necessary, but few would now defend the methods she used to achieve her ends. We need to summarize, briefly, the main events and protagonists of the strike in order to contextualize Harrison's antagonisms in *V*. The strike began in response to the NCB's intention to cut national coal production by 4 million tonnes; to close 20 pits with a loss of 20,000 jobs. The announcement of the closure of 20 pits, which precipitated the strike, masked the plan to close-down 75 pits, as Scargill always claimed; a claim which has since been corroborated by the release of Cabinet papers in January 2014 (Edgar, p. 19). The apparent contradiction between stockpiling coal, while simultaneously cutting the number of mines and miners' jobs is reconciled by understanding that the Government's short term aim was to ensure electricity supply and break the strike, while its long term aim was to make the industry more productive and comprehensively crush the NUM. The NUM was, eventually, beaten but only at the cost of placing control of energy supply in the hands of a few multinationals, and increasing the price of electricity by one third. The strike spread from its Yorkshire heartland, and was supported by miners in Wales and Nottingham,<sup>3</sup> by the dockers, by Fleet street Print Workers who refused to typeset the *Sun's* story of a doctored photograph of Scargill apparently giving a Nazi salute under the headline "Mine Führer"<sup>4</sup>, but above all by Women's Action Groups, who were there till the bitter end,

and indeed marched behind the miners' banners on their eventual return to work. The women's groups, allied to the Greenham Common protestors, were politicized and emancipated by the miners' strike: "no longer standing behind their menfolk, but beside them" (Edgar, p. 19). The twelve-month strike by the NUM, ended in failure, with the NUM split and having lost most of its power, but the pride of the miners was unbroken. The strike was the longest and most bitterly fought since 1926, but the battle formed only part of Thatcher's strategy to break the power of the Unions, which she achieved by seizing their fighting funds, and also through various judicial manoeuvres (Kavanagh, 236-37).<sup>5</sup> Peter Heathfield described the strike as "the most courageous and principled struggle in British Trade Union History."<sup>6</sup> Throughout the strike, the behaviour of the Police, particularly the Metropolitan Police (known as the Banana Squad, since they were bent and yellow) was particularly brutal. Specifically the Battle of Orgreave<sup>7</sup> and the Battle at the Coking Plant of Rotherham (to which Harrison refers directly, p. 31), where the police attacked the miners, but the BBC reversed the footage of the sequence of events to suggest that it was the miners who had first attacked the police—hardly the BBC's finest hour.

This paper is concerned, then, with Harrison's reaction to the Miners' strike; a reaction, which is inscribed within an elegy for his parents, for himself, and for a lost society. However, we should remind ourselves that Harrison, here and elsewhere, is a polemicist: he sees the past nostalgically and perhaps exaggerates the idea of a unified working-class society—although, of course, that does not invalidate his argument, nor the power of his sense of loss. Pain and repugnance of Thatcher's treatment of the miners was expressed even by Tory grandees such as Harold Macmillan who, in his inaugural speech to The House of Lords, commented on: "this terrible strike of the best men in the world" (Gouiffès, p. 327).

The poem's title *V.* enables the reader, from first engagement with the text, to perceive the antagonistic quality of the poem. The sign "V" is polysemic; it may be interpreted in many ways: Versus, and Verses, The NCB

vs the NUM, North vs South, Ulster vs Eire, Employed vs Unemployed, Educated vs Uneducated, Churchill's "V for Victory" sign in the Second World War, Past vs Present, and no doubt many more.<sup>8</sup> Harrison writes that during the war he too "helped whitewash a V on a brick wall." (p. 6). He goes on to enumerate some other "Vs" incorporated in the poem:

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

class v. class as bitter as before,  
the unending violence of US and THEM,  
personified in 1984  
by Coal Board MacGregor and the NUM,

Hindu/Sikh, soul/body, heart v. mind,  
East/West, male/female, and the ground  
these fixtures are fought out on's Man, resigned  
to hope from his future what his past never found. (p. 6)

Harrison places the date where its significance cannot be missed, at the end of the line, and allows the irony of "1984" to speak for itself: Orwell's prophetic portrayal of totalitarian oppression is manifest in the brutality of the police faced with a striking proletariat. As the last two lines above indicate, in general the sign "V" might be summarized, socio-economically, under "The Condition of England Question", with the whole history of Disraeli and Carlyle behind that question, and with the knowledge that little has been achieved in terms of equality. (Though it could be argued that Thatcher's Government was less discriminatory than the present Conservative Cameron Government, which is unapologetically elitist to the extent that even Michael Gove, the Minister for Education, has commented on the "preposterous number" of old Etonians in Cameron's inner cabinet).<sup>9</sup> As the poem is one of

confrontation, so Harrison in this and other poems is in confrontation with himself, an ambivalence that is unsatisfactorily worked out in *V*. In terms of confrontation, the poem reflects the traditional theme of the British Class system expressed in the different voices and language codes each class speaks. To articulate his divided self, Harrison employs two voices: an imagined, foul-mouthed, skinhead vandal in a confrontational dialogue with an educated, poetic voice. The doppelgängers reflect the fact that “language in Tony Harrison is the site of class struggle” (Corcoran, *EP 1940*, p. 159), or, as Eagleton has said: Harrison is a “natural Bakhtinian” (cited in Corcoran, *EP 1940*, p. 161). One might also see the creation of two voices as reflecting the classical dialectic form of *Hic et Ille*, or the Latin “Disputations” from the *Trivium*, but above all the voices emerge from Harrison’s interest in drama and his life-long dramatization of himself.

The split in the poet’s voice reflects the master image of the poem; that which is above ground and that which is below. Harrison’s visit to his parents’ grave, which he predicts will eventually be his own, finds that the graveyard is built over an abandoned, worked out mine. The land is subsiding, the graves and obelisks tilt and list, and there are shifts below the surface. The images of depth, instability, coal (which fuels the fire in Harrison’s home at the end of the poem), the way in which the Leeds area above ground is abandoned like the mine below, are abundant. What can also be understood from images of surface and depth is the questioning of identity. Harrison does not fear the grave, but he does fear “that great worked-out black hollow under mine” (p. 23). The pun on the word “mine” (possession and pit) together with the further pun in “undermine”<sup>10</sup> (to sabotage) brings drama into the question of who the poet is, and that question of identity carries with it guilt, as he finds he is neither one thing nor another. He is both a skin-deep, skinhead from Leeds and an educated poet who left Leeds, (although he learned classics “where Leeds United play”, p. 3); a man who refers to himself with deliberate self-irony as “bard” within the company of his tradesmen ancestors, butcher, publican and baker; a man who does *not*

tend the grave of his parents, though he expects to be buried with them. While his ancestors all had occupations, in contrast Harrison's skinhead voice wittily imagines what he will say when he arrives at heaven's gate:

*If mi mam's up there, don't want to meet 'er  
listening to me list mi dirty deeds,  
and 'ave to pipe up to St fucking Peter  
ah've been on t'dole all me life in fucking Leeds!*

*Then t'Alleluias stick in t'angels' gobs.  
When dole-wallahs fuck off to the void  
what'll t'mason carve up for their jobs?  
The cunts who lieth 'ere wor unemployed? (p. 16)*

When the skinhead aerosolls his name "Harrison" on his parents' grave the poet reports that one half of him is alive, but one half died: "Half versus half, the enemies within / the heart that can't be whole till they unite" (p. 21).<sup>11</sup>

V. is an elegy that contains a vestigial epithalamium, seen in repeated images of hawthorn blossom and soccer-playing boys singing "Here comes the bride" (pp. 9, 21, 23) which predict his return, "united" home with his partner, thus rescuing the word from the vandal. Harrison repeatedly refers to his partner as "my woman", a possessive phrase that sits awkwardly within the context of the poem.<sup>12</sup> The poem is rigorously structured of 112 quatrains (at 448 lines, comparable to *The Waste Land* in length), rhyming ABAB, mostly end-stressed on a monosyllable (thus achieving a sense of exaggerated closure), with a rhythm varied between iambic and trochaic, with frequent use of spondee, and with a varied stress pattern, within the line, between 4 to 6.<sup>13</sup> Spread over 36 pages, the poem is intercalated with 14 grainy, black and white photographs by Graham Sykes, all of which are printed on the verso page (apart from the double frontispiece).

The photographs play a key part in the reader's response to this poem and it is surprising that there has been little, if any, analysis of them in



criticism of the poem. The photographs are unmediated by any titles. Their subject matter is Harrison's parents' vandalized graveyard, the surrounding, depressed, townscape of Beeston, a suburb of Leeds, and the confrontation of police and miners.<sup>14</sup> The contract is established from the very beginning, before the reader has read a word beyond the title, the front and back covers show the snow-covered graveyard, with the lights of the football pitch below, like multiple moons. The first two pages within are composed of a double frontispiece: the left shows two mounted policemen who dwarf, on the right, a few striking miners in civilian clothes, holding the union newspaper. In general the relationship between text and photographs is direct: in photograph 8 (p. 22), an old, turbaned, Sikh walks with the aid of a stick slowly past a row of terraced houses, over the next page the text reads: "A pensioner in turban taps his stick / along the pavement past the corner shop" (p. 25); a photograph (N° 11) of a derelict Methodist church with an advertisement for "Rubber Products (Leeds) Ltd" predicts the line, on the opposite page: "on both Methodist and C of E billboards" (pp. 28-29). However, there are other functions to the photographs than direct illustrations of an image found in the text. The derelict and abandoned buildings, depressed people photographed against boarded up buildings, and, above all the recurring images of the vandalized graves and mounted police all eloquently evoke hardship, depression and abandonment – a society that has been dismantled and then forgotten by Thatcher's government in the South. For example, photograph 7 shows a scarved woman, carrying a heavy bag, walking from Right to Left<sup>15</sup> across an abandoned "Pavillion" Cinema. Dream and Reality are here juxtaposed: the dream world of the cinema is firmly boarded up, and the reality is of grim deprivation. Daniel Arasse usefully refers to Louis Marin, in saying that the function of such figures is not so much to show what can be seen, but rather to suggest how to see, what we have been given to observe. (Arasse, p. 82). The text opposite the scarved woman makes reference to his mother, his parents, and Britain.

I wish on this skin's word deep aspirations,  
first the prayer for my parents I can't make,  
then a call to Britain and to all the nations  
made in the name of love for peace's sake. (p. 15)

The woman walking with difficulty, carrying a burden, may be related back to the epiphany of Wordsworth's "Spots of Time" passage,<sup>16</sup> to the hard life of his mother, but the skin's word "United" is wrested from him and redeemed by the poet to refer to his dead parents, and to all peoples. In addition, the "deep aspirations" form part of an isotopy of underground and mines. Photograph 12 shows, in the foreground, a cobbled street, half-tarmacked, and a late-Victorian boarded-up, broken-windowed Police Station; mid-ground a horse-drawn coal-cart with flat-capped driver, sitting on the flat bed, plods up hill, while, in the background, a few grave stones are loomed over by a 1960s tenement block. The history of Beeston over the past 100 years is framed in this photograph, and history then extends into the past through the name of street: "Stocks Hill", clearly visible to the right of the Police Station door.<sup>17</sup> The closed, abandoned police station implies there is neither law nor order; the stocks signify ancient and brutal punishments by state power.<sup>18</sup> Finally, the subject matter and mood of the photographs is reinforced by their texture: slightly out of focus, grainy, neither black nor white, but composed of shades of grey, made colder by the cold blue, used in title and design, which leaches into the grey. The photographs are shot in mist or late evening, and they do so much more than illustrate the poem; they enrich it, by prompting our mood in reading the text which they accompany.

If the subject matter of text and photographs sounds grim, it is. However, the deprivation expressed in the poem is offset by Harrison's humour. As we have mentioned, Harrison has access to two cultures and voices: he creates the voice of an elegiac poet (in the manner of Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard" to which we will return shortly),<sup>19</sup> and the voice of a skinhead, a Leeds United Football supporter, who is vandalizing the graves. The two voices are ostensibly differentiated, by printing the skinhead's voice

in italics, although as we shall see, the vocabulary and syntax of the skinhead is sometimes standard, while Harrison's educated voice sometimes includes dialect. We thus have an imaginary conversation, where Harrison talks to himself, speaking with voices both of his roots and of his culture. He explicitly identifies with the skinhead: "He aerosolled his name and it was mine" (p. 20).<sup>20</sup> His abbreviating "skinhead" to "skin" reinforces the duality of the disunity and unity, established by the two voices; "I wish on this skin's word deep aspirations" (p. 15). It is as though Harrison's "skin" is his Leeds surface above, whereas below lies that which he has created and become his essential self - his poetic sensibility, and it is to the latter that he will return at the end of the poem.

V. is deliberately shocking, and caused outrage when a film version was first performed by the BBC on 4 October 1987 (it was broadcast again on Radio 4, on 18 February 2013, to a more sympathetic reception). The first confrontation between poet and skinhead exemplifies what caused the outrage:

Jobless though they are how can these kids,  
even though their team's lost one more game,  
believe that the 'Pakis', 'Niggers', even 'Yids'  
sprayed on the tombstones here should bear the blame?

What is it that these crude words are revealing?  
What is it that this aggro act implies?  
Giving the dead their xenophobic feeling  
or just a *cri-de-coeur* because man dies?

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

'She didn't talk like you do for a start!'  
I shouted, turning where I thought the voice had been.  
*She didn't understand yer fucking 'art'!*  
*She thought yer fucking poetry obscene!* (pp. 13-15)

In probing the significance of aggression, Harrison deliberately places the high register "xenophobic" and "*cri-de-coeur*" in juxtaposition with the scatology of the skinhead's voice. In the skinhead's dialect, Harrison's "art" also signifies "heart" because of the lost aspirates,<sup>21</sup> and his alienation from educated language is reinforced by the scatology, and the fact that the foreign '*cri-de-coeur*' is correctly italicized in the poet's voice, but printed in roman for the skinhead's voice.<sup>22</sup> One can also see, from this extract, that the formality of the metrics, a sign of traditional establishment verse, is unable to control the language of revolt which *undermines* it.

As we have seen, the master image is surface and depth, connected by images of "mine" and "unite"; by splitting himself into two voices Harrison can express the anger and distress of the working-class skinhead, his doppelgänger from the depressed North, and bring this voice into dramatic confrontation with his own educated voice, thus achieving a drama infrequently found in a standard elegy. However, while he has access to both discourses and cultures, and achieves a balance between the two, nevertheless the balance is uneasy; an unease which is underlined by the obvious construction of the skinhead's voice, which is more concerned in the poem with class rather than with race: "*Yer going to get 'urt and start resenting / it's not poetry we need in this class war*" (p. 20).<sup>23</sup> Further unease can be felt when one considers that skinheads are not at all representative of the working class in the North: indeed the character may be regarded as a stereotyped condescension. The poem's dialogue follows on from other, earlier, biographical poems. In one sense saying to himself "occupy / your lousy leasehold poetry" ("*Them & [uz]*", *SP*, 123), and there is obviously a critique of both cultures: "a plague o' both your houses" (*Rom.* 3.1.108).

The poem narrates Harrison's visit to his parents' grave; elegiac in tone, and expressing guilt, that just as he has abandoned his roots in working-class Leeds, so he has abandoned his parents' grave. Harrison contrasts his own lack of fidelity to his parents' grave, to their fidelity to his grandparents; similarly he contrasts his own, contemporary elegy to the past, because, as we noted earlier, behind Harrison's poem is the explicit example of Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard", composed in the same quatrains and rhyme scheme, ABAB, that Harrison employs. The situation is not dissimilar: Gray, urbane, witty, and learned, visits a country churchyard and comments on the rustic graves of "mute inglorious Milton" and "Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood" (ll. 59-60). His eighteenth-century "Picturesque", pre-Romantic sensibility, honed at Eton and Cambridge, is full of personification, inversion and hypallage:<sup>24</sup>

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade,  
Where heaves the turf in many a mouldering heap,  
Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,  
The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.

The breezy call of incense-breathing morn,  
The swallow twittering from the straw-built shed,  
The cock's shrill clarion or the echoing horn,  
No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed. (ll. 13-20)

Harrison's vandalized graveyard borrows Gray's form, but only to subvert it in scandalous, obscene, language. Harrison makes reference to Latin on the Mayor's gravestone, that the dead of the First World War have "hymnal fragments and the gilded prayer", while others "fell asleep in the Good Lord" (p. 5). Harrison employs Gray's eighteenth-century, stereotyped, hypallage; for example: "a blackened dynasty of unclaimed stone" (p. 3) which for a moment might lull the reader into thinking he is inhabiting a standard elegy, but instead of Gray's quiet resignation, one finds in *V.* a refusal to submit to

the power of the Thatcher government and the NCB: “[...] *all* these Vs: against! against! against!” (p. 16).

We have noted that the elegy *V*. contains within it an epithalamium, marked by the reprise of hawthorn and apple blossom, and the song of the children playing football in the graveyard, singing “Here comes the bride” (pp. 9, 21, 23, 33). The word “home” is repeated three times in an evident parallel to the thrice repeated “against” as he returns, under a red sunset, after a final visit to his parents’ grave:

Home, home, home, to my woman as the red  
darkens from a fresh blood to a dried.  
Home, home to my woman, home to bed  
where opposites seem sometimes unified. (p. 25).

In the last movement of the poem, which brings him back to his partner, to the warmth of the coal fire, Berg’s opera “Lulu”, and the television showing the “Gulf War”, the battle of the Rotherham Coke Plant during the Miners’ Strike, funerals in war-torn Ireland. At this moment the poet lives up to his earlier vaunt: “This pen’s all I have of magic wand (p. 11), for now he recuperates the skinhead’s scrawl and claims the word “United” for his own:

I hear like ghosts from all Leeds matches humming  
with one concerted voice the bride, the bride  
I feel united to, *my* bride is coming  
Into the bedroom, naked, to my side.

My *alter ego* wouldn’t want to know it,  
his aerosol vocab would balk at LOVE,  
the skin’s UNITED underwrites the poet,  
the measures carved below the ones above. (p. 33)

The concepts of Above and Below are here joined, as Harrison redeems the word “United”. As in many classic elegies, the poet turns at the end to

address the reader directly, asks whether, despite the passage of time, he will allow the word “United” to remain: “And now it’s your decision: does it stay?” (p. 33).

The envoi, which follows, leading directly to his own epitaph, begins with the the first line of the poem repeated: “Next millennium you’ll have to search quite hard” (pp. 1, 35), but continues with a variation on the first stanzas, by now evoking the imagined reader, paying a visit to Harrison’s own grave; and, just as he has tried to clean up his parents’ grave, it is now the turn of the reader to clean Harrison’s:

If love of art, or love, gives you affront  
that the grave I’m in’s graffitied then, maybe,  
erase the more offensive FUCK and CUNT  
but leave, with the worn UNITED, one small v.

Victory? For vast, slow, coal-creating forces  
that hew the body’s seams to get the soul.  
Will Earth run out of her ‘diurnal courses’  
before repeating her creation of black coal? (p. 35)

The epitaph, given in the italics of the skinhead’s discourse, as though underlining his roots in this final stanza, brings the reader directly into the graveyard, with its underground layers of abandoned coal<sup>25</sup> and comes full circle with the trades of his ancestors transformed into the goods they traded in:

*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. 36)*

“The pen’s all I have of magic wand”, he wrote, and we remember the epigraph to the poem about the importance Scargill’s father gave to mastering

words. It is deeply ironic, at this point in the poem, that what enables him to redeem "United" from the skinhead is the high culture, accessed through his education in the classics, that excludes him from the very roots he is defending.

Cultural references abound in *V*. For example, Harrison refers to Rimbaud in addressing the skinhead: "but the *autre* that *je est* is fucking you" (p. 17), and the skinhead replies, with a buried reference to *Julius Caesar*. When asked what Cicero said at the Senate, Casca's uncomprehending reply is "it was Greek to me" (*JC*. 1.2.280-81), so the skinhead replies to the poet's French:

*Ah've told yer, no more Greek . . . That's yer last warning!*

*Ah'll boot yer fucking balls to Kingdom Come.*

*They'll find yer cold on t'grave tomorrer morning.*

*So don't speak Greek. Don't treat me like I'm dumb.* (p. 17)

Harrison creates a jokey, imaginary conversation with his dead mother playing the role of Gertrude with himself cast as a naughty Hamlet upbraided for swearing (p. 21), and these references are easily recognisable. However, he makes greater demands on the reader. His father used to buy his cigarettes at the corner shop run by "old Wattsy", before it was bought out by a Pakistani immigrant, Mr. Patel, which put an end to his father's single conversation of the week (p. 27). The next lines are: "And there, 'Time like an ever rolling stream' 's / what I once trilled behind that boarded front" (p. 29). What Harrison sung as a child is taken from the Methodist hymn "O God Our Help in Ages Past" written by Isaac Watts - which, if the reader makes the connection, relates, ironically, back to "old Wattsy" one line previously. Likewise, the reader is expected to know Wordsworth's verse. When Harrison wonders whether the world will come to an end before there is time to create more coal: "Will Earth run out of her 'diurnal courses' / before repeating her creation of black coal?" (p. 35).<sup>26</sup> To anyone of Harrison's generation (he was born in 1937), references to Hugh Gaitskell, and Herman Darewski's band are



evident enough, as are references to Harp Lager, and the Bible seen mock commandments spoken in the voice of the skinhead:

*Covet not thy neighbour's wife, thy neighbour's riches.  
Vicar and cop who say, to save our souls,  
Get thee behind me, Satan, drop their breeches  
and get the Devil's dick right up their 'oles! (p. 19)*

Though it is worth noting the uneasy *mélange* of tones in this stanza: on the one hand, a correct use of apostrophe, and correct biblical citation simultaneous with slang “cop”, scatology “Devil’s dick”, and dropped aspirates. Harrison himself glosses “NF (National Front)” (p. 6), but only because he needs the additional syllables to complete the line. The reader of course is expected to get the joke with references to Wordsworth and Byron on the first page, but the poets are not what they seem: Wordsworth turns out to be an organ builder, and Byron a tanner. Obviously “Lohengrin” needs no note, but only the initiated will know “Alban Berg high D / lifted from a source that bears your name” (p. 31) to understand that Harrison is referring to his opera-singing partner, Teresa Stratas, who made her name in *Lulu*.<sup>27</sup> In the same stanza, probably only those from the North will understand that “Shilbottle cobbles” is coal from one of the oldest coal merchants in the country located in Alnwick, Northumberland. The two voices are efficiently joined when Harrison hears the boys singing in the graveyard: “I hear them as I go through growing gloom / still years away from being skald or skin” (p. 23). The alliterative “sk” gives us the possibility that the boys may become skins, or possibly bards; for apart from meaning burnt or scabby, “skald” is also the ancient Scandinavian word for poet.

Finally, as with many elegies, the poem turns from its ostensible purposes of visiting his parents’ grave, mourning the miners’ strike and a lost society, to express a very personal message. On the surface, Harrison’s achievement has been to overcome the bitterness and failure of the strike in accessing a shared culture with his readers. He seizes the word “United” from

his skinhead alter ego, to redeem it, and makes it “mine”. The coal from the mine below, adds heat to the warmth of his union with his partner, and points to a distant hope that this union may reflect a united society despite the worst that Thatcher’s government has done to dismantle it. But below the surface, another more subversive message can be read when we remember that the most memorable lines in this poem are given to the skinhead,<sup>28</sup> and also that there is something worryingly complacent in his repeated assertion of domestic bliss, which sounds like a reprise of Arnold’s “Dover Beach”. In the last resort, Harrison is trying to have it both ways: a pious hope for a united society: “a call to Britain and to all nations / made in the name of love for peace’s sake” (p. 15), together with his union with “my woman” but these unions are both *undermined* by the powerful voice of his doppelgänger, which penetrates, even into his own epitaph.<sup>29</sup> The subversive message is reinforced by the manner in which the classical quatrains of the poem explode with rage and scatology that rupture the formal metrics and express an undefeated antagonism to Margaret Thatcher’s government and ideology.

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<sup>1</sup> See Kavanagh, pp. 18-19; Green, pp. 104-5; Young, pp. 367-71, Milne, Introduction and chap. 1. Gouiffès reports that coal stocks in the power stations reached a peak of 30,8 million tonnes in October 1983, with additional stock-piling facilities available should they be needed (pp. 321-32).

<sup>2</sup> (08.07.1977, KJP 10/17, cited in Green, p. 120 and n.).

<sup>3</sup> Scargill had refused to allow a strike ballot for the Nottinghamshire miners, because he thought they would not vote for a strike.

<sup>4</sup> Among other dirty tricks was a campaign to disgrace Scargill “for allegedly using Libyan money donated to the strikers to repay what was in fact an already paid-off mortgage” (Edgar, p. 19, Milne, pp. 1, 40). The campaign against Scargill and the NUM was orchestrated by Stella Rimington, DG of MI5, aided by the CIA and fuelled by Maxwell’s *Daily Mirror* (cf. Milne, pp. 1-5).

<sup>5</sup> “The weakening of trade union power in the 1980s has been due to the interaction of government legislation, the rise in unemployment, and technological change” (Kavanagh, p. 239), and afterwards further debilitated by New Labour’s introduction of cheap immigrant labour.

<sup>6</sup> NUM 1992 Annual Conference, Scarborough, cited in Milne, p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> Scargill was arrested for obstruction at Orgreave on 30 May 1984 (Gouiffès, p. 328).

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Pynchon’s first novel shares the same title, *V.* and its sign is similarly overloaded.

<sup>9</sup> *Guardian*, 15 March 2014, reporting an interview in *FT Weekend Review*.

<sup>10</sup> Broom employs this pun in the context of domesticity (pp. 18-19).

<sup>11</sup> Apart from expressing splits in society and personality, the term “enemy within” was also Thatcher’s code for Scargill and the NUM (as opposed to the “enemy without”: referring to the invasion of the Falkland Islands (cf. Milne *passim*).

<sup>12</sup> The term “my woman” is repeated four times (pp. 25, 29) and the excessive possession has been criticized, as has the misogynist use of the word “cunts” by both voices (cf. Broom, p. 17).

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<sup>13</sup> One could usefully compare the tone of *V.* to the Latin poet Martial, who is an evident pattern for *V.* in terms of a rigorous form containing scatological content:

*Carpere causidicus fertur mea carmina : qui sit  
nescio. Si sciero, vae tibi, causidice*

Unknown, sad, little lawyer, who've deigned to criticize my verse;  
if I ever find you, lawyer, watch your arse!

"*In Causidicum*", Liber V, xxxiii (Martial, p. 82, my translation).

<sup>14</sup> The graveyard photographs are of Holbeck Cemetary overlooking the Elland Road Football ground, near where Harrison grew up.

<sup>15</sup> Images of movement from Right to Left are always a sign of hardship and difficulty, since they run counter to the reading eye in Western culture.

<sup>16</sup> *The Prelude* [1850] XII, 208-60, *CPW*, pp. 210-11.

<sup>17</sup> The sign of street name foreground, a quarter down extreme right of frame, operates like Barthes' *punctum*: a sign which reaches out to the viewer, beyond his volition, to pierce him like an arrow (Barthes, pp. 26-27).

<sup>18</sup> An additional interpretation could be to stocks of goods and coal, but like the empty cart, there are no more stocks in Beeston.

<sup>19</sup> *V.* has the same duality as Gray with the latter's educated voice juxtaposed with his imagined rustic "mute inglorious Milton" and "village Hampden". Both poems enjoy the same form and structure of elegy, return, and epitaph, but Harrison replaces Gray's retirement, modesty and melancholy with humour, scatology and pride in his own poetic fame.

<sup>20</sup> To make another analogy with T.S. Eliot, this time from "Little Gidding":

So I assumed a double part, and cried  
And heard another's voice cry: 'What! Are *you* here?'  
Although we were not. I was still the same,  
Knowing myself yet being someone other -  
And he a face still forming ("Little Gidding", II, Eliot, *CP*, p. 141)

<sup>21</sup> His mother understood neither his "heart" nor his "art". Harrison has made the joke before when remembering his snobbish school-teacher criticizing his enunciation of Keats: ". . . *mi art aches* and . . . 'Mine's broken,/ you barbarian T.W.!'"  
("Them & [uz]" *SP*, p. 122).

<sup>22</sup> The skinhead's speech is printed in italics, and therefore of course it is correct to print the foreign words, within italics, in roman; however, the difference in font, reinforces their difference in voice.

<sup>23</sup> Though there is casual racism in text and and photographs, of swastikas, the National Front (p. 6) PAKI GIT, NIGGER and Yids (p. 13), these seem to form part of an argumentative questioning, which unites these oppressed minorities with the oppression, unemployment and depression of the predominantly white miners.

<sup>24</sup> Hypallage (Gk. "exchange"), also known as transferred epithet, is defined by Cuddon as "A figure of speech in which the epithet is transferred from the appropriate noun to another to which it does not really belong". Eg. "a sleepless night", "a condemned cell" (Cuddon, p. 405).

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<sup>25</sup> The mine, underground, could evidently permit a psychological interpretation of the poem, in terms of the subconscious. Broom suggests it “symbolises the instability and riskiness of poetry” in the context of split identity (Broom, p. 19).

<sup>26</sup> The reference is to Wordsworth’s poem on Lucy’s pastoral grave in “A Slumber did my spirit seal” (*LB*, p. 154).

<sup>27</sup> Stratas, who is Greek-Canadian, and not from a privileged background, has a similar divided self to Harrison: “I make my own dresses; I never go to the hairdresser; I never go to parties. . . .With my background I find it very hard to justify the privileged life I have. It takes all my energy to do this very elitist thing.” (Teresa Stratas, *diaci.com*).

<sup>28</sup> Roberts (pp. 219-20), writes of the feebleness of some of the “poet’s utterances”, compared to the vigour of the skinhead’s speech.

<sup>29</sup> A point well-made by Sarah Broom: “In the poem, the speaker’s efforts towards a far too easy withdrawal from the arena of conflict into a cosy and self-satisfied world of domestic harmony are quite deliberately *undermined*, and the poem certainly leaves us with no answers to the fracturing of society, apart from the doubtful hope of continuing dialogue.” (Broom, p. 19).