

Classics, Class, and Cloaca: Harrison's humane coprology

In 1975 Tony Harrison published his translation of a selection of epigrams by Palladas, a fourth-century citizen of Alexandria and one of the last pagan poets. Harrison had been inspired by Peter Jay's modern verse translations of ancient Greek epigrams, mostly drawn from the Greek Anthology.¹ Palladas' cynical voice clearly struck a chord in the alienated young Harrison, who described it at the time as 'the authentic snarl of a man trapped physically in poverty and persecution, and metaphysically in a deep sense of the futile'.² Through this separate edition, Harrison rescued the distinctive individual voice of the ancient poet from centuries of anthologised oblivion. Amongst the verses Harrison chose to translate (which include satirical lines on the problems involved in reading canonical literature, misogynist tirades and meditations on the brevity of life) is this succinct assault on another poet (Harrison's no. 43 = *The Greek Anthology* 11.291):

Where's the public good in what you write,
raking it in from all that shameless shite,

hawking iambics like so much *Betterbrite*?

Bad poetry, composed to make money, is 'shameless shite', which rhymes with *Betterbrite*. The poet whom Palladas is attacking is compared with someone

selling lamp oil, and it seems that Harrison has here invented a new product, inspired by the famous British ‘direct sales’ company Betterware, whose inexpensive range of cleaning and other household products was (and still is) sold by door-to-door salesmen and is culturally associated with petit bourgeois aspirational housewives. If the Betterware company were to have made a lighting product, it would have called it Betterbrite.

But this apparently facetious little translation reveals Harrison’s struggles to define his own role as a literary figure. The poet whose shameless shite has failed to impress Palladas is criticised on the remarkable ground that there is no ‘public good’ in what he writes. For Palladas, this idea is an unusually responsible one, but it has always been central to Harrison’s own poetic project. In Palladas’ Greek, as Harrison will have been aware, the question ‘where’s the public good?’, more literally *how have you been useful for the polis?* (*ti ōphelēsas tēn polin*) harks all the way back to the earliest extended discussion of the role of poetry in society, Aeschylus’ debate with Euripides in Aristophanes’ *Frogs*. But the phrase *useful for the polis* resonates most profoundly with the passage in Plato’s *Republic* where Socrates declares that the poets will be turned away from the city until someone can prove to him that what they compose is *useful* to the community as well as pleasurable (10.607d 6-9).

This brief translated poem also contains three other ideas that will repeatedly intertwine with expressions of the public role of poetry throughout Harrison’s corpus of plays, screenplays and poems. The first is the remuneration of poets. The second is the comparison of composing poetry with the material production involved in working-class trades, since for Harrison, whose father was

a baker, the poet is a ‘maker’, a *poiētēs* in the ancient Greek sense. Both these strands are especially prominent in *Poetry or Bust* (1993), the play about the early 19th-century wool-sorter and ‘Airedale poet’, John Nicholson. But the third idea introduced in the *Palladas* translation is the relationship between the production of poetry and the production of ‘shite’, waste matter, by the human body. Harrison did find the idea of using a swear-word to describe the socially useless poet’s output in *Palladas*, who calls it *blasphemias* (approximately equivalent to the English term ‘profanities’). But it is Harrison who chose an English-language equivalent that had a scatological overtone not to be heard in the Greek.

Classical inspiration, class analysis, and cloacal imagery provide an appropriately alliterative cluster of ideas around which to structure a celebratory study of some of Tony Harrison’s verse, or at least of one innovative strand within it. My underlying premise is not new: it is simply that Harrison has faced up to the quandary of working in a medium whose consumers are not of the same class as that into which he was born -- and to which he remains loyal – through his own brand of classicism. His radical treatment of Classics has underpinned his quest for a public role for a poet who never forgets the way the middle class’s prosperity has been built on the working class’s deprivation. As Lorna Hardwick has put it, the impact of his classical education has been ‘to stand out as a mark of alienation, both personal and cultural, from his working-class roots’.³ Harrison also uses classical myth in the attempt to forge an inclusive public poetry rather than an exclusive curriculum.⁴ He has been described as ‘a public poet in the classical tradition’, a role that he has forged so successfully by involving his

poems in public affairs that in the early 1990s he was actually put on a retainer by the Left-Liberal *Guardian* newspaper, which asked him to provide ‘a few poems a year on contemporary themes.’⁵ But the way he uses that classical tradition of public poetry is consistently class-conscious and oppositional: it is, in Patrick Deane’s acute formulation, ‘the deft and opportunistic annexation of classical authority by a poet not born to it’.⁶

Coprology, this essay suggests, has proved a generative in Harrison’s quest for imagery through which to explore the painful tension created in his work by his ‘dual’ class identity, and by his own ambivalence towards elite culture.⁷ In his earlier poetry this tension was often focussed on his relationship with his parents, and especially with his father.⁸ It is expressed most succinctly of all in ‘Turns’ from *The School of Eloquence*. In this poem he proclaims his class solidarity in calling his father’s cloth hat not ‘his cap’ but ‘our cap’. But he also acknowledges the fact that he is earning a living by writing poetry that is read only by the higher classes in whose service, as a worker in an industry with an arduous daily routine, his father had ruined his health:

I’m opening my trap
to busk the class that broke him for the pence
that splash like brackish tears into our cap.

But that father worked in the food industry, and the digestive function of the human body has become increasingly important to Harrison over the past two decades. Three decades after the *Palladas* collection, in 2005, two poems in

Under the Clock display precisely the Classics-class-cloaca cluster of associated ideas, now developed into very different, but equally arresting directions. The first is the wonderful little poem ‘The Ode Not Taken’, subtitled ‘C.T. Thackrah (1799-1833)’; it is Charles Turner Thackrah whom the poetic voice celebrates. A controversial Leeds surgeon, Thackrah had trained at Guy’s Hospital alongside a famous poet:

Dissecting corpses with Keats at Guy’s,
Leeds-born Thackrah shared the poet’s TB.
Cadavers that made Keats poeticize
made Thackrah scorn the call of poetry.

But the reason why Harrison is interested in Thackrah is that he became a pioneering researcher into occupational disease. From 1817 he was Leeds Town Surgeon, with responsibility for the care of the city’s paupers. His commitment to the improvement of his fellow citizens’ lot led to his 1831 treatise, *The Effects of the Principal Arts, Trades on Health and Longevity*. The standard textbook on the subject for six decades, this study detailed the diseases associated with more than 150 occupations, especially work in textile factories and by children, and the ways in which they could be prevented by modifications in diet, posture, exercise, pollution, and ventilation. Thackrah became an important supporter of the movement to reform factories and reduce working hours.

Yet he had originally been destined for a career as a clergyman, which had entailed receiving a classical education, and Harrison muses on his preference for medicine over a more cerebral profession. Thackrah

Could write hexameters by Virgil's rules,
and parrot Latin epics but he chose
flax-hecklers' fluxes with their 'gruelly' stools,
the shit of Yorkshire operatives, in prose.

Medical research on the digestive system of the late Georgian Yorkshire proletariat, necessary to the improvement of their working and living conditions, was the achievement of this trenchant native of Leeds. In celebrating it Harrison reflects on both the parallels and contrasts between the production of Latin verses (part of the elite education of the Georgian gentleman) and the production of polemical, campaigning medical prose. Furthermore, the movement in this sentence from the neutral reference to the hexameters of Virgil through the less respectful allusion to being able 'to parrot' Latin epics, to the hardcore realism of quotation from Thackrah himself on the flax-worker's 'gruelly' stools, concisely conveys the impression of a man with a mission and no time to waste on cultural irrelevancies. (Indeed, his time really was curtailed because he only undertook his medical training at the cost of acquiring the tuberculosis that eventually killed him). The workers' own shit in this poem thus functions as nothing less profound and political than a permanent reproach to the British class system.

This is a noteworthy poetic function for human excrement. It is also virtually without precedent. A few recent writers of prose fiction, including Salman Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* and some of the novelists discussed by Reinhold Kramer in his study of scatology in English-Canadian literature, have recently used excrement to mark class structures.⁹ But in poetry, shit has been and still is almost always used to characterize things which are perceived as unpleasant negatives, and especially to alienate the reader from them. Scatological satire, in which it is never advantageous to be represented by shit, has been around for a very long time, as anyone versed in Aristophanes or Martial (both authors with whom Harrison has engaged extensively) will be well aware.¹⁰ Scatological vituperation has played a time-honoured role in attacks on artistic or intellectual efforts, ever since Aristophanes' *Clouds* and Catullus' famous assault on Volusius' *Annals* as *cacata carta*, 'shit-smear'd sheets' (36.1).¹¹ Characters in Jonson's dramas both echo these ancient models and share in what has been called 'the copious and ubiquitous scatological rhetoric of Early Modern Europe' when they imagine putting the paper on which the works of rivals were written to the use of cleansing the 'posterior'.¹² But in the English language, the filthiest and most vituperative scatology is probably provided by the 'high heroic Games' held by the dunces in the second book of Pope's *Dunciad* (II.18); the excrement on which they slip and in which they dive and swim invariably stands as a metaphor for the *inferiority* of both their writings and their morals (see II.69-108, 272, 276-8). On one occasion Harrison seems to turn such scatological invective on his own poetry – or at least on the potential insult to working-class suffering involved in composing sonnets to be read by the

bourgeoisie. A prime example is in one of the embedded voice in 'Working', the sonnet for Patience Kershaw, the teenage mine-worker whose testimony was recorded by the 1842 Children's Employment Commission: 'this wordshift and inwit's a load of crap / for dumping on a slagheap'.¹³

For Dante, it is moral sins such as flattery and fraud which find a major metaphor in excrement.¹⁴ Scatology that is politically rather than aesthetically or morally engaged also has a very long history. One of Juvenal's illustrations of the instability of human fortune takes the form of the chamber pots that have been made from Sejanus' statue, once melted down (10.61-4). During the English Civil War, excremental imagery was used by poets on both sides to characterize the repellent nature of the agendas of their opponents, although the Royalist anti-Parliamentarians had the advantage here simply because the term 'Rump parliament' was so suggestive.¹⁵ In France, the very doctors of the absolute monarch Louis XIV were gratified to discover that his discreet and inoffensive bowel movements reflected his unique status and perfection and therefore that of the monarchical body politic; they were rarely loose, because 'Nobody in the whole world has been as much a master of himself as the King'.¹⁶ In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the sheer shock factor in the public, theatrical use of scatological language had a social and ultimately political impact, above all in the first, famous '*merdre*' of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* that caused the audience to riot for 15 minutes at the premiere on December 10th 1896.¹⁷ Modern dramatic writers and poets contemporary with Harrison have used plenty of derisive scatology for political effect, as John Osborne in his *Luther* (1961) makes his

dissident hero describe his notice of excommunication as a piece of latrine paper from the devil's own latrine in Rome – 'papal decretals are the devil's excretals'.¹⁸

But Harrison's predominant use of shit is different from that of other contemporary left-wing writers. For him, shit represents not the oppressor but the oppressed. What he has done is think about the repugnance that is the customary response to fecal matter in both classical sources and more recent ones, and invert the way it operates. He has reformulated the conventional trope of literary revulsion as symbolic of the privileged classes' barbarous response to the poor and the destitute. If there is a precedent for this at all it is, surprisingly enough, in Thomas Carlyle, who described the British underclass, reduced to beggary, as 'the scandalous poison-tank of drainage' and 'that tremendous Cloaca of Pauperism'.¹⁹ Although, in marked contrast to Harrison's ubiquitous sympathy for the impoverished and dispossessed, the physical disgust Carlyle felt towards the London poor is palpable in such rhetoric, the target of his scatology was at least not the noisome poor but the social and economic system that produced them in the first place.

Aristophanes, Catullus, Martial, Pope, Carlyle, Jarry, Osborne (and, as we shall see below, Rabelais, Swift and Nietzsche) -- it seems that Harrison's scatology has if not a literary pedigree, then a tradition against which he is reacting. Yet defecation is not an aspect of his innovatory literary art that has received much attention. This is perhaps not surprising. Although the Indo-European etymological root from which 'scatology' derives is ultimately the same as the root of *scire*, 'to know',²⁰ scatology in literature is often regarded as 'the last taboo', or 'the last veil' clouding our vision of truth, as Victor Hugo describes

it in *Les Miserables*.²¹ Breaking the last taboo in order to attack class inequity, as Harrison does, is a bold and risky move, since writers who have used coprology have always made themselves vulnerable to reactions of intense disgust in their readers, and at best reductive Freudian analysis in their critics. But Harrison has never lacked courage.

Excoriation or psychological speculation has certainly been the fate of the extensive coprological imagery produced by Jonathan Swift, usually regarded as the most scatological author in the English language to date.²² Most of Swift's extensive scatology is in the same Augustan tradition of vituperation, derived from Latin poetry, that Pope and many of that literary generation practised. But something of Harrison's more humane treatment of human effluvia is occasionally anticipated by Swift. One of his riddles in the *Thesaurus Aenigmaticus* (1725-6) certainly uses the universal human need for elimination of waste products in order to cast class-based notions of hierarchy in a compellingly absurd light that burlesques Greco-Roman epic conventions. The answer to the riddle, which is entitled 'The Gulph of all human Possessions', is a privy; the setting is Olympus, and the speaker is Jove.

Necessity, the Tyrant's Law,
All human race must hither draw:
All prompted by the same Desire,
The vig'rous Youth, the aged Sire.
Behold, the Coward and the Brave,
The haughty Prince, the humble Slave,

Physician, Lawyer, and Divine,

All make Oblations at this Shrine.²³

Yet with the exceptions of Swift and Rabelais (see below), it seems almost universally to have been taken for granted by authors in the Western tradition, even those whose political views are not dissimilar to Harrison's, that bodily waste products are symbolic of what is *properly* repugnant in society.

Recuperating bodily functions in the cause of intellectual endeavour is something that Harrison however has in common with Nietzsche, a thinker whom he has elsewhere used (although very selectively) to brilliant effect.²⁴ Nietzsche, like Harrison, clarifies the connection between human consciousness and the interior of the body by repudiating the longstanding Platonic and Christian negation of the flesh and insistence on the priority of a transcendental world of ideas, or disincarnate spirit. Like Harrison, Nietzsche used the ancient Greeks to kick-start all his thinking about human experience: Nietzsche's work reinstates entrails and their contents to a place of philosophical significance and sees them as a locus for truth. Indeed, entrails were one of his favourite symbols for the process of 'undercutting metaphysical and transcendent aspirations: going *into* the body lies at the opposite pole from going *beyond* it'.²⁵ Nietzsche uses the innards to make people see what he thinks is the truth, however abominable, beneath surfaces.²⁶

Yet Harrison's inner man is not monstrous like Nietzsche's, nor are his truth-telling excreta abominable. Harrison treats bodily evacuation equally

fearlessly, but also with a most un-Nietzschean humanity, even the ‘charity’ that the visual artist Tom Phillips saw was integral to the inclusive social vision projected in *v.* in 1985.²⁷ In that poem, indeed, the non-judgmental and charitable attitude is extended even to the ‘peeved’ and ‘pissed’ football supporter who has vandalized the cemetery by spraying the word ‘SHIT’ on an obelisk. But it is humour that is most often the means by which the shock factor of Harrison’s scatology is alleviated, a lesson he perhaps learned from the traditional limerick verse of his home town which had appeared as the epigraph to *Loiners* (1970):²⁸

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.

Harrison’s success as a class-conscious oppositional poet has indeed been put down by a shrewd critic to ‘the integrity with which he has remained true to those regions “covered with weeds”’.²⁹ But the turning-point in Harrison’s scatology, as in many other aspects of his work, was his brilliant drama *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*. Midlife, he became fascinated by the ancient Greek myth of the genesis of lyric poetry – and by extension, all art – through engagement with Sophocles’ version of the theft of the cattle of Apollo. The encounter with Sophocles’ play proved to be one of the most fruitful of Harrison’s career precisely because what Adrian Poole has called the ‘ribald generic indeterminacy’ of satyr drama allowed him, amongst other things, to meditate on the gap in his

own previous theatre between the 'high' culture of the *Oresteia* and the folk culture of *Bow Down* (1977) and *The Mysteries*.³⁰ But in *Trackers*, which premiered at Delphi in 1988, Harrison also developed the central image of refuse in numerous fascinating directions.

The very papyrus of the satyr play was rubbish found on a dump. The location of poetry within the Epicurean cycle whereby matter, including the materials on which poetry is recorded, constantly circulates in the world and indeed through the food chain, is introduced in Grenfell's opening speech. He complains that the Egyptian workers, the fellaheen, do not appreciate the cultural value of the papyrus texts (p. 28):³¹

We ship back papyri to decipher them at Queen's
but they'd use them, if we let them, as compost for their greens.
Bits of Sappho, Sophocles and Plato
used as compost for the carrot and potato.

In the next speech, delivered by Hunt, ancient Greek poetic writings are brought one step closer to actual excrement in the scholar's fears (p. 29):

If one of our backs were turned our fellaheen
would be sloshing Bacchylides on their aubergine.
If we're not double-quick the local folk
will mix Homer and camel dung to grow their artichoke.

Hunt is using scatology, of course, in a derisive way: Homer should absolutely *not* be contaminated by camel dung. The gulf between art and bodily refuse should be impermeable. As soon as Grenfell is transformed into Apollo, this theme is reasserted in more precise terms; Apollo is appalled at what has happened to the papyri containing his fragments (p. 40). His verses have been

Converted into dust and bookworm excreta,
riddled lines with just ghost of their metre.
All my speeches, all my precious words
mounting mounds of dust and millipede turds.

The excremental image, thus established through camel dung, bookworm excreta and millipede turds, brings new life to an old term of abuse when, some lines later, Apollo describes the felon who has stolen his herd as a ‘dissembling cattle-rustling shit’. For Grenfell, Hunt, and Apollo, excrement is to be derided and at all costs avoided. It represents philistine members of the Egyptian working class, the physical destruction by idiots of high classical art, and the criminal who challenges the elite’s rights by stealing their property.

What a different note is struck from the thrilling moment that the satyrs leap out of their Egypt Exploration Fund crates and begin their clog-dancing chorus, directed by Silenus to track down ‘each missing Greek word / then sniff out the trail of Apollo’s lost herd’. The act of recovering the lost poetry of Sophocles is directly equated here with locating a herd of cows by olfactory means – tracking them down by smelling their dung. ‘Seek cow-clap...(track

it....track it...)', sings one group of satyrs; as they parody the Furies in the stage production of Harrison' own translation of the *Oresteia* sniffing for the blood of Orestes, the Yorkshire-dialect speaking chorus of satyrs warm to their excremental theme (pp. 48-9):

Sniff, sniff

sniff at the dung

t' devil who did this is gonna get 'ung.

Snffi, sniff

sniff every turd

t' droppings'll lead us t' god's 'erd.

Snif, sniff

sniff left and right

sniff every tincture

of cattle shite.

Sniff, sniff

sniff every clue

sniff every sort of numero two.

Sniff, sniff

sniff without stopping

sniff every turd, sniff every dropping.

This hilarious parabasis allows Harrison to luxuriate in finding alternative words for dung (turd, droppings, shite, numero two) and in contriving rhymes to match them. But he did not find much support for this in the Greek of Oxyrhynchus Papyrus no. 1174. The Sophoclean ‘tracking’ sequence is indeed introduced by Silenus instructing the satyrs as follows:

Come, everyone....nosing the scent...somewhere, perhaps a breath of wind....squatting double...follow the scent closely.³²

But that is all there is. In the Greek there is no surviving word for excrement at all; the terms for ‘scent’ and ‘nosing’ and ‘wind’ are anodyne and unspecific; they could be used in the context of looking for roses. In the lines that follow, what the satyrs are looking for is explicitly and repeatedly said to be hoofprints (68, 74, 76, 81). What this means is that Harrison has made his play explicitly coprological when his Sophoclean prototype was not. This needs thinking about.

It has often been said that the personality of the satyr offered Harrison a vehicle through which to explore the animal aspect as well as the divine spark in the human being. But Joe Kelleher has pointed out that Harrison had previously chosen, for the cover of his translations from Martial, a photograph of a carved stone satyr. The satyr serves as a kind of mask for Harrison’s persona as a translator. This persona is neither neutral nor self-effacing, but has ‘a diabolically

gleeful grin', suggesting that the transformation of poetry from the ancient language to modern vernacular is the work of a personality with 'an inscrutable agenda' of his own.³³ The same applies to the satyrs in *Trackers*. At this point in the play the audience realises that the inscrutable Harrison is gleefully concentrating on excrement, but is not yet clear why.

The excrement that is equated with poetry at last becomes if not human then at least anthropomorphic with the arrival on stage of the still incontinent baby Hermes; now papyrus serves the purpose of a diaper. But the incontinent Hermes is also the first individual ever to play the lyre – the very icon in antiquity of poetic art. Hermes produces music simultaneously with faeces (p. 66):

Apollo	Let me have your gadget or you'll get a good slap. That papyrus you're wearing. It's full of warm crap.
Hermes	That nymph's too snooty to change a kid's nappy. I can't help it, can I, if I'm all crappy.
Apollo	There, there, little fellow, but you're scarcely fit to give lyre recitals with pants full of shit. You're frankly disgusting. I think that the lyre requires a performer in formal attire. Change your crappy papyrus while I serenade these lowly satyrs with the lyre you made.

The one place where human excrement is visible, semi-tolerated even semi-publicly in our culture, is when it is produced by small babies. Harrison, here in

the part of his reconstruction of *Trackers* that is entirely his own invention, gives the audience a striking set of images about art – its producers and consumers and class orientation – through the contrasting figures on stage. The appealing baby-cum-musical-genius, complete with his dirty nappy, contrasts with the envious, snobbish adult god who decrees that music should only be performed in formal clothes, and the ‘lowly satyrs’ who have tracked down art as they have tracked down cattle by their dung. It is to miss the *political* clout of this scenario to see it primarily in psychoanalytical terms.³⁴ As Richard Eyre has put it in a different context, ‘Tony wants the whole body of society, not just its head, to be involved in art’,³⁵

Apollo’s serenade turns out to be a statement on the cosmic order and the satyrs’ place within it. He is concerned that the audience will find the start of the play ‘unpromising’, with its ‘trail of turds’, but he can reassure them that what has resulted, in the lyre, is Art. Apollo then describes the hierarchical scale of creation in which all creatures are allotted their place. Being half-animal, goatish and foul-smelling, the satyrs are very nearly at the bottom of this scale, but not quite:

Below the beasts, all beasts, come beetles and the mite
whose mandibles make meals of Sophocles
and leave gaping holes in such lost plays as these.
This little mite, the lowest in creation
turns Sophocles to dust and defecation,
and turns manuscripts of Mankind’s masterpieces

to little microbe meals and microbe faeces,
letters, then a line, a page of words
make minutest mincemeat and the tiniest of turds.

The lowest stratum in the cosmic order manufactures faeces and turds. Harrison's satyr play is of course a manifesto not only on the gulf that separates elite art from popular culture, but on the system of social stratification that has always silenced the poor, the hungry and the oppressed (above all represented in the flayed body of Marsyas) and excluded them from the rights and privileges enjoyed higher up the class system. The circulation of matter in the food chain, all the way through the body until it is expelled to the refuse dump, at the Delphi premiere of *Trackers* therefore became a commanding image for both cultural and social exclusion.

This was made even more explicit in the new ending that Harrison wrote for the National Theatre production that opened in London in the Olivier auditorium in March 1990. Here the satyrs underwent a transformation into the homeless who sleep rough on the South Bank of the Thames, near the National Theatre. Since they are freezing, they shred the papyrus of the *Trackers*, from which they sprang as satyrs, to use as bedding, and Silenus distributes small bits to use as toilet paper (147):

Here, take this little bit
it'll come in handy after a shit.

...

And here it's **PODA BA** and **APAPAP**

take it and use it after a crap.

Silenus says that he will be Apollo's spokesman (148)

...and say that I don't mind

if you use my papyrus to wipe your behind.

I am happy that my long-lost Satyr Play's

divided up into *Andrex* and dossers' duvets.

It is as if Harrison is saying that no amount of great art matters at all if people are freezing cold and lack even the most basic physical necessities of life, symbolised in the papyrus-bedding and papyrus-toilet-roll (*Andrex*).

The same collection as the poem on Thackrah, a decade and a half after *Trackers*, concludes with a much longer poem that explores further than ever before the illumination of the relationship between Classics and class that Harrison has found is made possible by faecal imagery. 'Reading the rolls: an arse verse', first published in this journal in 2004, is also the strongest statement to date of his Materialist conception of the world and the position of words within it. The fundamental symbol of the world, and the humans who inhabit it as matter, is the human being sitting on the toilet, engaged in producing or consuming verse as s/he processes foodstuffs through the body and ejects them as faecal matter. The poem is introduced by an epigraph quotation, in the original Latin, of Lucretius' *De rerum natura* 1.823-7, which addresses the question of

how all words are simply the same sounds, or letters of the alphabet that signify sounds, rearranged in different ways, just as the world is constructed of particles of the same elements in constant flux (my translation):

Indeed, throughout these very verses of mine you can see many elements common to many words, although you must admit that lines and words differ from one another both in meaning and in the sound that they produce.

Harrison has said several times in interviews that he is not a religious man, and if his world-view can be affiliated with any particular philosophical tradition, it is certainly the atheistic and Materialist one founded by the ancient Greek atomists and Epicureans. Another writer who was drawn to these ideas was Karl Marx, whose 1841 doctorate was entitled *The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*. That matter and idea are dialectically inter-related – the fundamental premise of Marx’s Dialectical Materialist philosophical method – is a view underpinning all Harrison’s work. This is not surprising given that he has not only read Karl Marx, but made a point of saying so in ‘A Good Read’, one of his most important poems about the wedge which education drove between him and his father.³⁶ Here he thinks about his vacation reading as a young student, and how the awareness of it created hostility on both sides: the poem’s internal dialogue portrays the father believing his son was a snob, and the son unable to prevent himself looking down on the limitations of his father’s education:

That summer it was Ibsen, Marx and Gide

I got one his you-stuck-up-bugger looks.

ah sometimes think you read too many books

ah nivver 'ad much time for a good read.

Good read! I bet! Your programme at United!

The labels on your whisky or your beer!

You'd never get unbearably excited

poring over Kafka or King Lear.

The Harrison-voice concludes,

I've come round to your position on 'the Arts'

but put it down in poems, that's the bind.

He actually agrees with his father that 'the Arts' as owned and practised by the elite have nothing to offer the working classes, but the only way he can express this conviction is through a medium that is most emphatically part of the literary establishment. Moreover, one of the authors who is named as estranging him from his working-class father is Marx, precisely the philosopher whose revolutionary Materialism was intended to liberate the working classes.

The Marxist conception of the world is particularly prominent in Harrison's feature film *Prometheus*, a lament for the death of the twentieth-century dream of a socialist utopia.³⁷ Manual labour in the form of the miners'

bodies is quite literally transformed into value as they are melted down, and the biologically productive female body of mam/ Io is treated as livestock in an agribusiness. ‘Fire and poetry – two great powers / that mek this so-called god’s world OURS’ says the working-class Prometheus of this film – fire transforms matter as poetry transforms the ideas that constitute the life of the mind. ‘Reading the rolls’ itself consists of three sections that explore the relationship borne by words to the material elements from which they are produced and the materials on which they are recorded. In the first section the predominant trope compares poetic inspiration with gaseous vapours that morph into language – whether from beneath the Pythian priestess’ seat or from gas pipes or rotting rats beneath the floorboards of Harrison’s childhood. But in the second section, the matter that is continuously paired with poetry is the ‘war-time infant turds’ that, as a small boy, he had deposited in his family toilet.

I’m aware today the earliest verse
I ever mumbled wiped my arse,
enjoyed for what they were, not judged,
torn off the roll, and used, and flushed.

This picture was partly anticipated more than three decades earlier by ‘The Excursion’ in *Loiners*, where he says that his ‘earliest reminiscences’ were of the bombardment of Leeds, of ‘explosions like flushing a closet’.³⁸

If Harrison’s scatology here is anticipated by any earlier author, it is most certainly Rabelais, in whose five-book novel *Gargantua and Pantagruel*

coprology looms large.³⁹ The image of the four-year-old Leeds boy's experience of bodily evacuation, and its association with the production of rhyming verse, is indeed clearly foreshadowed in Book 1 ch. 13 of the old French novel. As Gargantua approaches his fifth birthday, he one day reveals his high intelligence to his father when describing how he has devised numerous different ways for wiping his bottom after defecation – he has used items of his mother's clothing, a cat, the leaves of various plants, various leaves, flax, wool, and paper. As Gargantua explains how paper was not wholly effective at removing his turds, he suddenly bursts into rhyme, to his father's delight: In the 1653 translation of Thomas Urquhart,

Yes, yes, my lord the king, answered Gargantua, I can rhyme gallantly,
and rhyme till I become hoarse with rheum. Hark, what our privy says to
the skiters:

Shittard,
Squirtard,
Crackard,
Turdous,
Thy bung
Hath flung
Some dung
On us.

This hilarious episode, combining a child's delight in rhyme with his early experiences of defecating in the 'privy' (as well as the father-son relationship so prominent in Harrison's earlier poems on his own childhood) may well have resurfaced in 'Reading the rolls'. But after expanding this account of his own juvenile versification in the lavatory, including lines attacking Hitler, Harrison displays his extraordinarily wide reading in summary of a passage in a letter that was written to a son by another father, the 18th-century Earl of Chesterfield: ⁴⁰

Lord Chesterfield's advice
to his son was Latin verse,
not lengthy epics like Lucretius
dangerous and irreligious,
but shorter poems like Horace *Odes*
construed while extruding turds,
a page per shit for the beginner
before consigned to Cloacina.

Indeed, an investigation of the Earl's patrician letters do indeed reveal the astonishing recommendation to his son that good time management meant taking two sheets of an edition of Horace to 'the necessary-house', where they could furnish both edifying reading matter and disposable toilet roll, which could be sent down as a sacrifice to 'Cloacina'.⁴¹ Harrison is clearly delighted with the Earl's reference to this goddess, the benign divinity who in the less squeamish ancient world presided over the Roman Cloaca Maxima and whose shrine in the

forum is attested from as early as Plautus (*Curculio* 471; see also Livy 3.48 and Pliny, *NH* 15.119). She was sometimes identified with Venus as Venus Cloacina.

As Harrison's poem develops, the word-matter relationship is reconceived in terms of the Epicurean philosophical texts that are elucidated through coprological imagery; the individual imagined in the process of defecating is transformed from the figure of the four-year-old working-class Harrison and the aristocratic son of the Earl of Chesterfield to the ungendered reader whom the grown-up Harrison now addresses: this reader should feel at liberty to shred the pages on which the poem is written into paper snow,

Or feel free in need to use these verses,
if not too rough, to wipe your arses...

In Section II, after humorously wondering whether his reader is still reading because s/he is captivated by the verse or alternatively constipated, the poem moves on to the related image of poetry that emerges from papyrus rolls of Epicurean philosophy carbonised at Herculaneum, philosophy that 'iridesces' because it

aims to free the mind from fear
and put the old gods out to grass
and live life in the moment's grace.

If any world view is advocated by Tony Harrison, it is surely this one.

But it is yet again Harrison's coprology that is used in order to characterise the great Epicurean philosopher who has been rescued from these papyri, Philodemus of Gadara - or, rather, it is used to characterise the hierarchy constituted by Philodemus' client relationship with his aristocratic patron Piso. His fawning poetry as he 'brown-nosed' Piso was 'crap', at least according to Cicero. Here we come almost full circle back to the epigram of Palladas with the complaint that a poet who sold bad poetry for a living was hawking 'shite'. These days we are privileged enough to be able to read Philodemus' epigrams in conjunction with the fine commentary of David Sider, as well as the fragments of his Epicurean theory as it emerges from the cinders of Herculaneum, and are in a position to decide whether they are really 'crap'.⁴² But we can also read Harrison's poem on the subject. His ensuing fantasia on the themes of vowel sounds, love poetry, the dance of words in the never-ceasing entropy of the cosmos, and the recovery of ancient texts through modern technology is concluded with a renewed address to his reader in the toilet:

The soul goes with cloacal matters
as much as tragedy with satyrs,
so, if you're sitting on the loo
where your w fits in an O,
peruse these prosodics from my pen,
then use, and flush them down the pan.

[Though perhaps for average shits

I've given you too many sheets.]

In de-alienating excrement from the human body, Harrison has forged one of his most challenging and innovative poetic figures. Scatology is a pronounced feature of ancient and much more recent satire, but it has almost always been used in a way that preserves and affirms the notion that it is inherently disgusting and needs to be excluded. What Harrison has done is put the digestive system back into the imagery of the human experience, but without the fear and hateful derision that conventionally attends it. Effluvia, like human consciousness, is just part of the Lucretian atomic cycle, after all: for Harrison, effluvia can stand not only for class struggle and the correction of false consciousness, but such elevated forms of mental work as Philosophy or Art, the Epicurean doctrine of living for the moment, or the relationship of tragedy to satyr play. Harrison's cloacal imagery is, however, not just dispassionate but actively sympathetic to his fellow humans in its portrayal of our undignified digestive functions: it is deeply humane.

Little in earlier poetry in English quite shares this quality, except perhaps Swift's socially levelling privy riddle and the lyrical description by Swift's friend John Gay of London's sewage system as Cloacina, 'goddess of the tide / Whose sable streams beneath the city glide'.⁴³ But a socially committed dramatist like Harrison would be unlikely to object to being placed in company with the author of *The Beggar's Opera*. Harrison's coprology shares with Swift and Gay not only humanity but humour; it certainly provides him, as the examples from *Trackers*

and 'Reading the rolls' demonstrate, with some of his most scintillatingly witty puns and rhyme sequences.

Perhaps the greatest advantage of the cloacal trope in Harrison's innovative hands is that it allows him to address his reader as a corporeal subject of neither specific age nor specific gender. Small babies and old people defecate: so do both women and men. In his earlier work, for example in the poem 'Durham', Harrison sometimes used the image of the human body as involved in (hetero)sexual acts of love to explore 'the sick, / sick body politic'.⁴⁴ Harrison has come in for a good deal of criticism, even from his admirers, for the way that his poetry talks about women and their bodies – whether that of his mother, his wives, or his lovers.⁴⁵ When his poetry explores sexual themes in relation to bodily experience, it is indeed from a male heterosexual perspective that needs to be mediated heavily by any female reading subject. But when it comes to his nappy-clad divine baby and four-year-old in the lavatory, he has discovered a way of appealing to a universal human corporeality that is neither sexed (in the biological sense) nor gendered (in the acculturated one). Nor does this distinctive corporeal subject – at least in nature – belong to any particular class: we all -- both the homeless on the South Bank and the *Arion* readership addressed in 'Reading the rolls' -- inevitably make our offerings to Cloacina.

Notes

¹ Peter Jay, *The Greek Anthology and Other Ancient Greek Epigrams: a Selection in Modern Verse Translations*, edited with an introduction (London: Allen Lane, 1973).

² Tony Harrison, *Palladas: Poems* (London: Anvil Press, 1984), p. 10

³ Lorna Hardwick, 'Placing Prometheus', in Lorna Hardwick (ed.), *Tony Harrison's Poetry, Drama and Film: The Classical Dimension* (Milton Keynes: The Open University, 1999), 1-15, at p. 8.

⁴ Peter Robinson, 'Facing up the unbearable: the mythical method in Tony Harrison's film/poems' in Hardwick (note 3 above), 29-43 at p. 30.

⁵ Patrick Deane (1999), 'British Poetry since 1950: Recent Criticism, and the Laureateship', *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 40, No. 3. pp. 491-506, at p. 501; see also Oswyn Murray, 'Tony Harrison: poetry and the theatre', in Neil Astley (ed.), *Tony Harrison (Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies, 1)*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991), 262-74 at pp. 273-4. On the *Guardian* poems see especially Alan Rusbridger, 'Tony Harrison and the *Guardian*', in Sandie Byrne (ed.), *Tony Harrison: Loiner* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

⁶ Patrick Deane, *At Home in Time: Forms of Neo-Augustanism in Modern English Poetry* (Montreal & Kingston, London & Buffalo: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), p. 30.

⁷ On class allegiance in Harrison's poetry see especially Corcoran, *English Poetry since 1940* (London: Longman, 1993), pp. 158-62 and Neil Covey, 'Notes toward an Investigation of the Marginality of Poetry and the Sympathetic Imagination', *South Atlantic Review*, Vol. 60, No. 2. (May, 1995), 137-151 at pp. 139-141.

⁸ See especially Blake Morrison's fine essay 'The filial art: a reading of contemporary British poetry', in *The Yearbook of English Studies* Vol. 17 (1987) = *British Poetry since 1945*, Special Number, ed. C. J. Rawson, pp. 179-217.

⁹ Reinhold Kramer, *Scatology and Civility in the English-Canadian Novel* (Toronto, Buffalo & London: University of Toronto Press, 1997), pp. 11, 31-62.

¹⁰ See Jeffrey Henderson, *The Maculate Muse: Obscene Language in Attic Comedy*. 2nd edition (New York & Oxford: OUP, 1991), 187-203; Jae Num Lee, *Swift and Scatological Satire* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1971), pp. 7-22, with especially Martial 6.8.1.

¹¹ The translation here is that of Josephine Balmer, *Catullus: Poems of Love and Hate* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2004), p. 81. On scatology in English satire from Nashe and Skelton to Pope see Lee (note 10 above), ch. 2 (pp. 23-53).

¹² 'Introduction' to Jeff Persels and Russell Ganim (eds.), *Fecal Matters in Early Modern Literature and Art: Studies in Scatology* (Aldershot, Hants & Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), xiii; Jonson, *The Staple of News* 3.2.207-11. See Bruce Thomas Boehrer, *The Fury of Men's Gullets: Ben Jonson and the Digestive Canal* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1997), pp. 1-2.

¹³ Tony Harrison, *Selected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 124. On the way this poem 'dialogizes the social and cultural past (and present)',

see Jon Kirk, *Twentieth-Century Writing and the British Working Class* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), p. 96.

¹⁴ Lee (note 10 above), pp. 16, 18. Dante's sorcerers have their mouths where their anuses should be.

¹⁵ Lee (note 10 above), pp 23-53.

¹⁶ Antoine Vallot, Antoine d'Aquin and Guy-Crescent Fagon (1862), *Journal de la santé du roi Louis XIV, 1647-1711* (Paris: A. Durand, pp. 209-10). See Louis Marin, *Food for Thought, translated with an afterword by Mette Hjort* (Baltimore, MD & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989 [1986]), pp. 218-41.

¹⁷ Sidney Shrager, *Scatology in Modern Drama* (New York: Irvington Publishers, 1982), 1, 39-44.

¹⁸ Shrager (note 17 above), pp. 67-73.

¹⁹ Thomas Carlyle, 'The New Downing Street' = *Latter-Day Pamphlet* no. 4 (originally published in 1850), in *Latterday Pamphlets* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1898), pp. 159, 164.

²⁰ Ralph A. Lewin, *Merde: Excursions in Scientific, Cultural and Sociohistorical Coprology* (Aurum Press: London, 1999), p. 5.

²¹ See especially the editors' Introduction in Persels and Ganim (note 12 above), pp. xiii-xxi.

²² Lee (note 10 above), p. 1.

²³ *Thesaurus aenigmaticus: or, A collection of the most ingenious and diverting aenigma's or riddles* (London: John Wilford, 1725-1726), p. 922. See Lee (note 10 above), pp. 59-60.

²⁴ Harrison has frequently illustrated the function of the tragic mask – a visor that allows the wearer to look upon the ultimate of human horrors without being damaged -- by quoting Nietzsche's assertion in *The Birth of Tragedy* section 17 that Dionysiac art compels us to gaze into the horror of existence, yet without being turned into stone by what we see. See the English translation of Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*, translated from the first German edition of 1872 by Shaun Whiteside, ed. Michael Tanner (London: 1993 [1872]), p. 80, with Edith Hall 'Aeschylus, race, class and war', in Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh and Amanda Wrigley (2004, eds.) *Dionysus since 69*, 169-197 at p. 194. Oxford: OUP

²⁵ David Hillman, *Shakespeare's Entrails: Belief, Scepticism and the Interior of the Body* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), p. 61.

²⁶ See F. Nietzsche, (1967), *Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1967), vol. VII, 2, 25 (8), with Eric Blondel, *Nietzsche: the body and culture*, translated by Sean Hand (London: Athlone, 1991), p.220.

²⁷ Letter to the *Independent* 3rd November 1987, quoted and discussed in Christopher Butler, 'Culture and debate', in Byrne (note 5 above), 93-114 at p. 114.

²⁸ On the significance of this epigraph in terms of Harrison's position in regard to the literary establishment, see Sandie Byrne 'Introduction: Tony Harrison's public poetry' and Martyn Crucefix, 'The drunken porter does poetry: metre and

voice in the poems of Tony Harrison', in Byrne (note 5 above), 1-28 at p. 15, and 161-79 at p. 161 respectively.

²⁹ Crucefix (note 28 above), p. 162.

³⁰ Adrian Poole, 'Harrison and Marsyas', in Hardwick (note 3 above), 56-68 at p. 57.

³¹ All quotations from *Trackers* are from Tony Harrison, *Plays Five* (London: Faber & Faber, 2004.)

³² Lines 59-63 as translated by Denys Page, *Select Papyri*, vol. iii (*Literary Papyri*) (London & Cambridge, Mass: Heinemann & Harvard University Press. Loeb Classical Library, 1941), p. 35. The same translation is reproduced in Hugh Lloyd-Jones' recent Loeb, *Sophocles* vol. III, *The Fragments* (Cambridge, Mass. & London: Harvard University Press), p. 121.

³³ Joe Kelleher, *Tony Harrison* (Plymouth: Northcote House Publishers, 1996), p. 20.

³⁴ The reading of Kelleher (note 33 above), 64.

³⁵ Richard Eyre, 'Tony Harrison the playwright', in Byrne (note 5 above), 43-8 at p. 45.

³⁶ Harrison (note 13 above), p. 141 (from *The School of Eloquence* II).

³⁷ See Edith Hall, 'Tony Harrison's *Prometheus*: a view from the Left', *Arion* (2002), 129-40; Charity Scribner, *Requiem for Communism* (MIT 2003), ch. 3, includes *Prometheus* in her study of recent films that mourning the loss of the workers' dream.

³⁸ Harrison, Tony (1970), *The Loiners* (London: London Magazine Productions, 1970), p. 73.

³⁹ See especially David LaGuardia, 'Doctor Rabelais and the medicine of scatology', in Persels and Ganim (note 12 above), 24-37.

⁴⁰ *Under the Clock: New Poems by Tony Harrison* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 51. On Harrison's love of research and exceptional erudition, see especially Oliver Taplin, 'The chorus of mams', in Byrne (note 27 above), 171-84, at p. 170.

⁴¹ Philip Dormer Stanhope, 4th Earl of Chesterfield, *The Letters of the Earl of Chesterfield to his Son*, ed. with an introduction by Charles Strachey, and with notes by Annette Calthrop (London: Methuen & Co., 1901), vol. I, p. 192.

⁴² David Sider, *The Epigrams of Philodemos: Introduction, Text, and Commentary* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁴³ John Gay, 'Of Walking the Streets by Day' (= *Trivia: or, the Art of Walking the Streets of London*, part II, London: Bernard Lintott, 1716), lines 115-16. Reproduced in Vinton A. Dearing (ed.), *John Gay, Poetry and Prose*, vol. I, p. 144 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).

⁴⁴ Harrison, 'Durham', in Harrison (note 13 above), p. 70; see N.S. Thompson, 'Book ends: public and private in Tony Harrison's poetry', in Byrne (note 5 above), 115-32 at p. 128.

⁴⁵ Luke Spencer, *The Poetry of Tony Harrison* (New York: Harvester/Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 3, and ch. 2 *passim*.