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On (Not) Being Milton: Tony Harrison's Liminal Voice

ABSTRACT

Tony Harrison's poetry is rooted in the experience of a man who came out of the working class of Leeds and who, avowedly, became a poet and a stranger to his own community. As Harrison duly noted in one interview, from the moment he began his formal education at Leeds Grammar School, he has never felt fully at home in either the world of literature or the world of his working class background, preferring to continually transgress their boundaries and be subject to perpetual change.

The paper examines the relation between poetic identity, whose ongoing construction remains one of the most persistently reoccurring themes of Harrison's work, and the liminal position occupied by the speaker of Harrison's verse. In the context of the sociological thought of such scholars as Zygmunt Bauman and Stuart Hall, the following paper discusses the way in which the idea of being in-between operates in "On Not Being Milton," an initial poem from Harrison's widely acclaimed sonnet sequence *The School of Eloquence*, whose unique character stems partly from the fact that it constitutes an ongoing poetic project which has continued from 1978 onwards, reflecting the social and cultural changes of contemporary Britain.

Born in 1937, Tony Harrison is a poet who crossed the boundary dividing the English working and middle classes. He was one of these children who, due to education reform, received state scholarships, went to grammar schools and as a result had the opportunity to become students representing the first generation of the working class of the North at university level. Reading Harrison's poetry, it seems justifiable to say that his poetic path started not when he published his first poem but much earlier, in 1948, when, as a "scholarship boy," he crossed the threshold of Leeds Grammar School, finding himself from that moment onwards "at the friction point of two cultures,"¹ as Richard Hoggart put it (239). This was a crucial moment, a triggering point that changed the trajectory of Harrison's life, opening doors to the world of eloquence and simultaneously depriving him of a clear identification with the place he grew out of and to which he will be returning again and again in his verse.

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Joanna Bourke comments on the British education system in *Working-Class Cultures in Britain 1890–1960*, providing a useful background for understanding the situation in which children like Harrison found themselves:

By the 1940s, it was clear . . . that the education system was in crisis and radical reforms were needed. The Education Act of 1944 was advertised as "Free Secondary Education for all." Based on the principle that every child should be educated "according to his age, aptitude and ability," Butler's Act [1944] abolished tuition fees at state maintained schools, raised the leaving age to 15 years and introduced the tripartite system of secondary schools (grammar, modern and technical), which in the 1950s became bipartite (grammar via the 11-plus, and secondary modern). . . . Despite these attempts to promote greater social equality in access to education, class differentials persisted. (117–20)

The authorities ignored the problems working-class children encountered in the classroom, which meant that prejudice and alienation became a daily reality for pupils from the lower stratum of society, who were not

¹ "Until the 1970s it was largely agreed that the working-class was characterised by distinctive cultural values and practices which stood outside and in opposition to those of the middle and upper classes. A series of landmark studies of working-class culture, especially those carried out between the 1950s and the late 1970s emphasised the distinctive values and solidarities seen as characteristic of working-class life. Examples include studies such as Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), Williams's *The Long Revolution* (1961), Dennis et al.'s *Coal is Our Life* (1956), Goldthrope et al.'s *The Affluent Worker* (1968) and Willis's *Learning to Labour* (1977)" (Savage et al. 97).

only financially underprivileged but also spoke local vernacular, considered to be a lesser form of English. Those who chose a university path and decided not to abandon their working-class identity to survive faced a constant fight for respect and recognition in the world of RP speakers and to maintain ties with the place of their origin.

As Harrison duly noted in one interview, from the moment he began his formal education at Leeds Grammar School, he never felt fully “at home” in either “the world of literature with [his] education and identity of the poet” or “in [his] working-class background” (Haffenden 234). Alienated from both, he never sought “redemption or . . . respite in a dream of belonging” (Bauman 14). This kind of attitude, succinctly described by Zygmunt Bauman in *Identity: Conversation with Benedetto Vecchi*, allows Harrison to navigate with ease in “several different linguistic universes” (Bauman 14) and continually transgress the boundaries of these two conflicting worlds. According to Bauman, the question of identity can only occur in a situation where a man is pulled out of “wherever could pass for his natural habitat” (12), which is as much to say that it is always “born out of the crisis of belonging” to a given community (20). Contemporary sociology defines two basic types of community: *communities of life and fate* whose members “live . . . in an indissoluble attachment” (11) and communities which are “welded together solely by ideas and various principles” (11). The former has been denied to Harrison as a result of his education and profession.

The following paper examines the theme of poetic identity, whose ongoing construction remains one of the most persistently reoccurring themes of Harrison’s poems and which cannot be seen other than through the prism of the experience of liminality. The fact of being in-between, in transition, in the liminal space, manifests itself in Harrison’s works in the interwoven patterns of such oppositions as centre vs. periphery, marginal vs. mainstream or deprived vs. privileged, which operate in selected poems from Harrison’s widely acclaimed sonnet sequence *The School of Eloquence*,² an ongoing poetic project which has continued from 1978 onwards, reflecting an individual struggle of a poet writing from a liminal space and commenting on social and cultural changes in contemporary Britain. The poem analyzed in the paper entitled “On Not Being Milton” from *The School of Eloquence* sequence contains the germs of numerous issues, such as the issue of language, its role in identity construction and

² *The School of Eloquence* title is used in the article to refer to the entire sequence including *From The School of Eloquence* and *Continuous: 50 Sonnets from The School of Eloquence*.

the issue of rebellion against linguistic dominance of the privileged classes. These unfold over the course of subsequent poems in Harrison's longest poetic project. The poem chosen for analysis in this paper was selected not only on the basis of its undeniable popularity among critics and readers of Harrison's poetry, but primarily because it establishes a powerful relationship between the issues of the individual identity of the poetic "I" and the identity of the English working-class³ as a stratum of society.

Bauman claims that identity in the contemporary world has to be understood as the goal of an effort and as ongoing task (21). In "On Not Being Milton," the opening sonnet of *The School of Eloquence*, Harrison identifies this task as writing, his chosen method of constructing the poet's identity:

Read and committed to the flames, I call
 these sixteen lines that go back to my roots
 my *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*
 my growing black enough to fit my boots. (1-4)

In the third line Harrison refers to Aimé Césaire's poem "Cahier d'un retour au pays natal" which means "Notebook of Return to the Native Land." Lines of verse which "go back to . . . [his] roots" ("On Not Being Milton" 2) become lines which restore continuity with the past and have the power to sustain the connection. The first stanza of the poem uses the "elemental" imagery of fire and earth⁴ which, together with the verbs denoting movement, gives the act of writing the character of physical transformation. The destructive force of the flames, the processes of growing black and returning to one's roots suggest the transformational power of a language, which penetrates the layers of personal and public histories described in the poem. Writing acquires a concrete direction in time and space: the movement in the poem is the movement into the past and back to the native land, the place of origin. Additionally, the usage of a set metaphor "to go back to one's roots" suggests that the return may be read as a vertical journey, into and underneath; in other words, an inverted growth whose image is strengthened by referencing the blackness of coal

³ As with other works in *The School of Eloquence*, Harrison presents the reader with individual working-class characters but also, on a different level, with a working-class community which can be called a collective character of the sequence.

⁴ The image of earth (with related images of growth and decay) is an organizing image of Harrison's first collection of poems *Earthworks*. The image of fire reappears in many of the poems of *The School of Eloquence*, for example: "The Fire Eater," "Cremation," or "*Dichtung and Wahrheit*."

as the main natural resource of the English North East. This movement downwards metaphorically represents the intention of the poet who wants to re-establish the position of language spoken as “from below,” a language which constitutes the periphery of literary experience but whose roots lie deep in the history and culture of the native land Harrison left in order to read books and gain the privilege of literacy.

The title of the poem, a negative definition of the speaker’s self, immediately places the issue of identity in the framework of literature. The reference to John Milton, primarily the quotation from Thomas Gray’s elegy,⁵ sets the poem, according to Rick Rylance, “in the persistent tradition of the mournful alienation in English writing about the dispossessed” (118). In his elegy, Gray sympathizes with the inglorious Milton from a distance and in a highly literary voice befitting the distinguished elegiac form. Harrison recognizes his affiliation with the tradition of Milton and Gray but does not grant it the privilege of superiority, setting Gray’s lines alongside lines written by shoemaker Richard Tidd.⁶ His spelling mistake which produces a pun and makes “writing” tantamount to “setting to rights,” proves in Harrison’s rendering to be no less poetic than Gray’s sophisticated metaphors. The blending of these two ideas in one word (i.e. *Righting*) “clinches the connection between articulacy and political activism” (Rylance 116) and signals the analogy between the lack of linguistic eloquence and social marginalization reappearing frequently throughout the sequence. The concluding line, “*Sir, I Ham a very Bad Hand at Righting*” (“On Not Being Milton” 16) italicized within the print of Harrison’s poem suggests a quotation and also locates the perspective from which the problem of identity is to be viewed in the subsequent part of *The School of Eloquence*. The speaker of the line does not describe his problem with literacy in terms of aptitude. He does so in terms of identity and as lacking a command of language that might determine who he is. The line develops the meditation on the issue of identity initiated in the title of the poem and may be read as a provocative starting point for a discussion on the nature of social and cultural exclusion. The poem describes the scale according to which the value of language, and thus the position of the individual in the society, is summarily estimated. At the top of the scale reside Milton and Gray, and the elite tradition of art they represent; at the bottom, the regional voice, the barbarian diction unfit for poetry. The poem establishes

⁵ “Three cheers for mute ingloriousness” (“On Not Being Milton” 12) is an allusion to the line from “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” by T. Gray: “Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest” (59).

⁶ Executed with other co-conspirators in 1820 for his part in an attempt to assassinate the Cabinet planned in Cato Street.

the position of the speaker assumed in the majority of subsequent poems. He is a man occupied with the language of Milton and Gray, but who consciously chooses to speak with the voice of Richard Tidd; this combination allows the two languages to coexist in later poems.

The referencing to Richard Tidd is characteristic of Harrison, who dramatizes "personal crisis as representative of larger problems" (Rylance 115) while associating lack of literacy with social degradation. This citation strengthens the analogy "between political and linguistic violence" (Rylance 118) developed in the second stanza of the poem:

The stutter of the scold out of the branks
of condescension, class and counter-class
thickens with glottal to a lumpen mass
of Ludding morphemes closing up their ranks.
Each swung cast-iron Enoch of Leeds stress
Clangs a forged music on the frames of Art,
The looms of owned language smashed apart!

("On Not Being Milton" 5–11)

The voice of the scold, the troublemaker identified in the poem with nineteenth-century Ludditism interferes in the matters of Art while disturbing the rules of mainstream culture. The clash between the standardized version of language, represented by the capitalized "Art," ("On Not Being Milton" 10) and Harrison's native variation, the voice of a rebel and a poet,⁷ is rendered in terms of armed conflict. The Leeds accent destroys the frames of Art just as Luddites destroyed "the knitting-frames that were depriving them of livelihoods" (Rylance 117). Art and, consequently, the form of the dominant language, is framed, constructed, exclusive, and owned like the knitting-frames by representatives of a dominant social class. If language is owned, Rylance suggests, "expression is a cultural as well as political activity" (117), and a privilege the working class has rarely been granted.

Harrison's return to the eighteenth and the nineteenth century gains an additional dimension in the light of Tony Crowley's analyses⁸ of the history of standardization of English in Great Britain. Crowley argues that the emergence of the standard language was spurred by the social and economic development of the South-East rather than by any linguistic factors

⁷ "Scold" (or "skald")—an Old Norse poet.

⁸ Namely: *The Politics of Discourse: The Standard Language Question in British Cultural Debates*. London: Macmillan, 1989. Print.

(198–200). Standardization was followed by codification, which led to the “suppression of optional variability” (Milroy and Milroy 178) and stigmatization of non-standard forms. The fact that a large part of British society continued to speak one of the non-standard varieties, which were and still are perceived as culturally inferior, shows, as Milroy and Milroy argue, that “the universal adoption of the standard has failed” but “promotion of an ideology of a standard has been very successful” (179). According to Crowley, since the beginning of the nineteenth century, “whenever political or cultural crisis threatened, the English language was offered as evidence of underlying or unconscious unity that held together despite all superficial differences” (70). The creation of “social-bonding” (Rylance 119) on the basis of the standardized version excluded those who had no command of the prestigious dialect—that is, among others, members of the British working-class—from the circle of the “shared cultural heritage” (Rylance 119). In the poem, Harrison creates a set of analogies: between linguistic and social suppression, between the linguistic and physical attack and between the frames of Art and the knitting-frames, symbols of the establishment. They shed new light on the seemingly benign “ideology of the standard” which associates standardized English with “the ‘positive’ social behaviour” (Watts 156) and aesthetic superiority (Crowley 198–200) and by default, non-standard English, with their opposite. The nature of language standardization provides strong historical ground for Harrison’s extended metaphor of linguistic expression as rebellion. Harrison looks back to the eighteenth and nineteenth century for historical facts which can give credibility to his metaphors, but, first and foremost, as Rylance suggests, such facts maintain the continuities of linguistic and political working-class experience (119). The metaphors created in the poem such as “the looms of . . . language” and “Enoch of Leeds stress” (“On Not Being Milton” 9, 11) reveal these two lines of experience (the linguistic and political) as inextricably bound. In the poem, “lines” go back to the “roots” (“On Not Being Milton” 2) to the native land of the speaker, but also encompass larger social, cultural and political debate; the “historicity of [Harrison’s] poems extends far beyond Beeston”⁹ (Rowland 3) towards global issues.

The poem is a revolt against the marginalization of the non-standard forms wrongly labelled as intellectually, morally and aesthetically disadvantageous, but this revolt does not imply unambiguous identification or, as Rylance calls it, “naïve solidarity with the non-literary ‘other’” (118). Harrison knows that literature is produced primarily outside the working

⁹ The south Leeds district where the poet was born.

classes, and that makes the incorporation of a working-class voice into literature a difficult task. The pun on “forged”¹⁰ (“On Not Being Milton” 10) introduces the idea that the music of working-class expression runs the risk of being a mere imitation of mainstream art, of the language owned by a privileged minority. An example of such “forged” literature according to W. E. Parkinson are the poems of the pitman Joseph Skipsey (1832–1903), who, like Harrison, found himself in a liminal, social space, but whose artistic choices proved to be very different to the ones Harrison made. Wanting a better life, he climbed the social ladder to leave his place of origin. After moving to London to become a curator of Shakespeare’s house, Skipsey re-wrote his early work in “acceptable literary language” (Parkinson 110), modelling his diction on the works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. This act of domesticating translation from the source language of the pitman into the target language of a middle-class audience resulted in the creation of poems that were culturally sterile. The new versions could no longer express the complexity of working-class experience; they have lost touch with the reality from which they originally stemmed. Parkinson sees the main threat to regional and class poetry in the “conscious literariness” (110) of the poets who chose to write in a language commonly accepted as fit for literature. Although the poetry of Harrison, not so much a “cultural bastard” but an “immigrant” (Parkinson 107–22), to use Parkinson’s label, demonstrates that eloquence is not tantamount to the abandonment of regional voice, it appears tantamount to the abandonment of the working-class audience. When we read *The School of Eloquence*, we realize that the citizens of Leeds whose voice Harrison is trying to save from oblivion doubt in the power of poetic word to say the least. The disappointed voice of Harrison’s mother in “Bringing Up,” the skin’s fury in *v.* or silence which falls between the father and the son in “Book Ends” all suggest that the poet will always remain in-between, deprived of the possibility of full identification, caught in the paradoxical position of a working-class author writing for a middle-class reader. Failed attempts at communication between poetic persona Tony Harrison and working-class characters recur in Harrison’s verse and suggest that the fight for an undeniable working-class voice may prove difficult, especially for someone who suddenly found himself on the side of the oppressors and whose efforts are continually misunderstood by the oppressed.

¹⁰ To forge: 1. Create a shape (a metal object) by heating it in a fire or furnace and hammering it. 2. Create something strong, enduring and successful. 3. Produce a fraudulent copy or imitation of something (*Oxford Dictionary of English*).

The opening poem of *The School of Eloquence* renders rejection of the poetic achievements of Milton and Gray purely on the basis of political argument¹¹ as dubious and unsettling. Smashing the “frames of Art” (“On Not Being Milton” 10) may lead to the victory of “mute ingloriousness,” implied in the poem by an ironic “three cheers” (“On Not Being Milton” 12), but will not necessarily result in the creation of an original voice of the working classes. Moreover, the victory itself will be unsatisfactory and short lived, such as that of the nineteenth century Luddites, who were unable to stop the progress of mechanization. In “On Not Being Milton,” the scold/skald character, the outsider and the rebel, is the type of ambivalent hero described by William Empson as a man outside society because “too poor for its benefits” (20–21) and so “independent, as the artist claims to be” (20–21). He is allowed by the author to become:

[A] judge of the society that judges him. This is a source of irony both against him and against the society, and if he is a sympathetic criminal he can be made to suggest both Christ as the scapegoat . . . and the sacrifice tragic hero, who was normally above society rather than below it, which is a further source of irony. (Empson 20–21)

In “On Not Being Milton,” the hero has multiple incarnations, more or less liminal and “shadowy identities” (Byrne 22) whose nature is always oppositional and indeterminate. The rebellious scold associated with the Luddites and thus representing a collective rather than individual identity of the underprivileged and the dispossessed is given a specific face in the character of a scapegoat and/or an usurper Richard Tidd. Other historically documented heroes of the poem are Sergio Vieira and Armando Guebuza from the Frelimo movement who articulated their grievance and judgement through political action but also through poetry. Seemingly less ambivalent¹² than the scold, Tidd and the Luddites, they belong in the same category because they are outcasts, both dispossessed and rebellious. Incorporation of their histories into the poem emphasizes the “relationship between poetry, education and politics” (Rylance 121) and invites an analogy between the history of the English working class and the history

¹¹ Namely, that they represent the value system of the ruling class.

¹² Although moral ambivalence of the characters is not suggested directly in the poem, it can be claimed on the basis of historical context, and precisely on the disputable nature of Guebuza’s political success and his party’s electoral victory. For more information of Frelimo movement (Mozambique Liberation Front) and Mozambican fight for independence from Portugal see J. Cabrita, *Mozambique: A Tortuous Road to Democracy*, New York: Macmillan, 2001.

of the colonial and postcolonial independent movements (Rylance 121). The most important element of this analogy is “the experience of a condition of cultural exile” (Rylance 120), a point of contact between the story of Harrison and the story of Mozambican poets engaged in armed conflict and political discussion.

One more persona whose identity remains oppositional and deeply ambiguous in the poem is that of Milton. A fuller discussion of Milton's persona necessitates the differentiation at this point of two key issues: the issue of the ambiguity of the poem's attitude towards Milton, as analyzed by Rick Rylance and Sandie Byrne, and the ambiguity of the poem's attitude towards Milton, created through metaphor and literary allusion within the semantic and formal framework of the poem. The first issue presents itself in the first publication of the sequence *From The School of Eloquence and Other Poems* and is further emphasized in *Continuous: 50 Sonnets from The School of Eloquence* by the addition of a sixteen-line epigraph culled from Milton's famous elegy “Ad Patrem.” The epigraph, wrought to resemble one of Harrison's own sonnets (Rylance 118), suggests a humble reading of the title: “I am not Milton, my poems are not as good as his.” Conversely, the title, especially if read in the light of subsequent lines, opposes “Milton's Latinate language and his learned classicism” (Rylance 118). The author identifies his own poetry in unison with the poetry of Milton and, revolting against its elite status, both “celebrates the literary and criticizes it” (Rylance 118), remaining again in-between, seemingly indecisive. This latter type of ambiguity, inherent to Milton's persona, is constructed on the basis of an intertextual reference to Gray's poem and the character of the mute, inglorious namesake of the famous poet buried in the country churchyard. His understated presence might easily be overlooked by the reader, since this paraphrase is in no way signposted. Quite the opposite, “mute ingloriousness” (“On Not Being Milton” 12) is made to look as if it was Harrison's utterance, immediate, contemporary and general. The switching of the adjective (“inglorious”) for the noun (“ingloriousness”) changes the aspect of a person into a state characteristic of an entire stratum of society which remains, like Gray's Milton, buried and silent. Noteworthy too is that the adjective “inglorious” contains two meanings: “unknown,”¹³ as in Gray's intentional meaning and pointedly relevant for Harrison, and “disgraceful,”¹⁴ which achieves a specific overtone in the

¹³ This meaning is apparent in the etymology of the word: “Latin *inglorious*, from . . . *gloria* glory . . . not glorious; lacking *fame* or honour ‘made an *inglorious* comeback.” (*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th Edition, 810).

¹⁴ “shameful, ignominious ‘an *inglorious* defeat.” (*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th Edition, 810).

context of Harrison's social discussion. The lack of command of language or, as the following poems of the sequence bear out, a lack of command of the privileged dialect, is for a working-class speaker a source of shame, designating his inevitable marginalization within society. Whereas "ingloriousness" refers to the condition of the working-classes, the adjective "mute" binds this condition with the inability and/or impossibility to speak out and suggests the silence surrounding the issue of language hegemony, which had become an inherent element of an accepted social order.

The understated presence of the inglorious Milton, suggested by the paraphrase, raises the question of meaning in the poem's title and a corollary question about the identity of the speaker. Stuart Hall argues that identities

emerge within play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marketing of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of identical, naturally-constituted unity—an identity in its traditional meaning (that is, an all-inclusive, seamless, without internal differentiation) . . . identities [are] constructed through, not outside, difference. (4)

Hence, identity can be constructed only through the relation to 'The Other, the relation to "what it is not, what it lacks," to a so-called *constitutive outside* (Derrida, *Positions*; Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*; Butler, *Bodies that Matter*). The point Harrison makes in his opening sonnet is that the identity of Milton the poet functions "because of [its] capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render outside" (Hall 5) the abject element, that mute ingloriousness embodied by Gray's Milton, his silent alter ego¹⁵ absent from literary history and collective memory. Every identity, continues Hall, "has its margin, an excess, something more" (5) which, even if "silent and unspoken" (5) is necessary to achieve, even if only temporarily, a certain form of unity of the self. A constitution of the self as Ernesto Laclau persuasively argues, "is an act of power" since:

If . . . an objectivity manages to partially affirm itself it is only by repressing that which threatens it. Derrida has shown how an identity's constitution is always based on excluding something and establishing a violent hierarchy between the two resultant poles—white/black, man/woman, etc. What is peculiar to the second term is thus reduced to the function of an accident as opposed to the essentiality of the first.

¹⁵ A parallel construction is created in Harrison's elegy entitled *v. where on return to his native Leeds, the poet meets the skin, his working-class Other*.

It is the same with the black-white relationship, in which white, of course, is equivalent to "human being." "Woman" and "black" are thus marks (i.e. marked terms) in contrast to the unmarked terms of "man" and "white." (33)

In following Laclau's arguments, of note must be the relation on the social level between two Miltons, represented by a violent hierarchy, the privileged and the dispossessed, the voice of "Art" ("On Not Being Milton" 10) and the awkward articulation, standard English and the non-standard dialect: fraught dichotomies within which the identity of the ruling class is established through the abjection of working-class values. The established ruling-class identity must be then inevitably threatened (Hall 5) by the marginalized who assume the position of outcasts and outlawed as embodied in Harrison's poetry by ambivalent heroes. The two Miltons comprise one contradictory internal identity, one part of which is under constant destabilization by the other, by "what it leaves out" (Hall 5), what it opposes and what it argues against. On this level, where the glorious Milton stands for poetic eloquence and the inglorious Milton for working-class origin, both terms (poet/working-class man) are marked as dependent upon the set of values which the speaker acknowledges as his own in a given instance of discourse. In this way, the speaker cannot fully identify with either role and remains in a state of continual transgression of boundaries, feeling "alienated from both" worlds and seeking to "give justice to this alienation" (Haffenden 234). He does so by ascribing a special role to the spoken language he used at home: familiar and commonplace, the language of his dead parents commemorated in *The School of Eloquence* sequence. It is the articulation he never abandoned but which he feels he betrayed entering the world of eloquence, practicing Latin and Greek and eventually becoming a poet.

One pertinent adjective chosen by Jerzy Jarniewicz, i.e. "warm" ("ciepły") to describe the quality attributed to the spoken language in Harrison's poems (90), gains additional meaning in the literary context of Richard Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life, with Special References to Publications and Entertainments*.¹⁶ In the chapter entitled "'Them' and 'Us,'" Hoggart describes the working-class people's sense of

¹⁶ The title of one of the chapters of the book became a basis for the title of one of the most well-known of Harrison's poems "Them and [uz]." The poem is dedicated to two people: Leon Cortes, a stand-up comedian, and Professor Richard Hoggart, which further stresses the important role Hoggart's work and biography played for Harrison at the time. Hoggart was similarly to Harrison a working-class child from Leeds who grew up to become a writer concerned with working-class issues.

being members of the group (54) as a “sense of group warmth” (55) which “exercises a powerful hold, and continues to be missed when individuals have moved, financially and probably geographically, out of the working-classes” (55). The sense of working-class community Hoggart refers to is not particularly “self-conscious” (55), it is natural and inherent as opposed to taught and constructed. Herein, communality precedes any organized political or social action just as spoken precedes written language, and just as a spoken literary tradition is primal to a written one:

[the sense of community] does not draw its main strength from—indeed, it precedes, and is more elementary than—the belief in the need to improve each other’s lot jointly which gave rise to such organizations as the Co-operative movement. It arises chiefly from the knowledge it can give. (Hoggart 56–57)

Harrison’s choice to make his poems “essentially speech” (Barker 46) may be understood as an attempt at continuity of belonging to the working-class community—a task which can be seen in terms of possibility but not in sureness, since the working-class community “works against the idea of change” and imposes on its members “an extensive . . . pressure to conform” (Hoggart 58). Those who do not, such as a scholarship boy from “Them and [uz]” and “Me Tarzan,” “become different through education” (Hoggart 58) and are likely to find themselves in the position of outcast. In Harrison’s poetry, the pursuance of continuity of belonging of the poetic “I,” which cannot be definitely achieved and remains in process, is historicized and contextualized to represent a continuity of the experience of the working classes, the barbarians, the speakers of dialect. Some of them, such as Hoggart and Harrison, write from the liminal space, some die labelled linguistically incompetent, as it was with Harrison’s father.¹⁷ However, though divided by issues of “gender, family, war, politics” (Astley 10), all become in *The School of Eloquence* the “agents of *agon*” (Byrne 23), liminal, ambiguous heroes, and oppositional characters participating in Harrison’s struggle to maintain a continuity of culture endangered with extinction and to speak about the value of poetic identity constructed out of contrasting elements, identity which could not have existed without working-class roots. This inclusiveness¹⁸ (Astley 10)

¹⁷ See: “Marked with D.”

¹⁸ Astley uses the term in reference to Harrison’s verse, drawing on the linguistic claim that “we punctuate our speech with ‘sociocentric tags’: Middle-class speakers tend to say *I think* (giving their opinion), an exclusive tag, where working-class speakers will say *you know* (drawing the listener into a shared conversation)” (Astley 13).

resulting in the multiplicity and diversity of voices in Harrison's *The School of Eloquence*, is probably "the strongest legacy" (Astley 10) of the poet's liminal experience.

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