

# “Your sort of poet’s task”: Tony Harrison’s “A Cold Coming”

Adrian Grafe

## Biography

Adrian Grafe is an English professor at Artois University in France and Book Reviews Co-editor of *Hopkins Quarterly* (Philadelphia). He has published broadly on poetry spanning from the Victorian period to the present day. In 2011 he was awarded a Fellowship of the English Association (GB) in honor of his contribution to research on poetry.

## Abstract

This article seeks to explore “A Cold Coming” by Tony Harrison, about the 1991 Gulf War. Few British poets of recent years have written about war, at least other than the Second World War, as a major poetic preoccupation. (True to form, Harrison has written about both the First and Second World Wars, not to mention the Cold War and the Bosnian War). To his Gulf War poems – “An Initial Illumination” is another – may be added the four-line “Baghdad Lullaby” published in April 2003 by the *Guardian* newspaper, which two months before, in February 2003, had re-run *Coming*. As this shows, Harrison’s Gulf War poems retain all their actuality. Printed as they originally were on the front page of the *Guardian* as his ‘Dispatches’, they had, and still have, all the freshness – and horror – of a news report on a war, if not more. Nevertheless by bringing them out again in poetry collections, Harrison seeks to give what were originally ephemeral pieces some kind of permanence and therefore stake in the literary tradition. In “Coming”, a true call for the renunciation of war, through the strange meeting with the charred Iraqi soldier, and the latter’s war-deformed mouth, as well, perhaps, as through the allusion to Eliot, Harrison attempts to come to terms with his own “task” as a (war) poet, to which the soldier calls him. This might lead on to questioning the extent to which Eliot himself responded in his poetry to the two World Wars through which he lived and in which his country/ies were involved.

## Resumé

Cet article cherche à analyser le poème « *A Cold Coming* » de Tony Harrison, qui a trait à la Guerre du Golfe de 1991. Ces dernières années peu de poètes britanniques ont mis la guerre au cœur de leur inspiration poétique, du moins, pas autant que durant la seconde guerre mondiale. (En vérité, Harrison a écrit sur les deux guerres mondiales, la guerre froide et la guerre en Bosnie). A ses poèmes sur la guerre du golfe, et à « *An Initial illumination* » on doit ajouter le quatrain « *Baghdad Lullaby* », publié en avril 2003 par le *Guardian* qui deux mois plus tôt, en février 2003, avait déjà republié « *Coming* ». Comme on le voit les poèmes de Harrison sur la Guerre du Golfe restent tout à fait d’actualité. Publiés en première page du *Guardian* comme des « dépêches » ils eurent et continuent d’avoir, pour le moins le réalisme, – et l’horreur –, d’un reportage de guerre. Malgré cela, en les rééditant sous forme de recueils de poèmes, Harrison cherche à faire passer ces poèmes du

statut d'œuvres de circonstances éphémères à celui d'œuvres ayant une certaine pérennité et en cela à les inscrire dans la tradition littéraire.

### Keywords

Tony Harrison, War Poetry, *A Cold Coming: Gulf War Poems* (1991), *The Gaze of the Gorgon* (1992), Bosnia, Iraq, Dom McCullin, Helen Dunmore.

**Citation** *Arts of War and Peace* 1.2. (November 2013) **Can Literature and the Arts Be Irenic?**  
<http://www.awpreview.univ-paris-diderot.fr>

---

**B**orn in 1937, Tony Harrison has not only lived through but engaged with, in his poetry, many of the wars in which his country has been involved during his life-time: the Second World War, the Cold War, the Bosnian War and the first and second Gulf Wars. This alone makes him unique, I believe, among contemporary poets. While not being a combatant, his fruitful collaboration with the *Guardian* has enabled him to reflect on the first Gulf War, the war in Bosnia— where he was sent by the *Guardian*, which printed his Bosnian War poems on its front page—and, briefly, the second Iraq war, with a status somewhere between that of a war poet and a war reporter: these poems have all the adherence to objective truth, in as far as that is ascertainable, and immediacy, of a war report, combined with the literary freedom and creative subjectivity one associates with poetry. The poem “A Cold Coming” fits such criteria which in turn, incidentally, correspond to those given by Meyerhoff for the narrative process of a biographical or literary work, all the more relevant as Harrison is an autobiographical poet in many ways: for autobiography, the criteria according to Meyerhoff are “a subjective pattern of significant associations (poetry) and an objective structure of verifiable biographical and historical events (truth) (Meyerhoff 64). That said, Harrison’s “task” as a poet—that of any poet—is to surpass such limits.

“A Cold Coming” was first published in the *Guardian* on 18 March 1991 and reprinted first in the Bloodaxe pamphlet *A Cold Coming: Gulf War Poems* (1991) and then in Harrison’s 1992 collection *The Gaze of the Gorgon* (Bloodaxe). Its reprinting during the second Iraq war showed that Harrison’s poem had lost none of its impact. Of the *Guardian*’s first printing of the two Gulf War poems “An Initial Illumination” and “A Cold Coming”, the paper’s then features editor, Alan Rusbridger, wrote: “We carried the poems on the main editorial page since it seemed to us important that they be seen as a commentary upon current events and not as a piece of contemporary English Lit., which would undoubtedly have been the case had they been consigned to the arts or features pages” (Rusbridger 134). In 2003, they remained “a commentary on current events” and, in 2005, still remain so. With “A Cold Coming”, as so often, “‘war poetry’ turns out to be antiwar poetry” (Fussell 127).

Consisting of an interview with a charred Iraqi soldier by the poet initially apparent in the persona of a journalist (though the soldier addresses him as a poet soon enough), the poem is a powerful reminder that each combatant is an individual with his or her own views on his predicament, and not a mere cog in the war machine, despite all the propaganda aimed at suppressing the questioning of the war

effort: this seems to be as true of the Allies as of Saddam Hussein. The idea of a dialogue between two characters or personae matches the Greek-tragedy backdrop to the poem (the quotation from Sophocles) as well as the idea of war as a confrontation, a “theatre”. The journalist-poet goes out of his way to acknowledge his fear of the scorched, disfigures Iraqi: his microphone is “shaking” as he puts it close to the soldier. The latter does not pick the poet for the interview but rather “picks on” him, rewarding the poet with the recognition that Harrison, who has made much of his poetry from looking death and the dead in the eye, is eminently well-equipped to “record” the soldier’s “words”: the soldier asks him whether it isn’t his “sort of poet’s task” to lend speech to the soldier’s “frightening mask”. “Initial Illumination” also begins with the idea of recording, as Harrison begins the poem in a train, taking him to “record a reading”. At two points in “Coming”, the Iraqi soldier tells the poet to “press RECORD”. In this respect, bearing in mind the etymology of the verb “to record” as “to remember with one’s heart” (Latin, *cor*, *cordis*), the Iraqi soldier’s plea to the poet-journalist does not merely imply the use of technology for preservation purposes, but is an appeal to the listener’s emotions.

The poem is a true dialogue with the dead, a dialogue between the living and the dead. Alan Rusbridger, again, has discerned most perceptively what was at stake militarily for the reader of the poem: the latter “forced the reader starkly face-to-incinerated face with the unwilling soldiers for Saddam who were at the receiving end of the most awesome array of military hardware the world has ever seen” (Rusbridger 135). The Iraqi soldiers were flung into an unequal contest, one they could never hope to win. They were victims from the day Saddam used them to invade Kuwait. One journalist writes about the “turkey shoot” (US military for unopposed slaughter):

No one knows how many retreating Iraqis were slaughtered on the infamous ‘Highway of death.’ U.S. forces openly boasted about a ‘turkey shoot’ as they repeatedly strafed the line of people and vehicles traveling along the highway from Kuwait into Iraq.

‘From the ground, I witnessed the savage results of American air superiority: tanks and troop carriers turned upside down and ripped inside out; rotten, burned, half-buried bodies littering the desert like the detritus of years—not weeks—of combat,’ one U.S. Gulf War veteran recently wrote of the aftermath of the attack. ‘The tails of unexploded bombs, buried halfway or deeper in the earth, served as makeshift headstones and chilling reminders that at any moment, the whole place could blow.’ (Arnove)

The poem gives voice then to the enemy and the enemy’s view of the war—if the identity of the enemy is to be given by Harrison to the Iraqi soldier. The *Guardian* reprinted the poem on 14 February 2003. This demonstrated the wearying repetitiousness of the Allies’ war-mongering, already inscribed in the poem itself in several ways, notably the rhymes, several of which return in the poem, and above all in the superb ending, in which the speaker (the poetic persona) rewinds the tape and plays it, so that he hears “the charred man say:”. The end of the poem, including the final colon, lead the poem round and round in an endless loop, mirroring both man’s ceaselessly repeated recourse to war and the destruction of his fellows, and the necessity to listen over and over again to the message of such anti-war pronouncements, till war ends, if it ever does. Incidentally, such repetition is part of

the pathology of certain combat survivors (the charred Iraqi soldier is dead), as in this Viet Nam combatant's testimony, its language of play and replay strikingly similar to the end of Harrison's poem: "I mean there are booby-trap nightmares that speak for themselves. Instant replay nightmares where, asleep or awake, I play the same scene over and over again" (Hynes 219-220; one notes that Hynes's book, based on 1994 lectures, stops at the Viet Nam war). Behind the poem's title, a reference to the freezing of their own semen by three American servicemen in case they failed to return home alive, lies the theme of trans-generational warfare stressed by Harrison in his vision of the future, according to which children waving US or UK flags may be paving the way for "future wars" and their own deaths.

Stars and Stripes in sticky paws  
may sow the seeds for future wars.

Each Union Jack the kids now wave  
may lead them later to the grave.

The exuberant recourse to punning in the poem – the children "sowing the seeds" of future wars links up with the poem's title - a common technique in Harrison, as though, in typically English manner, there were no situation out of reach of linguistic instability and humour, is also symptomatic of Harrison's linguistic resilience in the face of death and provides a further ironic counterweight to the burnt-out Iraqi corpse. Given that the idea of dissembling lies behind irony (*eiron*, dissembler), it comes as no surprise that pretence, in the form of repeated imperatives addressed to the poet to "pretend".

Lie and pretend that I excuse  
my bombing by B52s,

pretend I pardon and forgive [ . . . ]

pretend they have the burnt man's blessing [ . . . ]

Pretend I've got the imagination  
To see the world beyond one nation.

That's your job, poet, to pretend  
I want my foe to be my friend.

These proleptic imperatives addressed to the poet are paradoxically designed to strip away the pretence in the interviewer's stance: the Iraqi "admits, and does not regret, the fact that he tortured in the name of Saddam, and that he cannot comprehend a humanist totality of 'spirit' or 'humanity' beyond his nation" (Rowland 79). There is nevertheless historical evidence to show that a feeling existed among the Iraqi rank and file that it was wrong to kill Muslim brothers in Kuwait, and that for this reason if for no other they were uneasy with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Besides this, the Iraqi's somewhat braggadocio stance adopted here—perhaps the pride of the defeated—should not make us forget that the Iraqis are among the most unwarlike and peace-loving peoples on earth, one that, despite appearances, has never had a culture of war in the way that some other nations have. All that said, the poem does

not excuse the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait any more than it does the American war on Iraq.

Harrison's poem stands as a quick-witted and immediate response to the actuality of the war. If there are later responses to the war, concerned with distance and reinterpretation, they might take into account such a testimony as this, by an Iraqi soldier:

How much I wish they [the Western Allies] had been by themselves but Muslims are with them and also for the right cause. They are all defending people whose rights were stripped, their honor smeared and their wealth plundered. Sure, they are not doing that out of principle but to protect their interests, yet the right cause is theirs. (Diary 17)

That said, the Iraqi's unyielding stance in the poem reinforces the poem's objectivity and removes any temptation to sentimentality. Even so, in this respect Harrison, it must be said, even or especially in his well-known poems about his parents, for example, has always been as tough-minded, or tough-hearted, as any modern poet. With regard to the poem's particular inspiration in a photograph, one is reminded of war photographer Don McCullin's search for objectivity: "You can't focus with tears in your eyes." This may be partly why Harrison portrays the dead soldier as bereft of regret for his torture and killing. But the fact of repeating the verb "pretend" so insistently reminds us that all art is artifice, a form of pretence whose "task," if it has one, is, paradoxically perhaps, to try to be adequate to the human suffering with which it engages. Hence Harrison's poem is not only an anti-war poem but also a reflection on the poet's—especially the non-combatant poet's—status or role in relation to what Eliot called the "situation" of war in his modestly-titled poem "A Note on War Poetry".

Linked to the dissembling theme, if that is what it is, is the equally conspicuous one of the mask. Though the reader may perhaps associate this idea more readily with a narrator than a character in a narration, the Iraqi soldier specifically alludes to his face as mask, the first instance of which, when the soldier is buttonholing the poet, has been mentioned above. He later refers to his face as "an armature half-patched with clay," a possible literary allusion to the classical origin of the persona as an actor's face coated in clay. When the soldier returns to the appearance of his face towards the end of the poem he calls it "this dumb mask like baked dogturds," an image through which Harrison overturns the higher register the preceding one with scatological shock tactics. The conspicuousness of the mask image serves to foreground the human being behind the soldier who, despite his lack of regret for what he did under Saddam's orders, is anything but dehumanised or mechanical. The Iraqi again refers to his forbidding, "charred" appearance, and all war victims are charred in one way or another. One might compare this with Helen Dunmore's "Poem on the obliteration of 100,000 Iraqi soldiers," partly inspired by the same photo as Harrison's poem, though it is the poet, and not the dead soldier, who utters the imperative: "Do not look away" from the "killed head". Dunmore's poem is far shorter than Harrison's, and she does not enter into the mask theme at all. But she shares with Harrison the insistence on the face's horrific aspect and the need for the spectator, the reader and, first of all, the poet, to look that horror full in the face if the poem is to be worth anything. In this respect, the journalist-figure in Harrison's poem is a version of the reader writ large, for it is a natural human reaction to turn away from excessive suffering, especially physical disfigurement—

though if both poets chose to write about the same horrifying photo, there is also a paradoxical attraction or curiosity involved. On the same theme, both poems also draw attention to the media focus on the war which, again paradoxically, can so easily lead to the spectator's holding at arm's length the true human gravity of war. Dunmore closes her poem since "God is counting" the silent ones hiding behind their newspapers. Incidentally, Harrison does not write of God in this way as he does not as it were use God as an element in the psychological settings of his poems. Harrison (or rather the charred Iraqi soldier) castigates the spectator of the war, who also "hides behind his headline: GOTCHA!" In the media age, the spectator's responsibility is easy to shrug off, especially when confronted with media like the British gutter press which makes no demands on the intelligence of its readership, though its Manichean approach is useful to Harrison poetically. Harrison's specific poetic form here—the dialogue—militates against mass consciousness, as indeed does any kind of lyric poetry, which arguable foregrounds the one-on-one individual writer-reader relationship more intensely than any other art-form. One thinks in this connection of Simone Weil's claim that "Every sentence that begins with 'we' is a lie." In "A Note on War Poetry," published in 1942, Eliot called mass consciousness, with a possibly ironic echo of Wordsworth's "emotion recollected in tranquillity", as "collective emotion / Imperfectly reflected in the daily papers" (Eliot 229). Though the subtlety of that "Imperfectly" is admirable, for poets like Harrison and Dunmore, such mass consciousness is, I think, not only reflected in but also engendered by the papers. The title of Dunmore's poem, including as it does the chilling word "obliteration," alludes to the barrage of statistics with which the media almost literally bombard spectators and readers till such figures lose any meaning for the latter. This is mirrored in the Harrison poem by the passage in which, losing concentration on the Iraqi's tale which he claims to have heard before, the poet-journalist tries to compare the number of sperm in one ejaculation to the number of the Iraqi population, and then to the number of dead:

Let's say the sperms were an amount  
so many times the body count,

2,500 times at least  
(but let's wait till the toll's released!).

This ridiculing of statistics which dehumanise human suffering is the obverse of the poem's concern to focus imaginatively on the plight of one particular Iraqi.

The freezing of the semen draws attention to the notion of perpetuation with which Harrison is much concerned. There is an analogy to be drawn between the freeze-storage of the semen and the Iraqi's keen desire not merely to tell the journalist character his tale but to have him tape it, presumably for posterity. The image of the taped interview can therefore be seen as in some sense the analogue of the Americans' sperm.

The poem is a combination—a more stark, almost voluntarily clumsy juxtaposition than blend—of narrative and lyricism, compassion and invective, direct observation and literary allusion, popular and even low culture and literary artifice, Greek tragedy and the Christian story. Written in iambic tetrameter rhyming couplets, sometimes called heroic couplets, the poem's metre is, in ironic contrast with its subject-matter, jaunty and potentially comic-sounding. Harrison introduces a gulf (*sic*) between the couplets with a blank, as though to highlight both the principle of duality at work in the poem (the two lines form a unit isolated from the

rest) and the different mirror-effects of the poem: the Iraqi describes his own war-scorched face as a “looking-glass” and “a mirror” in which the victors can admire the “gaze” of their own triumphant selves, their warriorlike-ness and triumphalism. As has been said, Harrison voices the poem through a Western journalist in Iraq. This voice gives way after ten lines to the direct “quotation” of the charred Iraqi soldier, burnt to death in the aforementioned turkey shoot, and the photograph of whose head Harrison had seen in the Observer newspaper. When the interview between the Western reporter and the Iraqi soldier is over, the former notes: “I gazed at him and he gazed back,” a phrase which, again, snugly fits the *Gaze of the Gorgon* collection title. Harrison’s prosody here is perhaps best seen, from the point of view of Harrison’s use of it in “Coming,” in relation to the metre’s frequent collocation with the notion of the mock-heroic rather than the heroic, above all in the Augustan era. Harrison is doing nothing here if not mocking the idea of heroism, male heroism in particular. There is perhaps a suggestion here that there may be no such thing as heroism in war, a sense possibly confirmed by Harrison’s quotation of a sentence of Simone Weil’s (from her “The Iliad, or the Poem of Force”) used as one of the epigraphs for the poem “The Gaze of the Gorgon”: “to the same degree, though in different fashion, those who use force and those who endure it are turned to stone.” The use of force of any kind, whether it be physical or otherwise, has as deadening an effect on the use as the victim. The poem concentrates in particular on the special force of technological warfare: “technological advances continually create new and better ways of killing” (Hynes 226). The Iraqi soldier rails articulately and almost wittily against “technophile” soldiers. In fact, the poem owes its impact partly to the combination of the canonical prosodic form and Harrison’s ultra-modern and absolutely specific vocabulary, especially that of modern warfare. This includes his awareness, shown by two mentions of the *Sun*, as indeed by his choice of casting the poem in the form of a media interview, that this was a media war as much as it was a military one. By first publishing the poem in the *Guardian*, Harrison shows that he was himself fighting that war. Harrison is alive to the poetic possibilities of such vocabulary, and adds to this a post-modern exploitation of idioms like “propaganda coup” (journalistic) or “kicking ass” (American slang). Harrison, then, breaks down the critical barriers between modernism and post-modernism by combining the Modernist poetic backdrop (Eliot and Yeats) and the post-modern, allusive, mixing of registers, cultural levels (the *Sun* and Sophocles) and styles.

In relation to the Modernist aspect, Harrison gives the poem-title’s source in the epigraph to the poem (Eliot’s “Journey of the Magi”). In the Harrison poem, it is the three US Marines who freeze their sperm (hence the poem title) back home to ensure their lineage in case they do not return from the war, who represent Eliot’s Magi. The Iraqi soldier complains that they barely have “such high tech” and so are “stuck with sex.” The Americans’ “high-tech” approach to procreation and killing cannot be matched by the Iraqis. Luke Spencer has perceptively written that the three Marines typify “not reverence or respect for life, but an arrogant desire to cheat death privately while inflicting it on a huge scale publicly” (Spencer 118). Their freezing of their sperm is indeed, as Spencer suggests here, a way of trying to create their own immortality. This is illogical or incoherent in terms of the faith that Harrison has each of the Marines in caricature fashion invoke as he thanks or praises God his semen is “safely stored”. On a general level, sex, sexual frustration and sexual aberration have always lain at the heart of warfare. Aristophanes has the women of Athens, led by Lysistrata, pledge to deny all sexual favours until their men agree to renounce warfare. Harrison’s poem is concerned with virility and the way in which war puts sexuality and gender to the test. Much of the poem’s pathos lies in

the Iraqi's longing to be beside his wife in order to engender "a child untouched by war's despair." Incidentally, Harrison's title and text also allude to Yeats's "Second Coming", with its inclusion of "Bethlehem" and "millennium". The allusion, albeit couched in the Harrison poem in obscene terms, deepens the apocalyptic nature of the poem. Such obscenity should draw our attention to what at one level or another is the obscenity of all war. The Yeatsian allusion adds a notable edge to the poem: Yeats's poem, written pessimistically in response to the Great War, predicts the disintegration of civilisation. Harrison's may be read along these lines, too, with the freezing of the sperm in this perspective a crude attempt to preserve what is finally doomed anyway. Yeats's non-Christian approach will be Harrison's: he uses the Marines' faith to mock them. The violence, arrogance and immorality of the new age can all be found in Harrison's poem. This new age would arise out of a culmination, a paroxysm, of horrible sensuality. Yeats also thought of the first lines of his poem in connection with what he viewed as "the growing murderousness of the world," which the first Iraq war well exemplifies (quoted Yeats 620). Lastly, Harrison's use of symbols such as fire, ice, the desert, the mirror and the mask, though some might find it a little heavy-handed, can be related to Yeats's interest in symbolism. The final part of the poem, when the interview is over and the tape-recorder turned off, sees Harrison plainly attempting a symbolic mode of expression: "a pilgrimage of Cross and Crescent".

As far as Eliot is concerned, it is worth remembering that he himself wrote his poetry against the background and in the aftermath of the two World Wars. His first volume of poetry was dedicated to his close friend Jean Verdenal, killed in 1915 on the Anglo-French expedition to the Dardanelles. It is true that in much of Eliot's poetry war rarely occurs directly, despite its reality during his lifetime. Of the *Four Quartets*, the first is dated 1935, while the last three bear the wartime dates 1940, 1941, and 1942. Yet the last three are not radically different from the first in style or even substance. Such a line as "East Coker"'s "The dancers are all gone under the hill" indeed has an enigmatic, Yeatsian, slightly apocalyptic ring to it, and might possibly allude to the War, but one can't be quite sure (Eliot 199). One would have to go back to these poems against the background of the War – as for example Helen Goethals does, rivetingly, with Larkin's early poems (Goethals 109-122) – in order to discern their exact relationship with the War. In the 600-odd pages of Kenneth Baker's 1996 *Faber Book of War Poetry*, to my knowledge the most comprehensive British published anthology of war poetry, not a single poem by Eliot is included (though it does contain one of Tony Harrison's Bosnian War poems). Nevertheless war now and then breaks explicitly out of Eliot's verse as in his post-WWI "Triumphal March", with its comic – or tragicomic - enumeration of different forms of artillery.

One should remember that in World War I the machine gun was an innovation, what Harrison's Iraqi soldier would describe as "high-tech". Eliot's extremely and comically precise detailing of the weaponry underscores the tragedy that all wars are, and anticipates the statistics poetically exploited by Harrison in "Coming". The only other poem of Eliot's that can genuinely be called a "war poem"—and a poem it is which cannot be considered as an "anti-war poem" in the way Harrison's "Coming" and so many others can—is "Defence of the Islands". The title of the poem "A Note on War Poetry" is self-explanatory, making it clear that the poem itself is not first and foremost a "war poem".

Harrison's "A Cold Coming" can perhaps be considered as relatively straightforward poetry – he was, after all, writing first of all for newspaper readers - with mainly recognisable vocabulary, and emotions expressed through metrically

uncomplicated, though by no means always regular, rhythms. Despite or because of this, as far as war is concerned, Harrison's poem puts us in touch with what Rimbaud called "rough reality" (*la réalité rugueuse*). "A Cold Coming" is literally and purposely elemental, the main elements exploited here being ice and fire and the symbolism to be gleaned from them. (Earth is perhaps sidelined by the profusion of technology, while water, a potential life principle in the midst of this deathscape, only appears indirectly in its frozen form). In this respect, "Fire & Ice", a poem from the same *Gaze of the Gorgon* collection is relevant. "Fire & Ice" is, incidentally, an explicit nod to Frost's practically eponymous "Fire and Ice": Frost's apocalyptic theme can be seen to underpin Harrison's two poems "Fire & Ice" and "Coming". Both the latter poems bring together themes like extinction, charring and freezing methods used as an attempt at perpetuation. In "Coming", the writer plays off the fire-destroyed Iraqi against the ice-stored sperm of the three US Marines. "Fire & Ice" freezes the now-extinct (since 16 June 1987, the date given by Harrison) dusky sparrow's genes "[i]n a Georgia lab," just as the three US Marines in "Coming" scientifically freeze their sperm. The bird's "mate" is "charred" in "glowing firelight". But given the way so much poetry since Modernism and *The Waste Land*—witness the "phial of frozen waste" in "Coming"—has become cut off from ordinary people since the heyday of Modernism, certain kinds of accessibility have their place and deserve intellectual recognition, of which Harrison has had much from both poets and critics. The critic Rick Rylance, after Harrison himself, links Harrison's accessibility to his awareness of the aforementioned need to look horror in the face (cf. Rylance 152). Hence "obscurity" is rejected and, in theatrical terms, audience and actor alike are exposed to daylight. Such light—and the repeated appearance of the "SUN" newspaper serves the poem's purpose and enables the clarity of vision which is one of the poem's most powerful features. His controversialness and ability to provoke reaction in this respect should, I think, give one pause for thought. This story of mutilation and dispossession, ringing wit Homeric overtone, of the charred Iraqi with half his face blown off, becomes a cipher for all who are victims of war, be they individual human beings or entire nations. Towards the end of the poem, however, Harrison looks to the day when "the World renounces War." With the capital letters—both these words previously appeared in the poem with lower-case initial letters—Harrison brings the poem to the climax it deserves. By saying that the frozen sperm will only thaw when war exists no longer, he implies the frozen sperm will never thaw, which seems to suggest that he believes war is inherent in human nature—a position familiar from a lot of poetry of past ages and seemingly adopted, in another context, by the First World War poet Edward Thomas. Yet the rugged sensitivity shown in the poem to war-caused suffering, make the poem a poem for peace. There again, in "Initial Illumination," the poet is "doubtful" as to the effectiveness of poetry to play any kind of role in the world of events and human conflict: poets are not, as Shelley would have had them, "the unacknowledged legislators of the world" and, as Kenneth Baker points out in his fine introduction to his Faber anthology, "no law or pronouncement [of a poet's] has ever prevented a war" (Baker xvi).

In "Initial Illumination," too, Harrison writes of man's tendency to "bellicose" triumphalism. Events of the past few years show that what was said of Franklin Roosevelt after World War Two, that he was in danger of winning the war but losing the peace, could equally be said about the Allies' involvement in the Gulf in the last millennium and this. And the main message of "A Cold Coming," too, is finally that in war there are no victors, only victims. Only the future will tell (though Harrison has made it clear he is not sure there will be) whether or not his poems will have

risen sufficiently above what Peter Forbes calls “the level of instant armchair indignation” to stand the test of time (Forbes 468).

2005

## **Bibliography**

Anon. *A Diary of an Iraqi Soldier*, analysis and commentary by Dr. Youssef Abdul-Moati, Centre for Research and studies on Kuwait: Almansoria [no date]. (Referenced as “Diary” in the body of the article, this remarkable document, in both human and historical terms, can be consulted at the Bodleian Library, Oxford).

Arnove, Anthony. “A Decade of US War on Iraq,” *Socialist Worker*, December 15, 2002, on-line.

Baker, Kenneth (ed). *The Faber Book of War Poetry*. London: Faber and Faber, 1996.

Byrne, Sandie (ed). *Tony Harrison: Loiner*. Oxford: OUP, 1997.

Dunmore, Helen. “Poem on the obliteration of 100,000 Iraqi soldiers” in *Poetry Review*, Summer 1992, p.10.

Eliot, T.S. *Collected Poems 1909-1962*. London: Faber & Faber, 1963.

Forbes, Peter (ed). *Scanning the Century: The Penguin Book of the Twentieth Century in Poetry* [1999]. . Penguin: Harmondsworth, 2000.

Fussell, Paul. *Thank God for the Atom Bomb, and other essays*. Summit Books: New York, London, 1988.

Goethals, Helen. “Philip Larkin and the Poetics of Resistance to the Second World War” in McKeown, Andrew, and Holdefer, Charles (eds), *Philip Larkin and the Poetics of Resistance*. Paris: L’Harmattan, 2006, 109-122.

Harrison, Tony. *The Gaze of the Gorgon*. Bloodaxe: Manchester, 1992.

Hynes, Samuel. *The Soldiers’ Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War*. Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1997.

Meyerhoff, Hans. *Time in Literature*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955.

Rowland, Anthony. *Tony Harrison and the Holocaust*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001.

Rusbridger, Alan. “Tony Harrison and the *Guardian*” in Byrne, Sandie (ed), *Tony Harrison: Loiner*. Oxford: OUP, 1997, 133-136.

Rylance, Rick. "Doomsongs: Tony Harrison and War" in Byrne, Sandie (ed), *Tony Harrison: Loiner*. Oxford: OUP, 1997, 137-160.

Spencer, Luke. *The Poetry of Tony Harrison*. New York, London: Harvester/Wheatsheaf, 1994.

Yeats, W.B. *The Poems*. Ed. Daniel Albright [1990]. London: Everyman, 2001.