

TONY HARRISON

‘Them and [uz]’

(for Professors Richard Hoggart and Leon Cortez)

I

αία, ay, ay! ... stutterer Demosthenes
gob full of pebbles outshouting seas –

4 words only of *mi* ‘art aches and ... ‘Mine’s broken,
you barbarian, T.W.!’ He was nicely spoken.
‘Can’t have our glorious heritage done to death!’

I played the Drunken Porter in *Macbeth*.

‘Poetry’s the speech of kings. You’re one of those
Shakespeare gives the comic bits to: prose!
All poetry (even Cockney Keats?) you see
‘s been dubbed [ʌs] into RP,
Received Pronunciation, please believe [ʌs]
Your speech is in the hands of the Receivers.’

‘We say [ʌs] not [uz], T.W.!’ That shut my trap.
I doffed my flat a’s (as in ‘flat cap’)
my mouth all stuffed with glottals, great
lumps to hawk up and spit out... *E-nun-ci-ate!*

II

So right, ye buggers, then! We’ll occupy
your lousy leasehold Poetry.

I chewed up Littererchewer and spat the bones
into the lap of dozing Daniel Jones,
dropped the initials I’d been harried as
and used my name and own voice: [uz] [uz] [uz],
ended sentences with by, with, from,
and spoke the language that I spoke at home.
RIP, RP, RIP T.W.
I’m *Tony* Harrison no longer you!

You can tell the Receivers where to go
(and not aspirate it) once you know
Wordsworth’s *matter/water* are full rhyme,
[uz] can be loving as well as funny.

My first mention in the *Times*
automatically made Tony Anthony!

'Timer'

Gold survives the fire that's hot enough
to make you ashes in a standard urn.
An envelope of coarse official buff
contains your wedding ring which wouldn't burn.

Dad told me I'd to tell them at St James's
that the ring should go in the incinerator.
That 'eternity' inscribed with both their names is
his surety that they'd be together, 'later'.

I signed for the parcelled clothing as the son,
the cardy, apron, pants, bra, dress –

The clerk phoned down: 6-8-8-3-1?
Has she still her ring on? (Slight pause) Yes!

It's on my warm palm now, your burnished ring!

I feel your ashes, head, arms, breasts, womb, legs,
sift through its circle slowly, like that thing
you used to let me watch to time the eggs.

'Punchline'

No! Revolution never crossed your mind!
For the kids who never made it through the schools
the Northern working class escaped the grind
as boxers or comedians, or won the pools.

Not lucky, no physique, too shy to joke,
you scraped together almost 3 weeks' pay
to buy a cast-off uke that left broke.
You mastered only two chords, G and A!

That's why when I've heard George Formby that I've wept.
I'd always wondered what the thing was for,
I now know was a plectrum, that you'd kept,
but kept hidden, in your secret condom drawer.

The day of your cremation which I missed
I saw an old man strum a uke he'll never play,
cap spattered with tossed dimes. I made a fist
round my small change, your son, and looked away.