TONY HARRISON – POET, PLAYWRIGHT, RADICAL CLASSICIST

Poet and playwright, inspiration and colleague, Tony Harrison died yesterday.

Widely acknowledged for his extraordinary poetic and dramatic verse, for his daring translation, he might also be remembered as an **archaeological poet** of classical antiquity – someone who habitually dug into the strata of Graeco-Roman (and

medieval) remains and reworked them not as past history, as inert heritage, but as living material for confronting the urgent tensions of our time.

In embracing the past as a way of tackling the present, he remains a constant reminder of the power of words to tell us about the world we all live in.

— Editorial *The Guardian*

Tony Harrison 1937–2025. Photo: *The Guardian*

In *The Guardian* – [Link] [Link] [Link]

He lived since the late 1960s in my home town, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and died there. Like him, from a working class background, I won a scholarship to grammar school and embraced classical languages in the most traditional of school curricula. Classical ruins in an industrial wasteland – the region was in free-fall economic decline in the UK of the 1970s and 80s. Roman remains at edge of more than one

empire. Horace in the Roman campagna, the theatre of Dionysus in Mediterranean sunshine – in a northern schoolroom! All pervaded by class tensions. At college, as I worked my way through archaeology and back to Classics, he was always there as a model of an engaged scholartistry able to deal with such stark and provocative contrasts [Link].

So much so, for me, that in my reflection of the discipline and its ideologies, *Classical Archaeology of Greece: Experiences of the Discipline* (1996) I end with Harrison (through his poem *Gaze of the Gorgon*) alongside Nietzsche as paradigm of effective history, after Foucault, or rather an effective applied archaeology that is always-already about the past-in-the-present [Link].

He did not inherit antiquity: he excavated, rewrote, and remade it. In his *Oresteia*, in his film-poems, in his northern inflections and clotted compound wordplay, Tony Harrison made classical ruin smell of coal and blood, of contemporary fracture and possibility.

He was what I wanted to be.

Aeschylus Oresteia, Translation by Tony Harrison. Director, Peter Hall. National Theatre, London 1981. Photo – IMDb.

Here are some short reflections.

Perhaps his signature classical intervention is his 1981 adaptation of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, directed by Peter Hall for the National Theatre, London. Harrison did not merely translate; he compressed, reworked, invented new compound words to suit Aeschylus's extraordinary language, to push the ancient into a more jagged, performative English rhythm. "Grudge-dogs," "blood-ooze" "Godgrudge and mangrudge ganging together / shepherded the blood-bride surely to Troy".

Harrison's plays often begin with the act of excavation or fragment – of recovering lost texts, myths, or sites. The *Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* (1990) dramatizes the discovery of papyri containing a satyr play fragment, blending the narrative of

archaeological recovery with satyr choruses bursting from crates.

The Labourers of Herakles (1995) stages a modern cement works against the phrynichid fragments of early Greek tragedy, treating the act of construction and destruction as coeval with the ancient violence.

His controversial poem *V* (1985) – sparked by the desecration of his parents' gravestones in Leeds – is raw, colloquial, visceral – phrases blasted into public life (widely broadcast and debated). This was probably the poem that first grabbed me in recognizing the experience of a northern classical voice aware of fractured class politics. In such works the graveyard, site becomes unstable: the ruins bleed into the modern, and vice versa.

Harrison's ventures in film and television extended that archaeology into the public square. The *Gaze of the Gorgon* (1992), just mentioned, used the Medusa myth and classical statuary metaphors to interrogate war, trauma, and elite silence in modern Europe.

Prometheus (1998) recast Prometheus as a working-class figure, merging myth and social collapse – the burning liver, the coalminers, the eagle, the fall of socialism. In so doing, Harrison insisted that poetry embedded itself not in ivory towers but in televisual, civic, cinematic spaces, addressing collective traumas.

His *Mysteries* cycle (1977) reimagined medieval religious plays with Yorkshire diction and aggressive alliteration. From his earliest collections, Harrison carried with him the disjunction between his working-class origins in Leeds and his classical education. He persistently inserted Yorkshire idioms, dialect rhythms, expletives, and class critique into his verse. The "Northern voice" that he embodied is never peripheral – it is grafted into classical rootstock.

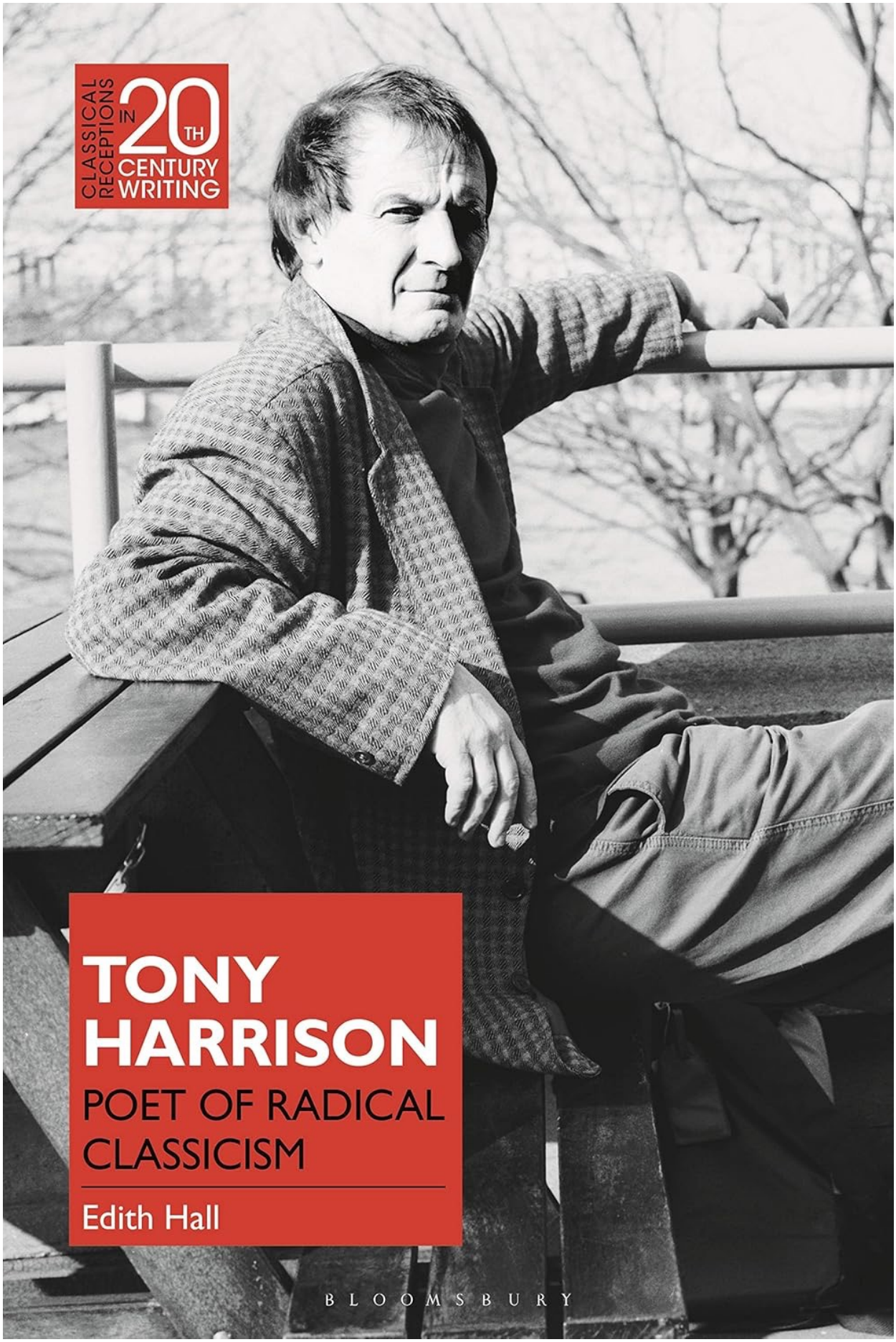
Upcycled antiquity in an archaeological sensibility

Harrison's relationship with antiquity was never that of pious reverence or antiquarian display. Instead, he treated ancient texts, myths, and fragments as raw material, resources – as residue to be excavated, picked over, recombined, and reactivated. In every mode (poems, verse drama, "film-poems"), he up-cycled what classical antiquity had left behind, reanimating it in sharp juxtaposition with contemporary actuality.

Edith Hall, in her sensitive reading of his works, *Tony Harrison: Poet of Radical Classicism* (2021) [Link], argues that Harrison pursued a radical classicism because he remade the classical public, contested, and socially engaged.

Neither orthodox Classicism nor Classical Reception. As Edith Hall shows, while he was steeped in classical scholarship, Harrison was not a classicist who treated antiquity as a stable inheritance or mirror to modernity. Harrison was less interested in a respectful echo than in collision and re-visioning. He saw his poetic imagination as inherently disruptive, open to metamorphosis.

He was certainly not, I would argue, involved in the *reception* of classical antiquity, the term that is so often used now to refer to different ways the historical-given of Classical antiquity is taken up by those who come after.


CLASSICAL RECEPTIONS IN 20TH CENTURY WRITING
TONY HARRISON
POET OF RADICAL CLASSICISM
Edith Hall
BLOOMSBURY

He was radical. I would add that his radicalism is not an external label but intrinsic – getting to the root of things. Elemental, even archetypal. Harrison's poetic roots do not anchor in a single tradition, but branch into vernacular voice, inscription, fragment, dialect, and public performance. To call him a radical classicist helps us see the connective rootwork running through his project.

Rhizomatic roots and the elements of poetry

Harrison's classical roots don't undergird a single stem, classical or otherwise. They are rhizomatic, sideways-spreading, modular, adaptive, associative. His classical roots reach into unexpected terrains (film, staging sites, everyday idiom), and to call him radical should not suggest a narrow politicized radicalism, but a kind of rooted dynamism, rootwork that sends shoots sideways.

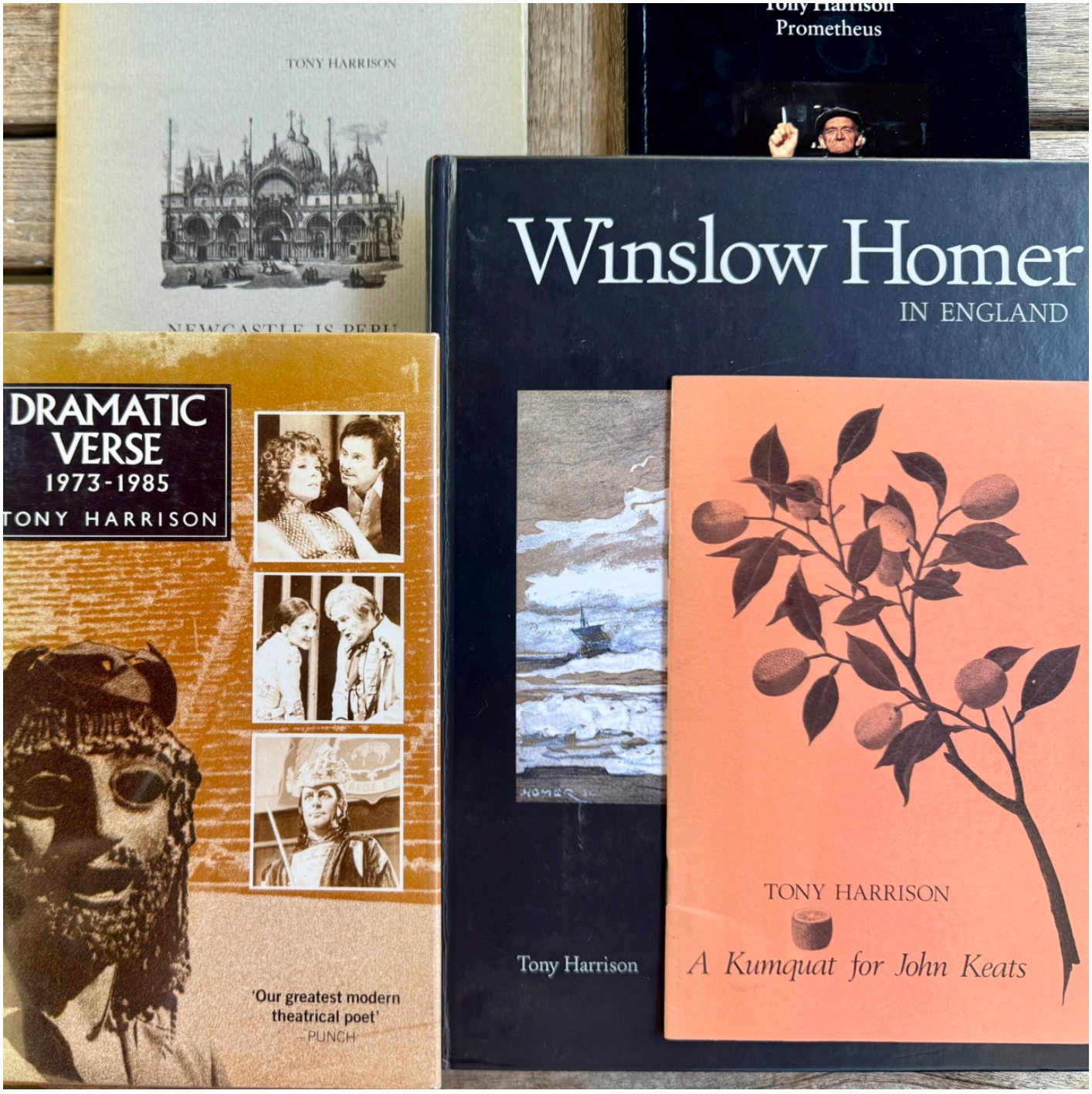
Class and the classical. One might say that Harrison's classicism is "open classism" – with class as a tense force, not a fixed identity, but an energy in one's agency. His excavation of the classical was never elitist; it was always layered with social urgency, rupture, vernacular blood. When an ancient chorus speaks in Yorkshire-inflected cadence, or when a Greek myth is twisted to slake modern injustices, his is a practice of radical reworking, not passive reception.

Empedocles used the term *rhizōmata* to refer to the four fundamental "roots" or elements – fire, air, water, and earth – that constitute the world and are in a state of eternal flux, combining and separating under the influences of Love and Strife – a system of energies. Such roots are the basic components of the universe, from which all things, including living beings, are formed. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari described the dynamics of rhizomatic deterritorialization. John Berger, another great radical, held that poetry is an erotic field of connection and association. Walter Benjamin and Bertholt Brecht forged past-present actualities in historiography and theatre, rubbing history against the grain of classical historicism.

In *Experiencing the Past* (1992) [Link] I connected such rhizomatics, poetics, erotics, Benjamin's kairotic *Jetztzeit*, Brecht's performative intervention and provocation in an outline of the archaeological imagination. This was made possible by reading Tony Harrison. Such a model and inspiration touched also my collaborations with Mike Pearson and Cliff McLucas of Brith Gof Theatre.

Haearn – A New Prometheus. Set in a disused industrial works in south Wales. Mike Pearson and Cliff McLucas, Brith Gof Theatre 1992 [Link]

Aeschylus Persians. Theatre/Archaeology. Mike Pearson Director. National Theatre Wales 2010.



Some works by Tony Harrison from my shelves – such expansive scope