

## WORDS AND THINGS: TONY HARRISON'S POETIC STAGE

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In 1977, after having written a version of Molière's *Le Misanthrope* and Racine's *Phèdre* for the National Theatre, Tony Harrison created a radically different work for the stage, *Bow Down*, with which he began to walk the path towards a form of theatre increasingly independent, and experimental. Experimental theatre has traditionally been the dominion of directors, rather than playwrights or literary writers, furthermore, the 20<sup>th</sup> century has witnessed an intellectual war between those who claimed Theater's independence as an art, experimental innovators for the most part, and those who wanted to retain it within the domain of literature. Tony Harrison, a poet, a writer of literature, enters the territory of experimental theatre ready to put his words at the service of the stage, rather than the stage at the service of his words, in this way he manages to create a form of theatrical poetry through the leveling the verbal and the non-verbal. This article aims at examining some of the ways in which Harrison achieves a leveling of the poetic and the purely theatrical.

With the birth of experimental theatre in the 20th century, the main worry of many directors was no longer words and plot structure, as it had been until that moment, but the construction of what could be defined as the *sensory text*, which implied the artistic articulation of independent non-verbal forms of communication, such as body expression, costumes, ritual movements, etc. For those who were at the moment the avant-garde directors, the playwright's text was of secondary importance compared with the ceremonial dimension of the real-time encounter between actors and audience (Ubersfeld 1989: 14).

Antonin Artaud was one of the first men of theatre who theorized this shift<sup>1</sup> of interest, and who claimed the preeminence of the *director's text* over the playwright's. In his view, traditional western theatre had too long betrayed the very concept of theatricality, which for him had to do with the conveyance of contents that cannot be expressed by means of words.

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<sup>1</sup> The list of contributions has been quite large, though; in 1909, Fuchs already wrote that a re-conquest of the theatrical had to be implemented at the expense of literature (1909: 17), G. Craig considered dancing rather than words as the proper poetry for the stage (Walton 1983: 57), etc. A fine treatment of the subject can be found in J. A. Sánchez (1999: 7-43).

Comment se fait-il qu'au théâtre, au théâtre du moins tel que nous le connaissons en Europe, ou mieux en Occident, tout ce qui est spécifiquement théâtral, c'est-à-dire tout ce qui n'obéit pas à l'expression par la parole, par les mots, ou si l'on veut tout ce qui n'est pas contenu dans le dialogue (et le dialogue lui-même considéré en fonction de ses possibilités de sonorisation sur la scène, et des exigences de cette sonorisation) soit laissé à l'arrière-plan ? (1964: 53)

The real language of theatre was not made up of words nor literature, but it was a *physical language* the director had to articulate, master and turn into a form of effective communication. This shift made possible such experiments as Beckett's *Act Without Words* (1957), or his famous show *Breath*, where a series of lights were the only actors on the stage.

Words could still play a role in Artaud's theatre, but they would be valued in a radically different way. The acoustic properties of the signified, together with the paralinguistic dimension of utterances were exploited by Artaud, who believed that the very sound of words, regardless of their meaning, could express an unlimited range of otherwise unspeakable affections as well as they could function as magical spells: "c'est enfin considérer le langage sous la forme de l'*Incantation*" (1964: 67). The word on the stage was to overcome a process of *desemantization* to become theatrical.

The role of the so-called *non-verbal codes*<sup>2</sup> in theatre has traditionally been considered one of *complementarity*. In this sense, intonation, facial expression, make up, costume, etc. could be considered codes which complement characters; the whole set, with its varied items, could be said to complement the dialogue; lights and sounds could be seen as complementary of the action<sup>3</sup>; to sum it up, the physicality of the show was thought and felt to be complementary and properly attuned to a literary product. Experimental theatre questioned this *complementarity* function establishing that every object on the stage could operate in an autonomous fashion not oriented to underline, emphasize or materialize the properties of textual structures such as words, characters or actions, but becoming the very nucleus of its own meaning.

What we face here could be described as a sort of 'War of Independence' led by some avant-garde directors, who struggle to move out of the realm of literature,

<sup>2</sup> Talking about non-verbal codes is theoretically quite problematic, since the fact that it is possible to produce effects and even to convey certain semantic contents, however nebulous, without the use of words, does not allow for the consideration that this form of communication is subject to real, systematized codification strictly speaking. We will still use the term non-verbal codes in a conventional manner to talk about the use of sensorial data for communicative, effective or affective purposes.

<sup>3</sup> F. Gutiérrez (1993: 153-157) organizes the traditional non-verbal codes into four categories based on the concept of complementarity: complementation of characters, complementation of dialogue, complementation of action, and complementation in general. He admits that this distinction works for traditional theatre, but not so much for experimental theatre.

and to found a new place of their own, to constitute an independent art, different in nature from that of novels and poems, and much closer and akin to ritual, ceremony or ballet. This claim has proved overtime to be productive and enjoyable<sup>4</sup>; but it has not prevented literature writers, such as Tony Harrison, from having a say on the experimental stage. The question is, how does an artist like Harrison, whose business is precisely words, deal with a form of art, experimental theater, which considers words as a necessary evil? If some sort of compromise is possible, and Harrison's plays have proved it is, it is because the nature of Artaud's art is quite compatible with and even quite similar to that of that poetry.

The *desemantization* of words claimed by Artaud is a concept which is not entirely alien to poetry. The essential line of thought which derives from Kruszewski and from Jakobson's Poetic Function, made it possible for the Spanish scholar-poet Jenaro Talens (1978: 65-109), to write of *desemantization-formalization* in poetry when there is a co-opposition of elements which are structurally equivalent; and this *Repetition and Rhythm Principle*, was for him the basic constructive mechanism of poetic language (repetition of refrains, of syllables in rhyme, of sentence structure in formal parallelisms, of schematic properties in metaphors and comparisons, etc.). In the words of Talens:

La combinación de elementos idénticos conlleva un valor específico: la repetición de un mismo elemento, si no elimina, cuando menos casi ahoga su significado (de ahí que la excesiva repetición de una frase acabe por convertirla en absurda); esto a nivel de lengua natural. En el lenguaje poético (literario en general), sin embargo, el procedimiento va más allá, y si, por una parte, se da una formalización (desemantización) de los elementos repetidos, por otra se produce una semantización de los engarces que los unen, esto es, el significado pasa a pertenecer al hecho mismo de la repetición. (1978: 77)

So in poetry, the desamentization of the linguistic structures by repetition causes a *semantization* of the very phenomenon of repetition, and this is precisely one of the ways in which poetic words manage to express contents beyond those assigned by the code; separated from their meanings, words stop being words and become *things* or *events* to be interpreted by their presence and existence in a certain moment and place. The principle can be properly expressed in pragmatic terms: repetition, which is unexpected and apparently irrelevant, must be made somehow relevant by our pragmatic competence, and we do so by turning it significant of something: the apparently absurd fact of repeating structurally equivalent linguistic segments may become more meaningful than the linguistic segments themselves.

<sup>4</sup> Ubersfeld (1989: 14) considered, already in 1978, that radical departures from the text were sinking into dullness. Whereas radicalization is rarer nowadays, past experiments have left their footprint on today's theater. (We cite the Spanish translation of her work *Lire le Théâtre*, Paris, Editions Sociales, 1978).

Right on the opposite extreme, the co-opposition of structures which are different is an obvious maxim for the construction of a plot, where there needs to be evolution and change, a path that lets the reader slide smoothly towards *denouement*. Such is the *discursive mode of composition* (Talens 1978: 74). Turning now our glance back to experimental theatre in its war against literature, against words and plots, we realize that we can also understand it as a war against alienating<sup>5</sup> discursive language, and a priming of poetic principles of composition with non verbal elements, a substitution of ‘creating poetic effects and meanings’ for the traditional ‘telling a story *vividly*’. In this war, poetry, with its constitutive tendency to repetition, formalization, and with its long acknowledged goal of speaking the unspeakable, becomes an ally rather than a foe.

In this sense, Tony Harrison’s theatre is as poetic as it is anti-discursive; especially the theatre the poet designed, and often directed, between *Bow Down* (1977) and *Medea: a sex war opera* (1985). This corpus constitutes for some critics the most lyrical work the poet created for the stage, for others, like P. Levi, it is just a ‘musical distraction’(1991:163). It is significant that Levi’s interest in Harrison’s theatre focuses mainly on works of discursive nature, that is, those in which there is a predominance of plot and dialogue, and are, therefore, traditionally *dramatic* (although Levi, quite unwisely, calls it “legitimate theatre” (1991:163), what lets us wondering whether he can possibly consider that plays such as *Bow Down* constitute forms of ‘*illegitimate theatre*’!). In the *Bow Down Group* (*Bow Down* (1977), *Yan Tan Tethera*(1983), *The Big H* (1984)), it is not the stories themselves that matter, at least no so much as *the act of telling those stories* and the moral implications of the different *tellings*.<sup>6</sup>

The language of the plays in the *Bow Down Group* makes significant use of the principle of repetition for the purpose of creating ritual, spellbounding effects. *Bow Down*, for instance, consists of the continuous repetition by a chorus of the different versions of the famous *Ballad of the Two Sisters*. Once and again as the show proceeds there is an obsessive return to the first line of the ballad: “There were two sisters in a bower”, and to the refrain “I’ll be true to my love/ if my love will be true to me”. Furthermore, at a certain point the performance becomes ritualistic to the extent that it recalls some sort of responsorial psalm:

“CHORUS 2 enters the circle, silences the music and recites a ballad, with the CHORUS responding with refrains and half-lines: There were two sisters in a bower / Bow down, bow down, bow down . . .”(1973: 129).

<sup>5</sup> I use the term ‘alienating’ quite aware of its implicit allusion to Brecht’s Epic Theater. Brecht’s was certainly a war against the sedative effects of the well-made play; as a collateral effect of his search, he was one of the innovators who made clear that essential difference between the dramatic and the theatrical. A definition of the Epic and its contrast with the Dramatic can be found in J. Willet’s anthology (1964: 179:205).

<sup>6</sup> This is definitely a feature that brings the plays of this group close to the concept of Epic Theatre.

This ritualistic mechanism is repeated in *Yan Tan Tethera*:

CHORUS OF HORNED WILTSHIRE SHEEP.  
 This is the sound of the bells folk hear in the valley...  
 SHEEP 1.  
 When I run with a dry throat to drink from the dewpond.  
 CHORUS  
 This is the sound of the bells folk hear in the valley...  
 SHEEP 2.  
 When the thick grass of the downs is flooded with sunshine.  
 CHORUS  
 This is the sound of the bells folk hear in the valley...  
 SHEEP 3.  
 When my hooves go slith'ring over the slipp'ry chalk slopes.  
 CHORUS  
 This is the sound of the bells folk hear in the valley... [...] (1973: 297)

The principle of repetition affects units larger than the word, the sentence or the verse-line; in *Bow Down* and *The Big H*, it is a whole narrative structure that is repeated with slight but significant variations. In the former, the same ballad is repeated in many of its versions; the different variants can be easily classified in two groups. All versions have a similar narrative structure: one sister, the Dark Sister, kills another, the Fair Sister, to marry her lover, later to be punished for that crime. But the different versions suggest different features for the construing of the actants. In some versions the Fair Sister appears as vain, conceited and even cruel:

FAIR SISTER.  
 Wash your hair in the salt sea brine  
 it will never be as fair as mine.  
 Even if your hair was gold  
 you'll always live alone and cold.  
 Wash yourself as white as bone  
 but you'll always live alone.  
 Wash yourself as white as flour  
 you'll be one sister in a bower. (1973: 132)

And the suitor is represented as a flirt:

CHORUS 7. He courted the eldest wi glove and ring,  
 CHORUS 8. But he loved the youngest above a'thing .  
 CHORUS 7. He courted the eldest with brotch and knife,  
 CHORUS 2. But he loved the youngest as his wife.  
 CHORUS 7. He brought the eldest ring and glove,  
 CHORUS 8. But the youngest was his ain true-love. (1973: 129)

In these versions of the ballad, both the Fair Sister and the Suitor pay for their vanity and betrayal, and the Dark Sister, however terrible, is construed as a revengeful Medea-like heroine. But in other versions the Dark Sister's crime emanates directly from her sinister nature; she is the one who plays unfair in an otherwise fair competition. So some versions moralize against vanity, and other versions moralize against crime and envy. In trying to make sense of the play and its narrative incoherence<sup>7</sup>, the plot becomes of secondary importance, and the very fact of *moralizing literature* emerges, allowing us to conclude that the whole play reflects about literary products and its moralizing potential. Harrison's war in this case, as in many others, is not so much a war against literature as a war against its textual illusions, and he fights this war by deconstructing the stories, showing its many contradictory versions, and tracking its *uses* in several languages and dialects. In doing so, the poet situates himself outside the realm of literature proper, to create some sort of meta-literary product. The story is no longer a narrative structure prepared to captivate an audience, it is objectified, that is, it becomes a *thing* to reflect upon.

In *The Big H* (1984), the same narrative structure is repeated three times with slight but significant variations: the setting being a classroom, the teacher announces an exam → the students complain → the teacher turns into Herod → students turn into the Prel → Herod/ Teacher praises the criminal deeds of his soldiers/ students → the last of the soldiers stands out for his difficulties in pronouncing the glottal fricative → the soldier is punished → the mothers complain. Once the first two sequences have been performed as perfect structural equivalents, the last sequence completely lacks dramatic tension, not that it really aimed at being dramatic. The repetition is established as something of an *operative convention*,<sup>8</sup> and denouement no longer appeals. Again, this clearly epic technique invites the treatment of the story as a *thing* which requires a symbolic interpretation. It is not the story of a particular child what we have here, but a reflection about culture and power, and about how culture, through its institutional propagation, is used as a tool to legitimate power. The lack of culture of the last student turns him

<sup>7</sup> Incoherence which inevitably derives from the episodic nature of the show, and from the fact that those episodes are not logically connected. Again, a feature that reminds us of Brechtian theatre.

<sup>8</sup> P. Pavis (1998: 95) defines the operative convention as that which 'is presented overtly as an artificial tool to be used for a few minutes' (my translation). In *Bow Down* and *The Big H*, the repetition of a narrative structure happens continually all along the performance, so that it cannot be an operative convention in Pavis' terms. However, the other group of conventions described by this author, the characterizing conventions, are defined as 'those which help turn incredible conventions into credible ones' (my translation). With his technique I very much doubt that Harrison be concerned with verisimilitude, I would rather think that he is inviting us to play a very well known game: 'look at the two almost identical pictures and look for the differences (and the similarities)'. It is because I perceive this convention as playful that I tend to regard it as an operative convention.

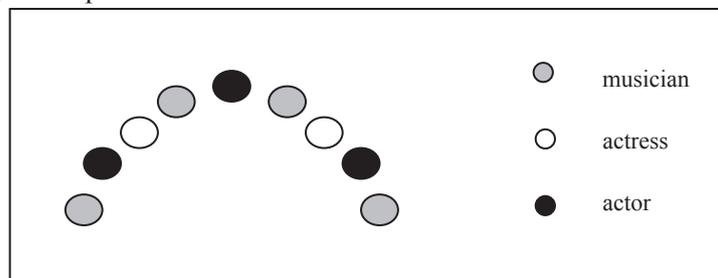
into a victim, while succeeding in education opens the door to power and domination. Impossible not to mention here Arthur Scargill's famous quotation, with which Tony Harrison would open, some years later, his long poem *v*: "My father still reads the dictionary every day. He says that your life depends on your power to master words".

In *Bow Down*, a typically experimental piece, Harrison makes a sophisticated use of non-verbal codes. Furthermore, the physical text and the verbal text go hand in hand in the creation of spellbinding effects which remind us of Artaud's theorization:

The cast, positioned in a circle, recite, sing, chant, intone, hum, keen, sway, mime, act, dance; even their breathing becomes part of the rhythm and the effect. There are masks, ritual movements, abrupt cries; the integration of various elements [...] is harmonious. (Astley 1991: 195)

Movements, spatial relations and objects on the stage do not aim at seeming real, and do not aim at complementing verbal action in the traditional sense. These elements answer to elaborate *physical grammars* and most of them are clearly symbolic. The loss of the traditional complementary function together with the loss of verisimilitude continually triggers interpretation to the extent that we can clearly talk of a physical text not subordinated to verbal text. The testimony of Stephen Edwards is most significant at this point; Edward praises Harrison's openness as a director; even when his field as a poet is words, his aim is not to ornate words with music, but to collaborate with the composer in the search for a new form in which words and music are leveled, "a conglomerate of the best of both worlds" (Astley 1991: 163). This search is filled with the same nostalgia that moved most innovators of the theater during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a yearn for the primitive forms of social and community theatre.

This yearn explains the essentialism of the stage in *Bow Down*, where there is no decoration, nor set, nor objects other than the very actors who create different spaces with their positioning and their movements. But even here, we detect what we might call a poetic construction of the stage. The actors sit on a semicircle which might be reproduced as follows:



There is symmetry and repetition in the positioning of actors on the stage, and this proxemic structure reproduces the dialectic relation that exists between the two sisters, and the two main versions of the story. The actresses that perform the roles of Dark sister and Fair sister step out into the circle from opposite sides. The first movements they perform together mimic their death, anticipating both the ending of the ballad as well as the leveling of the two main versions: both are first seen as victims of an aggressive process.

The semicircle is quite successfully exploited in terms of meaning, and it contributes to the consideration of the ballad as a *thing* to study and observe. The figure separates two spaces, one for fiction, the inside of the circle, and another for reflection, the outside of the circle. The actors become actants in the ballad anytime they step into the inner space; and anytime they step out, they become the tellers of the story, or more properly, actants in the process of telling a story. The figure of the circle then is a visual representation of a conflict between the story and the act of telling or, rather, using it. Inside the circle, the narrative structure is *something* to look at from the outside, very especially from the angle of the audience, who actually closes the semicircle.

Action does also take place outside the circle, though always connected to the circle in several ways:

FAIR SISTER.

O...

O... sister...

O... sis...

O...si...

*At her final cry CHORUS 2 becomes the BLIND HARPER who catches her cry and prolongs it with it's own:*

BLIND HARPER.

....ster

*Then he begins to walk round the outside of the choral circle composing a ballad. He is walking the sea-shore. He seems to have one foot in the water and one foot on the sand. As he feels the water deepen he evades it with a dexterity that has come from centuries of doing the same thing. His wavering "dance" follows the ebb and flow of the tides. He has been following the Northern coasts, searching, listening. His "dance" defines the contours of the continents. He mutters fragments of the Ballad and as he passes each of the CHORUS they take up a pitch from his mutter. (127)*

This elaborate choreography is at least enigmatic. The movements of the Blind Harper outside the circle make no contribution to the action of the ballad itself. It is impossible to understand these movements as complementary of any of the actions of the main characters in the ballad, but nevertheless, being obviously elaborate and lengthy, they become the only focus of attention. We, both as audience and readers, find it necessary to infer their meaning. Important cues are provided by the stage

directions, but the separation between the narrative processes of the ballad as fiction and the process of representation exterior to the ballad, which has been already pointed out, gives all the necessary information to the audience, who have no access to the written stage directions. The Blind Harper represents the universal bard, the class of the bards, who picks the story somewhere, perhaps from reality, and both owns it and propagates it around the world (“*catches her cry and prolongs it with it's own*”). The bard shares the story, but he adds his own variations, and interpretations of the narrative facts. Anytime a new version comes into play, the Blind Harper reappears and initiates the process. So even when there is action outside the circle, we are still in the meta-literary domain, beyond words.

Also inside the circle, it is not uncommon to find scenes in which the non-verbal codes, especially proxemic and kinesic, gain their independence from dialogue. But not only the movements on the stage resist subordination to the dialogue, they even manage to subordinate verbal codes. At a certain point in one of the versions of the ballad, a miller and a servant find the drowned body of the fair sister, and proceed to sexually abuse it and to strip it of its jewels. If we try to read this part jumping over the stage directions, understanding of what is going on would require quite a lot of inference. However, if we read only part of the stage directions we manage to follow the whole scene:

body [FS] becomes all fluidity  
 body collapses  
 [M'D] coming to fetch water  
 goes to water. . . discovers body  
 [MIL, SERV] come out to see body  
 [SERV] bends down as if to kiss  
 as [GHOST] rises she sings note  
 [SERV] mimes kissing body  
 GHOST behind touches her lips  
 SERVANT recoils  
 [MIL,SERV] study body  
 MILLER removes ring from hand of body/ throws it in bucket  
 GHOST sings 'prove true, my love prove true to me' each of the eight rings  
 pinging on each word'  
 [MIL, SERV] remove upper garments / stare at breasts  
 [SERV] snips off nipple which [MIL] catches and throws it in bucket  
 Ping. Then another. Ping!  
 [GHOST] touches each of her breasts in turns and sings  
 [MIL] pointing to body's navel  
 [SERV] scoops out navel and throws it into bucket. Ping!  
 [GHOST] touches her navel and sings  
 [SERV] looks at body dreaming erotic dreams  
 [SERV] dreamily  
 They lift up legs and pull off drawers

[SERV] has an orgasm during which the GHOST sings  
 [SERV] fishes his hand into drawers/ pulls out string of pearls  
 [MIL] pointing to between body's legs  
 [SERV] feels and reveals clitoris  
 [SERV] begins to cut off clitoris  
 GHOST touches her groin... sings  
 SERV vomits into bucket  
 MIL picks up bucket/ tosses contents into auditorium  
 Shower of cellophane confetti like slow-motion shower of confetti  
 MIL to audience  
 GHOST sings behind them  
 MIL, SERV stare at body  
 They are transfixed staring at body  
 they see her  
 They run back to places in CHORUS  
 Instrumental scream  
 GHOST speaks to audience  
 (135-140)

The scene certainly belongs more to a theatre of actions than to a theatre of words. And still, words are there, beautifully disposed in perfectly rhyming verses, ready to yield its dominion to action in an attempt to extract “the best of both worlds”, in this case, words and actions.

Harrison's poetic imagination goes beyond the use of words, and he manages to translate traditional rhetoric figures into physical language. There are many instances of this in a play such as *Bow Down*. The immoral actions of the miller and the servant, for instance, are curiously ambiguous. In poetry its quite usual that words, sentences or whole poems have more than one meaning, and this fact has traditionally been considered as inherent to the poetic nature of texts. The miller is verbally admiring the jewels of Fair sister, but he is, *actually*, tearing off parts of her body instead of taking the jewels. The servant, who admires the beauty of the body, takes the mutilated bits, once erotic, and throws them in a bucket where they sound like jewels falling. The movements on the stage have three values at one, they represent stripping, sexually abusing and mutilating, all at once. Harrison's well known style is perfectly translated into visual language, with that readily identifiable mixture of the vulgar, the cruel, the humorous and the beautiful:

SERVANT. (*Dreamily*)  
 The loveliest lady I've ever seen.  
 MILLER.  
 Ay, but her flesh is turning green.  
 Best get off the rest of her clothes  
 before she starts to decompose.  
 Take her legs. Up with her bum.  
*They lift up the legs and pull off the drawers.*

SERVANT. I... I... I... I'm going to come...  
 SERVANT *has an orgasm during which the GHOSTsings:*  
 Sing I die, sing I day.  
 MILLER.  
 Fish your hand into your drawers.  
 Anything you find there's yours.  
 SERVANT *fishes his hand into his drawers, and pulls out a very long string of pearls.*

In Tony Harrison's theater, very especially within the *Bow Down Group*, there is a leveling of the verbal and non-verbal modes of communication. This leveling means that the non-verbal is articulated and the verbal is objectified. When the non-verbal is independently organized as an autonomous, rather than complementary, expressive substance, and forced into symmetry or other kinds of repetition, essential meanings may be transmitted without the use of words on the stage, and *physical grammars* are created that may even allow for the incorporation of rhetorical figures. On the other hand, the verbal text is subjected to different types of repetition, from the ritual repetition of words to the conventional repetition of narrative structures and structurally equivalent episodes. It is, therefore, the very application of the poetic mode of composition that brings about this leveling of the verbal and the non-verbal. As the non-verbal becomes *language* and language becomes *object*, both modes of communication are intertwined and confused, and a hybrid form emerges. This new unit is mastered and controlled by Harrison in a way that the result is a poetic performance which has the characteristic harrisonian taste and style. The poet's own words come to mind now: "Poetry is all I write, whether for books, or readings, or for the National Theatre, or for the opera house and concert hall, or even for TV" (Astley 1991: 9); and, true to this almost proud determination, it is also poetry, *theatrical poetry*, what he designs for the stage.

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