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The canary in the coal mine: Tony Harrison and the poetics of coal, climate, and capital

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that Tony Harrison's poetic studies of deindustrialised Yorkshire anticipate Jason Moore's eco-Marxist critique of the neoliberal energy economy. Critical discussion of Tony Harrison's poetry has focused on the characteristic stances and techniques by which the poet first established his canonical standing, essaying his uneasy class consciousness and explosive use of regional dialect. Precious little attention has been paid to the ecological concerns that have become an increasingly integral element of Harrison's work. In the long narrative poem *v.* (1984) Harrison responded to the hard-fought Miners' Strike (1984–5), protesting the disenfranchisement of the British industrial working class. In some of *v.*'s more speculative lines, he countenanced the possibility of coal's eventual 'exhaustion'. In the film poem *Prometheus* (1998), he appraised the Miners' Strike from the distance of a decade, anchoring the poem in the perspective of a cancer-ridden coal miner. In the image of a dying, chain-smoking, Prometheus, Harrison cast the peculiar ironies of Britain's ongoing coal dependency in particularly profound relief. This paper finds that the evolution of Harrison's lyric voice captures much of the underlying music of British society, as it confronts the legacy of industrialisation, as history closes in, unremittingly, on capital's socioecological endgame.

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As literary criticism belatedly turns to confront the reality of climate change, and as scholars attempt to draw 'attention to catastrophic events that are low in initial spectacle',¹ it is surely more than past time to heed Britain's own canary in the coal mine, Tony Harrison. Critical discussion of Harrison's poetry has focused on the characteristic stances and techniques by which the poet first established his canonical standing, essaying his uneasy class consciousness and explosive use of regional dialect. Precious little attention has

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been paid to the ecological concerns that have become an increasingly integral element of Harrison's uncommonly ambitious poetic project. In the years following Thatcher's neoliberal revolution, from the vantage offered by northern England's grassed-over slag heaps, Harrison trained a melancholy eye on the global immiseration of land and labour. The poet's careful attention to the legacies and landscapes of post-industrial Leeds returned penetrating insights into the structures of plunder and profit that define the global economy as a whole. In the course of his inquiries into coal, class, and capital, Harrison emerged as songbird and sentinel of the industrial north, celebrating and lamenting the last stand of the British industrial working class, and signalling the fatal ecological tendencies of the fossil-fuel-dependent global economy.

Today, the British economy's ongoing dependence on coal power tends to be disavowed, as it produces an awkward kink in the nation's narrative arc. Yet there was a time not too distant when coal bulked large in the national imagination. In the wake of Margaret Thatcher's re-election, a newly emboldened Tory Party targeted the coal industries, appointing infamous union breaker Ian MacGregor as head of the National Coal Board. Under MacGregor, the National Coal Board announced that it would close 20 'unprofitable' pits, axing some 20,000 jobs. Following the hard-fought but unsuccessful Miners' Strike of 1984–5, privatisation unfolded apace, devastating many of the nation's once close-knit mining communities. The decline of British coal defined the era, and became synonymous with the advent of neoliberal Britain, as the government saw off the labour movement, and orchestrated the rise of the City of London and the financialisation of the British economy.

Few contemporary writers have remained as obsessed with the period as Harrison. In the aftermath of New Labour's election, Harrison's preoccupations were read as an 'unreconstructed' curiosity. As John Lucas writes, 'Harrison [was] accused, by Craig Raine among others, of making too much of a fuss about working-class deprivation, of loss, of suffering.'² Yet his long narrative poem *v.* (1984), reflecting on the disenfranchisement of the British industrial class, remains a landmark in the cultural history of the period. In it, coal is pictured as a product of 'vast, slow forces' and as a site of class struggle and collective sustenance. In some of the poem's more speculative lines, Harrison countenances the possibility of coal's eventual 'exhaustion'. In subsequent years, as consensus on climate change began to emerge, the poet's interpretation of the conflict embraced a more explicitly ecological vision. In the film poem *Prometheus* (1998), he appraised the Miners' Strike from the distance of a decade, anchoring the poem in the perspective of Prometheus, in his vision an aged cancer-ridden coal miner. In the image of a dying, chain-smoking, Prometheus, Harrison casts the peculiar ironies of Britain's coal dependency in particularly profound relief. The evolution of Harrison's lyric voice – haunted, as always, by the tragic shapes of the classical age, and fired with rage, resentment, and utopian

yearning – captures much of the underlying music of British society, as it confronts the legacy of industrialisation, as history closes in, unremittingly, on capital's socioecological endgame.

As Harrison's ongoing meditation on coal, capital, and class unfolded, its different moments of articulation remained tellingly characteristic of the periods in which they found expression. Writing in the turbulent aftermath of the energy crises of the 1970s, *v.* countenances the possibility of coal's eventual exhaustion, and documents the social consequences of rising unemployment. Retuning home to the grave of his parents, Harrison finds their headstones vandalised. As his initial burst of indignation subsides, the poet reflects on the event's material causes. He begins to interpret the incident as the ramification of a political economy structured, throughout, by what Bourdieu defined as 'symbolic violence'. As Bourdieu observes, 'utterances are not only ... signs to be deciphered; they are also signs of wealth, intended to be evaluated and appreciated, and signs of authority, intended to be believed and obeyed'.³ Harrison notes the ways in which domination is embedded in signification, as he writes,

The big blue star for booze, tobacco ads,
the magnet's monogram, the royal crest,
insignia in neon dwarf the lads
who spray a few odd FUCKS when they're depressed.⁴

The symbolic violence of the contemporary culture industry, and the residual influence of the feudal system, not only 'dwarf' the vandalistic response of the dispossessed, they also operate as its proximal causes. Hence, '[w]here there were flower urns and troughs of water/and mesh receptacles for withered flowers/are the HARP tins of some skinhead Leeds supporter'.⁵ The speaker adds '[i]t isn't all his fault though. Much is ours'.⁶ This admission sets the stage for Harrison's inquiry into the dispossession of the British industrial working class.

Here, it seems important to situate Harrison's poem in relation to the work of Giovanni Arrighi, who interprets the rise of the financial sector, and the deindustrialisation of the global north, as symptoms of a crisis of 'overaccumulation' that rocked the global economy in the 1970s. Arrighi saw the successive deindustrialisation and financialisation of 'high-income countries' as facets of the same movement towards the 'greater mobility of capital', and insisted that, far from exceptional, such a movement towards mobility typified capitalist dynamics as a whole. Taking up his claim, Annie McClanahan writes that

[a]s a result of rising oil prices in the 1970s, the post-war economic efflorescence withered away: investment in production no longer generated adequate

profit, and thus a significant portion of capital was 'set free', heralding a looming crisis of overaccumulation.⁷

In the waning moments of the western industrial age, unemployment and inflation skyrocketed. Initially, 'the US and British governments' attempt[ed] to maintain the momentum of the post-war economic boom through an extraordinarily loose monetary policy met with some success'.⁸ But in the early 1970s,

real growth ceased, inflationary tendencies got out of hand, and the system of fixed exchange rates, which had sustained and regulated the post-war expansion, collapsed. Since that time, all states have been at the mercy of financial discipline, either through the effects of capital flight or by direct institutional pressures.⁹

In the course of its attempts to manage the crisis, Edward Heath's Conservative government (1970–4) tried to arrest national labour costs, tabling a series of wage freezes that targeted heavy industry. In response, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) turned the period's underlying concerns about energy scarcity to their (temporary) political advantage. The bulk of Britain's electricity was produced by coal-burning power stations fuelled in large part by British coal. The miners choked off the coal supply, and finally succeeded in bringing down Heath's government. As the conflict came to a head, the combination of industrial strike action and the government's energy-rationing policies reduced the British work week to a mere three days. Frustrations ran high, and under the influence of Rupert Murdoch's media empire, News Corporation, public opinion began to turn decisively against the labour movement. In the view of Arrighi and David Harvey, capital could no longer operate within the old 'rigidities', and any attempt to maintain the Keynesian order seemed doomed to failure. Inevitable or not, as it played out 'the breakdown of Fordism-Keynesianism ... meant a shift towards the empowerment of finance capital vis-a-vis the nation state'.¹⁰ As the trade unions and the British government contested the future direction of British politics, the old class compromise between labour and capital proved increasingly untenable. This appeared to be true for major protagonists on either side of the class divide. The semi-syndicalism of the NUM president, Arthur Scargill, ranged itself against Thatcher's insurgent neoliberalism.

As the opposing forces clashed, the spectre of fossil fuel exhaustion loomed in the background. In *v.*, Harrison begins to suggest that the class conflicts that characterised the period were embedded in a 'web of life' that was evidently rather more fragile than had thus far been imagined. The energy crisis that supplied the proximal cause of stagflation and its neoliberal 'fix' suggested that fossil fuel deposits had been eroded with alarming speed. As the poem opens, Harrison describes the graveyard as situated 'above a worked-out pit'. Here, mined-coal becomes the absent cause of a 'subsidence' that 'makes the obelisks all list'. Referring to the headstones, and noting the

graffiti for the first time, the poet finds, 'One leaning left's marked FUCK, one right's marked SHIT.'¹¹ The symbolic violence of capitalism's class striations is manifest in the violence done to the gravestones, while capital's material practices undermine the living strata on which life, death, and signification play out. It is a telling image. As Marx insists, 'Capitalist production ... only develops the techniques and the degree of combination of the social process of production by simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth – the soil and the worker.'¹²

Harrison's drive to represent the crisis in concrete and tangible terms finds him anticipating the turn towards materialist ecology that Moore formalised in recent years. Towards the conclusion of the poem, '[a]s the coal with reddish dust cools in the grate' and as 'we see/police v. pickets at a coke-plant grate' 'on the late night news',¹³ v. countenances the possibility that 'Earth [might] run out of her "diurnal courses"/before repeating her creation of black coal'.¹⁴ Intuiting the kind of position that Moore would explicitly define some decades later, Harrison finds that there was more to the struggle over coal than 'relations between humans alone', for as Moore reminds us,

Coal is a rock in the ground. Only under definite historical relations did coal become fossil fuel. Geology becomes *geo-history* through definite relations of power and production; these definite relations are, of course, geographical, which is to say they are not relations between humans alone.¹⁵

Harrison's attempt to understand the period's class conflicts in the context of something akin to Moore's 'geo-history' pushes the poem beyond the customary horizons of historical materialism.

However, in transposing his account of the Miners' Strike into a geo-historical register Harrison's poem occasionally lapses into a category error that Engels objected to in the work of Sergei Podolinsky over a century earlier. Criticising Podolinsky's attempt to 'find in the field of natural science fresh proof of the rightness of socialism' Engels averred that he had 'confused the physical with the economic'.¹⁶ Harrison demonstrates similar kinds of tendencies as v. moves towards its conclusion. A sense of thermodynamic pessimism troubles the poem throughout, and finally becomes one of the means by which Harrison accepts the period's losses. As Harrison addresses the prospect of fossil fuel exhaustion, he restages his discovery of his parents' vandalised headstones. In place of the original moment, he imagines that the reader has come across his own headstone some years hence,

Next millennium you'll have to search quite hard
to find out where I'm buried but I'm near
the grave of haberdasher Appleyard,
the pile of HARPs, or some new neoned beer.
If love of art, or love, gives you affront

that the grave I'm in 's graffitied then, maybe,
 erase the more offensive FUCK and CUNT
 but leave, with the worn UNITED, one small v.
 Victory? For vast, slow, coal-creating forces
 that hew the body's seams to get the soul.
 Will Earth run out of her 'diurnal courses'
 before repeating her creation of black coal?¹⁷

There is a curious stasis at work in the poem's climactic imagery. The fate of Harrison's headstone implies that the north would remain subject to socio-economic dereliction, while the dilapidated condition of the cemetery is conflated with the entropic collapse of the cosmos itself. Part of this tendency to spectacularise the Miners' Strike, to render it off a piece with the universal sublime, can likely be explained in terms of Harrison's actual class position. Though he had been raised in the terraced streets of working-class Leeds, his education at the elite Leeds Grammar School, and subsequent career as a poet and classical scholar, severed Harrison's material dependence on the fate of the British pits. As the poem draws to a close, he watches the Miners' Strike unfold much as one might momentarily fixate on an immense roadside car wreck, or pause transfixed before televised reports of a natural disaster. Though Harrison sympathised with the mining community from which he originated, the sense of detachment that characterises his concluding perspective can be explained, in large part, as a product of a class transition that the poet knew to be all too complete.

In the poem's central encounter, Harrison imagines confronting the youth who graffitied his parents' headstone. As the confrontation unfolds, the question of class and its 'representation' is forced into the foreground. The young 'skinhead' responds to Harrison's attempts to 'dignify' his 'scrawl' by disavowing the poet, his learning, and his claim to represent a class he no longer belongs to,

Don't talk to me of fucking representing
 the class yer were born into any more.
 Yer going to get 'urt and start resenting
 It's not poetry we need in this class war.
 Yer've given yerself toffee, cunt. Who needs
 yer fucking poufy words. Ah write mi own.¹⁸

And, indeed, as Harrison recounts the events of the period, it is clear that his own material interests were, as yet, not threatened. Coal would come from elsewhere. His house would stay warm, his study lit. Although coal mining would remain one of the primary sources of British electricity in the years ahead, the workers who produced it – primarily in Russia and Columbia –

were no longer members of the British polity. The nation's power plants increasingly relied on 'cheap' imports.¹⁹ As a consequence, Britain's energy needs were now met by labourers considerably less politically enfranchised than the British miners of the previous generation. For as Spivak insists, '[h]uman labour is not, of course, intrinsically "cheap" or "expensive". An absence of labour laws ... a totalitarian state ... and minimal subsistence requirements on the part of the worker will ensure it'.²⁰ Western deindustrialisation proved a telling movement in the history of global class struggle. As Jasper Bernes explains,

Once deindustrialisation began in earnest, the chance [of effective resistance] had been officially missed – the global restructuring and redistribution of productive means leaves us in a position that is probably as bad as, if not worse than, those early 20th-century revolutions, when some large percentage of the means of production for consumer goods were ready to hand, and one could locate, in one's own region, shoe factories and textile mills and steel refineries.²¹

With the failure of the Miners' Strike, coal – and with it, labour politics – retreated from public view. While the nation's homes and businesses continued to be powered by coal and the labour that produced it, the financialisation of the British economy was framed as a new phase in the nation's developmental arc. The post-industrial 'age' had arrived, and the so-called knowledge economy was the order of the day. Successive governments funnelled the nation's youth into post-secondary education, and as the City of London rose to pre-eminence, Britain's thriving consumer economy was increasingly credit-driven. The turn to consumer credit developed as an offshoot of 'the new financial architecture that emerged from the 1970s onwards ... to facilitate ease of capital movement around the world'.²² In time, as Harvey observes, 'financialisation ... became an end in itself ... [N]ew markets emerging in the 1990s in currency derivatives, interest rate swaps, etc. They grew from almost nothing in 1990 to about three times the output of the global economy in 2006'.²³ But as Jason Moore reminds us, however apparently immaterial, the City of London, like Wall Street, proved to be 'a way of organizing nature'.²⁴

By 1998, with release of the film poem *Prometheus*, Harrison had arrived at comparable insights. Yet despite its significance, *Prometheus* has received scant academic attention. The film poem suffers in comparison to the more accomplished and widely lauded *v.* Yet, of the two poems, it is without doubt the most ambitious, unabashedly grappling with the kind of world historical scale that *v.* merely hints at. In Harrison's return to the Miners' Strike, the struggle between labour and capital no longer played out across a forbiddingly vast expanse of time and space. In place of the possible but distant 'exhaustion' countenanced in *v.*, the waterways of *Prometheus* are saturated

with excreted by-products, while its scorched earth seems continually on the edge of combustion. The industrial landscape of the poem takes on Blakean characteristics. Satanic mines pump 'filthy slag-shit'²⁵ into the waterways, industrialised war leaves the earth 'black/from the bomb-blitz blaze',²⁶ the dead are dumped in 'mass pit[s]',²⁷ and the air is reduced to 'acrid murk'.²⁸ v. found Harrison speculating on the possibility that earth might 'repeat ... her creation of black coal' before 'run[ning] out of her diurnal courses'.²⁹ By the time of *Prometheus*, Harrison would insist that the path of unfettered capitalism led not to the trickle-down utopia promised by the architects of the neoliberal revolution, but to widespread dispossession and ecological disaster,

Look how the free-trade rainbow arcs,
in the hues of dollars, sterling, Marks,
but what they'll find as the end of it
's not gold, but a crock of shit.³⁰

What the poet calls here a 'crock of shit' becomes, at the end of the film poem, a vast 'conflagration'. The central lyric voice of the poem belongs to an old coal miner, whose dependence on 'his weed' functions as a metaphor for modernity's ailing, and likely fatal, dependency on fossil fuels. The film poem closes around the image of a child running through a giant dust cloud produced by the fallen water towers of a coal-burning power plant. The concluding tableau is prefigured by images in which Prometheus's gift of fire is seen to have cruelly rebounded on his human beneficiaries,

The big blow up! Or bit by bit
sink Man slowly in the shit,
the slower but secure solution
poisoned by his own pollution.
Let such factories do their work
and swathe mankind in acrid murk.
And if not Armageddon dream a
universal emphysema!³¹

In his representation of planetary despoilment, Harrison's diction reflects the fact that, by 1998, the now ubiquitous concept of climate change had yet to define substantially environmental discourse. Harrison's worries about the effects of 'pollution' and 'acrid murk', however disconcerting, fall somewhat short of the projected impact of 'climate change' as we now conceive it.³² In actuality, even by 1992, data on 'global warming' had gained the notice of international policy-makers, resulting in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC or FCCC), whose primary goal was to 'stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level

that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system'.³³

In *Prometheus*, the notion that carbon emissions were actually changing global climate rarely features in anything like its fully fledged form. Still, there is an undeniably catastrophic cast to the poem. In his framing of it, Harrison develops his Promethean metaphor, and makes productive use of the central image of fire. The poem plays with the varying versions of the myth, portraying the titanic fire thief in terms that draw on Hesiod and Aeschylus. Following Aeschylus, Prometheus is portrayed as a benefactor of humankind, and as an agent of its liberation,

We've got t'knowledge, we've got t'fire,
we've raised ussesns up out of the mire.
Diso-bloody-bedience got us over
t'barbed wire fences of Jehovah³⁴

Yet on other occasions Harrison cites Hesiod, portraying the Promethean gift as curse rather than boon,

It's long been Zeus' fervent hope
that by giving men sufficient rope
and simply allowing a free hand
with stolen fire, the contraband,
that fire will blow up in the face
of the whole detested human race.³⁵

This vacillation seems to illustrate the extent to which climate science had begun to cast a long shadow across the utopian horizon of materialist historiography. Although Raymond Williams could write in 1958 that '[a]ny account of our culture which explicitly or implicitly denies the value of industrial society is really irrelevant[,] not in a million years would you make us give up this power',³⁶ by 1998 the ecological consequences of industrialisation had complicated the picture. Promethean 'transgressions' may have 'made possible this vast alteration and all-important alterability of our surroundings',³⁷ but they also appeared increasingly capable of altering the earth's climate, in ways that threatened to extinguish much human and non-human life. As Rob Nixon has noted, this kind of drastic global change has remained difficult to conceive of or represent. Coining the term 'slow violence' Nixon writes,

To confront slow violence requires, then, that we plot and give figurative shape to formless threats whose fatal repercussions are dispersed across space and time. The representational challenges are acute, requiring creative ways of drawing public attention to catastrophic events that are low in initial spectacle but high in long term effects.³⁸

In its attempt to represent this 'attritional violence', Harrison's poem takes an unexpected turn as his central promethean voice returns to the dilapidated 'cinema' of his youth. Here, Harrison reminds us that the industrial class once relied on the cinema, not just for entertainment, but for 't'newsreels that [they] saw/on Saturday mornings'.³⁹ Prior to the advent of television and the internet, the movie theatre functioned as the local hub of late modernity's nascent audiovisual culture. As workers across the industrial west appropriated the stylised swagger of 'a Cagney or a Bogart',⁴⁰ and watched as the newsreels rattled out reports of wartime devastations, some of the first moments of McLuhan's global village became manifest. Returning to the ruins of Fordist culture, Harrison's poem anticipates the recent flurry of interest in so-called disaster porn. Yet Harrison's account is not just concerned to document the sublime vicissitudes of capital's creative destruction. In the old man's reflections on the silver screen, Harrison construes audiovisual media as a product of 'fire'. Coal-powered plants both produced the energy on which the 'Palace Cinema's' projectors ran, and filled the miners' pockets with the money that sustained cinema as a commercial enterprise. The cinema culture of the immediate post-war period is construed as a particularly indicative instantiation of the Fordist order, in which the industrial class participated as an enfranchised consumer of culture, and as an informed political player.

It is crucial to note that the western industrial working class's capacity for political agency was tethered, historically, to their active participation in consumer culture, to their capacity to share in the fruits of production. Harrison's old man complains, 'Dictators, deities, they're all the same/forbidding men fags, fruit, and flame/ ... those in power like to red-ring/round almost every bloody thing'.⁴¹ Spivak contends that in the wake of western deindustrialisation – as the major centres of production were shifted beyond the reach of Fordist labour laws – the industrial class was largely reconstituted in the global south. There, workers could not yet count on participating in the consumer economy that 'against all odds prepares the ground for resistance through ... coalition politics'.⁴² From their different vantages, Spivak and Harrison observe that the energy crisis of the 1970s culminated in a class confrontation that saw labour outmanoeuvred by capital. The globalisation of world trade left 'multinationals ... freer to resist militant workers, revolutionary upheavals, and even economic downturns'.⁴³ Harrison notes the same trend as his old man warns Eastern European workers against falling for the seductive fictions of free-market apologists,

Don't brothers! Stop! All t'old bosses
will cash in quick on t'workers losses.
The 'free' market'll just leave you broke

All our livings have gone up in smoke
or demolition dust-clouds.⁴⁴

It is this reading of globalisation that accounts for the heightened sense of nostalgia that shapes Harrison's second prolonged meditation on the Miners' Strike. The unbowed class consciousness that the western industrial class toiled for two centuries to produce is elegiacally reconstructed, in terms that betray the influence of Harrison's broad, black humour,

I'll tell thee summat. I'm not awed
by any bloody overlord.
In Yorkshire we've got our own sign
when we're saluting owt divine.
OLD MAN *makes a v-sign*⁴⁵

As this period comes to a close, the new industrial class of the global south and the former soviet bloc now faced a long battle to claw back the sort of class consciousness and assertive politics that had once been known to western workers. In the film poem's final moments, the dilapidated movie theatre becomes the site of a last stand between the old man and Hermes, portrayed here as an agent of capital. The old man is somewhat consoled that his death will arrive before the final collapse of the socialist order that he had fought to sustain,

It's just as well I'll pop me clogs
when Socialism's gone to the dogs.
It'd be a struggle to exist
in t'world and *not* be socialist.
How could I go on existing
wi' t'war still on wi'out enlisting?⁴⁶

He is aware that the battle in Britain has been lost, even as he still clings defiantly to his millennial hope, 'But I know it'll come/the new socialist millennium.'⁴⁷ Even in the face of despair, the formal properties of fire continue to offer a strange kind of solace and summons,

what's been called Man's soul,
... like a ... (he coughs) ... lung or liver gnawed
at t'orders of a t'great overlord,
reasserts, gets rent, and reasserts
for all its rending and raw hurts,
its fiery nature and its light,

its first defiance of dark night.⁴⁸

But as Harrison's Prometheus casts his 'half-smoked' 'ciggy' at Hermes, in a last defiant gesture, the movie theatre is set alight. Here, the film poem prefigures the possible consequences of current economic practices. The promethean struggles that produced the global village now threaten to destroy it. However 'immaterial' new media might appear, the poem understands them as the material products of a fossil fuel-driven economy that had begun to exert considerable pressure on the broader web of life of within which it existed. Tellingly, the only voice that survives the fire belongs to Hermes, who insists that, defiant or not, Prometheus has 'engineer[ed] his own defeat'.⁴⁹

In this account – through the various ways in which industry, commerce, and culture are viewed as the material articulations of coal-burning fire – '[t]he circulation of money and of capital [are] constructed as ecological variables'⁵⁰ in their own right. But in presenting this ecological vision in apocalyptic terms, Harrison arguably succumbs to the central fallacy that Jason Moore identified in the Anthropocene argument. Scholars use the term Anthropocene to understand the impact of human activity on global ecosystems as a distinct geological period. Though there has been considerable debate on how best to frame the period, in general usage the term describes the effects that industrialisation has had on climatic conditions and species diversity. Moore's contribution to this debate has been to show that the concept of the Anthropocene not only fails to effectively distinguish between the ecological consequences of industrialisation and capitalism, but that it also naturalises capitalism, presenting our period's dominant mode of production as the signature form of human 'species being'. For although the 'Anthropocene has been subject to a wide spectrum of interpretations', Moore finds that the 'dominant...one tells us that the origins of the modern world are to be found in England...around the dawn of the 19th century'. In this account, '[t]he driving force behind coal and steam' is '[n]ot class. Not capital. Not imperialism. Not even culture. But...the *Anthropos*...[h]umanity as an undifferentiated whole'.⁵¹ Through Moore's analysis, it becomes evident that the concept of the Anthropocene is a product of liberal historicism; it presents capitalism's 'progress' as the fully fledged realisation of humanity's intrinsic powers. Indeed, as Moore writes, '[t]he Anthropocene makes for an easy story',

Easy, because it does not challenge the naturalized inequalities, alienation, and violence inscribed in modernity's strategic relations of power and production. It is an easy story to tell because it does not ask us to think about these relations *at all*. The mosaic of human activity in the web of life is reduced to an abstract humanity as homogenous acting unit... This framing unfolds from an eminently commonsensical, yet I think also profoundly misleading, narrative: one in which the 'human enterprise' is set against the 'great forces of nature'.⁵²

In *Prometheus*, Harrison reproduces many of the fundamental elements of this argument. Although the poet is keenly aware of ‘the naturalised inequalities, alienation, and violence inscribed in modernity’s strategic relations of power and production’, he still routinely represents environmental catastrophe as a product of ‘an abstract humanity’ that acts as a ‘homogenous unit’. Indeed, from the vantage of Harrison’s Hermes, it is ‘Man’s’ transgression of the ‘natural order’ that all but assures ‘his’ final destruction,

It’s long been Zeus’ fervent hope
that by giving men sufficient rope
and simply allowing a free hand
with stolen fire, the contraband,
that fire will blow up in the face
of the whole detested human race.
The bib blow up! Or bit by bit
sink Man slowly in the shit,
the slower but secure solution,
poisoned by his own pollution.⁵³

It is important to note that Harrison is drawn into this narrative through the classical tropes on which his poem relies. In the original versions of the myth, Prometheus’ fate plays out at the fraught intersection of the transgressive energies of upstart humanity and the world defining prohibitions of the gods. To the extent that the figure of Prometheus functions as a type of humankind, promethean narratives understand humanity not only ‘as an undifferentiated whole’, but also as an alienated social entity, at odds with a prohibitive cosmic order. Harrison depends on this promethean logic when presenting humanity’s immanent self-destruction as the outcome of its constitutive instincts and desires. As his promethean protagonist puts it, ‘Fire, that’s brought Man close to t’brink/were t’first to help him dream and think.’⁵⁴

But, perhaps, as Moore has argued, we would ‘do well to ask if industrialization’ – or, for that matter, ‘fire’ – ‘is really the best way to frame the origins and subsequent development of modernity’s “ecological” crisis?’⁵⁵ At the very least, admitting the contingency of the world we have made – allowing that capitalism and humanity are not actually synonyms – would throw the present order into relief, showing that it is capital, not iron-clad necessity, that has dictated the present shape of our ecological practice. Yet in Harrison’s *Prometheus*, as in the Anthropocene argument, ‘the human enterprise is set against the great forces of nature’.⁵⁶ And to the extent that the poem portrays ecological disaster as an ironic recompense for humanity’s native hubris – its intrinsic tendency towards ‘defiance’ – it

reproduces another form of the tragic vision that shaped *v.* Here, however, in Harrison's return to the Miners' Strike, the stakes have been raised. Not only is the neoliberal revolution interpreted as a form of 'accumulation by dispossession',

All t'old bosses
 'll cash in quick on t'workers losses.
 The 'free' market'll just leave you broke.
 All our livings have gone up in smoke
 or demolition dust-clouds.⁵⁷

but the poem also signals the ways in which, by the end of the millennia, climate catastrophe had begun to emerge as the all-but-inevitable horizon of capital's fossil-fuel-dependent global economy.

Once again, it proved easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. Yet through a reading of Harrison's evolving meditation on coal, class, and capital, two things of particular consequence emerge. On the one hand, as the Miners' Strike faltered and failed it became evident that the Keynesian order had become obsolete. It was no longer possible, for instance, for industrial labour action to bring down a British government. As capitalist logistics redrew the distributive map, the old fault lines along which labour and capital were arraigned appeared to have vanished. The workers who produced the bulk of Britain's energy now had no stake in its political economy. By the same token, the new industrial class, increasingly located in the southern hemisphere, were subject to political conditions more typical of the British economy of the early nineteenth century. In Spivak's terms the 'link to training in consumerism [was] almost snapped'.⁵⁸ Capital appeared to have reset the historical clock on emancipation, while the historical frontlines of the labour capital dialectic seemed to have melted into air. Harrison's verse notes these systemic transformations in their first moments of actualisation. Little wonder that it proved difficult to imagine resistance, let alone alternative futures.

At the same time, Harrison's verse insists on the fictive quality of the so-called surplus liquidity – a product of the financialisation of the global economy – that had begun to flood the global market. As the 'blizzard' of bills rained down, Harrison warned Eastern European workers that they were giving up their role as political stakeholders, in favour of the seductive fictions of 'free-trade Hermes',

This dereliction, and these hills
 I'll blizzard now with dollar bills ...
 Zeus entrusts these jobs to me,
 free-trade Hermes/Mercury!

When jobs collapse they know their pal
is *D-mark*-toting capital!⁵⁹

This kind of appraisal is also popular with fiscal conservatives, who hark back to the era of the gold standard and the Bretton Woods agreement, and confine their critique of the deregulated economy within a liberal framework. Harrison's concerns are somewhat different. Hermes's 'blizzard of bills' 'seduces' the workers to the extent that it persuades them to trade an ephemeral burst of irrational exuberance for a long-term commitment to the egalitarian redistribution of wealth. But as capital appeared to break loose of its dependence on industrial labour, the apparently infinite horizon of the so-called immaterial economy proved, for most, a welcome distraction from the spectre of fossil fuel exhaustion that had initially thrown the global economy into crisis during the 1970s. Harrison remained largely unpersuaded, and instead fixed his attention on the material dispossession and despoilment that underpinned the so-called end-of-history. It is ironic that the financial crash of 2008 should have corresponded so closely with renewed concerns about the economically catastrophic impact of peak oil.

All the while, of course, consensus on climate change has crystallised. In the interim, as the new lineaments of the global capital ecology came into focus, the strategies of global struggle have taken an increasingly logistical turn. In his path-breaking attempt to discern the new fault lines of the global economy, Jasper Bernes writes,

We might work to disseminate the idea that the seizure of the globally-distributed factory is no longer a meaningful horizon, and we might essay to map out the new relations of production in a way that takes account of this fact. For instance, we might try to graph the flows and linkages around us in ways that comprehend their brittleness as well as the most effective ways they might be blocked as part of the conduct of particular struggles. These would be semi-local maps – maps that operate from the perspective of a certain zone or area.⁶⁰

The new directions evident in Berne's proposals were as yet unavailable as Harrison wrote. The losses were too fresh. Yet as Harrison's reading of the Miners' Strike developed, his poetry grappled more and more explicitly with the conundrum that 'unregulated market capitalism could only survive by destroying the two sources of its wealth the land and the labourer'.⁶¹ Some contemporary commentators criticised Harrison's film poem for its lack of subtlety. But as we witness increasingly grotesque levels of capital concentration, and as we close in on the ecological catastrophe that the global economy seems intent on producing, one might be tempted to transpose Kafka into the vernacular of *v.*'s belligerent skinhead. Bugger subtlety. If the work we are reading does not wake us, with its fist hammering on our skull, what's the fucking point of it?

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