

Original Paper

The Heir and the Gravedigger: Tony Harrison's Dual Relationship with Keats

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Received: July 14, 2026

Accepted: August 10, 2026

Online Published: September 3, 2026

doi:10.22158/sll.v10n3p169

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/sll.v10n3p169>

Abstract

The poetic relationship between Tony Harrison and John Keats is a double paradox of “successor” and “gravedigger”. Harrison’s violent subversion of Keats’ tradition stemmed from the “anxiety of influence” he experienced as his successor: the aesthetic tradition represented by Keats could not encompass his working-class experience, necessitating its transformation to serve as a vessel for his own voice. This paper uses “dual father” (his working-class father and Keats, his literary father) and Harold Bloom’s theory of “the anxiety of influence” as a framework for analyzing poetic dynamics and employs a new biographical theory to explore the psychological driving force of Harrison’s class origin. Textual analysis reveals that Harrison employs “creative misreading” as a core strategy. Building on his inheritance of Keats’ sensuality, classical framework, and formal discipline, Harrison deviates from, opposes, and subverts Keats’ poetic legacy, transforming it into a sharp tool with which to express class demands and ultimately achieve creative transcendence of tradition.

Keywords

Tony Harrison, John Keats, anxiety of influence, new biographical theory, creative misreading

1. Introduction

1.1 Keats’ Poetic Tradition and Literary Status

John Keats, a genius poet of British Romantic literature, left an immortal legacy for English poetry despite his short creative career. His poetry constructs an aesthetic world that combines sensual richness and spiritual eternity. In terms of sensory expression, Keats possesses an almost synesthetic

artistic ability to subtly intertwine sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch, forming a self-sufficient, timeless aesthetic experience. His sensory descriptions are not mere depictions of scenery; they are philosophical paths to truth and beauty. They serve as a spiritual shield against the passage of time and the pain of life. At their core, they capture momentary beauty and pursue timeless art.

In terms of poetic form, Keats was deeply attached to the ancient Greco-Roman civilization and the classical mythology and epic structure thus became important “skeletons” of his poetry. In his works, the classical world is an aesthetic utopia that is disrupted from a series of negative and miserable feelings and senses like “fever, trouble, and restlessness” and embodies artistic ideals that transcend through over time. In terms of skills involved in weaving the poetic form, Keats as a master of the form of English poetry endeavors to compose various remarkable poetic form and as a result his sonnets and odes, especially his use of heroic couplets has achieved a perfect balance between emotional intensity and rigorous rhythm. The poetic form becomes a sacred vessel that carries and sublimates ideas, highlighting the solemnity and delicacy of classical poetry.

Keats’ poetic tradition writing has become a model for later poets, but its highly purified aesthetic orientation naturally keeps it distant from the rough experience of real society. This lays the groundwork for subsequent poets to inherit and rebel against it.

1.2 Harrison’s Creative Background and Poetic Position

Tony Harrison is a unique poet in the field of British postwar poetry. His artistic style, deeply bound to class identity, is very different from traditional elite poetry. More precisely, Harrison’s critical importance lies in the way class enters the texture of poetic voice, form, and address, a problem that Byrne identifies as central to his “poetry of class” (Byrne, 1996). Born to a coal miner father in a working-class family in Leeds, Harrison’s childhood and youth were immersed in the working atmosphere of the industrial city. He witnessed firsthand the hard work, social injustice, and cultural marginalization of the working class. Although he did not deliberately incorporate this life experience into his work, it became the core of his cultural identity and the spiritual background from which his poetry could not be separated.

With his extraordinary talent and hard work, Harrison entered the academic arena, becoming an accomplished classical scholar and translator. This “crossover” experience gave him a dual perspective. On the one hand, he was well-versed in the essence of the classical poetic tradition and had mastered various rigorous poetic forms. On the other hand, he could not let go of his emotional connection to the working class and felt deep pain about class oppression and cultural exclusion under the dominance of elite culture.

Therefore, Harrison’s poetic stance is distinctly intervening and critical. He rejects poetry as escapism and advocates that it confronts social divisions and class contradictions and speak for the silent majority. His poetry is like a flame rising from the ruins of industry, burning the social reality of class division and forging the “golden yoke” of the English poetic tradition. He tries to fight for legitimacy for the

experience and language of the working class in a literary tradition dominated by the elite.

1.3 The Dual Poetic Relationship between Harrison and Keats

The relationship between Harrison and Keats is the central tension in his creative career. Harrison's "A Kumquat for John Keats" makes this relationship textually explicit by turning Keats into a named poetic interlocutor rather than an abstract Romantic influence (Harrison, 1987). It cannot be simply judged as the acceptance or rejection, but rather a dialectical unity of "successor" and "gravedigger". As a successor, Harrison internalized Keats's core poetical techniques: the pursuit of sensory intensity, the skillful use of classical frameworks, and adherence to formal discipline. This profound inheritance gives his rebellion precise targeting and power rather than external, barbaric destruction.

As a "gravedigger", Harrison's mission is to dismantle the aesthetic barriers of "purification" in the Keats tradition. Keats' poetic world focuses on pastoral songs, classical themes, and personal contemplation. It naturally rejects the rough labor experience and social conflicts of the working class—the very content Harrison most wants to express. He must transform Keats' tradition, not to destroy it, but to carve out a place for himself and the oppressed class within it.

This dual relationship is a lifelong complex dialogue, not only of formal inheritance and aesthetic innovation, but also of the expression of class demands and the struggle for cultural democratization, which profoundly reflects class anxiety and identity politics in the post-war British cultural field.

1.4 Explanation of the Core Theoretical Framework

1.4.1 New Biographical Theory

The new biographical theory offers social and psychological perspectives on interpreting Harrison's creative processes. It emphasizes the intertextuality of writers' life experiences, psychological states, and literary creations. In this sense, biography is not used as a simple explanation of the poem; it is used to identify the historical and psychological pressures that make particular formal choices meaningful (Benton, 2009). This theory posits that personal biographies are not merely background information, but rather important "context" and "fuel" for generating textual meaning. Unlike traditional biographical criticism, the new biographical theory does not seek to fully restore the writer's life. Instead, it focuses on core experiences and psychological conflicts that create tension with the creative process. It also explores how these conflicts deeply shape text form, theme, and value orientation.

In Harrison's work, the core application of the new biographical theory highlights the psychological conflict of his "double father": the working-class father that represents the lower-level crude labor, silent class dilemmas, and marginalized cultural identity. Keats in turn, as the "father" of literature, represents an elitist aesthetic tradition, exquisite formal skills, and mainstream cultural discourse power. The conflict between these two fathers doesn't fall into a simple binary opposition; rather, it intertwines and interacts, thus becoming the driving force behind Harrison's poetic revolution. His poetry is essentially an artistic resolution and cultural response to this psychological conflict.

1.4.2 Anxiety Theory of Influence

Harold Bloom's theory of the "anxiety of influence" act as a key to understanding Harrison's relationship with Keats. According to this theory, later poets develop a "patricide" anxiety similar to that described by Freud when facing powerful predecessor poets. These poets fear that their creativity will be overwhelmed by the brilliance of their predecessors, preventing them from establishing a unique position in literary history. To overcome this anxiety, later poets must "correct" their predecessors' works through "creative misreading". The value of Bloom's theory here is therefore methodological: it offers a vocabulary for describing revisionary relations between poets, not a license to collapse Harrison into Keats (Bloom, 2006; Luo, 2010). Bloom summarizes this process as six "correction ratios", and this article focuses on the three most relevant to Harrison's practice:

1) Clinamen, borrowed from Lucretius's term for the atomic "swerve", denotes the later poet's corrective deviation from the precursor's direction—not a negation but a creative misprision that opens new imaginative space (Bloom, 2006, pp. 43-52).

2) Tessera, meaning "a fragment that completes", describes the later poet's completion of the precursor's work by filling in the experiential and ethical gaps that the predecessor deliberately ignored or left unfinished, thereby achieving a counter-completion of tradition (Bloom, 2006, pp. 66-75).

Askesis, derived from the Greek concept of ascetic self-discipline, refers to the later poet's separation from the precursor through extreme adherence to formal rigor—a strategy of "contraction" that refines the self's artistic power and achieves transcendence within, rather than outside, tradition (Bloom, 2006, pp. 91-103).

These three corrections precisely correspond to Harrison's transformation of Keats' tradition and form a central tool for analyzing his poetic strategy.

2. Analysis of the Impact of "Double Fatherhood" Based on New Biographical Theory

2.1 Reality Father: The Roots and Identity Anchor of the Working-Class Experience

Harrison's real father, a quiet coal miner, paints the real color of his class identity and creative work. He provides the most vivid and fundamental basis for Harrison's poetry. This father's image and experience is not just a personal memory. It is a microcosm of the living conditions of the entire working class and has become Harrison's inseparable spiritual anchor.

His father's labor experience constitutes Harrison's core sensory and emotional memory. Coal miners work in an extremely harsh environment that is dark, damp, dusty, and dangerous. The high-intensity physical labor is exhausting, but the miners can merely receive meager pay in exchange for it. This labor experience is not an abstract concept of "class oppression", but rather a concrete, tangible physical memory: the saltiness of sweat, respiratory tract irritation from soot, muscle soreness, joint strain, and exhaustion that makes rest difficult. These experiences penetrated Harrison's sensory system, becoming the core material for his later construction of "sensory politics". His accurate descriptions of

the physical experiences of the working class and his profound presentations of labor pain stem from his close observations and emotional resonance with his father's labor.

Harrison's class consciousness was shaped by his father's "silence" and "marginalization". As a working-class man, his father was economically and culturally marginalized. He lacked the cultural capital to express his experience and demands. Since he could not enter the mainstream discourse system, so his pain and struggle could only be endured silently. This "silent oppression" made Harrison realize that class oppression is reflected not only in economic exploitation but also in the deprivation of cultural discourse. The experience of the working class is ignored and belittled by mainstream culture and defined as "unpoetic" and "vulgar". His father's silence became a silent calling, prompting Harrison to take on the mission of "speaking up for the silent" and translating the "silent experience" of his father and the working class into poetic language.

His father's body and personality became ethical symbols in Harrison's poetry. In Harrison's writing, his father's body carries labor and testifies to class suffering. Rough palms and calloused fingers are not signs of "ugliness", but symbols of hard work, tenacity, and sacrifice. His father's personality embodies the simple virtues of the working class: patience, kindness, family responsibility, and dignity in the face of suffering. This charming personality gave Harrison a deep emotional connection to the working class and strengthened his stance against class discrimination and in defense of the dignity of the underclass. Thus, the figure of the father transcends the personal level and becomes an ethical symbol of the dignity and worth of the working class, a theme that runs through Harrison's poetry.

In short, Harrison's real father is the root of his class identity. Harrison's poetry has always maintained a blood connection with the working class because his father's labor experience, state of silence, and personality traits provided the core material, emotional motivation, and ethical stance of creation.

2.2 *The Father of Literature: The Gravity and Constraint of Keats' Poetic Tradition*

As Harrison's "literary father", John Keats' poetic tradition exerted a strong gravitational pull-on Harrison and constrained him, becoming another core driving force in his creative process. Crucially, Keats himself was no scion of the literary aristocracy; he was born the son of a livery-stable keeper in Moorgate, a profession that placed his family at the lower margins of respectable society. His father died when Keats was eight, and his mother remarried only to die of tuberculosis when he was fourteen, leaving him effectively orphaned and financially insecure. Keats was apprenticed to an apothecary-surgeon—a trade associated with the working and lower-middle classes—before turning to poetry. Throughout his brief career, he was mocked by conservative reviewers such as John Lockhart, who dismissed him as a member of the "Cockney School" precisely because of his humble origins and lack of classical education at Oxford or Cambridge. This biographical fact creates a profound, if paradoxical, kinship between Harrison's two "fathers": both the real father and the literary father emerged from the lower strata of British society, and both experienced the cultural silencing and marginalization that accompany humble birth. The "father-son relationship" between Keats and

Harrison was thus full of tension —Keats' poetic achievements provided Harrison with an artistic model and formal tools, but his aesthetic values and class limitations became the shackles that Harrison had to break through.

Harrison was strongly drawn to the artistic achievements of Keats' poetics. During his academic career, Harrison delved into classical literature and romantic poetry. Keats' exquisite technique of sensory description, skillful use of classical frameworks, and ultimate pursuit of formal discipline earned Harrison's sincere admiration. Keats proved that poetry could perfectly express emotions and ideas through exquisite artistic skill. The aesthetic heights of his works became the artistic benchmark Harrison pursued. Harrison's adoption of the core elements of Keats's poetics is a recognition of and an attempt to absorb this artistic achievement. He hopes to use Keats's artistic tools to enhance the poetic appeal of his own work and to give the experience of the working class a stronger poetic expression.

Harrison was influenced by Keats' poetic tradition, which provided him with important formal tools. As a master of the form, Keats' heroic double lines, sonnets, and other forms matured into artistic vessels with strong expressiveness and aesthetic value through historical development. Harrison knew that, in order for the working-class experience to be recognized by mainstream literature, it was necessary not only to innovate the subject matter but also to master exquisite art forms. Only by expressing the underlying experience in the most rigorous and aesthetically valuable form can we overcome the prejudice that "the underlying experience is not poetic". Therefore, Keats' poetic forms became Harrison's "weapon", providing him with a suitable artistic vehicle for his class expression.

However, Keats' poetic tradition also imposed deep constraints on Harrison. At the heart of Keats' poetics is "art for art's sake", with themes focusing on beauty, eternity, personal meditation, and distance from class conflicts and labor suffering in real society. This aesthetic value orientation essentially embodies the aesthetic taste of the middle class and cannot accommodate the working class's crude experience and political demands. When Harrison tried to use Keats's poetic tradition to express his own class experience, he encountered a serious "acclimatization" problem: Keats's aesthetic framework sharply contradicted the real experience of the working class, and the traditional "poetic" standard became a tool to suppress the underlying experience. This constraint caused Harrison to experience the "anxiety of influence" and forced him to reinvent Keats' poetic tradition to suit his own expressive needs.

2.3 The Conflict and Fusion of Dual Fathers: The Core Driving Force of the Poetics Revolution

The conflict between the real and literary fathers is the most fundamental psychological driving force behind Harrison's work. The resolution of this conflict contributed to his poetic revolution, which combined the working-class experience of the real father with the poetic tradition of the literary father. This conflict is essentially the opposition of two empirical worlds and value systems. The real father represents the "world of existence": survival through manual labor, a marginalized cultural status, silent class suffering, and simple, realistic care. Its values are "truth" and "survival". Keats, the literary father,

represents the “aesthetic world”: an aesthetic experience with spiritual pleasure at its core; the discourse power of mainstream culture; the pursuit of eternity and beauty; and artistic self-discipline that distances itself from reality. These two worlds have almost no intersection and are even mutually exclusive. Keats’s aesthetic world cannot accommodate the real father’s rough labor, and the real father’s world cannot understand Keats’s aesthetic pursuit.

This conflict created strong tension in Harrison’s heart. As the son of the real father, he cannot betray his class identity and ignore his father’s and the working class’s suffering. As an “apprentice” to the father of literature, he is deeply fascinated by Keats’s artistic achievements and longs to master his exquisite poetic skills. This tension puts Harrison in a dilemma: If he completely follows Keats, he must give up his class experience and become a “vassal” of elite culture. If he completely deviates from Keats, he may lose his exquisite art form and reduce his expression to a simple political slogan. He would also fail to enter the mainstream literary discourse system.

To resolve this conflict, Harrison chose the path of “fusion”—not to allow one world to swallow the other, but rather, to enable the two worlds to engage in dialogue and achieve symbiosis through poetry. He adopted Keats’ poetic tradition as the “skeleton” and retained the technique of sensory description, the structure of the classical framework, and the rigor of formal discipline. Using the working-class experience of the real father as “flesh and blood”, labor experience, class suffering, and social criticism were injected into the “skeleton”, realizing the organic combination of “skeleton” and “flesh and blood”.

This integration is a two-way transformation. For the Keats tradition, it transitions from aestheticism and “art for art’s sake” to interventional poetry and “art for reality’s sake”. For the working-class experience, it gains an exquisite art form and aesthetic value, transitioning from “silent suffering” to “dignified poetic expression”. Thus, the conflict of the dual father is transformed into a driving force for creation. The tension of the conflict gives birth to artistic innovation, resulting in poetry that has a high degree of artistic complexity and a strong sense of reality. This forms a unique artistic style.

From a psychological perspective, this integration is also Harrison’s acceptance of his “dual identity”. Rather than choosing between “the son of the working class” and “the successor of Keats”, he unified the two identities through poetry, becoming the “spokesperson” of the real father and the “innovator” of the literary father. This integration of identities allowed Harrison to eliminate the internal friction of psychological conflict and gain strong creative energy. It also gave his poetry a deep personal and broad social nature.

3. Analysis of the Harrison-Keats Relationship Based on the Theory of “Anxiety of Influence”

3.1 The Burden of Inheritance: Affects the Generative Roots of Anxiety

Harrison’s “anxiety of influence” regarding Keats does not stem from strangeness or a rejection of tradition. Rather, it stems from a profound inheritance of the core elements of Keats’s poetics. This

inheritance burdens Harrison with tradition, and the internal conflict between tradition and his own class experience eventually gives rise to anxiety that must be “corrected”.

First, Harrison inherited Keats’ sensualist poetics. He agreed with Keats’ pursuit of sensory intensity, firmly believing that poetry must strongly affect the reader’s sensory nervous system to achieve profound artistic appeal. However, Keats’s sensory world focuses on the pleasurable experience of idyllic scenery and classical secrets. Its core is a personalized aesthetic contemplation associated with leisure and aesthetic distance. This aesthetic distance is essentially a poetic expression of middle-class aesthetic pleasure. In contrast, Harrison’s sensory experience is rooted in the labor scene of an industrial city and consists of sweat, soot, mechanical noise, and physical exhaustion, which have no place in Keats’s aesthetic tradition.

Second, Harrison inherited Keats’s reliance on classical frameworks. As a classical scholar, Harrison is as familiar with classical mythology and epic structure as Keats was. He also regards classical elements as important for giving poetry a sense of depth and solemnity. However, Keats viewed the classical world as an escapist utopia. Harrison’s life experiences prevented him from accepting this “escapist” classicism. Classical culture should provide spiritual shelter for the elite and serve as a tool to reflect reality and criticize injustice. This cognitive difference motivated him to transform Keats’s classical framework.

Finally, Harrison inherited Keats’s adherence to formal discipline. He agreed with Keats’s idea that form is a sacred vessel for poetry and was obsessed with traditional, rigorous poetic styles, such as heroic double lines, throughout his life. However, over time, these styles have become associated with the bourgeoisie, whose language and expression are bound to their class, naturally rejecting the dialects and experiences of the working class. Harrison wanted to express the demands of the working class through these rigorous forms but encountered an inherent contradiction between form and content.

This “inherited conflict” plunged Harrison into “anxiety of influence”: he could not abandon the valuable artistic core of Keats’s poetics nor allow his core experience to be suppressed by tradition. To resolve this contradiction, he must revise the Keats tradition systematically with a strategy of “creative misreading” and complete the rebellion based on inheritance.

3.2 Clinamen: Deviation and Politicized Reconstruction of the Poetic Framework

Harrison employs the clinamen as a strategy to deviate fundamentally from Keats’ poetic framework, transforming his introverted, aesthetic poetic space into a field of extroverted, political social criticism. Keats’s poetic framework is distinctly introverted and aesthetic. He often detaches himself from the real world, immersing in spaces constructed by nature, classical mythology, or works of art. There, he meditates on beauty, eternity, and the meaning of life. In his writings, themes such as death, nature, and art transform into personal metaphysical reflections. The cemetery serves as a quiet backdrop for meditation, and the nightingale’s song leads to tranquility of the soul. The core is the pain and limitation that transcends reality through aesthetic experience. The essence of this framework is “art for

art's sake", which emphasizes the self-discipline and aesthetic independence of poetry while maintaining a deliberate distance from social reality.

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains

My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,

...

Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,

But being too happy in thine happiness—

That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,

In some melodious plot

Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,

Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

(Keats, 1978, Ode to a Nightingale lines 1-2, 5-10)

Harrison's deviation from this framework centers on transforming the poetic space from a "personal meditation field" to a "social conflict field". While retaining the core idea of "spatial construction"—such as Keats's focus on natural and artistic scenes—he completely replaces the nature and function of space. While Keats's space is closed, self-sufficient, and evasive, Harrison's space is open, broken, and intrusive. He shifts the setting of poetry from pastoral fields, ancient urns, and quiet cemeteries to industrial ruins, labor sites, and public spaces filled with class conflict, allowing poetry to address the realities of social division, class oppression, and cultural inequality.

Next millennium you'll have to search quite hard

to find some slab of raised West Riding stone

with a weatherproof meaning, a meaning that's mine.

...

The skin and bone that it's carved on's still alive

and kicking and coming to kick you in the balls,

the arse, the face, for all the grief you gave.

It's not the dead you should be scared of, mate,

it's the living. We're the ones who'll slit your throat.

(Harrison, 1985, v. lines 60-63, 65-69)

This is not merely a scene replacement; it is a fundamental reconstruction of poetic function. While Keats's poetic framework aims to provide spiritual refuge and help readers escape real pain, Harrison's framework aims to reveal the root causes of pain and inspire readers to reflect on and act upon social reality. Through this deviation, Harrison reverses the "inner gaze" into "external criticism", transforming poetry from a carrier of personal aesthetic experience into a tool for intervening in social reality.

3.3 Tessera: Complement and Ethical Perfection of the Sensory World

Harrison employs the Tessera strategy to supplement the missing working-class, painful experience in Keats' sensory world, thereby achieving the "completion" of Keats' aesthetic system. This strategy establishes a sensory politics with an ethical dimension that opposes Keats' aesthetic sensualism.

Keats's sensory world centers on harmony, abundance, and sweetness. He is mostly directed toward pleasant and intoxicating sensations—the sweetness of ripe fruit, the freshness of nature, and the tranquility of classical scenes—which together build an idealized sensory utopia. At the heart of this sensualism is aesthetic pleasure. Its ethical tendency is to transcend the imperfections of reality by beautifying it while invisibly filtering out painful, ugly, and oppressive experiences. From a class perspective, Keats's sensory world is essentially a poetic expression of middle-class life. It presupposes that the experiencer has leisure time and aesthetic distance, free from the struggle of survival. This is in contrast to the sensory experience of the working class, which is wrapped in labor, exhaustion, and poverty.

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
...
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
Among the river shallows, borne aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
(Keats, 1978, To Autumn lines 1-6, 27-29)

Harrison believes there is a significant ethical gap in Keats's sensory world: it presents only the bright, sweet half of the world's sensory experience but deliberately avoids the dark, bitter other half. His Tessera strategy uses the real, painful sensory experiences of the working class to "complete" Keats's aesthetic system so that poetic sensory descriptions return to reflecting the entire social reality.

Harrison's sensory descriptions focus on the labor and life scenes of the working class. At the core are physical hardship, environmental harshness, and mental depression. Rather than intoxicating sweetness and freshness, the sensory imagery in his paintings conveys the saltiness of sweat, the choking sensation of coal ash, the harshness of mechanical noise, and the suffocation of humid environments. These experiences are not associated with aesthetic pleasure; rather, they directly point to the hardships of labor, the toll that industrial pollution takes on health, and the mental trauma caused by class oppression. Harrison forcefully implanted these experiences, filtered out by Keats' tradition, into poetry's sensory category, which sharply opposed Keats' aesthetic sensory imagery.

The leather-aproned men who smelled of shit
and turned the knacker's yard into a pit
...

The stink of profit and the stink of loss.

(Harrison, 1987, *National Trust* lines 5-6, 8)

This “completion” is essentially an ethical critique and perfection. Harrison argues that a poetic tradition focusing only on beauty and ignoring pain—depicting only the pastoral and ignoring factories—is morally flawed. Sensory descriptions in poetry should not only carry aesthetic pleasure but also serve as tools to record reality and reveal injustice. By incorporating the sensory experiences of the working class into poetry, Harrison expanded the scope of poetic subject matter and challenged the ethical foundation of traditional aesthetics. He established a poetic ethics of “truth first”, arguing that the value of poetry lies not only in presenting beauty but also in presenting truth—especially those truths deliberately obscured by power and elite culture.

The ultimate meaning of this Tessera strategy is to validate the legitimacy and authenticity of the working class’s real experience. It broke the class boundaries of traditional poetic sensory descriptions and proved that the sensory experience of the working class is equally poetic and worthy of serious consideration.

3.4 Askesis: The Adherence to Formal Discipline and Class Breakthrough

Harrison employed Askesis as a strategy, achieving the subversion of formal class attributes through extreme adherence to traditional poetic forms and content innovation, thereby completing an “internal revolution” in the cultural field.

Keats regarded poetic form as a sacred vessel that carried lofty ideas and eternal beauty. His use of heroic double lines and odes highlighted the solemnity and delicacy of classical poetry, which was highly consistent with his aesthetic theme. This formed a “harmonious unity of form and content”. Over time, these traditional, rigorous poetic styles became deeply associated with elite culture and bourgeois values, forming a kind of “cultural capital”. Mastering these forms meant entering the mainstream literary discourse system, whose language norms and expression paradigms naturally rejected the dialects and rough experiences of the lower classes, creating a “formal class barrier”.

Upon a time, before the faery broods
Drove Nymph and Satyr from the prosperous woods,
Before King Oberon’s bright diadem,
Sceptre, and mantle, clasp’d with dewy gem,
Frighted away the Dryads and the Fauns
From rushes and green banks, and fountain lawns.

(Keats, 1978, *Lamia* lines 1-6)

Harrison’s Askesis strategy began with extreme adherence to this “form of classification”. Unlike some

modern poets, he did not rebel against tradition by writing free verse. Instead, he chose the most elegant and rigorous “bourgeois” heroic double line in English poetry and adhered to its rhythm and rhyme requirements with almost ascetic self-discipline. This choice is a kind of “poetic penance”—he embraces the limitations of traditional forms as an obstacle to be overcome, thereby tempering his artistic power.

However, Harrison’s persistence is not blind obedience to tradition; rather, it is a “confrontational occupation”. While adhering strictly to the traditional formal discipline, he introduced subversive innovations in content: he neatly filled the metrical framework of heroic epic poetry with working-class dialects, everyday colloquialisms, political slogans, and even expressions of “vulgarity” as defined by elite culture. This practice creates a violent “tension between form and content”: the most elegant form conveys the most “grounded” class experience, and the most rigorous rhythm expresses the sharpest social criticism. This tension produces a powerful artistic explosive force.

I’d like to be the poet of my class,
the first one, anyhow, to make the pass,

...

The shit that seems to drive you up the wall
is the shit that we’re creating, that’s all.

...

So what’s a cri-de-coeur? Cunt! Can’t you tell?
It’s what a bore’s cry’s like when he’s in Hell.

(Harrison, 1985, v. lines 99-100, 107-108, 115-116)

His work achieves a double breakthrough. First, it proves that traditional poetic forms are surprisingly inclusive and flexible. They can accommodate completely heterogeneous content and language. This breaks the myth of “form and class binding”. Second, by injecting the experience and language of the working class into traditional forms, he gives bottom culture a voice in mainstream literature. This achieves a class breakthrough. This strategy of “using elegance against elegance and attacking tradition itself with traditional weapons” creatively employs Askesis theory—through extreme traditionalism, it transcends traditional class limitations.

4. Conclusion

The poetic relationship between Tony Harrison and Keats is presented as a dialectical unity of inheritance and rebellion. This unity constitutes the core of Harrison’s poetics and reveals the internal laws of the creative transformation of literary tradition.

Harrison’s rebellion is based on a profound inheritance; without an in-depth internalization of Keats’s poetics, his rebellion would lose its precision and power. Harrison inherited Keats’ pursuit of sensory intensity but shifted the focus of sensory description from aesthetic scenes to working-class labor

scenes. He also inherited Keats' use of classical frameworks but transformed the classical world from an escapist utopia to a prism that critiques reality. Furthermore, he inherited Keats' adherence to formal discipline but transformed the traditional poetic style from an exclusive tool of elite culture to a voice for the voiceless. This inheritance is not passive imitation but active absorption. Harrison accurately identifies the most valuable artistic core of Keats's poetics and uses it as the "foundation" for his own creations, providing a solid artistic basis for his rebellion.

Harrison's work is always accompanied by a clear sense of rebellion. Without it, inheritance becomes rigid copying, unable to achieve artistic innovation and breakthrough. His rebellion was not a complete denial of Keats' poetics but rather a revision of his class limitations and value orientation. He challenged Keats' aestheticism of "art for art's sake" and established an interventional poetics of "art for reality's sake". In doing so, he broke the class boundaries of sensory descriptions in Keats' poetics, incorporating the experience of the working class into the core field of poetry. He subverted the class attributes of traditional poetry, winning the right for the underlying language to speak in mainstream literature. This kind of rebellion innovates inheritance. Respecting the value of traditional art, it gives tradition a new, contemporary connotation and class position.

The dialectical unity of inheritance and rebellion enabled Harrison to achieve "transcendence on the shoulders of giants". He did not allow himself to be overwhelmed by Keats's aura but rather opened up his own territory within Keats's tradition through creative misreading and transformation. He did not break away from the nourishment of literary tradition because of his rebellion but rather maintained a dialogue with tradition so that his innovations gained a profound historical heritage. This dialectical relationship proves that literary tradition is not rigid, but dynamic, and that true inheritance must include rebellion and true rebellion must be based on inheritance.

Acknowledgement

The completion of this thesis would not have been possible without the guidance and support of many people. First, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Dan Cui, for her patient instruction, insightful advice, and continuous encouragement throughout the entire research process. From the selection of the topic and the construction of the theoretical framework to the revision and finalization of the thesis, her professional guidance has been invaluable. I am also sincerely grateful to all the teachers who have taught me during my years of study. Their lectures and academic guidance have provided me with the knowledge and theoretical foundation necessary for this research. Finally, I would like to thank my classmates, friends, and family members for their understanding, encouragement, and support. I extend my sincere appreciation and best wishes to everyone who has contributed to the completion of this thesis.

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Notes

This paper is the periodical research results of the Project of the 2024 Annual Special Research Program on Foreign Language Textbooks in China: A Study of National Image in FLTRP's English Literature Textbook System; of Keats's Ethnic Identity Writing and Consolidating the Sense of Community for the Chinese Nation sponsored by Department of Education of Jilin Province; of A Study on Ice and Snow Writing in British Romantic Literature and the International Shaping and Communication of Jilin Regional Ice and Snow Cultural Image sponsored by Jilin Provincial Social Science Fund Project.