

From Shropshire to Hell Gate:

The Poetic Range of A. E. Housman

Albert M. Bender  
English 650  
May 12, 1977

A

A. E. Housman's reputation as a poet is based largely upon A Shropshire Lad, poems which have preserved Housman's minor status. Critics such as Richard Aldington, a former student of Housman at University College, London, who terms his professor the one "who is known to the literary world as the author of A Shropshire Lad, and to the small but important world of classical scholarship as one of the great Latinists of his age"<sup>1</sup> do the poet a grave injustice. True, Housman was not an especially prolific writer since much of his time was devoted to studying and other academic duties, but he did not stop writing poetry in 1896 when his only claim to fame was published. It is the purpose here, then, to show, by illustrative examples, the range of Housman's poetry and let the reader decide whether or not this relatively obscure poet of the fin de siècle deserves a new and perhaps more extensive critical evaluation.

The entire body of A. E. Housman's poetry can be divided chronologically into four books: A Shropshire Lad (published, as mentioned, in 1896), Last Poems (published in 1922), and Additional Poems (1937) which was published by Laurence Housman, the poet's brother. It is not necessary to discuss the chosen poems in any particular order, but it seems fitting to begin with selections from A Shropshire Lad to showcase the Housman everyone knows and expects. In "To An Athlete Dying Young"<sup>2</sup> we see the true "Shropshire" touch:



Smart lad, to slip betimes away  
From fields where glory does not stay  
And early though the laurel grows  
It withers quicker than the rose.

-ASL XIX

The poet assumes the role of an older and omniscient sage who gently mocks the imaginary protagonist's youthful unawareness of life's realities.

Structurally, the poem shows the typical Housman style. The use of contrast ("grows" - "withers") provides an irony of which Housman is a master:

The lover of the grave, the lover  
That hanged himself for love.

-ASL XVI

Death, especially hanging, is another important aspect of the Shropshire poems. In one of the most famous poems from A Shropshire Lad, Housman begins:

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now  
Is hung with bloom along the bough.

and ends:

About the woodlands I will go  
To see the cherry hung with snow.

-ASL II

Ostensibly, the poem appears to resemble Robert Frost's "Stopping By Woods On A Snowy Evening." However, unlike Frost, whose sense of responsibility ("But I have promises to keep/And miles to go before I sleep") dissuades him from staying to admire the woods, Housman expresses an

almost opposite philosophy, but one typical of the Shropshire poems:

Now, of my threescore years and ten,  
Twenty will not come again

And take from seventy springs a score,  
It only leaves me fifty more

And since to look at things in bloom  
Fifty springs are little room...

Again, the ironic contrast appears. Housman, aware of life's ephemerality, cannot wait to admire the cherry blossom in spring so he goes to the woods in winter.

Unfortunately for Housman's reputation, the death, hanging, and transience-of-life theme so prevalent in A Shropshire Lad has become a rather juicy morsel to parodists. Many spoofs of Housman's poetry have been written; the best, however, is the very amusing one done by Hugh Kingmill. Housman himself admitted "The parody of me is the best I have seen, and indeed the only good one."<sup>3</sup> It reads:

What, still alive at twenty two,  
A clean upstanding chap like you.  
Sure, if your throat is hard to slit,  
Slit your girl's and swing for it.

Like enough, you won't be glad,  
When they come to hang you, lad  
But bacon's not the only thing  
That's cured by hanging from a string.

When the blotting-pad of night  
Sucks the latest drop of light,  
Lads whose job is still to do  
Shall whet their knives and think of you.



Humorous and well-intentioned as it is, Kingsmill's poem has become epigrammatic for the Shropshire collection, and in a larger sense, Housman's poetry. If Kingsmill had considered Shakespeare's 154 sonnets, all of which focus on Love, the embodiment of his poetic output, he most certainly could have composed a parody just as amusing but just as negligent of Shakespeare's other works. Rather than just a bunch of young lads being hanged, an all-encompassing view shows that "Death was to be the polyphonic background of Housman's poetry, with many variations in the foreground of his compositions -- deviations in mood according to whether the theme dwelt on the death of soldiers, or lovers, or suicides, or criminals -- a fugue developed in minor keys that sang of the silence of the grave; its darkness, its immobility, its remoteness; relieved by interludes interpreting it as a healing peace and eternal balm for the pain and death of living."<sup>4</sup>

Analogously, as Death is to Housman's poetry, so was Moses John Jackson to Housman's life. It is important to note here, however, that Jackson's relationship to Housman will be made significant only to show how it influenced some of Housman's later, most powerful, and most ignored poetry. It is both a foolish and dangerous notion to equate an artist's life with the quality of his or her art. It has been this essay's argument thus far that Housman's reputation as a poet has been unjustly crippled by critical labels and brands. To discuss Jackson and Housman in any other vein



other than artistic would be to deviate from the original purpose stated earlier, and, therefore will not be given attention.

"Mo," as Jackson was affectionately called, was a classmate of Housman at Oxford where they met during their freshman year. The attraction was virtually instantaneous since Housman saw in Jackson "The Victorian equivalent of the all-round boy -- an effortless honours student, a natural athlete, an estimable manly character...and even though his interests were more scientific than classical, he embodied all those qualities which for Housman rendered life at that age so promising, so perilous and so poetic."<sup>5</sup> In 1882, Housman, embittered by his failure in Greats ("a prescribed program of readings"<sup>6</sup>) and subsequent "Pass" degree, was considerably happier to have the opportunity of sharing, as in his senior year, a house with "Mo". Joining the duo was Adalbert, Jackson's younger brother, who, "graced not only with his brother's good looks and sterling character, but in addition with a taste for literature and scholarship, immediately won Housman's heart."<sup>7</sup> The dwelling, happy as it must have been, lasted only four years. Housman's desire for a "lodging more conducive to quietness and pure concentration"<sup>8</sup> led him to find private lodging in a house where he always made his two dear friends feel welcome.

Then came perhaps the two greatest tragedies of Housman's life. In 1887, "Mo", the holder of a Doctorate



of Science degree from Oxford, grew tired of work at the Patent Office (where Housman worked also) and left to accept a schoolmaster's position at Sind College in Karachi. It was actually the beginning of the end of their close association, a fact which Housman would later lament:

He would not stay for me, and who can wonder?  
 He would not stay for me to stand and gaze  
 I shook his hand and tore my heart in sunder  
 And went with half my life about my ways.  
 -AP VII

Jackson was to return briefly two years later, but only to marry and eventually (1911) leave Sind College for a farm in British Columbia where he would spend the remaining eleven years of his life. The solace Housman found in the company of Adalbert ("Ad," as he was called) was similarly aborted when the younger Jackson died of typhoid fever in 1892. In his memorial poem titled simply "A.J.J." Housman characteristically uses repetition for emphasis. Here the focus is grief:

Strange, strange to think his blood is cold  
 And mine flows easy on;  
 And that straight look, that heart of gold  
 That grace, that manhood gone.  
 -MP XLII

Still, however, it was indeed "Mo" who would always occupy the heart and mind of the poet, as A.E. confessed to his brother Laurence: "That was my friend Jackson, the man who had more influence on my life than anybody else."<sup>9</sup>

This influence makes itself evident in Housman's longest, most enigmatic, and, perhaps, greatest poem "Hell Gate" which was included in his Last Poems collection. The poem allegorically portrays Hell "as a medieval city (therefore archaic today) to which Satan is returning as a conquering hero."<sup>10</sup> With Satan ("my dark conductor"), presumably as one of his subjects of "captives of his war," is the poet who uses this journey to Hell to express the power of love between himself and the sentry (Jackson) at the gate. His first sight of this particular damned soul all-consumed by hell-fire reminds him of his long lost friend:

Still one saw the sentry go,  
Trim and burning, to and fro,  
One for women to admire  
In his finery of fire.  
Something, as I watched him pace,  
Minded me of time and place,  
Soldiers of another corps  
And a sentry known before.

It is then, however, that the poet speaks to the portress ("Met again, my lass," said I.) at the gate, and the sentry suddenly becomes aware who is with Satan:

Then the sentry turned his head,  
Looked, and knew me, and was Ned.

Immediately love (between the sentinel and the poet) challenges the power and authority of Hell, and Ned, not allowing Satan a triumphant return through the gates, incites a mutiny:



Once he looked, and halted straight,  
 Set his back against the gate,  
 Caught his musket to his chin,  
 While the hive of hell within  
 Sent abroad a seething hum  
 As of towns whose king is come

Just as quickly, Hell responds to the "flaming mutineer."  
 The "leaden sky" darkens and poises to deliver the fatal blow  
 ("...the lightning for the stroke"), but not before "the  
 traitor musket" sounds and kills Satan. Symbolically, as  
 Hell is rendered helpless (" Tyranny and terror flown/Left  
 a pair of friends alone"), its fire "ebbs" and "fails,"  
 leaving the two free to savor the victory:

Midmost of the homeward track  
 Once we listened and looked back;  
 But the city, dusk and mute,  
 Slept, and there was no pursuit.

Equally as beautifully expressed as is Housman's pa-  
 ganism ("his own ego in place of 'the laws of God' as given  
 through the established Church"<sup>11</sup>) in "Hell Gate" is his  
 view of life, a "long fool's-errand to the grave,"<sup>12</sup> in  
 "XLV" (More Poems), one of the poet's last utterances.  
 Housman, his life nearing its end, felt the futility and  
 frustration of dreams and ambitions "and among all his poems  
 there are few more perfect, none of profounder melancholy,  
 than that in which this truth is recognised"<sup>13</sup> [sic]:

Smooth between sea and land  
 Is laid the yellow sand,  
 And here through summer days  
 The seed of Adam plays.

The two questions the poet then asks:

What shall I build or write  
Against the fall of night?

and:

Shall it be Troy or Rome  
A fence against the foam  
Or my own name, to stay  
When I depart for aye?

he abruptly answers:

Nothing: too near at hand,  
Planing the figured sand,  
Effacing clean and fast  
Cities not built to last  
And charms devised in vain,  
Pours the confounding main.

But Housman is wrong. Just how deeply he has imprinted his name in the "yellow sand" has yet been given proper measurement. One must question the reliability and judgment of so-called scholars who consider only A Shropshire Lad and then say "Despite the sameness of his themes, Housman has attained high rank among English poets."<sup>14</sup> Ironically, neither "Hell Gate"<sup>r</sup> or "XLV" (MP) appear in the anthology just cited. It is this critical negligence, then, that fails to shed light on most of A. E. Housman's best poetry which, as long as it remains buried in the darkness of the Shropshire mystique, will never earn for its author his long overdue place in the literary world.

Well done!  
A



### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Richard Aldington, A. E. Housman and W. B. Yeats (Folcroft, Pa.: Folcroft Press, 1955), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup>John Carter, ed., The Collected Poems of A. E. Housman (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965). All selections are taken from this collection. Abbreviations following the passages denote the book and number of that particular poem.

<sup>3</sup>Laurence Housman, My Brother, A. E. Housman (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1938), p. 180.

<sup>4</sup>Maude M. Hawkins, A. E. Housman: Man Behind a Mask (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1958), p. 84.

<sup>5</sup>George L. Watson, A. E. Housman: A Divided Life (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1957), pp. 71-72.

<sup>6</sup>Hawkins, p. 120.

<sup>7</sup>Watson, p. 104.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>9</sup>Housman, p. 61.

<sup>10</sup>Hawkins, p. 202.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 244.

<sup>12</sup>A. S. F. Gow, A. E. Housman: A Sketch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936), p. 52.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>George B. Woods et al., The Literature of England (Chicago: Scott, Foresman, 1953). p. 1101.

### Bibliography

Aldington, Richard. A.E. Housman and W. B. Yeats. Folcroft, Pa.: Folcroft Press, 1955.

Carter, John, ed. The Collected Poems of A. E. Housman. New York: Holt, 1965.

Gow, A. S. F. A. E. Housman: A Sketch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936.

Hawkins, Maude M. A. E. Housman: Man Behind a Mask. Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1958.

Housman, Laurence. My Brother, A. E. Housman. Port Washington, N. Y.: Kennikat Press, 1938.

Watson, George L. A. E. Housman: A Divided Life. London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1957.

Woods, George B., et al. The Literature of England. Chicago: Scott, Foresman, 1953.



