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THE UNITY OF A. E. HOUSMAN'S *A SHROPSHIRE LAD*

by

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The City University of New York

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UNIVERSITY MICROFILMS.

They say my verse is sad: no wonder;
   Its narrow measure spans
Tears of eternity, and sorrow,
   Not mine, but man's.

This is for all ill-treated fellows
   Unborn and unbegot,
For them to read when they're in trouble
   And I am not.

More Poems

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Introduction

There can be little doubt that the poetry of A.E. Housman is, despite frequent detraction, extremely popular and, as the American poet Edwin Arlington Robinson suggested when he spoke of Housman's "enduring quality,"[1] likely to remain popular. Over the past sixty years, the verse of this late Victorian has received a great deal of general praise, praise that often borders on pure adulation. We read of Housman's "exquisite simplicity," his "captivating music," and his "austere perfection," and we are told that his compositions are "magical," "magnificent," "pure," "imperishable," "flawless," unsurpassed in English poetry.[2] These assertions are, of course, supercharged, part of what F. L. Lucas calls the "inflated currency" of contemporary criticism.[3] Regrettably, they place a burden on all the poetry that much of it cannot support. Nonetheless, even unequivocal and undiscriminating approbation of this kind is a reflection of Housman's power as a poet.

Housman's poetry, especially the Shropshire Lad collection, has also attracted the notice of numerous fellow-artists.

Thomas Hardy, Robert Graves, William Empson, Stephen Spender, Richard Wilbur, John Crowe Ransom, Randall Jarrell, and John Ciardi-all have expressed admiration of some kind for Housman's art. And three important poets have created verse tributes of a kind: W. H. Auden, Kingsley Amis, and Ezra Pound. Furthermore, artistic regard for the lyricism of Housman's verse is perhaps best attested to by the number of musical settings it has inspired, among which Vaughan Williams' "On Wenlock Edge," a song cycle based on six Shropshire Lad poems, is probably the most famous.

Various technical and stylistic aspects of Housman's poetry, moreover, appear to have proved worthy of imitation, and, although it is always difficult, if not impossible, to substantiate claims about the influence of one writer on another, echoes of Housman--diction, imagery, phrasing, pace, cadence, world view, and so on--are, in the judgment of many commentators, present in the poetry of Walter de la Mare, D. H. Lawrence, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Ernest Dowson, John Masefield, W. H. Auden, Karl Shapiro, and Norman Nicholson. Indeed, according to Harold Monroe writing in 1920, "the influence" of Housman's A Shropshire Lad could "be heard echoing through the verse of more than half the younger living poets of the strictly English school."[4] And the so-called Georgian school of poetry, which dominated English verse in the second decade of the twentieth century, found, says Hoxie Neale Fairchild, its "perfect model" in the Shropshire Lad cycle.[5]

Yet another indication of Housman's popularity is the frequency with which his poems appear in collections. A number

of recent studies show that he is one of the most frequently anthologized of all the relatively minor English poets of the nineteenth or any other century,[6] a somewhat ironic twist in view of Housman's adamant refusal to permit, except in a few rare instances, the publication of single poems or selections from _A Shropshire Lad_.[7] Such poems as "With rue my heart is laden," "'Terence, this is stupid stuff,'" "To an Athlete Dying Young," and "Loveliest of trees, the cherry now," all from the _Shropshire Lad_ group, are familiar to almost every undergraduate, and not a few students probably go through life knowing one or several of these by heart.

Indeed, one might claim with some justice, as Christopher Ricks does, that Housman's poetry "pays a price for the wide appeal it seeks," by being what this critic calls "too instantly palatable."[8] Housman is, as Ricks claims, "the kind of poet easily over-rated by the middlebrow many," and, perhaps more important, "easily under-rated by the highbrow few."[9] It is too often the case with Housman's verse that its "popularity, and, in particular, its popularity with those [readers] who are unpopular . . . [comes] between Housman and a certain kind of modern reader."[10] John Sparrow echoes this view when he writes that Housman's "reputation suffers from the indiscriminating adulation of many of his admirers."[11]

Curiously enough, however, despite the critical panegyric, the artistic acclaim and imitation, and the general popularity of Housman's work, few commentators have chosen to analyse and demonstrate, in detail and with restraint, the worth of Housman's

poetic achievement. And there may be several reasons for this neglect.

First, perhaps the felicities of Housman's poetry seem too obvious. Perhaps, for example, the poetry's pristine simplicity--or, better, what appears to be, on the surface, pristine simplicity--does not hold, for the modern textual critic, any particular fascination. In Housman, there is little of the engaging complexity of expression, the density, that marks the poetry of Donne, Tennyson, Browning, Hopkins, Yeats, and Eliot. Unlike these writers, Housman does not appear to be a "favourite quarry for interpreters [and] explicators."[12] Tension, symbol, allusion, ambiguity, syntactical convolution--this is rarely the kind of ore with which Housman loads his poetic rifts. He is not a poet who lends himself to what Saintsbury calls "sham liking, . . . coterie worship, . . . [and] false enthusiasm,"[13] and there is little danger, in relation to Housman's verse, of praising the clock merely for the intricacy of its parts. William Archer makes a valid point when he writes that "some readers who have come to regard decoration, and even contortion, as the essence of poetry, may need time to acquire the taste for . . . Housman's simplicity. . . . He eschews extrinsic and factitious ornament because he knows how to attain beauty without it."[14]

Other critics may hold that the fragility of Housman's poetry cannot support detailed elucidation. For them, possibly, what meets the eye and touches the heart might be violated by

close scrutiny and detailed explanation. An example of this reluctance is found in the otherwise excellent comments of William Archer. Referring to Number L in A Shropshire Lad, "Clunton and Clunbury," this critic writes that the poem is "so delicate that even the tenderest breath of praise would only shake off some of its bloom".[15] To be sure, Housman himself would be in this camp. In "The Name and Nature of Poetry," a lecture he delivered at Cambridge in 1933, he asserted that "perfect understanding" of a poem "will sometimes almost extinguish pleasure."[16] Indeed, he said, quoting Coleridge, "'Poetry gives most pleasure . . . when only generally understood'"; the reader should be content "to swim in the sensations [poetry] evokes."[17] But one wonders how much sensible and enlightening commentary, much of it by poets whose critical perception is equal to their creative ability, would never have been written were every reader of poetry satisfied merely to "swim" in his emotional responses. Moreover, no critic seeks "perfect understanding" of any work, but a better, more complete understanding --an understanding that does not decrease pleasure. Careful analysis can often reveal the bones and subsurface processes that shape the visible flesh of literature.

But the validity of Housman's theory of poetry is not at issue here, and J. Bronowski's evaluation of the lecture cogently indicates some of the shortcomings of, and fallacies in, Housman's argument.[18] Housman's inexplicable and illiberal antagonism, in the lecture and elsewhere, towards literary criticism is nevertheless relevant. If we are to believe his colleagues

and his students, he was himself an able critic of poetry, and his lectures and discussions might prove extremely interesting and edifying had he not deliberately destroyed them.[19] Housman was one of the most eminent textual critics of Latin poetry, and, according to A. S. F. Gow, would discuss "all the problems raised by" the author he was treating, problems that were, presumably, textual, aesthetic, and interpretive.[20] Percy Withers also refers to Housman's critical abilities. The "rarest quality" in Housman's discussions, he writes, was "judgments and opinions that were never perverse or whimsical, but the fruits of a mind trained to precision, amazingly retentive, and exquisitely sensitive to literary values."[21] Similarly, A. S. F. Gow explains that Housman composed, for the University College, London, Literary Society, essays on the poetry of Matthew Arnold, Burns, Campbell, Swinburne, Tennyson, and the Spasmodic School, and that the Cambridge University Press was very eager to publish several of these.[22] Housman, however, refused permission, and, after his death, those essays that were found among his papers were, on the poet's instructions, destroyed by his executors.[23]

But Housman did not consider himself anything more than a "connoisseur" of literature, one who could "tell good from bad"; a critic, he claimed, is one who refers his "opinions to principles and [sets] them forth so as to command assent."[24] This was, he said, "a high and rare accomplishment . . . quite beyond" him,[25] "foreign territory" he preferred not to set foot on.[26]

That the poet came to regret the "Name and Nature of Poetry" lecture, and was "taken aback" by its success does nothing to explain his anti-critical stance.[27] He wrote the lecture against his will, he said, and was not proud of it, but he did not cite the reasons for his regret, only that the lecture was, to him, a "painful episode."[28]

Regardless of his own critical propensities, then, and regardless of his second thoughts about the "Name and Nature of Poetry" lecture, Housman was, publicly at least, antagonistic towards literary critics. To him they were inflated Jehovahs "thundering out of Zion, or Little Bethel,"[29] and in his foreword to Arthur Platt's Nine Essays, he voices, in his characteristic manner, his view of commentators. Platt, he writes, "knew better than to conceive himself that rarest of all the great works of God, a literary critic; . . . such remarks on literature as [Platt] did let fall were very different stuff from the usual flummery of the cobbler who is ambitious to go beyond his last."[30]

Some would-be critics of Housman's verse, then, are perhaps over-cautious. Because the poetry seems so fragile, they may be somewhat wary of perpetrating what Housman terms "flummery," meaningless mumbo-jumbo. Perhaps, too, the range of the poet's contribution is so narrow that it has discouraged commentators from attempting extended analyses. For the number of poems Housman himself published, one hundred and four, is small, the subjects few, the forms relatively unvaried, and the thematic scope narrow.

Housman's range, interestingly enough, has elicited a series of sharply contrasting critical responses. Louis Untermeyer, for instance, speaks of Housman's small "stock of ideas," and goes on to deprecate the absence of any "development" in Housman's world view, as if to imply that lack of variety and "development"--whatever Untermeyer means by the latter term--are, per se, shortcomings.[31] Similarly, Bronowski attacks Housman's narrow focus and output, and in his discussion, which, at times, seems undeservedly savage as well as misguided, he affirms that the late Victorian's achievement is "so thin . . . that [Housman] can hardly be called a poet."[32] This contention places a curious stress on quantity, and would lead us to deem non-poets a number of great writers who were not particularly prolific. In addition, what Basil Davenport terms the "tone of moral indignation" that underlies such comments as those of Untermeyer and Bronowski is bewildering.[33]

J. B. Priestley, writing in 1924 about the critical neglect of Housman's work, makes a pertinent point when he says that there are "many critics who are only impressed by . . . sheer bulk, . . . [who] like nothing better than the appearance of book after book by names that have gradually gathered about them a safe cluster of attributes, the use of which renders the task of criticizing a contemporary as easy as that of appreciating Shakespeare."[34]

Clearly, Housman is not concerned with what is to be found in Chaucer, "God's plenty," variety, nor does he, like Arnold's Sophocles, attempt to see life "whole." Nevertheless, even if

Housman wrote little, even if what F. L. Lucas terms his "reading of life,"[35] his view of human experience, is tightly focused, perhaps in some sense limited, too narrow, he drew, as E. K. Brown argues, "from the deepest wells, recording no ordinary or trivial feelings."[36] According to Priestley, Housman's is "a little estate," but it is "exquisitely ordered,"[37] and there is little doubt that, as Davidson claims, "within [his] range, [Housman is] very nearly perfect."[38] There is "not much reason," as this commentator points out, "for complaining that a violin has only four strings."[39] Similarly, G. S. Fraser, in discussing the "commonplaces" in Housman's poetry, the emphasis on "love, death, and the sad transience of beauty," points up that such "commonplaces have a permanent validity, [and] poets return to them in every generation."[40]

There exists, of course, yet another reason for the absence of any extended critical evaluation of Housman's verse. It may well be that his poetry is, to some critics, neither sufficiently important nor worthwhile, and there is little doubt that many commentators would, if asked, offer one or both arguments. To these critics, Housman is, for the most part, "cloying," "vulgar," "shallow," "self-pitiful," "affected," "puerile," "maudlin," "banal," "theatrical," "mawkish," "false," "insincere," "sentimental," "romantic," "adolescent," to mention only a few of the pejorative terms that are used to describe Housman's verse. And, although this outright condemnation of Housman is as general as much of the critical panegyric, some of it is not unjustified. But at his best, as he often

is in the poems he himself published, he is excellent. This particular study will, it is hoped, demonstrate some of the sources of that excellence as well as indicate Housman's characteristic weaknesses, and, in some valid way, challenge the unjust denigration that Housman's verse has received.

The apparent simplicity of Housman's poetry, its tenuity, its limited quantity and range, and its quality--these, then, may have dissuaded critics from attempting to evaluate, in an organized and detailed fashion, its worth. Such considerations, however, have not discouraged writers from treating, in minute detail, what they have uncovered about Housman's life. Ironically, the man appears to have become more fascinating than the verse he composed, initially the only justification for any biographical interest in its creator. In the last three decades, at least seven full-length biographical studies have been published: A. S. F. Gow's _A. E. Housman_; Tom Burns Haber's _A. E. Housman_; Maude M. Hawkins' _A. E. Housman: Man Behind a Mask_; Laurence Housman's _My Brother, A. E. Housman_; Grant Richards' _Housman: 1897-1936_; George L. Watson's _A. E. Housman: A Divided Life_; and Percy Withers' _A Buried Life: Personal Recollections of A. E. Housman_. There are, in addition, dozens of shorter works--monographs, memoirs, and essays--that also focus attention on the life of the late Victorian poet-scholar. Many of these studies are interesting, and several of them, in various ways, intriguing, but few say anything that has real or useful bearing on Housman's poetry. Too many Housman biographers fail to recognize his use of the dramatic mask.

They assume that most of Housman's verse, in A Shropshire Lad and elsewhere, is directly autobiographical or that the masks are intended to disguise actual experiences Housman himself underwent. They lose sight of the fact that poetry, especially dramatic poetry, often has a life of its own. This is not to suggest that, occasionally, biographical information does not help clarify particular ambiguities, especially in some of the more personal compositions published after Housman's death in 1936, poems Housman himself chose not to make public during his life. But too frequently the biographers become caught up in the man at the expense of his poetry. As Samuel Chew explains, the "enigmatic personality" of the poet "contrasts so strangely with the crystal clarity of his poetry that critical inquiry has been directed less towards . . . the verse than towards its creator."[41] H. W. Garrod expresses his view of the problem thus:

> I have lost myself . . . in the enigma of the man. What matters, and what will outlast curiosity, is the pure and cold art of his good work. But we are human creatures; and this enigmatic figure--one of the most notable of our time--this enigmatic figure, lonely, irresponsive, setting us so many questions and answering none of them, crediting none of us with truth or intelligence, but allowing us to make what we can of the fire and ice that contend in his nature, the Byronic and the donnish--we may be forgiven if we look at him a little like men who have forgotten good manners. It is his fault if we stare.[42]

It is necessary to point out, however, that whether or not we find Housman's enigmatic life more interesting than we ought, he is hardly to blame for our preoccupation.

Garrod, like so many Housman critics, is concerned not with the quality of Housman's poetry, but with the causal core of that poetry. In contrast, this study will focus on the "cold art" of Housman's verse, will evaluate, in particular, the "cold art" of Housman's best-known collection, A Shropshire Lad, a collection J. B. Priestley calls "a masterpiece,"[43] a collection whose impact on late Victorian England Tucker Brooke and Matthias A. Shaaber liken to the impact of Spenser's The Shepherd's Calendar and Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads on their contemporaries. Housman's volume, these critics explain, appeared at the close of the nineteenth century, "when the sap [seemed] to have gone out of poetry and the patterns of life [had] grown too stereotyped."[44] A Shropshire Lad was "like heaven's benediction," embodying an urgent "demand for homelier things and a truer poetic language."[45] Indeed, the work's pastoral atmosphere, according to John Heath-Stubbs, "seemed like a fresh breeze after the jaded urbanism of the typical 'nineties poets."[46]

This study will also be concerned with those aspects of A Shropshire Lad that prompt such critics as Nesca A. Robb to call the collection, in itself, "a poem."[47] In short, the essay will deal with the structure and unity of A Shropshire Lad, with setting, dramatic voice, subject, tone, and theme. At the same time, some detailed analysis of Housman's poetic style, a characteristic that also unifies the Shropshire poems, will be pertinent. Furthermore, it will be necessary occasionally to relate to this analysis, discussions of Housman's

Last Poems, and discussions of the two collections published posthumously, *Later Poems* and *Additional Poems*, for much of the verse contained in these three groups was written during the last decade of the nineteenth century, the period that witnessed the composition and the publication of Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*.

Notes

[1]Robinson is quoted in Joseph Mersand, "The Significance of A. E. Housman," A Shropshire Lad, by A. E. Housman (New York, 1966), p. 18.

[2]These general tributes are gleaned from various sources: Alan Ker, Alfred Edward Housman: Recollections (New York, 1937), p. 64; Samuel C. Chew, "The Nineteenth Century and After," A Literary History of England, ed. Albert C. Baugh (New York, 1948), p. 1546; Louis Untermeyer, Lives of the Poets: The Story Of One Thousand Years of English and American Poetry (New York, 1959), p. 613; Joseph Mersand, ed. A Shropshire Lad, by A. E. Housman (New York, 1966), p. 42; John Ciardi, How Does a Poem Mean? (Boston, 1959), p. 926; Bernard Grebanier et al, English Literature and Its Backgrounds, II (New York, 1949), p. 797; and so forth.

[3]F. L. Lucas, Authors, Dead and Living (New York, 1926), p. 171.

[4]Harold Monroe, Some Contemporary Poets (London, 1920), p. 18.

[5]Hoxie Neale Fairchild, Religious Trends in English Poetry, V (New York, 1962), p. 349.

[6]Carl J. Weber, ed., A Shropshire Lad (Waterville, Colby College Library Edition, 1946).

[7]Housman's lifelong battle with anthologists, especially American anthologists, who, without his permission, published excerpts from A Shropshire Lad, is discussed and documented in Grant Richards, Housman: 1897-1936 (New York, 1942).

[8]Christopher Ricks, ed., A. E. Housman, A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), p. 3.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Ibid., p. 4.

[11]John Sparrow's comments are quoted in Cyril Connolly, "A. E. Housman: A Controversy," A. E. Housman, A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), p. 46.

[12]Giorgio Melchiori, The Whole Mystery of Art (New York, 1960), p. 1.

[13]George Saintsbury, "John Donne," John Donne, A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Helen Gardner (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1962), p. 13.

[14]William Archer, Poets of the Younger Generation (London, 1902,), p. 193.

[15]Ibid., p. 188.

[16](New York, 1937), p. 36.

[17]Ibid.

[18]The Poet's Defense (Cambridge, 1939), pp. 14-219.

[19]A number of biographers record that Housman destroyed most of his lecture notes immediately after delivering his lectures

[20]A. S. F. Gow, A. E. Housman: A Sketch Together with a List of His Writings and Indexes to His Classical Papers (New York, 1936), p. 46.

[21]Quoted in Laurence Housman, My Brother, A. E. Housman: Personal Recollections Together with Thirty Hitherto Unpublished Poems (New York, 1938), p. 98.

[22]Gow, p. 21.

[23]*Ibid.*

[24]*Ibid.*

[25]*Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

[26]A. E. Housman, *On the Name and Nature of Poetry* (New York, 1933), p. 50.

[27]Laurence Housman, p. 185.

[28]*Ibid.*

[29]A. E. Housman, *On the Name and Nature of Poetry* (New York, 1933), p. 50.

[30](Cambridge, 1927), p. ix.

[31]Louis Untermeyer, *Lives of the Poets: The Story of One Thousand Years of English and American Poetry* (New York, 1959), p. 611. William York Tindall makes a similar comment in *Forces in Modern British Literature: 1885-1946* (New York, 1949), p. 113.

[32]J. Bronowski, *The Poet's Defense* (Cambridge, 1939), p. 250.

[33]Introduction, *Complete Poems of A. E. Housman* (New York, 1959), p. 6.

[34]J. B. Priestley, *Figures in Modern Literature* (New York, 1924), pp. 79-80.

[35]Lucas, p. 172.

[36]E. K. Brown, ed., *Victorian Poetry* (New York, 1942), p. 736.

[37]Priestley, p. 101.

[38]Eugene Davidson, quoted in Richards, p. 353.

[39]*Ibid.*

[40]G. S. Fraser, *The Modern Writer and His World* (London, 1953), p. 188.

[41]Chew, p. 1545.

[42]H. W. Garrod, "The Profession of Poetry" and Other Lectures (Oxford, 1929), p. 224.

[43]Priestley, p. 77.

[44]"The Renaissance," A Literary History of England, ed. Albert C. Baugh (New York, 1948), p. 483.

[45]Ibid.

[46]John Heath-Stubbs, The Darkling Plain, A Study of the Later Fortunes of Romanticism in English Poetry from George Darley to W. B. Yeats (London, 1950), p. 95.

[47]Four in Exile (London, 1945), p. 12.

Chapter I

The Biographical Bias

Almost invariably, critics refer to Housman as a lyrist, a classification that, because it is only in part appropriate, often leads to a serious misunderstanding of A Shropshire Lad. It cannot be disputed that the verse in the Shropshire cycle is, in many interesting ways, lyrical. Indeed, most contemporary poetry anthologists include Shropshire Lad pieces in their lyric selections, obviously because Housman's lyric qualities are such that they lucidly exemplify what we have come to associate with lyric poetry: brevity, economy, fragility, intensity, subjectivity, emotion, and musicality.

It is important to recognize, however, what is not lyrical about Housman's verse. Housman's point of view is, in the bulk of his published compositions, indirect. He is a dramatic poet, and the intimate connections between the "I" speaker in a lyric and the writer of that lyric, the sense we have that speaker and poet are one and the same voice, are absent from most poems in A Shropshire Lad and infrequent in Last Poems. In More Poems and Additional Poems, however, both of which were published after Housman's death, these personal connections are more

pronounced, to such an extent, perhaps, that critics fail to perceive the indirection of the earlier verse.

Indeed, in that earlier poetry, Housman goes to great lengths to indicate the presence of very specific speakers, voices whose identities are concretely suggested by what they say in their alloted poetic vehicles. These "phantom lads of Shropshire"[1] are characters especially created to voice various poetic sentiments, and to confuse them with Housman, even to judge them thinly disguised shadows of Housman, as many commentators do, is not merely a "mistake," as Katharine Symons, Housman's sister, says.[2] It is a failure to come to terms with Housman's dramatic technique.

The reasons for this speaker-poet confusion are not difficult to apprehend. First, the tonal sincerity in a significant number of Housman's poems is misleading. We have the sense that genuine emotion is being expressed genuinely, and, as a result, we assume that Housman's real self is the voice we hear. Furthermore, Housman was from the Shropshire environs, and the Salopian scene is an important element in the Shropshire Lad cycle and elsewhere in his verse. But its importance is less biographical than many of Housman's critics, his defenders and his detractors, insist. We cannot assume that because Housman was from the Shropshire area and uses that locale in his poetry it is his voice we hear in the verse. Critics would hesitate to apply to Faulkner's Mississippi characters the techniques they employ in their approaches to Housman's Shropshire characters.

Furthermore, most Housman commentators and biographers have chosen simply to ignore Housman's claim that "the Shropshire Lad is an imaginary figure, with something of my temper and view of life. Very little in the book," he said, "is biographical."[3] Indeed, Maude M. Hawkins denies that this statement has any validity, for most, if not all, Housman's comments on the dramatic quality of A Shropshire Lad, she insists, were intended to serve only one purpose: self-concealment and "self-protection."[4]

More importantly, Miss Hawkins and others ignore numerous textual details that imply the poetry is not autobiographical. One such indication occurs in "They say my verse is sad: no wonder," which prefaces More Poems, and in which it can be presumed that Housman himself speaks:

> They say my verse is sad: no wonder;
>   Its narrow measure spans
> Tears of eternity, and sorrow,
>   Not mine, but man's.[5]

And as a result of disregarding evidence such as this, there has emerged a body of criticism that is biographically biased--a body to which, ironically, many of Housman's staunchest defenders often contribute. The bias seems to center around one interest: Housman's alleged homosexuality.

One defender, for example, having discussed Housman's passion for his Oxford friend, Moses Jackson, goes on to say that Housman, in his poetry, considers God's creation of the world "the primal fault." God is a "brute and blackguard."[6] But, this writer continues, in Number XXXIII

of A Shropshire Lad, "If truth in hearts that perish," this anti-theistic indictment is absent.[7] "The cause of unhappiness --the curse of man--is here," she says, "clearly linked with an unfortunate type of passion that induces a guilt complex towards sexual relations."[8] The invalidity of this assertion is obvious if one reads the poem:

> If truth in hearts that perish
> Could move the powers on high,
> I think the love I bear you
> Should make you not to die.
>
> Sure, sure, if steadfast meaning,
> If single thought could save,
> The world might end to-morrow,
> You should not see the grave.
>
> This long and sure-set liking,
> This boundless will to please
> --Oh, you should live for ever
> If there were help in these.
>
> But now, since all is idle,
> To this lost heart be kind,
> Ere to a town you journey
> Where friends are ill to find.[9]

The clear link to which Miss Hawkins refers does not exist, for this poem alludes to no "unfortunate" passion, and there is no "sexual" implication or "guilt." We cannot infer, as perhaps Miss Hawkins does, that, here, the speaker is Housman addressing Moses Jackson, and the composition should be permitted to say what it says quite unambiguously --namely, that romantic love, intense as it is, cannot change the fixed order of things, cannot prevent death. To the speaker in this poem, perhaps a man, perhaps a woman, the listener, the beloved, whom he is about to lose, is life

itself. If the speaker had his way, and if love could conquer death, the beloved "should not see the grave."

In addition, contrary to Miss Hawkins' initial claim that "If truth in hearts that perish" does not refer to "the primal fault," the creation of the world, there is no doubt that this poem does so refer. The poem is about the helplessness of the lover with his "long and sure-set liking" _vis a vis_ the omnipotence of the immoveable "powers on high"--in other words, God. These "powers," which are unsympathetic, make immortality impossible. According to Christian belief, God ordains not only the deaths of individual lovers, indeed all men, but also, perhaps even as soon as "tomorrow" if He so determines, the death of the entire "world." The speaker's desire to save his beloved from death is an "idle" aspiration. He is "lost," as all men are lost, in that he is doomed to die also, and being lost is the direct result of Original Sin. That sin involved sexual love, as the poem does, and two lovers, Adam and Eve, who chose love over everlasting life, to whom love was more important than eternal life. Housman's speaker implies that to love is to want eternal life not for the self but for the beloved.

Furthermore, the "town" to which the beloved will soon journey may very well be an actual town if we consider "If truth in hearts that perish" one of a series of exile poems in _A Shropshire Lad_. Or, if it is a metaphor, it may allude to death. The "town" could be Housman's version of the so-called Heavenly City, a community that is far from being, in

the entire <u>Shropshire Lad</u> context, a paradise. Whatever the "town" is, it will offer the beloved not love and dedication but "ill."

Another consideration that Miss Hawkins' comments ignore is the possibility that Number XXXIII is a companion poem to the composition that precedes it, Number XXXII, "From Far, from eve and morning," in which the speaker, obviously a man, asks his beloved to "take my hand quick and tell me/What have you in your heart" before he takes his "endless way" to "the wind's twelve quarters." His beloved may speak her heart in "If truth in hearts that perish." And if this relationship between the two compositions does exist, then the speaker in Number XXXIII is a woman and cannot in any way be associated with Housman.

The kind of forced biographical meaning imposed on this poem by Miss Hawkins is all too common in Housman criticism, and Miss Hawkins' technique, what one might call the rhetoric of assertion, is just as popular. The commentators do not demonstrate the validity of their biographical projections; they merely assert them.

Morton Dauwen Zabel, for instance, in an essay that is essentially a tribute to Housman's art, also refers to the "implacable tragedy" of the poet's life, Housman's homosexuality.[10] "What that tragedy was is too much a part of the complex of his nature and his poems to bear crude expression," Zabel writes, "but this much he makes unmistakable: it was his realization that he was to live a life deprived of human

love. That fact, implicit everywhere," he goes on, is "written clearly enough" in, among others, three Shropshire Lad poems, Numbers XV, XLIV, and XLV.[11] Unfortunately, Zabel requires that we read the verse and argue his case for him, for he does not support his claim with a single specific.

Even a cursory evaluation of the three compositions, however, reveals the dubiousness of Zabel's statement. "Look not in my eyes, for fear," Number XV, for example, is Housman's adaptation of the Narcissus myth:

> Look not in my eyes, for fear
> They mirror true the sight I see,
> And there you find your face too clear
> And love it and be lost like me.
> One the long nights through must lie
> Spent in star-defeated sighs,
> But why should you as well as I
> Perish? gaze not in my eyes.
>
> A Grecian lad, as I hear tell,
> One that many loved in vain,
> Looked into a forest well
> And never looked away again.
> There, when the turf in springtime flowers,
> With downward eye and gazes sad,
> Stands amid the glancing showers
> A jonquil, not a Grecian lad.

It is conceivable that this poem has homosexual implications. Narcissus, a man, became entranced with his own reflection, the reflection of a man. The speaker in Housman's poem is "lost," hopelessly in love with the listener, and, as a result, lies awake sighing "star-defeated sighs." If the beloved perceives his or her reflection in the speaker's eye, he or she, like the speaker, may "perish," may fall in love with that reflection. Thus, the listener will suffer as the speaker

suffers, from unrequited love. The Narcissus allusion occurs in the second stanza where the speaker mentions the "Grecian lad" who was transformed into a jonquil.

The important and unanswerable questions here, are, first, is a man speaking, and second, is a man listening? There is no reason to believe that a man is not addressing a woman, or that a woman is not addressing a man. And there is also no reason to insist that the poem reflects Housman's awareness that he was to be "deprived of human love,' as Zabel argues. This is a poem about unrequited love and self-love, and if the subject of unrequited love in Housman's poetry necessarily carries this biographical implication, then Zabel is free to assert that most of Housman's love poetry is concerned with the poet's personal dilemma, and this pattern will not fit. Housman's interest in love, his view that romantic love is both a source of exquisite joy and terrible anguish, is more important. For romantic love, like so much else in the universe, is a source of "ill," as this study will later demonstrate, and, in Housman's poetry, it does not much matter whether a lover's sentiments are reciprocated.

It is agreed that "Look not in my eyes, for fear" is more forceful if two men are involved in the dramatic situation Housman depicts. But the Narcissus stanza is more an <u>exemplum</u> of the kind that ends "'Terence, this is stupid stuff,'" which introduces the Mithridates story with a view to reinforcing theme.

In any event, it is hardly our responsibility to argue Zabel's general claim. The Narcissus story is about a youth, beloved by many, who himself is unable to love. Housman's "Look not in my eyes, for fear" is about an individual who loves intensely, but whose love is not reciprocated. Zabel seems to be mixing the original myth with Housman's adaptation, and adding to the brew his knowledge of Housman's sexual inversion, the result of which is a forced interpretation of the poem that disregards any non-biographical meaning.[12]

Zabel's insistence that the poet's awareness of his irremedial loneliness is indicated in "Shot? so quick, so clean an ending?" is even less valid. This poem is Housman's dramatization of an item he read in a newspaper about the suicide of an eighteen-year-old Woolwich military cadet on August 6, 1895. Housman retained the newspaper account of the incident, which includes the young man's suicide note, and kept it in his copy of A Shropshire Lad. The cadet wrote,

> I wish it to be clearly understood that I am not what is commonly called 'temporarily insane,' and that I am putting an end to my life after several weeks of careful deliberation. . . . I will state the main reasons which have determined me. The first is utter cowardice and despair. There is only one thing in this world which would make me thoroughly happy; that one thing I have no earthly hope of obtaining. The second--which I wish was the only one--is that I have absolutely ruined my own life; but I thank God that as yet, as far as I know, I have not morally injured, or 'offended,' as it is called in the Bible, anyone else. Now I am quite certain that I could not live another five years without doing so, and for that reason alone, even if the first did not exist, I should do what I am doing. . . . At all events, it is final, and consequently better than a long series of sorrows and disgraces.[13]

Housman's poetic tribute to the youngster, Number XLIV in A Shropshire Lad, is no more explicit about the source of the man's disgrace:

Shot? so quick, so clean an ending?
    Oh that was right, lad, that was brave:
Yours was not an ill for mending,
    'Twas best to take it to the grave.

Oh you had forethought, you could reason,
    And saw your road and where it led,
And early wise and brave in season
    Put the pistol to your head.

Oh soon, and better so than later
    After long disgrace and scorn,
You shot dead the household traitor,
    The soul that should not have been born.

Right you guessed the rising morrow
    And scorned to tread the mire you must:
Dust's your wages, son of sorrow,
    But men may come to worse than dust.

Souls undone, undoing others,--
    Long time since the tale began.
You would not live to wrong your brothers:
    Oh lad, you died as fits a man.

Now to your grave shall friend and stranger
    With ruth and some with envy come:
Undishonoured, clear of danger,
    Clean of guilt, pass hence and home.

Turn safe to rest, no dreams, no waking;
    And here, man, here's the wreath I've made:
'Tis not a gift that's worth the taking,
    But wear it and it will not fade.

What Housman does in this poem is not reveal his awareness of his own alone-ness but pay tribute to an individual who, with "forethought" and "reason," ended his life rather than continue it and eventually undo his "brothers." The coroner's verdict in suicides in Britain never varies; a suicide takes his life at a time when the "balance" of his

mind is, says the coroner, "disturbed." At the very least, Housman, in Number XLIV, upends this arbitrary view. It is conceivable that the poet perceived in the suicide's moral dilemma some reflection of his own sexual "ill," but this parallel is not, as Zabel says, "unmistakable."

As for "If it chance your eye offend you," Number XLV in the Shropshire Lad cycle, another composition that, like so many of Housman's poems, lauds the wisdom of suicide or early death, we are, again, not convinced that the poet is voicing his concern for his own loneliness and lovelessness:

> If it chance your eye offend you,
> Pluck it out, lad, and be sound:
> 'Twill hurt, but here are salves to friend you,
> And many a balsam grows on ground.
>
> And if your hand or foot offend you,
> Cut it off, lad, and be whole;
> But play the man, stand up and end you,
> When your sickness is your soul.

It is worthwhile noting that in both poems lads, in taking charge of their own fate, in committing suicide, become "men." Furthermore, in both poems, the suicides suffer from moral sickness, "soul-sickness." Zabel's underlying assumption seems to be that when a Housman composition refers to this kind of moral ill, Housman is actually exposing, albeit unwittingly, his own moral corruption, his homosexuality. But this is no more than a possibility. There are other, more pertinent probabilities. From beginning to end, A Shropshire Lad focuses on the soul-sickness from which all men suffer. Occasionally, Housman is vague about its sources; more often,

he is quite specific about its origins, as this study will explain. But to personalize this "sickness," as Zabel and other critics do, is to lessen its philosophic significance and, ultimately, to miss the point of Housman's art.

This irritating technique, the rhetoric of assertion, is deplored by Norman Marlow in A. E. Housman, Scholar and Poet, one of the few truly interesting, informative, documented, and balanced treatments of Housman's work, when he asks, in desperation, why so many critics, especially Housman critics, are "not trained to use words to express" rather than to "conceal thought?"[14] He pleads with Housman commentators, in particular the detractors, to "give us an example," and goes on to say, in a figure that Housman would have admired, "truly the brush that these valets wield brings more dust than it removes."[15]

F. W. Bateson tries yet another biographical tack. In his reference to Housman's soldier poems, he resorts to pure guesswork:

> In Housman's London years the regiments quartered there normally provided middle-class homosexuals with their male prostitutes. The suggestion is a guess, but it is a guess that would help to explain [Housman's] preoccupation with the lower ranks, especially in A Shropshire Lad. Indeed, the persona of the Shropshire yokel that holds the collection together may well derive from Housman's association with such men, most of whom were at that time country-born. If I am right, the soldier poems and such extensions from them as the pseudo-Pindaric "To an Athlete Dying Young" would acquire a new dimension from their personal implications.[16]

But there exist less speculative possibilities, not all of them biographical. First, the soldier poem was popular in the latter part of the last century, as any reader familiar with Kipling's _Departmental Ditties_ (1886) and _Barrack-Room Ballads_ (1892) might know, and soldier poems of various kinds remained in fashion until after the first World War. There were also soldiers in Housman's family (his younger brother, George Herbert, for example, an army sergeant killed in the Boer War, and his nephews, Clement Aubrey Symons and Victor Noel Housman), and there is no question that the poet greatly admired and loved such military men, especially the less articulate foot-soldiers whose dedication to duty revealed to him a special kind of courage and a beautiful selflessness. It is, at least in part, these attributes to which Housman's soldier poems pay tribute. And Katharine Symons, Housman's sister, explains that "many of the poet's soldier pieces in _A Shropshire Lad_ . . . have a very certain connection with the history of our brother Herbert."[17]

Bateson's guesswork is not only unwarranted and unenlightening but damaging. And one might also ask how this critic arrives at the statement that most London-stationed soldiers in the 1890's were country-born. The claim is not documented, and, one suspects, cannot be. Maude M. Hawkins quite rightly observes that "the love Housman had for soldiers as expressed in [the _Shropshire Lad_] poems on soldiering was not sexual. Half-truths often result in whole untruths," she continues, "and the whisperings about the sex life of Housman have resulted in such gross misinterpretations of a spartan-like

man and his poetry that there is need for facts to testify in his behalf. Nothing could be more ridiculous than the rumors that his soldier poems were based on sexual experiences. Most of these falsities are insecurely grounded on total ignormance about the simplest facts in [Housman's] life--facts which any encyclopedia could straighten out if one took the trouble to look them up."[18]

Writing in 1929, while Housman was still alive, Rica Brenner, in her perceptive discussion of Housman's "modernism," said that "the poems as a transmutation of Housman's own experiences have still to be explained. This can be done, however, only when Housman himself consents to reveal the clew [sic]. One wishes for such a revelation."[19] The "revelation," such as it is in terms of its relation to Housman's poetry, came in 1958. Maude Hawkins, with the help of Housman's family, especially his sister Clemence and his brother Laurence, came to the conclusion that Housman was a sexual invert. This biographer writes: "during his third year at Oxford, . . . a disturbing change developed in Housman's affection for his friend [Moses] Jackson. Housman discovered with despair that he was capable of a strange abnormal love which all the stern upbringing in him abhorred."[20] He was torn "to pieces emotionally. Jackson's words, expressions, festures absorbed him. . . . He lost weight, consumed by the intensity of his [abnormal] craving."[21]

Thus, the mystery that had surrounded Housman--Housman the retiring don, Housman the savage textual critic, Housman

the lyrist--was destroyed. But much of what has been done with this "revelation" should not have happened. Modern critics, perhaps because ours is a Feudian age, have projected Housman's life, particularly his homosexuality, into his poetry wherever and whenever they have seen fit, and the results are disturbing.

John Peale Bishop, for example, referring to Housman's homosexuality, writes that now "we know what [the poet's] personal plight was, and that is bound to affect our reading of all his poems. To know 'Oh who is that young sinner with the handcuffs on his wrists'[22] is to know something that we should have known all along about those culprits of *A Shropshire Lad*. We have known and long known those hanged boys who hear the stroke of eight from the clock in the tower on the market-place and never hear the stroke of nine. We know now for what crime all of them have been condemned."[23] But Housman's poetic reticence, one aspect of which is his refusal to specify the crimes his "culprits" are guilty of, has another function, as this evaluation explains in another chapter. Furthermore, there is some question as to whether information about Housman's sexual interests should "affect our reading of all his poems," especially since the issue, in relation to most, seems irrevelant.

Hoxie Neale Fairchild, however, clearly disagrees. Fixing on what he terms the "fact" of Housman's homosexuality, this critic asserts that the *Shropshire Lad* cycle "bears witness to . . . [this] psychic disorder," for it constitutes

a direct relief, in verse, for Housman's "painful" sexual feelings for Moses Jackson.[24] The poetry is "a means for Housman of simultaneously expressing and concealing and fortifying himself against his real despair," his sexual inversion, says Fairchild.[25] But this critic presents no convincing evidence to support his claim. He cites several Housman quotations, most of which are taken from poems not contained in A Shropshire Lad, and all of which are used out of context. Fairchild, usually an astute and fair-minded writer, goes a step further, however: Housman's pessimistic world view, he says, "becomes less impressive when we know that it springs from a personal neurosis rather than from a reasoned view of life."[26] The logic, here, is bewildering. Is all "impressive" poetry, then, the product of "a reasoned view of life"?

Christopher Ricks, in his discussion of Housman's position today, argues that "it would be wrong to use his poems solely as biographical documents," but, Ricks adds, "there is no reason why they should not be used also as biographical documents."[27] To use Housman's verse as too many critics use it, to manipulate it and force it to relate to biographical concerns, however, seems very unproductive. T. S. Eliot contends that "honest criticism and sensitive apprecation are directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry,"[28] for, he explains, "impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in

the man, the personality."[29] Other poets and critics, among them Matthew Arnold, C. S. Lewis, William K. Wimsatt, Jr., and Cleanth Brooks,[30] echo this anti-biographical view. Implicity or explicitly, they agree that, as Eliot puts it, "poetry is not a turning loose of emotion but an escape from personality."[31]

Nor, one should add, is poetry a "disguise." One receives the distinct impression from many Housman critics that the Shropshire poet created his Salopian "figment" deliberately to mask his sexual inversion. And this inference is, surely, unacceptable. First, Housman was not forced to publish his verse. Second, Housman's notebook revisions indicate no conscious attempt to obscure homosexual signals, and one can assume that he, more keenly than anyone else, would have been responsive to any homosexual implications his poems might have. Particular poems carrying these sexual overtones or undertones were deliberately not published by Housman himself but have appeared since his death in the _More Poems_ and _Additional Poems_ selections. In view of the fact that such compositions as "Because I liked you better"[32] and "Oh who is that young sinner with the handcuffs on his wrists?"[33] were intentionally omitted from the _Shropshire Lad_ and _Last Poems_ groups, most likely because of their homosexual implications, we may ask why Housman would retain in the published selections other compositions that expose his sexual problem.

At this point, then it is necessary that some reasoned attempt be made to rescue Housman's A Shropshire Lad from his biographically biased interpreters, and to examine narrative elements, setting and character, in the cycle, with a view to separating the dramatic wheat from the biographical chaff. This is not to suggest that there exists in the Shropshire cycle no biographical dimension. A man writes about what he knows. Who he is, what he has experienced, what he believes, the nature of his fears and frustrations--all, in one or another way, are likely to affect his art. But, as John Sparrow explains, "how deep a foundation of personal experience" actually underlies Housman's verse "must [always] remain a matter for conjecture."[34] It is, finally, Housman's art with which we ought to be primarily concerned.

Notes

[1]Katharine Symons, *Alfred Edward Housman: Recollections* (New York, 1937), p. 33.

[2]*Ibid.*

[3]Laurence Housman, *My Brother, A. E. Housman: Personal Recollections Together with Thirty Hitherto Unpublished Poems* (New York, 1938), p. 71.

[4]Maude M. Hawkins, *A. E. Housman: Man Behind a Mask* (Chicago, 1958), p. 140.

[5]Introductory piece of Housman's *More Poems*.

[6]Hawkins, p. 160.

[7]*Ibid.*

[8]*Ibid.*

[9]*The Collected Poems of A. E. Housman* (New York, 1965), p. 50.

[10]Morton Dauwen Zabel, "The Whole of Housman," *A. E. Housman, A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Christopher Ricks (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), p. 128.

[11]*Ibid.*

[12]One suspects that Zabel has been influenced by a passage in Laurence Housman's biography of his brother, a passage that is quoted in almost every work, of essay or book length, that deals with the poet. In his *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, T. E. Lawrence writes, "There was my craving to be liked--so strong and nervous that never could I open myself friendly to another. The terror of failure in an effort so important made me shrink

from trying. . . . There was [also] a craving to be famous; and a horror of being known to like being known." In Housman's copy of Lawrence's autobiography, he wrote alongside these lines, "This is me," which indicates the thesis Zabel attempts to support in his essay--namely, that Housman was painfully aware he would never be able to give or, as a result, to receive the affection he craved. See Laurence Housman, _My Brother, A. E. Housman_, p. 99.

[13]Quoted in Laurence Housman, p. 104.

[14]Norman Marlow, _A. E. Housman, Scholar and Poet_ (Minneapolis, 1958), p. 161.

[15]_Ibid_.

[16]F. W. Bateson, "The Poetry of Emphasis," _A. E. Housman A Collection of Critical Essays_, ed. Christopher Ricks (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), p. 141.

[17]Symons, p. 34.

[18]Hawkins, p. 151.

[19]Rica Brenner, _Ten Modern Poets_ (New York, 1930), p. 191.

[20]Hawkins, p. 91.

[21]_Ibid_.

[22]Number XVIII, _Additional Poems_.

[23]John Peale Bishop, "The Poetry of A. E. Housman," _Poetry_, LVI (April, 1940), p. 145.

[24]Hoxie Neale Fairchild, _Religious Trends in English Poetry_, V (New York 1962), p. 56.

[25]_Ibid_.

[26]_Ibid_., p. 55.

[27]Christopher Ricks, ed., A. E. Housman, A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), p. 6.

[28]Ibid., p. 7.

[29]Ibid., p. 9.

[30]Arnold's comments appear in his essay on Shelley and elsewhere, C. S. Lewis' in The Personal Heresy, A Controversy (London, 1939), and Wimsatt's and Brooks' in Literary Criticism, A Short History (New York, 1957).

[31]T. S. Eliot, Selected Essays (New York, 1932), p. 10.

[32]Number XXXI, More Poems.

[33]Number XVIII, Additional Poems.

[34]John Sparrow, Alfred Edward Housman: Recollections (New York, 1937), p. 76.

Chapter II

The Shropshire Setting

The West Midlands county of Shropshire is indissolubly associated with Housman's name. Indeed, with perhaps the exception of Thomas Hard and his "Wessex"--Dorsetshire--poems, no English poet is more closely identified with a particular region than Housman is with Salop's quiet fields, its fruitful orchards, and its gentle, lavendar-misted hills. We often relate Wordsworth to the Lake District, and Arnold, in such poems as "The Scholar-Gypsy" and "Thyrsis," to the Oxfordshire environs. But setting does not seem, in their poetry, ubiquitous. Ludlow, Shrewsbury, and Upton; the Teme, the Wyre, and the Severn; the Wrekin, Wenlock Edge, and Bredon Hill (actually located in Worcestershire)--these are the towns, the rivers, and the hills that dot the *Shropshire Lad* landscape. So inextricably linked to the county is Housman that several anthologists mistakenly make him a Shropshire native, whereas he was born and bred in the neighboring county to the east, Worcestershire.

In point of fact, things Salopian seem so pervasive in Housman's first collection that they are, indirectly, responsible for the title by which posterity knows the work. After reading the as yet unpublished manuscript, Alfred W. Pollard, a Saint John's College, Oxford, friend, suggested the inappropriateness of Housman's original title, Poems of Terence Hearsay. This appellation, said Pollard, was "unworthy" and did not "go with the spirit of the collection at all."[1] The cycle has a Shropshire setting, Pollard argued, "and Shropshire lads are speaking."[2] Thus, the collection's present title, A Shropshire Lad, was born. Professor Pollard later said that he found the exact phrase "a Shropshire lad" in "the poem"[3]--by which he means the entire Shropshire cycle--but the phrase does not actually appear there.

To some extent, the explanation of Housman's lasting interest in Shropshire, and the reason he seems to give that Midland county so much prominence in his poetry, may be buried somewhere in his earliest childhood.

Both Housman's siter, Katharine Symons, and his brother, Laurence, in their essays on Housman's life, explain that, from his earliest years, the poet was interested in, and intensely responsive to, nature. Apparently, he took his brothers and sisters on country walks and taught them to identify flowers, shrubs, and trees. But nature-study in an English youngster who lives in the country is not at all uncommon. Furthermore, these childhood sallies were conducted in Worcestershire, not Shropshire. Housman himself admitted

after the publication of A Shropshire Lad that he did not really know very much about Shropshire, "except in parts," and that some of his topographical details were not only "wrong" but purely "imaginary."[4] Bredon Hill, for example, the subject of Number XXI in A Shropshire Lad, is not in Salop. And Hughley, the setting for Number LXI, "Hughley Steeple," does not have a church with a steeple. Informed of this last topographical error by his brother, Housman explained that he had learned this on a visit to Shropshire. He "ascertained by looking down from Wenlock edge that Hughley Church could not have such a steeple [as that described] , . . . but as I had composed the poem [and] could not invent another name that sounded so nice, I could only deplore that the church at Hughley should follow the bad example of the Church at Brou, which persists in standing on a plain after Matthew Arnold had said that it stands among the mountains."[5] With characteristic irony, Housman added, "I did not apprehend [at the time he wrote the cycle] that the faithful would be making pilgrimages to these holy places."[6]

But the faithful do make such pilgrimages, for A Shropshire Lad, has, as one Housman biographer puts it, "given to Shropshire . . . an added romance comparable to that which attaches to Hardy's 'Wessex.'"[7]

Unquestionably, Housman's love of the English landscape is as biographical as any element in A Shropshire Lad. He himself contended that "Nature intended me for a geographer."[8] But he insisted that he did not actually know Shropshire.

The county "was our Western horizon," he writes in a letter to an American admirer, Houston Martin, "which made me feel romantic about it."[9] And in a letter to a French translator, he repeats the point: "I had a sentimental feeling for Shropshire because its hills were our western horizon."[10]

Interestingly, most Housman critics have chosen to disregard these statements. They attribute the poet-scholar's Salopian focus to his later separation from the place of his childhood. "The hills of Shropshire could only evoke profound poetry if they were viewed as boyhood's land of lost content," writes Norman Marlow,[11] and other commentators reinforce this explanation. John Heath-Stubbs, for instance, claims that "the world of A Shropshire Lad is a . . . pastoral dream-world of lost adolescence."[12] But if this is indeed the case, one wonders why Housman, after leaving Worcestershire for London, chose to visit his childhood environs only two or three times during his life.

Certainly, there are several compositions in the Shropshire Lad collection that, regardless of their relation to other poems in the cycle, do seem to be particularly personal, do seem more directly to reflect Housman's poignant recollection of his early years in a rural setting that was, for any number of reasons, congenial. In these few poems, the biographical substratum appears to be undeniable, and perhaps here, as the poet's sister states, Housman "throws off the figment of a Shropshire lad and refers unmistakably to his home and boyhood."[13]

In these compositions, the speakers are rural exiles

living in London, and the connections between the speakers and the poet himself seem obvious, perhaps too obvious. After failing Greats at Oxford, Housman left Worcestershire to work, first, as a private secretary, and, later, as a tradesmarks registrar in the Patent Office in London. Clearly, this must have been stiflingly tedious work for a man of Housman's scholarly abilities and poetic energies, and it is no wonder that he likened it to being in the "gutter"; the work must have been, indeed, "drudgery."[14] It is not surprising that critics have come to refer to Housman's ten-year civil service stint as the writer's "Purgatory Period." To view these exile poems only as biographical reflections, however, is, as will be demonstrated later, to miss more important implications.

One such apparently biographical poem, which makes no specific reference to Salop, but which describes in telling detail the West Midlands landscape, is Number XLI in the Shropshire cycle, "In my own shire, if I was sad." Purely descriptive poetry is rare in Housman, and the romantic view of nature embodied in this composition is also not typical, for, here, the speaker contrasts the bleak isolation of his London existence with the intensity of the life he led earlier in the country, a life that constituted a companionable involvement in, and communication with, nature.

Loneliness, despair, hostility, misery, distrust, and hatred--together these comprise the quality of life in the English capital, where there are no "helpmates." Londoners, having their own problems, cannot shoulder "another's care."

They measure one another suspiciously, and reveal, in their expressions, "The mortal sickness of minds /Too unhappy to be kind." The most Londoners can do

> Is to hate their fellow man;
> And till they drop they needs must still
> Look at you and wish you ill.

In contrast, nature, to the rural exile, seemed a source of constant companionship in his youth, a helpmate, a provider of consolation, sympathy, and pleasure. In short, nature was a living, concerned maternal force bestowing "homely" comfort and providing spiritual aid:

> In my own shire, if I was sad,
> Homely comforters I had;
> The earth, because my heart was sore,
> Sorrowed for the son she bore;
> And standing hills, long to remain,
> Shared their short-lived comrade's pain.
> And bound for the same bourn as I,
> On every road I wandered by,
> Trod beside me, close and dear,
> The beautiful and death-struck year:
> Whether in the woodland brown
> I heard the beechnut rustle down,
> And saw the purple crocus pale
> Flower about the autumn dale;
> Or littering far the fields of May
> Lady smocks a-bleaching lay,
> And like a sky-lit water stood
> The bluebells in the azured wood.
>
> Yonder, lightening other loads,
> The seasons range the country roads.

"In my own shire, if I was sad" demonstrates a fairly traditional romantic view of nature, the idea that it is actively involved with man. It suggests that, in nature, man can never experience the absolute loneliness that is concommitant

with urban living. But what is not characteristically romantic about this poem is the emphasis on pain and sorrow, both of which beset the speaker even in his youthtime in the country. Nature appeared to share his pain, but the pain existed even there.

Nature's role in the life of man is also contrasted with the loneliness of life in London in another Shropshire Lad exile poem, Number LII, "Far in a western brookland":

> Far in a western brookland
> That bred me long ago
> The poplars stand and tremble
> By pools I used to know.
>
> There, in the windless night-time,
> The wanderer, marvelling why,
> Halts on the bridge to hearken
> How soft the poplars sigh.
>
> He hears: no more remembered
> In fields where I was known,
> Here I lie down in London
> And turn to rest alone.
>
> There, by the starlit fences,
> The wanderer halts and hears
> My soul that lingers sighing
> About the glimmering weirs.

Nature, represented by the poplars that appear to sough, is, in this composition, not a motherly companion, however, but a kind of faithless friend, perhaps even a mistress. In the past, it was intimately involved with the speaker, but, now, it bemuses the occasional "wanderer" who passes by. Indeed, the trees no longer remember the speaker, even though his "soul" still loyally lingers about, and whispers to, them, while his physical self, separated from the unfaithful trees, lies in his

bed "and [turns] to rest alone." The image of the speaker lying sleepless and alone in the silent night eloquently suggests his absolute isolation, in contrast to the involvement of the rural transient who pauses to listen to what he believes is a marvel: the sigh of the poplars "in the windless nighttime."

A third poem that perhaps pays a more direct tribute to Housman's Worcestershire, and to the childhood years he spent there, is number XL, "Into my heart an air that kills." According to Carl J. Weber, this lyric, "more than any other, sums up Housman's pangs of rememberance, in London, of his home in Bromsgrove [actually, his homes in Catshill, Fockbury, and Bromsgrove] and his boyhood there."[15] The poem is such an intense and moving expression of homesickness that it speaks for itself:

> Into my heart an air that kills
>   From yon far country blows;
> What are those blue remembered hills,
>   What spires, what farms are those?
>
> That is the land of lost content,
>   I see it shining plain,
> The happy highways where I went
>   And cannot come again.

The depth of feeling this poem evokes in the listener does not at first seem commensurate with the surface starkness of the composition, and of Housman's style more will be said later. But some discussion of the poem is necessary. In this delicate piece, the speaker is so far away, in time and space, from the country of his early years that he does

not at first recognize the "blue remembered hills," the "spires," and the "farms" with which, clearly, he was intimately familiar in the past. Here, Housman is dramatizing a complex idea--namely that the surfaces of the memory can become numbed, anaesthetized, if one is separated, in time and space, from the known. But the numbing of recollection is mere prelude. It is succeeded by sudden illumination: hills, spires, and farms are a "shining" manifestation of "yon far country," the speaker's birthplace, "the land of lost content."

In "Into my heart an air that kills," however, emotions are mixed, the joyful triumph of recognition is swiftly countered by a sobering reflection, for the lyric ends with the awareness that the happiness of the past, of youthtime, is forever gone. Those "happy highways" involved more than mere topography; states of mind to which the speaker cannot return were also involved. And time, a remorseless antagonist throughout A Shropshire Lad, has transformed that earlier self. The sweet and the bitter are, in this poem, mixed, inseparable, as they invariably are in all the compositions in the Shropshire cycle.

Number LI in A Shropshire Lad, a fourth exile poem, is less direct. The setting, here, is a museum or gallery in London, a city far away from the country birthplace of the "vacant"-eyed man who loiters there, brooding on his "heavy ill," his exile. The abject loneliness of the speaker is emphasized when he apprehends, in the expression on a statue's

face, signs of his own isolation. Similarly, the statue appears to respond to the speaker's alienation, for it seems as if it would say,

> 'What, lad, drooping with your lot?
> I too would be where I am not.
> I too survey that endless line
> Of men whose thoughts are not as mine.'

Both speaker and statue yearn for their homelands, but Number LI, "Loitering with vacant eye," a dialogue, does not treat only the pain of loss. The statue voices an object lession in endurance:

> 'Years ere you stood up from rest,
> On my neck the collar prest;
> Years, when you lay down your ill,
> I shall stand and bear it still.
> Courage, lad, 'tis not for long;
> Stand, quit you like stone, be strong.'

This call for granite-like endurance is not, in Housman, unfamiliar, and the concluding lines of Number LI indicate that the speaker's hallucinatory exercise (he has, in actuality, voiced a dialogue with himself) has done its work, for he says:

> Light on me my trouble lay,
> And I stept out in flesh and bone
> Manful like the man of stone.

But this resolution does not satisfy; it comes too suddenly and is really no answer to the agonies of alienation suggested earlier. Furthermore, the somewhat too clever ironies in the poem (the speaker, for instance, a living

man, has "vacant," statue-like eyes, in contrast to the statue, who seems alive, and a stone man counsels stony endurance, after which the speaker leaves "manful like the man of stone") undermine the sincerity of the composition. But these shortcomings do not seriously challenge the possible biographical implications of the poem. It is known that Housman, while working in the London Patent Office from 1882 to 1892, frequently visited the Reading Room of the British Museum, and it is conceivable that those visits, coupled with what Housman's biographers say was the poet's profound dissatisfaction with life in London, served to inspire this quaint piece. Furthermore, when Katharine Symons, Housman's sister, argues that several Shropshire Lad poems refer "unmistakably" to Housman's unhappiness in the London capital during these so-called Purgatory years, she specifies Number LI.[16]

It is not unreasonable to argue, then, that to some extent, a limited extent certainly, the biographical dimension is present in these four Shropshire Lad exile poems, as well as in Last Poems, and, perhaps more obviously, in the More Poems and Additional Poems selections published after Housman died. But to interpret the Salopian emphasis solely the product of Housman's personal nostalgia is to misread the essential function of setting in A Shropshire Lad. Katharine Symons suggests a much more interesting explanation when she says that her brother "followed" his "phantom lads" into Shropshire, "and they made him love it."[17]

Another comment that challenges the biographical impli-

cations of the four exile poems here discussed comes from A. S. F. Gow, a close friend of Housman during the Purgatory years. "If certain poems . . . are to be regarded as expressing the poet's own view of life," he writes, "it would appear that Housman was unhappy in London and homesick for the country and for the friends he had left in Worcestershire, and no doubt town life was at first irksome to so eager and observant a lover of the country. He had, however, other friends in London besides [Moses] Jackson, and it is not my impression that he was unhappy for long" in the capital.[18]

That critics have seized on the phrase "land of lost content," in Number XL, as a key not only to Housman's interest in Shropshire, but also to most of his subjects and themes, is a manifestation of a critical bias that borders on naivete. In effect, they imply that the writer's preoccupation with things Salopian is crucially connected to his desire to return to some earlier, happy state, a not uncontroversial suggestion if one takes into account what cannot be ignored in A Shropshire Lad: the emphasis on despair, isolation, alienation, frustration, and defeat. Housman dramatizes what he calls the eternal and inescapable "sadness of the world,"[19] a sadness that is as ubiquitous in Shropshire as it is in London. In Housman's Salop, there is little contentment to which one would want to return. He is no creator of pastoral idylls.

What actually underlies these exile poems is not Housman's concern for his personal separation from the land of his fathers

so much as an interest in the role separation plays in the lives of all men. This is the theme of painful disconnection that pervades the Shropshire cycle. Housman suggests, indeed, that being born is one such disconnection, and that life presents man with a series of similarly debilitating disconnections. One can speculate that his interest in separation is in part the result of the effect separation had on him as a child. It was while he was away from home, for instance (he was twelve and visiting friends for the Easter holidays), that Housman's mother died.[20] Later, an outbreak of scarlet fever forced him to be isolated from his family for several days.[21] Interestingly, Housman seemed to cultivate the emotion that he experienced in these painful situations. He would stand at a distance from his home for hours, trying to imagine what activities were taking place inside the house, just as he did, from a distance of several miles, when involuntarily separated from his family during the scarlet fever outbreak.[22]

What Housman succeeds in doing in _A Shropshire Lad_, then, is to transmute, to universalize, the personal. The biographical implications may be present, but they are not the source of Housman's appeal. A closer, less biased examination of the Shropshire setting in the cycle may suggest a more interesting function. First, his use of topographical allusions is, despite the first impressions of most readers, sparing. As Norman Marlow says; "It is remarkable how few particulars there are in the verse cycle to create this

atmosphere of place."[23] In the sixty-three poems in the collection, Housman uses fifty-nine topographical references. There are only three mentions of Shropshire, and one of these appears in the title of the volume, and four references are to Bredon Hill, a Worcestershire landmark, the presence of which non-Salopian detail Housman explains in a letter to Houston Martin. "Bredon Hill is in Worcestershire on the edge of Gloucestershire," he says. This poem, Number XXI, "was written early, before I knew the book would be a Shropshire book."[24]

This simple statement, buried in a relatively unimportant letter, is significant. It seems to indicate that A Shropshire Lad is Salopian by design, a design that many Housman commentators ignore, or, conversely, a design that has prompted some critics to deplore what they consider the "sham pastoral"[25] or "fake pastoralism."[26] What these writers seek, and apparently fail to find, in the cycle is some variety of pastoral realism, a quality that is perhaps lacking in all pastoral poetry. William Empson in Some Versions of Pastoral refers to the lack of realism in the traditional pastoral when he writes, "the essential trick of the old pastoral, which was felt to imply a beautiful relation between rich and poor, was to make simple people express strong feelings (. . . something fundamentally true about everybody) in learned and fashionable language."[27] Thus, the "best subject" was communicated in the "best way."[28] This "clash between style and theme," as Empson calls it, can hardly be considered realistic.[29]

Nonetheless, to some critics, Housman's Shropshire "is fabricated rather than imagined."[30] These critics do not ask the reason for the fabrication. H. W. Garrod, for instance, refers to the artificiality of Housman's Shropshire Lad pastoralism. The poet has, he says, "vivified and glorified large tracts of that pleasant [Salopian] countryside," but Housman's interest in patriotism, the frequent references to "lads" and "chaps," and the poems about "girls with their throats cut, and their lovers who were hanged for it"--all are somehow "false."[31] But there are no girls whose throats are cut in A Shropshire Lad (there is a dead lover who, despite his cut throat, returns to cohabit with the woman who rejected him in life), and there are no lovers in the collection who are hanged for the murder of their mistresses.

In seeking some undefined, and possibly undefinable, pastoral realism, Fairchild, Garrod, et al fail to perceive and evaluate Housman's manipulation of an established pastoral convention. Writing in 1960, David Daiches is one of very few critics who apprehend and applaud Housman's technique. "The note of proverbail rusticity" suggested by setting and character in Housman's verse, Daiches says, "is not genuine, nor is it really meant to be," and he goes on to compliment what he terms Housman's poetic "trickery."[32] Regrettably, Daiches does not elaborate. William Archer's response is also intelligent. "Never was there less of a 'pastoral' poet, in the artificial, Italian-Elizabethan sense of the word," he says of Housman. Shropshire "is no Arcadia, no

Sicily, still less a courtly pleasaunce peopled with beribboned nymphs and swains. It is . . . real."[33]

Housman's use of the pastoral element in A <u>Shropshire Lad</u> becomes evident if one isolates the topographical allusions. Statistical studies tend to be somewhat tedious, but, here, an arithmetical count provides an interesting study in design. There are only sixteen poems in the sixty-three poem collection that specifically refer to parts of Shropshire, and these are Numbers I, III, VII, VIII, IX, XXI, XXIII, XXVIII, XXXI, XXXVII, XXXIX, L, LV, LVIII, LXI, and XLII. Between most, but not all, these explicity Salopian poems, there occur verse clusters in which no specific setting is mentioned at all, but over which, if one may use a figure, the Shropshire atmosphere rolls. The Salopian association in these latter poems is suggested, first, by their placement in the <u>Shropshire Lad</u> sequence. They are, in effect, framed by poems that specify setting, and, as a result, a kind of spacial contagion takes place. Setting, common to only a few poems, is made to seem common to all. Second, this Salopian atmosphere is reinforced by Housman's use, throughout the cycle, of what seems to be a local Salopian dialect, about which more will be said later.

What Housman is attempting, then, is the creation of a sense of place, and there can be no doubt that the poet is successful. The technique of extension works, and it is a trap into which most readers fall quite unwittingly, perhaps because most of us, old and young alike, respond to place,

identifiable terrain, in literature, especially in the prose narrative, where setting enables a writer not only to dramatize his world view and theme, but also to realize them. It is not untoward to claim that Housman, in a significant number of Shropshire Lad poems, is not only true to life but twice as true as life. For some of his poems fuse the apparently real, particular speakers with a particular idiom who are linked to a particular place, with the higher reality that is the stuff of poetry--vision, theme, idea.

In explaining the importance of place in fiction, the novelist Eudora Welty makes a statement that is pertinent to Housman's use of Shropshire in his cycle:

> Location is the ground conductor of all the currents of emotion and belief and moral conviction that charge out from the story in its course. These charges need the warm hard earth underfoot, the light and lift of air, the stir and play of mood, the softening bath of atmosphere that give the likeness-to-life that life needs . . . .
>
> I think the sense of place is as essential to good and honest writing as a logical mind . . . . It is by knowing where you stand that you grow able to judge where you are. Place absorbs our earliest notice and attention, [and] it bestows on us our original awareness; and our critical powers spring up from the study of it and the growth of experience inside it. It perseveres in bringing us back to earth when we fly too high. It never really stops informing us, for it is forever astir, alive, changing, reflecting, like the mind of man itself. One place comprehended can make us understand other places better.[34]

If we are to talk about verisimilitude in Housman's _A Shropshire Lad_, we must admit that the poet's sense of place is realistically achieved. Housman's Salopian setting has yet another important function, a mythic function, for the verse, set so concretely in the Shropshire environs, awakens the reader's interest in the primitive, the unspoiled. This is a psychic predisposition to which perhaps all pastoral poetry appeals, the belief most of us share that rural man in the rural scene is more attuned to the fundamental realities of human existence, less disassociated, by virtue of his environmental isolation, his intimate connections with the soil, and his lack of urban artificiality and affectation, from the eternal verities. This is not to imply that this superiority of connection and vision is a fact; but many readers believe it to be a fact. Pastoralism in literature is, as William Empson argues, an escape from the complex to the simple, or, perhaps more accurately, "putting the complex into the simple."[35] And, in Housman's Shropshire cycle, the complex, the inescapable "sadness of the world," "trouble," is reduced to manageable, simple, proportions, as this study will demonstrate. To what extent Housman was conscious of his use of the pastoral convention does not really signify. It matters only that he does use it and that this use has artistic meaning.

Notes

[1]The conversation is reported in Maude M. Hawkins, *A. E. Housman: Man Behind a Mask* (Chicago, 1958), p. 145.

[2]*Ibid*.

[3]Quoted in Norman Marlow, *A. E. Housman, Scholar and Poet* (Minneapolis, 1958), p. 9.

[4]Letter to Houston Martin, dated April 14, 1934, reprinted in Laurence Housman, *My Brother, A. E. Housman: Personal Recollections Together with Thirty Hitherto Unpublished Poems* (New York, 1938), p. 195.

[5]*Ibid*., p. 165.

[6]*Ibid*.

[7]Laurence Housman, p. 82.

[8]Marlow, p. 153.

[9]The letter, dated April 14, 1934, is reprinted in Laurence Housman, p. 195.

[10]Laurence Housman, p. 21.

[11]Marlow, p. 158.

[12]John Heath-Stubbs, *The Darkling Plain, a Study of the Later Fortunes of Romanticism in English Poetry from George Darley to W. B. Yeats* (London, 1950), p. 94.

[13]Katharine Symons, *Alfred Edward Housman: Recollections* (New York, 1937), p. 31.

[14]R. W. Chambers, *Man's Unconquerable Mind, Studies of English Writers from Bede to A. E. Housman and W. P. Ker* (London, 1939), p. 384.

[15]Quoted in *A Shropshire Lad*, by A. E. Housman, ed. Joseph Mersand (New York, 1966), p. 108.

[16]Symons, p. 31.

[17]*Ibid.*, p. 33.

[18]A. S. F. Gow, *A. E. Housman, A Sketch Together with a List of His Writings and Indexes to His Classical Papers* (Cambridge, 1936), p. 9.

[19]Symons, p. 37.

[20]Laurence Housman, pp. 23-24.

[21]*Ibid.*, p. 27.

[22]*Ibid.*

[23]Marlow, pp. 20-21.

[24]The comment appears in a letter to Houston Martin, dated October 17, 1934, reprinted in Laurence Housman, p. 197.

[25]Cyril Connolly, "A . E. Housman: A Controversy," *A. E. Housman, A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Christopher Ricks (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), p. 31.

[26]John Wain, "Housman," *A. E. Housman, A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Christopher Ricks (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), p. 31.

[27](~~Great Britain~~ London, ~~undated~~ 1935), p. 11.

[28]*Ibid.*

[29]*Ibid.*, p. 12.

[30]Hoxie Neale Fairchild, *Religious Trends in English Poetry*, V (New York, 1962), p. 55.

[31]H. W. Garrod, *"The Profession of Poetry" and Other Lectures* (Oxford, 1929).

[32]*A Critical History of English Literature*, II (New York, 1960), pp. 1038-1039.

[33]William Archer, *Poets of the Younger Generation* (London, 1902), p. 184.

[34]"Place in Fiction," *Critical Approaches to Fiction*, eds. Shiv. K. Kumar and Keith McKean (New York, 1968), p. 259.

[35]*Some Versions of Pastoral* (London, 1935), p. 23.

Chapter III

The Shropshire *Personae*

In *A Shropshire Lad*, then, the pastoral setting, regardless of any biographical connections and implications, has an important structural function. No less significant artistically are the voices we hear speaking in the cycle, voices that are an inseparable part of Housman's Salopian scene. To be sure, the poet's bleak and anti-Christian world view underlies the entire collection, but individual speakers are permitted to vocalize this view. They are no more Housman, however, than the voices in Donne's *Songs and Sonnets* and Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* are necessarily identifiable with their creators. One of the most serious shortcomings in Housman criticism--even, at times, the best criticism--is the failure to take into account what Priestley calls the numerous "degrees of dramatization, shading off one into another," in his verse.[1]

That Housman himself is crucially concerned with establishing a discrete distance between himself and the voices we hear in the Shropshire volume is evident from his original title

for the work, Poems of Terence Hearsay, and from at least one of the poems in the cycle, Number LXII, "'Terence, this is stupid stuff.'" Clearly, Terence is intended to be Housman's surrogate poet-philosopher, the "creator" of the pieces in A Shropshire Lad. He presents his Shropshire friends with a selection of verse whose "smack," whose impact and flavor, is "sour," a verse that will aid them in "the embittered hour."

The name Housman awards this persona is freighted with meaning. The surname "Hearsay" provides the reader with an insight into Terence's poetic method: he is a listener and an observer. Essentially, it is what he has heard said that is poetically recreated in the Shropshire Lad poems, not, as Nesca Robb argues, his own "personal fortunes."[2] There is an irony to the fact that he offers his bitter brew as a kind of philosophic-spiritual anodyne to the very men whose agony it records. In this life, he contends, "trouble's sure," and

> I'd face it as a wise man should,
> And train for ill and not for good.

How will life's "luckless" victims prepare? They will harden themselves by tasting life's multitude of "poisons" indirectly, by reading, or at least listening to, the "moping melancholy" of Terence Hearsay.

Nevertheless, we cannot be absolutely certain that all the experiences Terence presents are second-hand. When he refers to the "'stuff'" he sells, his poetry, for example,

he makes it clear that the gathering of it was an agony. "Out of a stem that scored the hand," he says, "I wrung it in a weary land." And there is ample indication throughout the cycle that no man--Terence included--escapes the "ill" in life. But the collection demonstrates that many, perhaps most, of the experiences and situations dramatized therein are not Terence's. Indeed, to cite an irrefutable example, in Number VIII, "'Farewell to barn and stack and tree,'" Terence is being addressed. Here, the speaker, a young fraticide, says, "'Terence, look your last at me,/ For I come home no more.'"

The poet-philosopher's surname has yet another implication, for the term hearsay connotes, especially when applied to legal evidence, unreliability. Here, Housman's irony is at work. The evidence--testimony--for the existence of God's iniquity in an unceasingly troubled universe, of which more will be said, is presented persuasively enough in the cycle, but the name of the recorder playfully casts doubt on the reliability of that evidence. When all is said and done, Housman indicates with a chuckle (ultimately, at his own, rather than Terence's, expense), the vision underlying *A Shropshire Lad* is but one man's opinion and involves a judgment that is fallible.

The Christian name "Terence" is troubling. Most of Housman's Shropshire natives, when they are named at all, are Dicks and Neds and Roses and Freds. Undeniably, Terence is himself a Shropshire native. He is a farmer or farmworker

who, according to Number LXIII, hoes and trenches and weeds; he speaks in the country idiom we have come to associate with Housman's Salop; and the "hearsay" he poeticizes in the Shropshire volume is local experience, Shropshire experience, albeit with cosmic implications. One commentator argues that, through the Christian name Terence, Housman is subtly signalling the connection of A Shropshire Lad to the pastoral tradition by using the name of the Roman dramatic poet closely associated with that tradition.[3] This point, however, is not persuasive. Terence was not a writer of pastorals but a stage comedian, and the connection between the Roman Terence and Housman's Terence, if one is intended, seems more likely to relate to both writers' being concerned with comedy and drama. One is forced to conclude that if Terence is, like Hearsay, a tagname, its meaning is obscure.

The dramatic distance between Housman and the Shropshire cycle does not, as has already been suggested, end with Terence. Terence is the frame persona, a substitute poet-thinker-educator, what William Archer terms Housman's "namefather."[4] He is, in addition, the Shropshire Lad described elsewhere by the poet as "an imaginary figure, with something of my temper and view of life."[5] As we shall see, he is of critical significance for a number of reasons, but there are, within the cycle, other speakers who must not be confused with him, men whose particular identities are revealed by what they say.

This multiple-mask technique becomes particularly evident

if one pays attention to Housman's use of quotation marks in some of the Shropshire Lad compositions, quotation marks that are designed to show the speakers, here, are not Terence. There are five such pieces: Number VIII, "'Farewell to barn and stack and tree,'" already cited in this chapter, in which the speaker is a fraticide who confesses to Terence; Number XXVII, "'Is my team ploughing,'" in which we hear the voice of a dead lover in colloquy with a friend who has taken up with the dead man's mistress; Number XXXIV, "The New Mistress," in which two speakers converse, a woman, who is sick of her suitor, and the suitor, who foregoes the lady's company to enlist in the service of a more appreciative mistress, the Queen; Number XLVII, "The Carpenter's Son," in which we hear the last words of a Shropshire felon sentenced to hang; and Number LVI, "The Day of Battle," in which a soldier, fighting against a desire to flee from battle or speaking with a comrade who experiences that desire, argues that "'the man that runs away/ Lives to die another day.'" There can be no debate about these voices.

It is also extremely unlikely that any of the voices we hear in the so-called exile poems--Numbers XXXVI through XLI and L through LII, nine pieces in all--are Terence's. There is one composition that dramatizes the return of a Shropshire exile, Number LVIII:

> When I came last to Ludlow
>   Amidst the moonlight pale,
> Two friends kept step beside me,
>   Two honest lads and hale.

Now Dick lies long in the churchyard,
   And Ned lies long in jail,
And I come home to Ludlow
   Amidst the moonlight pale.

This piece may suggest that Terence at some point departed for London and has now returned, but this possibility seems unconvincing. Two exiles (and the poems suggest there are several rather than one), for instance, make it perfectly clear that they cannot return to the place of their birth. One of these says that he "cannot come again" to the "happy highways" of his youth (Number XL), and the other appears to have been forced to leave his native county (Number XXXVII). The wry old codger who sits contentedly devouring his "victuals" and quaffing his ale in Number LXII, "'Terence, this is stupid stuff,'" seems too settled and comfortable ever to have suffered the kind of exile the cycle treats. Indeed, his Shropshire critic intimates that Terence does little except eat, drink, and versify, and "'oh, good Lord, the verse you make,'" he complains, "'gives a chap the belly-ache.'"

There are, furthermore, at least two pieces in a Shropshire Lad whose speakers may be women. One of these, Number XXXIII, "If truth in hearts that perish," mentioned earlier, is possibly a woman's answer to her lover's request to "take my hand quick and tell me/ What have you in your heart," a request made in the previous poem in the collection, Number XXXII, "From far, from eve and morning." It is also conceivable that a woman speaks in Number XXII, one of the many soldier poems:

> The street sounds to the soldiers' tread,
>   And out we troop to see:
> A single redcoat turns his head,
>   He turns and looks at me.

To be sure, there is no reason to suppose the speaker, here, could not be a man, but the tonality of the piece suggests a woman. And Housman is clearly not averse to using women's voices in colloquies in the Shropshire volume, in Numbers V and XXXIV, for example, and in the ballad "The True Lover," Number LIII.

Another consideration also persuades us to believe that Terence's voice is not the one we hear in the Shropshire Lad love poems. Were he the only speaker, we would have to assume, first, that, whether young or old, Terence is extremely amorous, and, second, that, since most of these poems involve frustration in love, Terence is also given to enjoying romantic torment. And can the lover who speaks in Number XV, "Look not in my eyes, for fear," who is destroyed by his love, or the speaker in Number XIV, "There pass the careless people," whose heart and soul are forever lost in love, be the same man we hear in Number XVIII? Like them, he has loved, but with a difference. His love was obviously reciprocated:

> Oh, when I was in love with you,
>   Then I was clean and brave,
> And miles around the wonder grew
>   How well did I behave.

The transformation was but temporary, however, and the ex-lover's sentiments, now that he has recovered from love, are

sharply different from those expressed by the speakers in Numbers XV and XIV:

> And now the fancy passes by,
> And nothing will remain,
> And miles around they'll say that I
> Am quite myself again.

And is any one of these three lovers the same man who speaks in Number XXI, "Bredon Hill"? His love is also reciprocated, a rare experience in <u>A Shropshire Lad</u>, but his mistress deserts him by dying unexpectedly, and he is genuinely grief-stricken. If the same man speaks in Number XXV, however, that grief is cynically demolished, for the speaker in "This time of year a twelvemonth past" is quite matter-of-fact, if not crass, about his squiring the sweetheart of Fred, his deceased rival:

> The better man she walks with still,
> Though now 'tis not with Fred:
> A lad that lives and has his will
> Is worth a dozen dead.

The man's callousness seems gratuitous, hardly what we would expect if the same voice is present in both poems.

A careful and thoughtful examination of the <u>Shropshire Lad</u> love poems, then, suggests that Housman is dramatizing not one man's views of, and experiences in, romantic-sexual love, neither Terence's nor anyone else's. Rather the poet is more concerned with demonstrating that love, traditionally the source of some of man's greatest joys and satisfactions, is a spiritually perilous enterprise. Hence, Housman presents

his reader with a variety of views and responses, all of which imply that love, in one way or another, rarely satisfies, a theme that will be taken up later in this study.

There is, moreover, a supplementary consideration involving age. A majority of Shropshire Lad speakers are young men--indeed, several, the speakers in Numbers II and XIII, for example, specify their exact ages--and others seem, in view of what they say about life, more mature if not old. Two of the latter appear in Numbers XIX and LIV. It is doubtful that Terence could be, at one and the same time, youthful and aged, and it is equally doubtful that Housman, one of the most careful of poets as well as a writer who criticized his brother for composing verse in which point of view was not sufficiently clear,[6] would have permitted so utterly muddled a point of view to go unchanged in the Shropshire volume.

It is with the Shropshire Lad point of view that Cyril Connolly is concerned when he writes,

> Homer is detached from his swineherd; the shepherds of Virgil and Theocritus are either genuine, or the poet and his friends playing at being them, not both in the same poem. Now, in the case of Housman there is an uneasy and variable relationship: he is not quite sure whether he is a peasant himself; with some his relations are more than friendly, at other times he becomes a distant monitor . . . . I maintain there is deep confusion here.[7]

But Connolly ignores the role played by Terence Hearsay. Terence's, not Housman's, relations with other speakers in the Shropshire cycle shift, and where Terence is the actual speaker and where merely a "distant monitor" is not as easy

to determine as one might wish. But perhaps the shifts have a function.

Other commentators fix on the same problem, and, like Connolly, they tend not to distinguish important differences between the writer Housman and the frame persona Terence. Hoxie Neale Fairchild claims that there is "too much confusion of self and anti-self," in A Shropshire Lad; "again and again," he writes, "the mask drops and Housman addresses us in his own desperate person."[8] But to which mask does Fairchild here refer? John Heath-Stubbs is perhaps even less cautious. He says that Housman, in A Shropshire Lad, dons the mask "of ballad simplicity" for only one reason--"to conceal the complexities of the personality which [lie] behind his poetry."[9] In his "idylls," Heath-Stubbs continues, "Housman assumes simplicity of manner and emotional understatement . . . as a mask to conceal complex and sophisticated feelings of nostalgia and pity. He is not only an escapist, but lacks even the courage to affirm the dream-world which he has created."[10]

Heath-Stubbs thus dismisses totally the artistic function of the Shropshire personae. To be sure, the Shropshire collection does, as he claims, dramatize "highly complex and sophisticated feelings," but most pastorals do, and whether Housman's pieces are "idylls," and whether the emotions captured in and awakened by them stem from the writer's personal "nostalgia" and self-pity, are debatable issues. One infers from Heath-Stubbs' comments that he expects to

find peopling Housman's Salop an assortment of rural dolts with a muddled view of life, people who respond to life's vicissitudes in some simplistic fashion. There exist few total fools in pastoral poetry, however, and Housman's speakers are never mindless dolts, yokels, neither the village idiot sort nor the Colin Clout variety that is unwittingly wise. Housman's speakers range from young lads to old men, and a few are women, but all are noticeably canny. One might wish to argue that the Shropshire man who faults Terence's "'stupid stuff'" in Number LXII is not particularly bright, but his less than penetrating reaction to Terence's verse is understandable. If the human condition is as tormented as Terence's "rhyme" insists, how can Terence put so much gusto into eating and drinking? It is this man's--and our--naivete at which, finally, Terence's poetry is aimed. We must learn to see things as they are, to prepare for "ill," as Terence puts it, in order better to enjoy the "much good" that exists in the universe, of which tasty "'victuals'" and rich ale are a part.

Thus, a cautious and thoughtful examination of all sixty-three pieces in _A Shropshire Lad_ reveals that point of view is not confused but constantly shifting. Housman utilizes not one but numerous masks for the purpose of presenting his reader with a range of particular experiences. It will be explained later how these experiences work to form a thematic matrix.

Still, the question of Terence's voice needs to be dealt

with. Where, except in Numbers LXII and LXIII, can we be reasonably sure we hear the accents of Terence Hearsay? Any answer has to be somewhat speculative, and one must look to the two closing poems in _A Shropshire Lad_ for possible leads. These pieces are important not only because they constitute what is, in effect, a frame, but for what they reveal about Housman's poet _persona_, Terence. Clearly, he is a philosophic man, a man given both to observing and generalizing about the human condition. Furthermore, Terence's world view, despite his ironic humor, is bleak.

Interestingly, there are a number of _Shropshire Lad_ compositions in which the substance of what we read is pronouncedly philosophic, and in which the voice we hear is comparable to Terence's in Number LXII. These poems, which frequently follow clusters of pieces that dramatize individual experiences involving some kind of "trouble," provide us with commentary. In these, the speaker seems thoughtful, knowledgeable, penetrating, and reliable, and it appears likely that this speaker is Terence Hearsay, advising, clarifying, meditating, moralizing, generalizing, and so forth. Excluding Numbers LXII and LXIII, there are some twenty-one such pieces, which we might call the _Shropshire Lad_ commentary poems.[11] These compositions seem to have a triple function: appropriately, most reinforce the paradoxical theme that underlies the entire volume, the conflicting appeals of being and non-being, vitality and oblivion, which will be more fully explained in a subsequent chapter; they signal the universal implications of the individual experiences depicted in the other forty

Shropshire Lad poems; and they point the way to the two closing poems in the collection, in which Terence specifies his world view and explains the purpose of his art. In so doing, the commentary poems, together with other elements, about which more will be said, help unify the Shropshire cycle.

The appeal of life, vitality, for instance, is emphasized in several commentary pieces. In Number IV, "Reveille," Terence implies the energy of being by describing the dawn in terms of a violent military engagement, and goes on to say,

> Up, lad: thews that lie and cumber
> Sunlit pallets never thrive;
> Morns abed and daylight slumber
> Were not meant for man alive.
>
> Clay lies still, but blood's a rover;
> Breath's a ware that will not keep.

In the last quatrain of "Reveille," a characteristic mournfulness creeps in:

> Up, lad: when the journey's over
> There'll be time enough to sleep.

The appeal of being is also the subject of another Terence commentary piece, "When I watch the living meet," Number XII:

> When I watch the living meet,
> And the moving pageant file
> Warm and breathing through the street
> Where I lodge a little while,
>
> If the heats of hate and lust
> In the house of flesh are strong,
> Let me mind the house of dust
> Where my sojourn shall be long.

It is not coincidental that this piece follows "On your midnight pallet lying," in which the speaker, a rejected or deserted lover, contemplates suicide.

Number XXIX, "The Lent Lily," also suggests the appeal of life. Here, Terence urges his Shropshire friends to enjoy Spring while it lasts, and while they, his friends, are still alive:

> Bring baskets now, and sally
> Upon the spring's array,
> And bear from hill and valley
> The daffodil away
> That dies on Easter day.

Most of these poems that celebrate vitality have an undertone of sadness, primarily because Terence believes, and indicates frequently, that being is rarely untroubled. Hence, a significant number of commentary poems contemplate and generalize about this inescapable "ill." In Number XXXI, "On Wenlock Edge the wood's in trouble," for instance, Terence comments on the nature of cosmic "trouble," and in Number XXVIII, "The Welsh Marches," he implies that "trouble" has its source in the distant past and is eternal. It reaches out to, and assails, man from the grave, so to speak.

Terence also comments on the appeal of non-being, death. It is evident, for example, that in part, at least, he favors early death, as Number XIX, "To an Athlete Dying Young," indicates. His bias is even more apparent in Number XXIII, "The lads in their hundreds to Ludlow come in for the fair," for his admiration for "the lads that will never be old" is unqualified. He is particular eager to identify these paragons:

> I wish one could know them, I wish there were tokens to tell
> The fortunate fellows that now you can never discern;
> And then one could talk with them friendly and wish them farewell
> And watch them depart on the way that they will not return.

The early dead lose neither "their looks [nor] their truth"; "They carry back bright to the coiner the mintage of man" by dying "in their glory."

Thus it comes as no surprise to discover that Terence not only condones but advocates suicide. He says that, in taking their lives, presumably for moral reasons, suicides become "men":

> Shot? so quick, so clean an ending?
> Oh that was right, lad, that was brave:
> Yours was not an ill for mending,
> 'Twas best to take it to the grave.

The suicide Terence apostrophizes in this excerpt from Number XLIV suffered from a soul-sickness that threatened to "undo," corrupt, others, and, in ending his life, he has avoided wronging his "brothers." As a result, he is "undishonored, clear of danger,/[and] Clean of guilt." Suicide is also a moral imperative in Number XLV, "If it chance your eye offend you."

Paradoxically, however, Terence also advocates stoic endurance. To be is to suffer "ill," he explains, but one can endure that "ill." In Number XLVIII, for instance, he commands his soul, which wants to return to the peace that it enjoyed prior to birth, to "be still." In this poem, Terence explains that he must, without really knowing why, live for a while to "muse," to think and to create poetry. He and his soul will "endure an hour and see injustice done." In "Be still, my soul, be still; the arms you bear are brittle," Terence specifies what his poetry has so far illustrated:

that "high heaven and earth ail from the prime foundation."

Meditative, perceptive, compassionate, philosophic--Terence, then, is all of these. But he is also an ironist, and in at least two commentary poems his irony is evident, even though the dilemmas with which Terence is concerned in these pieces is far from humorous. The most thoughtful of all the speakers in A Shropshire Lad, he advocates thoughtlessness in Number XLIV, "Think no more, lad; laugh, be jolly":

> Oh, 'tis jesting, dancing, drinking
> Spins the heavy world around.
> If young hearts were not so clever,
> Oh, they would be young for ever:
> Think no more; 'tis only thinking
> Lays lads underground.

That this playful piece follows "Be still, my soul, be still; the arms you bear are brittle," is no accident. In a way, Number XLIV humorously undercuts the agony expressed in the poem that precedes it. Terence's irony is also present in Number XLIII, "The Immortal Part," in which the poet-philosopher patiently listens to the testy complaints of his aching bones. Like the soul in Number XLVIII, they want to escape from life, want to return to "endless night," oblivion. But, says Terence, they shall "do my will / Today while I am master still."

In some sense, then, Terence Hearsay may function as a commentator and interpreter in A Shropshire Lad, as the equivalent of a Greek chorus. In part, he seems to clarify the thematic import of the Shropshire Lad cycle, to point up the significance of the poems that dramatize individual experiences. He is, moreover, but one of many personae in the collection.

Although this explanation of Terence's role is at best tentative, it is not without foundation. For it is finally the world view underlying the entire volume that Terence calls attention to in Number LXII, "'Terence, this is stupid stuff,'" and this world view is clearly foreshadowed in most of the commentary pieces discussed here, pieces that, in contrast to the forty poems they punctuate, depart from the particular, the local, the individual, to imply general, universal, meanings. This is not to suggest that Terence or any other speaker in _A Shropshire Lad_ can solve the cosmic problems exemplified, contemplated, and explained. It is sufficient for Housman that his reader learn such universal dilemmas exist.

Notes

[1]J. B. Priestley, Figures in Modern Literature (New York, 1924), p. 89.

[2]Nesca Robb, Four in Exile (London, 1948), p. 13.

[3]John W. Stevenson, "The Pastoral Setting in the Poetry of A. E. Housman," South Atlantic Quarterly, LV (October 1956), p. 490.

[4]William Archer, Poets of the Younger Generation (London, 1902), p. 184.

[5]Laurence Housman, My Brother, A. E. Housman: Personal Recollections Together with Thirty Hitherto Unpublished Poems (New York, 1938), p. 71.

[6]The criticism appears in a letter addressed to Laurence Housman dated December 14, 1894, reprinted in Laurence Housman, My Brother, A. E. Housman: Personal Recollections Together with Thirty Hitherto Unpublished Poems (New York, 1938), pp. 156-160.

[7]Cyril Connolly, "A. E. Housman: A Controversy," A. E. Housman, A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Christopher Ricks (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), pp. 48-49.

[8]Hoxie Neale Fairchild, Religious Trends in English Poetry, V (New York, 1962), p. 55.

[9]John Heath-Stubbs, The Darkling Plain, A Study of the Later Fortunes of Romanticism in English Poetry from George Darley to W. B. Yeats (London, 1950), p. xvii.

[10] *Ibid*., p. 95.

[11] These are Numbers I, III, IV, VI, XII, XVI, XIX, XXIII, XXIV, XXVIII, XXIX, XXXI, XLIII, XLIV, XLV, XLVI, XLVIII, XLIX, LIV, LX, and LXI.

Chapter IV

The Shropshire Idiom

The puzzled response to the *personae* in Housman's *A Shropshire Lad* may be connected to yet another aspect of the poet's Salopian focus--namely, his use of what purports to be Shropshire dialect. All the *Shropshire Lad* speakers, although some more pronouncedly than others, articulate in this distinctive folk dialect, a dialect that is, as Zabel points out, partly responsible for the power and appeal of Housman's verse because "its aphoristic tang and irony" make the poems "haunting human appeals."[1] Marlow, too, refers to the effectiveness of the *Shropshire Lad* idiom when he writes that Housman's "verse is unmistakably his, and its terseness and ring make it stay in the mind so surely that one knows it by heart more quickly than almost any other."[2] Housman's Shropshire poetry, Marlow says, "puts a spell on us."[3]

Housman's consistent use of the idiom in the Shropshire cycle, however, may have led some readers to assume that only one man speaks in the collection; as the previous chapter demonstrates, this is not the case.

The idiom is, of course, also responsible for the title of the collection. As Housman's colleague Pollard explains, his claim that "Shropshire lads are speaking" in the work persuaded the poet to call the cycle A Shropshire Lad. But in making this claim, Pollard betrayed his ignorance of true Shropshire dialect. He was responding to what is essentially an invented idiom in much the same way most readers respond. Since the cycle frequently refers to a Salopian setting, and since the accent of the speakers in the cycle is distinctly rural, Pollard understandably assumed, as we all do, that the accent is Salopian.

Any dialectician, however, would argue that the accent running through the Shropshire Lad selection, indeed through almost all Housman's poetry, is no more Shropshire than it is Devonshire, Staffordshire, Yorkshire, Norfolk, Worcestershire, or whatever English regional dialect one may wish to mention. That it is "wholly British," as Cleanth Brooks points out,[4] is as far as one can go, for, in actuality, it is what J. B. Priestley calls it, the "pretended speech of [the] Westcountry."[5] Housman's idiom is not authentically Salopian but a persuasive and artfully created accent intended to suggest actual dialect. Few of us are Salopian or sufficiently familiar with Shropshire dialect to challenge Housman's version of it. What is more, most of us would probably find the poetry unreadable had Housman employed pure Shropshire.

Housman actually shapes an idiolect, a unique linguistic pattern that, in the context of A Shropshire Lad, carries the

sense of being Salopian. Certainly, the brevity, simplicity, and concreteness of Housman's diction contributes largely to the success of this idiolect. Abstractions, polysyllabic terms, and Latin derivatives are rare in Housman's Shropshire vernacular, just as they are rare in the vocabularly of rural people, who, perhaps because of their unfamiliarity with, or distrust of, "big" words, generally communicate their thoughts matter-of-factly in short, concrete, simple terms. The talk in which we expect them to engage is plain and simple, and it is this plainness and simplicity that Housman captures.

In Number LIV, "With rue my heart is laden," for instance, the speaker, an older man, meditates on the loss of his youth-time friends:

> With rue my heart is laden
>   For golden friends I had,
> For many a rose-lipt maiden
>   And many a lightfoot lad.
>
> By brooks to broad for leaping
>   The lightfoot boys are laid;
> The rose-lipt girls are sleeping
>   In fields where roses fade.

In this elegy, the idiolect is relatively subdued, but, at the same time, it is very compelling, and no reader will argue the identity of the speaker: he is a bucolic, a man versed in country things. Throughout he uses concrete terms and sparse, although heavily freighted, images to suggest the abstractions that lie at the heart of the poem--the death of friends and the loneliness and pain that his, the speaker's, survival involves. The term "rue" in the first line, for instance, signals subject

setting, and theme, for, although implying sadness, regret, and even guilt, the word designates an evergreen herb that usually flourishes in country graveyards. As a result, rue and death are traditionally associated. The long, sonorous sound of the word also contributes to the mood of the poem. The concreteness of Housman's diction is consistent. "Heart," "golden," "rose-lipt," "lightfoot," "maidens," "lads," "brooks," "fields"--all are short (of the forty-two words in the poem, thirty-two are monosyllables) and concrete, and most are Anglo-Saxon derivatives. Together, in context, they serve to suggest a rural speaker in a rural environment, particularly the words "maiden" and "lad," which usually make us think of the country.

In relation to Housman's use of monosyllabic diction, Norman Marlow makes an astute observation: "One of the most striking features of Housman's poetic style," he writes, "is the high proportion of monosyllabic verbs, and indeed of monosyllables in general. He can get more out of a monosyllable than almost any English poet."[6] These monosyllabic terms are part of the idiolect, but Housman does much more with them than merely imply the rural background of his speaker.

Housman claimed that his "effort as a poet was not so much to find the right word as to reject the wrong word."[7] And the time and effort the poet gave to monosyllables is graphically demonstrated by his revisions of only one line of Number XIX, "To an Athlete Dying Young," one of the most popular poems, although certainly not the best poem, in _A Shropshire Lad_. Line 9 reads "Smart lad, to slip betimes

away," but the worksheets in Housman's notebooks indicate that Housman's first choice of adjective was "wise lad," which he rejected for "well-done." In turn, this was dropped in favor of "smart lad."[8] The last choice is, of course, most felicitous. It is connotatively fitting in that the term smart implies not only wisdom but shrewdness and speed (the English colloquialism "do it smartly" means "do it quickly"). The sound of the word is also effective, and the term is idiolectically appropriate. "Smart" meets the rural requirements of the *Shropshire Lad* vernacular.

One should also briefly mention the wealth of connotation of some of the apparently ordinary, and certainly homely, metaphors in "With rue my heart is laden." The speaker does not specify what his friends in youth meant to him, what qualities they embodied, but his adjectives are, although extraordinarily economical, eloquently suggestive. *Gold* (in "golden friends") implies preciousness, warmth, purity, vitality, ripeness, and integrity; *rose* (in "rose-lipt maidens") implies fragrance, fragility, innocence, beauty, virginity, youth, and transcience; *lightfoot* (in "lightfoot lads") implies youth, vitality, lack of responsibility, and agility. And when the heart is described as being "laden" with rue in the opening line, it is implicitly compared to a coffin in a grave, buried under, and burdened down with, on the metaphorical level, the herb rue, on a literal level, sadness and remorse.

The persuasiveness of Housman's Shropshire idiolect is, without question, partly due to the effectiveness of his figures,

most of which are, in their individual poetic contexts, "superlatively clear,"[9] in keeping with the Salopian setting and dialect, plain, economical, and homely.

Understandably, Housman frequently employs personification. To his Shropshire speakers, aspects of external nature and nature in general seem alive, human. The nettle in Number XVI, for instance, is a coy country dancer; "It nods and curtseys and recovers" on the graves of dead lovers. Nature is a concerned and consoling mother figure in Number XLI, and the annual seasons are friends, "helpmates," who range the country highways. In contrast, Number LII suggests that the sighing and trembling poplars are quick to forget the speaker, a kind of friend and lover, who lies alone in distant London. The poplars are also fickle, for they now bemuse a passing stranger. The cherry trees in Number II are, like spring churchgoers, "Wearing white for Eastertide." Here, nature decks itself out in the traditional Easter color.

Metaphors also contribute to the rural focus. The brain of a troubled man in Number XLIII is a "humming hive of bees," and the speaker in Number LII refers to his own suicide when he says he "stopped the clock." Elsewhere, in Number IX, the speaker, who awaits the execution of a criminal friend, calls attention to "yon gallows where/ A careless shepherd once would keep/ The flocks by moonlight." The metaphor "keeping flocks by moonlight" means to hang in chains. One of Housman's most telling metaphors occurs in Number LXII, where Terence likens life to hops. From "a stem [of hops] that scored the

hand," the Shropshire poet "wrung" the juice, the ale, that is his poetry. Equally effective are the comparisons in Number XXXI. The wood on Wenlock Edge, one aspect of nature, is implicitly likened to another aspect, sheep, when the speaker says the "forest fleece the Wreakin heaves," and the wind in this poem, an "old wind in the old anger," had, in the past, like a farmer or even an angry parent, "threshed another wood." And in Number I, Housman employs a metaphor that is almost a conceit. In alluding to the Shropshire heritage of England's brave dead soldiers, the speaker applauds the West Midlands "skies that knit their [the dead soldiers'] heart-strings right."

Death, too, which features prominently in A Shropshire Lad, is often described indirectly. It is most frequently a "bed" (in Numbers XXVI and XXVII, for instance), "sleep" (in Number LIV), a "house" (in Number XXV), or a quiet "town"--and the figures are appropriate in a verse cycle that demonstrates the agony of life and argues the appeal of death or non-being.

One might also mention a metaphor for death that appears in Number XX, Last Poems, a figure that implies the ultimate in solipsism. Dick, a suicide, is a "Prompt hand and headpiece clever," for, in taking his life, he

> Has woven a winter robe,
> And made of earth and sea
> His overcoat for ever,
> And wears the turning globe.

The rural elements in the figure are worth citing; the

synechdoche uses the country terms "hand" and "headpiece," and, in the rest of the image, death is likened to a warm and comfortable "overcoat" that protects Dick from the chill of life.

Housman occasionally favors the extended metaphor. Number XIX, "To an Athlete Dying Young," likens life to a country race, a race the dead youth, whom the speaker apostrophizes, has won because he has been "smart" enough to "slip" away, fast enough to run ahead, early in that race. Indeed, the apostrophe is, at one and the same time, a funeral dirge and a victory panegyric. "I hoed and trenched and weeded," Number LXIII, the poem that closes A Shropshire Lad, is also an extended metaphor. The "flowers" Terence takes to, and brings back from, the country "fair" are his poems, of which the "hue," the philosophy, is "not the wear," is neither popular nor fashionable. The flowers' seeds, however, will be sown, and those that are not eaten by the birds or destroyed by the seasons will flower annually, and, says Terence, future generations of "luckless lads" will wear them.

Once in a while, a Housman metaphor blossoms into a startling conceit, and we are presented with what one critic calls "the commonplace on a large scale."[10] The first quatrain of "Reveille," Number IV, contains one such figure:

> Wake: the silver dusk returning
>   Up the beach of darkness brims,
> And the ship of sunrise burning
>   Strands upon the eastern rims.

Night, here, is a beach, and the morning dusk is ocean waters ebbing over it. Sunrise, a burning ship, "strands," streams, in the eastern skies. The second stanza introduces an even more mind-engaging comparison:

> Wake: the vaulted shadow shatters,
> Tramples to the floor it spanned,
> And the tent of night in tatters
> Straws the sky-pavilioned land.

Night is now a vaulted roof whose shadows are suddenly broken, "shattered," like fragile glass, and trampled, as if stamped on by marching feet, to the "floor" the roof sheltered. The comparison switches again in the third line: night is at this point a torn tent that "straws," waves, its ripped remnants across the land, over which the sky hangs like a pavilion.

The force of the verbs "brims," "strands," "shatters," "tramples," and "straws," is extraordinary in this excerpt. Certainly, the violence they suggest is appropriate in a poem that likens life to a military engagement, and dawn to the sound of a military bugle call, "reveille." The passage suggests a pause before a conflict involving sea forces and land forces, or, if one goes beyond the pictorial implications, "Reveille" suggests a contrast between the comfort and protection that night, non-being, offers, and the battle that day, life, necessitates.

A contrasting conceit is employed to describe the dawn in another Shropshire Lad Poem, Number XXVIII, "The Welsh Marches":

> The flag of morn in conqueror's state
> Enters at the English gate:
> The vanquished eve, as night prevails,
> Bleeds upon the road to Wales.

In this poem about Celtic-Saxon conflict, it is singularly fitting that the morning sun be described as a victory pennant entering Shropshire from the east, from which direction England's Saxon invaders approached, and that night, a beaten and bleeding loser, retreat, as the Celts retreated before the Saxon invaders, westward to Wales. The two traditions, the Celtic and Saxon, battle eternally in the Shropshire lad who speaks in this perplexing parable, a lad whose past began with the violent sexual coupling of a Saxon warrior and a Celtic slave.

A less engaging conceit occurs in Number XIV, "There pass the careless people," a poem about the destruction of selfhood in love. The speaker sighs,

> Ah, past the plunge of plummet,
> In seas I cannot sound,
> My heart and soul and senses,
> World without end, are drowned.

The man's "heart and soul and senses" are, paradoxically, a "world without end" that drowns in a part of itself, the "seas" that cannot be plumbed. These are, indeed, deep, powerful, and troubled waters.

Another Shropshire Lad poem that employs the conceit is Number X, "March," which begins,

The Sun at noon to higher air,
Unharnessing the silver Pair
That late before his chariot swam,
Rides on the gold wool of the Ram.

So braver notes the storm-cock sings
To start the rusted wheel of things,
And brutes in field and brutes in pen
Leap that the world goes round again.

The passage is a cluster of images, the abstractions suggested by which are more than a little startling. There are also astrological implications. The Sun, for example, is a charioteer, who, at a given moment, unharnesses his "silver pair," Pisces, the early, presumably rainy morning, and mounts the golden "Ram," Aries, the late morning sunlight. With the arrival of sunshine, the rooster, now more courageous and confident, crows, the signal for the day's activities to begin. These activities are "rusted" from the early rainfall, and the farm animals, in field and staff, "Leap" at the crow's call, which signifies the end of what seems absolute inactivity. For them, "the world goes round again."

Regardless of the complexity of Housman's Shropshire Lad conceits, however, he roots these descriptive passages firmly in solid earth. Usually, they combine the majestic and the homely.

Colloquialisms and allusion are also part of Housman's Shropshire idiolect. In "With rue my heart is laden," for example, the article "a" following the prepositional phrase "for many" ("For many a rose-lipt maiden/ And many a lightfoot lad") has a colloquial ring. Even the rivers Styx and Acheron, and the Elysian Fields, alluded to in the second quatrain, are

transposed to a rural environment. These traditional Greek rivers of death become "brooks too broad for leaping," and Elysium, the traditional Greek afterworld, becomes "fields where roses fade."

Housman's interesting adaptation of allusions, which he transposes to the Shropshire scene, and which he transforms somewhat through his use of idiolect, should be discussed briefly. Allusions occur in at least two other Shropshire Lad Poems, Number XV, "Look not in my eyes for fear," and Number XLVII,"The Carpenter's Son." In the first of these, the Greek Narcissus becomes "a Grecian lad," and the flower into which he is transformed becomes the jonquil, the more familiar English name for the narcissus. The Christ-like speaker in "The Carpenter's Son," of whom more will be said later, becomes, in A Shropshire Lad, a Shropshire criminal, who, moments before his execution on the "'gallows-trees'" between "'two poor fellows'" who will hang "' for theft,'" bids his friends to learn from his example. "'Comrades all,'" he says, "'leave ill alone.'" Housman's localization of the distant in time and space effects an engaging, and occasionally disturbing, revitalization of what is often in poetry tired, hackneyed. The allusions take on new life and new meaning.

Colloquialisms, mentioned earlier, also contribute importantly to idiolect, as Number XIII, "When I was one-and twenty", demonstrates:

When I was one-and-twenty
   I heard a wise man say,
'Give crowns and pounds and guineas
   But not your heart away;

Give pearls away and rubies
   But keep your fancy free.
But I was one-and-twenty,
   No use to talk to me.

When I was one-and-twenty
   I heard him say again,
'The heart out of the bosom
   Was never given in vain;
'Tis paid with sighs a plenty
   And sold for endless rue.'
And I am two-and-twenty,
   And oh, 'tis true, 'tis true.

The speaker's references to his age ("one and twenty" and, later, "two-and-twenty") point the idiom. The somewhat archaic practice of citing the lower digit before the higher in ordinal numbers is typical of rural English. This accent is reinforced by several uses of "'Tis" for "it is," and by the elliptical phrases "No use to talk to me" (for "there was no point in talking to me") and "'Tis paid with sighs a plenty" (for "it is paid for with plenty of sighs"). Such repetitions as <u>and</u> (in line 3), <u>give</u> (lines 3 and 5), and <u>but</u> (lines 4, 6 and 7) add to the rural flavor, and, as is usually the case in Housman's Shropshire verse, the diction is mainly monosyllabic, Anglo-Saxon in origin, and concrete.

Carefully placed colloquialisms or near-colloquialisms, then, abound in Housman, and, since these play an important part in Housman's idiolect, another illustration might be worthwhile. In the last quatrain of "1887," Number I in <u>A Shropshire Lad</u>, Terence (having alluded to Clee, Shropshire, and the River Severn earlier) says,

> Oh, God will save her, fear you not:
> Be you the men you've been,
> Get you the sons your fathers got,
> And God will save the Queen.

The colloquial--indeed, Biblical--echoes in the constructions "fear you," "be you," and "get you" are obvious. The pronoun-verb inversion ("be you" for "you be") and the very use of the familiar "you" to strengthen the imperative (in preference to the more polished and impersonal "be the men you've been") are typical of English country idiom. What is worth noting, however, is that Housman, although colloquial a good deal of the time, is rarely ungrammatical.[11] Once in a while, he will employ a double subject involving both a noun and a pronoun ("The gale, it plies the saplings double" in Number XXI, for instance) or an adjective as a substitute for an adverb, but, in the context of the rural idiom, these liberties are usually quite acceptable.

Word order, too, is part of Housman's Shropshire idiolect. It is, Charles Williams explains, "extraordinarily" direct, "sparing of inversions; stanza after stanza will run on almost as if [they] were written in prose."[12] "The variations from direct speech" are "slight," and, this critic says, "where they occur they never suggest themselves as coming merely for the convenience of the verse."[13] Certainly, such "technical convenience" is "part of their _raison d'etre_," but usually, Williams continues, "it is the emotion alone which seems to control the place of every word . . . . There is a kind of poetic innocence about [Housman's Shropshire poems], a

virginity of behaviour which increases the intensity of the message they bring."[14] The emotion that controls word order in Housman's Shropshire verse, however, is quietly and prosaically understated, mainly because Housman's speakers are country dwellers whose daily contact with the elemental precludes emotional excess. This understatement effects a special emphasis that the more familiar (and less subtle) *alas*, *alack*, and *lack-a-day* could not effect. Even *oh*, in Housman, is used very sparingly, and primarily for audial considerations rather than for emphasis of emotion. Rarely does it call attention to itself.

The prosaic quality of Housman's *Shropshire Lad* poetry, the conversational fluidity and syntactical simplicity, which add to the versimilitude of the idiolect, are demonstrable. In Number VIII, "'Farewell to barn and stack and tree,'" one of the most impressive poems in the Shropshire selection in this respect, it is important that the sense of casual speech be captured, for the speaker, a fratricide, relates the incident conversationally to Terence:

> 'Farewell to barn and stack and tree,
>   Farewell to Severn shore.
> Terence, look your last at me,
>   For I come home no more.
>
> 'The sun burns on the half-mown hill,
>   By now the blood is dried;
> And Maurice amongst the hay lies still
>   And my knife is in his side.
>
> 'My mother thinks us long away;
>   'Tis time the field were mown.
> She had two sons at rising day,
>   Tonight she'll be alone.

'And here's a bloody hand to shake,
    And oh, man, here's goodbye;
We'll sweat no more on scythe and rake,
    My bloody hands and I.

'I wish you strength to bring you pride,
    And love to keep you clean,
And I wish you luck, come Lammastide,
    At racing on the green.

'Long for me the rick will wait,
    And long will wait the fold,
And long will stand the empty plate,
    And dinner will be cold.'

Here we have a sadness too deep for tears. There is much to be said for this extraordinarily effective monologue--for example, Housman's indirection, his ability to concentrate in twenty-four lines a murder story (without having the speaker actually specify he has murdered his brother) and, simultaneously, his manner of suggesting with such poignancy the cost of that crime for the murderer (beautifully summarized in the quiet and homely reference to "the empty plate" and the cold dinner in the closing lines of the monologue). Here, however, we are concerned primarily with syntax. There are only four inversions in the poem, and no one of these seems forced for technical reasons. The first occurs in line 7 where we are told that "'Maurice amongst the hay lies still.'" Normal would order (which governs most of the monologue) would require that the line read "Maurice lies still amongst the hay," but, apart from rhyme considerations (each stanza rhymes abab), which necessitate that the last word in line 7 rhyme with the last word in line 5 ("still"), there is, here, another reason for the inversion. The emphasis, as a result of the inversion,

falls on the crucially important term in the line, "still." It is Maurice's death that is, here, important, not the location of his body, and it is the latter that would be underscored if normal word order were used.

The other inversions occur in a series in the first three lines of the last quatrain:

> 'Long for me the rick will wait,
> And long will wait the fold,
> And long will stand the empty plate,
> And dinner will be cold."

Once again, mechanical, rhyme, requirements, although important, are not solely responsible for the inversion. Normal syntax would produce the following: "The rick will wait long for me, and the fold will wait long, and the empty plate will stand long, and dinner will be cold." The term long, appearing as it does at the beginning of three lines, points up, as perhaps no other word order could, the penalty the fracticide must pay, disconnection, indeed eternal disconnection, from the familiar, the known, the loved. The term also implies another meaning. The murderer will be separated from what he knows and loves for a long time, and, simultaneously, he will long for that from which he is separated. The inversion even determines voice inflection. The sonorous term is emphasized, pitched relatively high, and the words that follow it fall away almost monotonously, lifelessly. It is not too forced to suggest that, in doing so, they serve to convey both mood and theme, for this poem is about not only murder but the

consequences. For the fraticide, the future is dismal, monotonous, lifeless--for the future holds, at the very least, exile, or perhaps even death. The finality of his farewell speech to Terence indicates that he is perhaps contemplating suicide.

Yet another consideration helps explain the inversions in the last stanza. In so far as the speaker's individual speech pattern is concerned, the inversions are right. For in the two previous stanzas, the fraticide repeats himself in a similar way, but without the inversion. In the fourth stanza here's is repeated, and, in the fifth, wish is repeated. The speaker makes a habit, then, of conversing in parallels.

To what extent the prosody of this poem functions to modify the verbal fluidity of the murderer's statement to Terence, which it undoubtedly does, is another question. "Farewell to barn and stack and tree'" is obviously intended to capture the essence of the folk-ballad, as Marlow and other critics explain,[15] and, metrically, it is a ballad, but Housman innovates by rhyming the first and third lines in each quatrain. The function of form in, and the effect of form on, Housman's verse, however,will be discussed in another chapter.

Normal word order also predominates even in the more reflective poems in A Shropshire Lad, where more inversion might be justifiable in view of one of Housman's poetic objectives--to record the workings of the human mind as it plays upon, and attempts to come to terms with, some spiritual or moral crisis. Number XXX, "Others, I am not the first,"

for example, captures the flow of evolving thought, but Housman uses only a few inversions, none of which is forced, and all of which, in the context, seem appropriate:

> Others, I am not the first,
> Have willed more mischief that they durst:
> If in the breathless night I too
> Shiver now, 'tis nothing new.
>
> More than I, if truth were told,
> Have stood and sweated hot and cold,
> And through their reins in ice and fire
> Fear contended with desire.
>
> Agued once like me were they,
> But I like them shall win my way
> Lastly to the bed of mould
> Where there's neither heat nor cold.
>
> But from my grave across my brow
> Plays no wind of healing now,
> And fire and ice within me fight
> Beneath the suffocating night.

Housman's idiolect is, here, signalled in the terms "durst," "sweated," and "agued," and in the contraction "'tis," reinforced by the concrete and plain diction and imagery used throughout the composition, and underscored by the normal word order employed to convey the speaker's divided mind. The poem begins with a tortured statement. The main thought, "Others . . ./ Have willed more mischief than they durst," is forcefully interrupted by another main clause, "I am not the first." But the interruption is right, for it succeeds in closely juxtaposing the "others" and the "I," and this poem deals with the speaker's need to destroy the absolute isolation he experiences in being a man who wills a "mischief" but lacks sufficient courage to do the mischief. The diction

and imagery in the poem, particularly in the last quatrain, may imply that he is a would-be suicide. The desire to die, to escape the suffocation of life, is a passion, a "fire," but the ability to commit suicide involves cold calculation, "ice." Throughout the soliloquy, the speaker, whom Marlow mistakenly claims is an adulterer,[16] seeks community, belonging, connection, which he fails to find, and it is proper that his mind attempt to project that connection into his thoughts. The syntax, fragmented though it is in the first two lines, reflects the reason's attempt to establish the connection the speaker aspires to, in order to console the divided man. The inversion in line 9 ("Agued once like me were they") permits the same intimate connection between the "me" speaker and the "they," whereas normal word order ("They were once agued like me") separates, with too great a distance, the "they" and the "me", and does not award the term "agued" sufficient stress. This desperate attempt on the part of the man's mind to establish connection between the community of mischief-makers and the speaker is implied elsewhere, in line 5 ("More than I") and line 10 ("But I like them"), but the connection cannot console the speaker, as the fourth quatrain implies. Here, Housman employs another inversion. Instead of normal word order("No wind of healing now plays across my brow"), we have "But from my grave across my brow/Plays no wind of healing now.") This inversion, regardless of rhyme demands, functions to accentuate the speaker's need for connection _now_. That community

to which his reason attempts to demonstrate the speaker belongs is in the past, safely and comfortable tucked away in a "bed of mould/Where there's no heat or cold." But the speaker's crisis, the battle between "fire and ice," between passion and reason, between aspiration and action, is <u>now</u>. His "grave," his desire to end a life that is actually a "suffocating night," is beneath his brow, is within his mind, <u>now</u>.

To be sure, however, some weak inversions and other unfelicitous syntactical convolutions are present in the Shropshire poems. In Number XXIX, "The Lent Lily," the opening stanza, an apostrophe, reads,

> 'Tis spring; come out to ramble
> The hilly brakes around,
> For under thorn and bramble
> About the hollow ground
> The primroses are found.

One questions the inversion of the phrase "come out to ramble/The hilly brakes around," a word order that seems painfully forced, in order to permit its last component, "around," to rhyme with "ground" and "found." Some readers may argue that this excerpt involves an ellipsis, that the phrase means "come out to ramble/The hilly brakes [that are] around." But this is not persuasive. One cannot "ramble . . . hilly brakes." British idiom, even country idiom, requires an appropriate preposition: ramble <u>around</u>, ramble <u>through</u>, ramble <u>about</u>, and so on.

Another syntactical convolution that seems related only to prosodic requirements occurs in what Thomas Hardy called

"the most dramatic short poem" in the English language,[17] and the composition Housman himself thought might be "the best" in A Shropshire Lad,[18] Number XXVII, "'Is my team ploughing.'" Throughout this ballad colloquy between a dead man and the living friend who has replaced him in his sweetheart's bed, normal word order is used. In the seventh stanza, however, the the dead man asks:

> 'Is my friend hearty,
>   Now I am thin and pine,
> And has he found to sleep in
>   A better bed than mine?

It is perhaps a minor flaw, but the position of the prepositional phrase "to sleep in" (line 3) is weak, and, in this poem, where the bald, plain, unconvoluted flow of unemotional colloquy is masterfully reproduced, the phrase calls attention to itself in an unfortunate way because of the position in which Housman places it. The dead speaker, as he is revealed to us in the poem, would surely say, "And has he found . . . /A better bed than mind [to sleep in]?'"

Such infelicities are, however, infrequent in Housman's Shropshire Lad verse. Normal word order, which gives the poetry its prosaic flavor, and which, at least in part, is essential to the success of Housman's idiolect, is more frequent. This easy, congenial flow is perhaps best illustrated by one of the least effective of the Shropshire Lad exile poems, Number XXXVII, "As through the wild green hills of Wyre," where the liquidity of expression is so compelling that many readers fail

to notice Housman's use of iambic tetrameter couplets.

> As through the wild green hills of Wyre
> The train ran, changing sky and shire,
> And far behind, a fading crest,
> Low in the forsaken west
> Sank the high-reared head of Clee,
> My hand lay empty on my knee.
> Aching on my knee it lay:
> That morning half a shire away
> So many an honest fellow's fist
> Had well-nigh wrung it from the wrist.
> Hand, said I, since now we part
> From fields and men we know by heart,
> For strangers' faces, strangers' lands,--
> Hand, you have held true fellows' hands.
> Be clean then; rot before you do
> A thing they'd not believe of you.
> You and I must keep from shame
> In London streets the Shropshire name;
> On banks of Thames they must not say
> Severn breeds worse men than they;
> And friends abroad must bear in mind
> Friends at home they leave behind.
> Oh, I shall be stiff and cold
> When I forget you, hearts of gold;
> The land where I shall mind you not
> Is the land where all's forgot.
> And if my foot returns no more
> To Teme nor Corve nor Severn shore,
> Luck, my lads, be with you still
> By falling stream and standing hill,
> By chiming tower and whispering tree,
> Men that made a man of me.
> About your work in town and farm
> Still you'll keep my head from harm,
> Still you'll help me, hands that gave
> A grasp to friend me to the grave.

We must grant that, in this composition, Housman does lapse into the cloying sentimentality of which he is too often falsely accused. The fluidity of the piece, however, is extraordinary and requires no discussion. But it is worth mentioning that, here, Housman abandons the quatrain form (mistakenly identified by many critics as the ballad quatrain) he favors throughout most of _A Shropshire Lad_. This formal

departure clearly effects greater conversational realism, despite the poet's use of tetrameter couplets, but the formal aspects of the Shropshire cycle will be examined elsewhere in this study.

Normal word order, then, is essential to the rural verisimilitude of Housman's A Shropshire Lad. As Alicia C. Percival points out, "to those who are accustomed to the countryman's slow short-worded speech, Housman's easy sentences bring a sense of reality."[19] Further, there is a great deal of truth to William Archer's claim that one of Housman's chief technical strengths "lies in the directness and terseness of his style. There is nerve and fibre in every line he writes," says Archer,"and of superfluous tissue not a trace."[20] Measure and rhyme do not "dictate" syntax; Housman's "words seem to fall into their places with a predesinted fitness."[21]

Another aspect of this "sense of reality" is Housman's use, in the idiolect, of archaisms, most of which are employed so effectively that most readers are unaware of them,[22] for many are current English ruralisms or are, in the Shropshire Lad context, acceptable as such. Lists are somewhat tedious, but a sampling of some of these archaisms will suggest the flavor of Housman's Shropshire language: "list" (for "listen"); "mind" (for "remember" or "pay attention to"); "road" (for "way" or "manner"); "betimes" (for "early"); "yon" (for "yonder"); "jangle" (for "fight" or "quarrel"); "hie" (for "hurry"); "thorough" (for "through"); "thews" (for "muscles"); "fits" (for "befits")' "friend" (for "befriend")' "vex" (for "annoy" or

"irritate")' "aye" (for "ever")' "nought" (for "nothing"); and so one. To be sure, some of these are standard poeticisms, but rarely are they used this way in Housman's A Shropshire Lad. Further, most of these terms are normally employed with discretion.

It has been suggested that Housman's poetry casts a spell over many readers, and, as Norman Marlow points out, the "secret of this spell" is in part Housman's ability to preserve "unimpaired the primitive energy of words."[23] Most of the words in this list of archaisms--indeed, most of the diction used in the Shropshire Lad volume--are monosyllabic and of Anglo-Saxon origin. Latinate diction is usually employed only in adjectival modifiers. Further, as Marlow says, the Anglo-Saxon monosyllables "may startle us by their abruptness, but they are never obscure nor do they seem quaint or affected."[24] And their plainness, concreteness, and appropriateness are memorable.

However, although Housman "employs scarcely a word that is not understanded of the people, and current on their lips,"[25] there are, as F. W. Bateson calls them, "offenders," terms that call attention to themselves either because they "pretend to be rustic" or occur too frequently.[26] These include "lief" (for "prefer"), the contractions "'twill," "'twas," "'tis," and "'twould," which are often resorted to for metrical rather than idiolectic reasons, and the familiar country designation for a young or old bucolic, "lad." No self-respecting Housman parodist could ignore this lastword, which appears more than

sixty times in the Shropshire cycle. Often, it is very apt, but Housman seems addicted to the term. In point of fact, in some poems it appears four or five times.[27] Occasionally, the word "chap" is substituted (it occurs six times in A Shropshire Lad), or the words "youth," "boy," and "man." Housman's "lads," however, are ubiquitous, altogether too ubiquitous, in the Shropshire volume.

Despite these relatively minor weaknesses, the idiolect is successful, convincing. And, as this chapter has tried to demonstrate, diction, imagery, figurative language, and syntax are employed in a special way to suggest an apparently authentic idiom that is not actually true Shropshire. It is, of course, enough that Housman's idiom artfully conveys the sense of authentic rural speech. Since Housman was not writing poetry only for Salopians, moreover, it is doubtful that he expected the authenticity of his accent to be challenged. That the idiolect contributes to the congeniality of the cycle is worth noting. Together with the setting, this created dialect succeeds in suggesting the kind of pastoral verisimilitude that affects many readers intensely, even those readers who might not agree with Housman's disturbing and controversial world view.

Notes

[1]Morton Dauwen Zabel, "The Whole Housman," A. E. Housman, A Collection of Critical Essays, et. Christopher Ricks (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), p. 125.

[2]Norman Marlow, A. E. Housman, Scholar and Poet (Minneapolis, 1958), p. 136.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Cleanth Brooks, "Alfred Edward Housman," A. E. Housman, A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Christopher Ricks (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), p. 63.

[5]J. B. Priestley, Figures in Modern Literature (New York, 1924), p. 84.

[6]Marlow, p. 138.

[7]The statement is contained in a letter to Arnold Stein, Rare Manuscript Division, Housman Collection, Library of Congress, and is quoted in Maude M. Hawkins, A. E. Housman: Man Behind a Mask (Chicago, 1958), p. 156.

[8]Ibid., pp. 156-157.

[9]Marlow, p. 147.

[10]Ibid., p. 146.

[11]Ibid., p. 169.

[12]Charles Williams, Poetry at Present (Oxford, 1930), p. 37.

[13]Ibid., p. 38.

[14]Ibid., pp. 37-38.

[15]Marlow, pp. 71-72.

[16]*Ibid.*, p. 114.

[17]Babette Deutsch, *Poetry in Our Time* (New York, 1956), p. 12.

[18]This comment is from a letter to Houston Martin, dated March 28, 1933, reprinted in Laurence Housman, *My Brother, A. E. Housman: Personal Recollections Together with Thirty Hitherto Unpublished Poems* (New York, 1938), p. 193.

[19]"The Art of A. E. Housman," *Poetry Review*, XXVII (July-August 1936), p. 279.

[20]William Archer, *Poets of the Younger Generation* (London, 1902), p. 185.

[21]*Ibid.*

[22]Marlow, pp. 136-137.

[23]*Ibid.*, p. 136.

[24]*Ibid.*

[25]Archer, p. 192.

[26]F. W. Bateson, "The Poetry of Emphasis," *A. E. Housman, A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Christopher Ricks (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), p. 145.

[27]The word appears five times in Number XXIII and four times in Numbers LIII and XXVII.

Chapter V

Housman's Pejorism

In Housman, man is a "luckless" creature, doomed, perhaps even designed, to suffer in a world that provides "more ill than good." Living, being, is pain, endless "trouble," a "long fool's errand to the grave." It guarantees frustration, rejection, isolation, alienation, separation, deprivation, and defeat. The sooner one departs from life--or, more accurately, the sooner one embraces death, non-being, oblivion, which brings an end to pain--the better. Courageously to meet death, as the soldier does, or deliberately to cut short the agony of existence, as the suicide does--this is the only possible triumph, and even this triumph is dubious.

This, in general, is the view of existence, the bleak and disturbing view, the distinctly modern, but also ancient, view that underlies Housman's _A Shropshire Lad_, a volume Geoffrey Bullough calls a "steady contemplation of a universe robbed of . . . ultimate meaning."[1] And, certainly, "everything is for the worst in this worst of all possible worlds"[2]--on the surface, at least. But it is somewhat inaccurate to claim, as

does one commentator, that there is "nothing of the nineteenth century in [the cycle] except the date, and nothing Victorian except the allusions to the Queen."[3] Housman's world view has its counterparts in Victorian literature--in Arnold, in some of Tennyson, in James Thomson, and in Hardy, for instance. The Shropshire collection is, however, "unorthodox."[4] "In tone, temper, and . . . emphasis," A Shropshire Lad is, as William Lyon Phelps says, "thoroughly 'modern'" in its pessimistic viewpoint.[5]

But Housman's Shropshire cycle is not merely pessimistic; it is anti-theistic. For the primary source of man's anguish is the "brute and blackguard" who fashioned the world. And with some justification we can consider Housman's verse as a whole a testament that constitutes a vehemently bitter challenge to, and a Satanic outcry against, God, the sadistic creator of "the iniquity of the universe."[6]

Guy Boas says that in some respects Housman's anti-theism is unique: "no one . . . has wished or dared to take up so independent a position. Other poets have presumed to judge man," but Housman "presumes to judge God--and to find him wanting."[7] Most poets, Boas continues, "are at pains to put men in harmony with the same God with whom they find themselves in sympathy. The profound sensation of hopeless negation which Housman's poetry produces comes from the fact that he will admit no God, no Reality, no spirit with whom he can find communion."[8]

The origin of Housman's negative, even nihilist, vision is the subject of a great deal of critical disagreement. Some

writers attribute the vision to events in Housman's life: the sudden death of his mother, whom he adored, when he was only twelve;[9] his profound disappointment at failing Greats at Oxford;[10] his apparently frustrated passion for his Oxford friend and London room-mate, Moses Jackson, in particular,[11] or his sexual inversion in general.[12] All of these have been cited as causes. Elsewhere, Housman's philosophy is thought to have an historical implication; it results from "Housman's consciousness that accepted standards were crumbling, [and] that with the disappearance of old values reliance must be placed in stoic pride and personal integrity."[13] A third explanation attributes the poet's world view to a philosophic preconception, based on his observations--namely, that life is futile.[14]

Whatever the origin of Housman's world view, and it seems likely that personal experience, historical awareness, and philosophic predispositions contributed to its development, it is evident that, as Samuel C. Chew and Richard D. Altick explain, "Housman's nature, like Hardy's, was one that became 'vocal to tragedy,' that saw the frustrations of life more clearly than its satisfactions."[15] This is not to suggest that Housman ignores life's satisfactions. Rather, his poetry implies that life's rewards are few and, finally, inadequate. He sees "'life as it is,'" Boas writes, but chooses "to make it a great deal worse."[16]

What is more, Housman was perfectly aware of his philosophic bias. His brother records that the poet was once asked if

A Shropshire Lad was "the product of 'a crisis of pessimism,'" and Housman replied that he had never experienced any such crisis.[17] "'In the first place,'" he went on, "'I am not a pessimist but a pejorist (as George Eliot said she was not an optimist but a meliorist); and that is owing to my observation of the world, not to personal circumstances. Secondly, I did not begin to write poetry in earnest until the really emotional part of my life was over; and my poetry, so far as I could make out, sprang chiefly from physical conditions, such as a relaxed sore throat during my most prolific period, the first five months of 1895.'"[18]

Housman's reference to his pejorism in these comments is particularly important, for the term indicates his deliberate effort to emphasize the "worse" in life, the negative aspects of the human condition. In his poetry, Housman focuses on what is, if we are to be persuaded by the "hearsay" poems and Terence's commentary, inescapable: "ill," "evil," "trouble." It is this that is more prevalent than satisfaction, and it is this that man needs to be informed about.

In addition, if Terence's statements in Number LXII, "'Terence, this is stupid stuff,'" are a reliable indication, Housman's poetic goal was quite practical: man must be trained to cope with "ill," just as Mithridates, by sampling every poison, developed a superhuman resistance to all poisons, the result of which careful conditioning was, "he died old." But the legendary monarch's build up of resistance was relatively easy when compared to the challenge of self-preserva-

tion facing most modern men. In his University College, London, Introductory Lecture, Housman said, "one lifetime [three score years and ten], nine lifetimes are not long enough for the task of blocking every cranny through which calamity may enter."[19]

Housman's interest in what he calls "disagreeable knowledge"--and it is this that his poetry dramatizes--is central in the introductory address. He says, in discussing the need for the pursuit of truth, and the relationship between this pursuit and man's happiness,

> it may be urged . . . that the pursuit of truth in some directions is even injurious to happiness, because it compels us to take leave of delusions which were pleasant while they lasted. It may be urged that the light shed on the origin and destiny of man by the pursuit of truth in some directions is not altogether a cheerful light. It may be urged that man stands to-day in the position of one who has been reared from his cradle as the child of a noble race and the heir to great possessions, and who finds at his coming of age that he has been deceived alike as to his origin and his expectations; that he neither springs of the high lineage he fancied, nor will inherit the vast estate he looked for, but must put off his towering pride, and contract his boundless hopes, and begin the world anew from a lower level.[20]

He goes on to say,

> wisdom . . . comes to men whether they will or no. The house of delusions is cheap to build, but draughty to live in, and ready at any instant to fall; and it is surely truer prudence to move our furniture betimes into the open air than to stay indoors until our tenement tumbles about our ears. It is and it must in the long run be better for man to see things as they are than to be ignorant of them.[21]

In the poetry, however, Housman's pejorism seems intended less to capture "things as they are," and more to counter what he believes is a terrible deception practiced on man, a Christian deception, for in A Shropshire Lad "creeds [are] destroyed, illusions shattered, [and] the very heavens derided."[22] Babette Deutsch makes a perceptive claim when she says that one of the primary values of Housman's poetry "is not its drama. . . but a kindred quality of sardonic recognition of the conflict between the idea and the reality. The conflict is in substance the theme of Matthew Arnold's 'Empedocles on Aetna,' which Housman in his youth declared to contain all the law and the prophets. [For Housman] the sum of its wisdom . . . lies in [Empedocles'] affirmation: 'Because thou must not dream, thou need'st not then despair.'"[23]

Any attempt to link Housman's views expressed outside the poetry to the world view implied by his poetry, however, needs to be cautious and qualified. In a letter to a French translator, for instance, Housman wrote that he was "brought up in the Church of England and in the High Church party . . . . But Lempriere's Classical Dictionary, which fell into my hands when I was eight, attached my affections to paganism. I became a deist at 13 and an atheist at 21."[24]

Housman's Shropshire Lad speakers, on the other hand, cannot be considered atheists. Frequently, their references indicate their belief in the existence of a theistic force responsible for the creation of the universe and for the "trouble" that abounds in it. The lines "God has saved the

Queen" (Number I), "And you will trump of doomsday" (Number III), "A neck God made for other use" (Number IX), "Sea-deep, till doomsday morning,/Lie lost my heart and soul" (Number XIV), "They carry back bright to the coiner the mintage of man" (Number XXIII), "high heaven and earth ail from the prime foundation" (Number XLVIII), and "Malt does more than Milton can/To justify God's ways to man" (Number LXII)--each, although in context anti-theistic, signals the Christian substratum of the Shropshire cycle.

One commentator explains the discrepancy between Housman's personal atheism and the poetry's anti-theism thus: the poetry "seems to be utilizing for merely rhetorical purposes a system of religion that [Housman] had abandoned long before" he composed the verse.[25] Marlow, on the other hand, contends that Housman "believes in no God, and only uses the name as a synonym for the blind forces of nature."[26] Both explanations may have some validity, but it seems more likely that the references to Christianity are related to dramatic considerations. The speakers in *A Shropshire Lad* are not, as this study demonstrates, Housman, and that the speakers use Christian allusions is in no way untoward. It is the *personae* who cannot "forget or step outside the Christian civilization" into which they were born, not, as Cooper argues, A. E. Housman.[27]

But it is the anti-theism that is focal in the Shropshire cycle, and Housman's indictment of the Christian God would be less forceful, and less relevant to his reader, were there no specific references to God and to the Christian tradition.

A Shropshire Lad intimates not that in life "trouble" merely exists and has to be dealt with, but that in some sadistic fashion it is deliberately planned by God to debilitate man. The anti-theistic thrust, however, is not always obvious. Number XLIII, "The Immortal Part," for example, which Cleanth Brooks considers "brilliant,"[28] argues that, contrary to Christian belief, it is not man's soul that is immortal, nor his mind, but his bones. Indeed, the engaging device on which the composition is built is the testy complaint of the speaker's enslaved skeleton:

> When I meet the morning beam,
> Or lay me down at night to dream,
> I hear my bones within me say,
> 'Another night, another day.
>
> 'When shall this slough of sense be cast,
> This dust of thoughts be laid at last,
> The man of flesh and soul be slain
> And the man of bone remain?
>
> 'This tongue that talks, these lungs that shout,
> These thews that hustle us about,
> This brain that fills the skull with schemes,
> And its humming hive of dreams,--
>
> 'These today are proud in power
> And lord it in their little hour:
> The immortal bones obey control
> Of dying flesh and dying soul.
>
> ''Tis long till eve and morn are gone:
> Slow the endless night comes on ,
> And late to fulness grows the birth
> That shall last as long as earth.
>
> 'Wanderers eastward, wanderers west,
> Know you why you cannot rest?
> 'Tis that every mother's son
> Travails with a skeleton.

'Lie down in the bed of dust;
Bear the fruit that bear you must;
Bring the eternal seed to light,
And morn is all the same as night.

'Rest you so from trouble sore,
Fear the heat o' the sun no more,
Nor the snowing winter wild,
Now you labour not with child.

'Empty vessel, garment cast,
We that wore you long shall last.
--Another night, another day.'
So my bones within me say.

Therefore they shall do my will
Today while I am master still,
And flesh and soul, now both are strong,
Shall hale the sullen slaves along.

Before this fire of sense decay,
This smoke of thought blow clean away,
And leave with ancient night alone
The steadfast and enduring bone.

In life, man's senses, his mind, and, more significant, his soul, are at war with his skeleton, which wants only to return to its source, "the bed of dust." The impatient and irritated skeleton is required to bear the "trouble," life, and sullenly awaits--"'Another night, another day'"--its release, secure in the knowledge that only it, bone, the most nearly mineral part of man, is "steadfast and enduring." This last phrase has two implications: first, the bones stoically endure, suffer, life; second, they are, unlike man's soul, indestructible after death, for their chemical properties always remain. Here, the bones are not the soul's charnel house so familiar to the reader of traditional Christian poetry. Ironically, they, the bones, are imprisoned and subjugated. And life, for the skeleton, is as futile and painful as it is for the soul in

conventional religious literature.

Housman's anti-theism is less ironically suggested in another Shropshire Lad poem in which the speaker takes a more orthodox approach to the agony of existence. In Number XLVIII, the soul, not the skeleton, suffers. "Be still, my soul, be still," the speaker says, and refers to the peace that he and the soul enjoyed before they were exposed to the pain of life:

> Men loved unkindness then, but lightless in
> the quarry
> I slept and saw not; tears fell down. I did
> not mourn;
> Sweat ran and blood sprang out and I was
> never sorry:
> Then it was well with me, in days ere I was born.

But speaker and soul are required to "endure an hour and see injustice done":

> Ay, look: high heaven and earth ail from the
> prime foundation;
> All thoughts to rive the heart are here, and
> all are vain:
> Horror and scorn and hate and fear and
> indignation--
> Oh why did I awake? when shall I sleep
> again?

Whatever part of man endures after death, the skeleton, the mind, the soul, is less important in Housman that what, in life, man is forced to endure, even to love: "unkindness," "tears," "sweat," "blood," "horror," "scorn," "hate," "fear," "indignation." Being born is a cruel act of dispossession.

The bitterness of Housman's anti-Christianity underlies another Shropshire Lad poem, Number XLVII, "The Carpenter's Son,"

a composition that shocks and disturbs any perceptive Christian reader. The speaker in this dramatic monologue is a criminal addressing his comrades moments before he is executed:

> 'Here the hangman stops his cart:
> Now the best of friends must part.
> Fare you well, for ill fare I:
> Live, lads, and I will die.
>
> 'Oh, at home had I but stayed
> 'Prenticed to my father's trade,
> Had I stuck to plane and adze,
> I had not been lost, my lads.
>
> 'Then I might have built perhaps
> Gallows-trees for other chaps,
> Never dangled on my own,
> Had I but left ill alone.
>
> 'Now, you see, they hang me high,
> And the people passing by
> Stop to shake their fists and curse;
> So 'tis come from ill to worse.
>
> 'Here hang I, and right and left
> Two poor fellows hang for theft:
> All the same's the luck we prove,
> Though the midmost hangs for love.
>
> 'Comrades all, that stand and gaze,
> Walk henceforth in other ways;
> See my neck and save you own:
> Comrades all, leave ill alone.
>
> 'Make some day a decent end,
> Shrewder fellows than your friend.
> Fare you well, for ill fare I:
> Live, lads, and I will die.'

There can be no doubt that Housman wishes us to connect this Salopian criminal to Jesus Christ: each is a carpenter's son, each dies between two thieves, and each is cursed by his contemporaries. Further, both, immediately before death, sermonize. But Jesus' resignation, his acceptance of His

Crucifixion, is absent in Housman's speaker. Whatever crime he is guilt of is an "'ill'" that ought to have been left alone. This Shropshire man is a sacrificial lamb with second thoughts. He should have remained apprenticed to his father, he says, and made gallows for other victims. He should have been "'shrewder.'" Even the criminal's statements echo Christ's admonitions, but in the context of "The Carpenter's Son" they are bitterly ironic. "'Walk henceforth in other ways,'" he tells the few friends who will witness his hanging. Whereas Christ required that man attempt to be Christlike, this Shropshire sermonizer commands his comrades not to emulate him. And he ends his monologue by asserting that he dies not that they, men, might live, which is Christ's message, but only that they, his friends, will "'live, . . . and I will die.'"

Housman, here, is implying that Jesus' self-sacrifice was not redemptive, saved no one, and meant nothing. In short, his death was a cruel waste, for it, together with the deaths of the two thieves between whom He was crucified, proved merely that ours is a luckless universe. Certainly, in Housman's estimate, Christ's death did not change the quality of life for mankind. It is also worth nothing that Housman is deliberately vague about the crime for which the carpenter's son receives the death penalty. We know only that it involved love (just as Christ's "crime" involved the love of mankind), and, in _A Shropshire Lad_, love of any kind usually leads to unhappiness. But more will be said about Housman's view of love later in this chapter.

In effect, then,"The Carpenter's Son" is, as the poet Robert Graves points out, "an Apocryphal account of the Crucifixion" with "blasphemous" implications.[29] One might go even further and claim that the entire Shropshire collection is blasphemous, for, throughout, Housman implies that the God-man relationship is antagonistic and, for man, perilous, for life is an unending conflict in which man is destined to be the loser. At the same time, however, the unevenness of the battle brings out some of man's best qualities, his ability to endure and his ability to act heroically. One can live and suffer "injustice," or, perhaps better, one can cheat God by dying before one's time.

Housman's poetic contention that to live is to be victimized by cosmic malevolence and his praise of death are attacked by numerous critics, and understandably. That God is benevolent, that life has meaning and purpose, and that suicide is both cowardly and defeatist--these beliefs are part of the West's Christian Humanistic heritage. And Housman's poetry is a subversive challenge to, if not a total repudiation of, these generally accepted belief, beliefs his poetry suggests are misconceptions, deceptions.

Indeed, Christopher Ricks rightly argues that Housman's anti-Christianity and anti-Humanism, as expressed in the poetry, are primarily responsible for most of the unfavorable commentary that has emerged.[30] Similarly, R. W. Stallman, in his annotated Housman bibliography, believes he must discuss Housman criticism and "the problem of belief." In fact,

Stallman goes so far as to classify critical responses on the basis of their relation to the world view underlying Housman's verse. He writes that

> on the ground of these beliefs [Housman's] poetry is evaluated thus: (1) The poetry is adversely criticised or rejected on the ground that *his beliefs*, being adolescent, unsound, or without a final standard of value, *interpose obstacles to the enjoyment or appreciation of the poetry*; (2) the poetry is discredited on the ground that *his beliefs*, being agnostic or un-Christian, *are discreditable beliefs*; (3) the poetry, *with his beliefs abstracted*, is valued apart from and in spite of these beliefs; (4) the poetry is valued *because of his beliefs*; the poetry, however pessimistic his beliefs, is 'good medicine,' an anodyne for the wounds of life.[31]

The issue of belief is troublesome, and one can only assert that literature surely cannot be expected to reconfirm what we already accept. One of poetry's greatest values is that it invigorates our consciousness by dramatizing possibilities of which we are either vaguely aware or totally unaware. And the price of that stimulation is frequently the shattering of some of our most comfortable preconceptions. In relation to Housman's verse, furthermore, there is a great deal of truth to Michael Roberts' claim that "not everybody who likes Housman's poetry . . . accepts his beliefs . . . . To poetry we need only give a partial and provisional assent," but "it is safe to say that those who value Housman's poetry most highly have an uneasy feeling" that what he dramatizes "*may* be true."[32] None-theless, there are many Housman critics whose judgments echo that of R. A. Scott-James. Had Housman "been less convinced . . .

of the fatuity of life," he writes, "he might have held a much more important place among the poets of his time."[33]

At the core of Housman's vision, then, is the controversial idea that life is basically an agony, a dispossession of the cruelest kind, and that God is the author of the numerous "troubles" to which all men are heir. These "troubles" are not pestilence, famine, fire, earthquake, and flood, for such ravages do not fit the Shropshire Lad canvas. They are larger than life as most men experience it. Housman is concerned primarily with the small-scale and the life-like, with problems, dilemmas, frustrations, and the like, that are, for the most part, familiar, commonplace, even trivial. Human existence in A Shropshire Lad does not involve cataclysmic agony but an endless series of nagging deprivations, all of which point to a question that underlies the entire cycle: "'Why should a man go on living?'"[34] And to this profound question, Christianity, in Housman's poetic estimate, provides no acceptable answer.

Thus, superficially, Housman's verse seems to dwell only on the particular, the local, the everyday. Ultimately, however, these particularities form a matrix; the anguish is finally related to a "trouble" that is cosmic and timeless. "High heaven and earth ail from the prime foundation," says one Salopian speaker (Number XLVIII), and throughout the Shropshire collection this theme is dramatically reinforced--illustrated, so to speak--in an engaging and persuasive fashion. Housman employs a reductive technique. First, the cosmic "ill"

is converted into familiar experiences, reduced, as it were, to a manageable size; second, the experiences are rooted firmly in a known locale, Shropshire; third, the "troubles" are vocalized in a familiar country dialect. This use of a pastoral mode serves to imply the omnipresence and inescapability of God's malevolence, for the technique demonstrates convincingly that "trouble," even in the most elementary civilized Christian setting, is, as William R. Brashear says, "the norm of life."[35] In _A Shropshire Lad_, "two worlds, the individual and the universal, are kept continuously but obstrusively before us," writes Nesca Robb.[36] Shropshire is, in the end,"a microcosm of infinite potentialities."[37] And one might profitably argue that Housman's reductive technique succeeds in making the anti-theism that lies at the heart of his verse more palatable to the Christian reader. To be sure, there are some readers who do not even recognize the anti-theistic substratum.

Housman's poetry in general, and _A Shropshire Lad_ in particular, then, constitute his challenge to the creator of the universe. His verse is concerned with the problem of time, mortality, which Cleanth Brooks argues is "always the enemy" in Housman,[38] but more with the quality of life, and with the draftsman of man's existence, God, a "proud and angry" creator who, at the beginning, ordained that man's "troubles" should never "fail," should never diminish or end.[39] In effect, the poetry repudiates three basic Christian tenets: that God is love, that love conquers all, and that suffering is in any way redemptive.

Love is of singular importance in _A Shropshire Lad_, for the cycle, in a sense, provides us with a repertoire of love poems, the majority of which indicate unequivocally the insufficiency of love--any kind of love. Romantic and sexual love, friendship, love of nature, and love of homeland--each proves, in Housman, incorrigibly painful, for each involves or produces "trouble" of one or another variety. Stephen Spender observes that "frustrated love" is central to the meaning of _A Shropshire Lad_.[40] "The whole of Housman's pessimism and sense of injustice [springs] from the idea of frustrated love," he writes.[41] Similarly, John Peale Bishop argues that "to Housman, all loves are frustrate or faithless."[42]

Romantic and sexual love, for example, tacitly assumed to be the source of some of man's greatest physical and spiritual satisfactions, is the subject of many _Shropshire Lad_ poems. These compositions, however, indicate that the rewards derived from such love, traditionally the force that "peoples the world with energy," according to Boas,[43] are minimal and transient. Housman elects to stress the bitterness rather than the sweetness of love. The most obvious kind of "trouble" that results from romantic involvement is playfully treated in Number V, "Oh see how thick the goldcup flowers," a _carpe-diem_ seduction colloquy between an aspiring Shropshire youth and a "lass." Persuasively, but indirectly, the man voices his sexual proposition, and his lady demurely agrees to the various requests and comments that are prelude to the sexual invitation: he may walk with her, she says; one should

enjoy nature in the spring, "before the world is old," she concurs; and many young men do pursue girls only to thieve, "to bear the bloom away," she acknowledges. But at the critical moment in the dialogue--"Be kind, have pity, my own, my pretty," the speaker pleads--the lady reveals that she is not as malleable as she appears. She says, tersely, "Goodbye, young man, goodbye." She is nobody's gull.

"Oh see how thick the goldcup flowers" is light-hearted, hardly agonizing, but the Shropshire Lad piece that follows, Number VI, "When the lad for longing sighs," is less flippant:

> When the lad for longing sighs,
> Mute and dull of cheer and pale,
> If at death's own door he lies,
> Maiden, you can heal his ail.
>
> Lover's ills are all to buy:
> The wan look, the hollow tone,
> The hung head, the sunken eye,
> You can have them for your own.
>
> Buy them, buy them: eve and morn
> Lover's ills are all to sell.
> Then you can lie down forlorn;
> But the lover will be well.

The first stanza suggests the conventional lover's melancholy, but the second and third stanzas point to a more interesting and less orthodox theme. The maiden who ends the lover's sighs by accepting him does not end love's agony. It is transferred to her and, at the same time, he will recover. To be in love, then, is a kind of death in life and this death-like condition is unending because lover and mistress barter it.

The hopelessness involved in loving is reiterated throughout A Shropshire Lad. Number XIII, "When I was one-and-twenty,"

suggests that romantic-sexual love is "paid for with sighs a plenty/ And sold for endless rue." Similarly, Number XIV, "There pass the careless people," reads,

> His folly has not fellow
> Beneath the blue of day
> That gives to man or woman
> His heart and soul away.

Housman's Shropshire verse also intimates that love brings about a total loss of self in the lover. In Number XV, "Look not in my eyes for fear," the speaker pleads with his beloved not to look into his eyes and be captivated by her own reflection. Like him, she will be "lost"; like him, she will "perish." On the other hand, the loss can be for the better, temporarily at least, as Number XVIII implies:

> Oh, when I was in love with you,
> Then I was clean and brave,
> And miles around the wonder grew
> How well did I behave.

But the transformation is short-lived, and, finally, the love the speaker has experienced is designated a mere "fancy":

> And now the fancy passes by;
> And nothing will remain,
> And miles around they'll say that I
> Am quite myself again.

The speaker's only legacy is, apparently, a flippant cynicism.

Disappointment, despair, frustration, loss of integrity--these are a few of the "troubles" that are part of the "fraudulent lottery" that romantic love seems to be in Housman's cycle.[44] In addition, the love between man and woman is

inextricably linked to death in <u>A Shropshire Lad</u>. As has been suggested, to be in love in Housman is to experience living death, but, more poignantly perhaps, Housman's verse demonstrates that love can lead to actual death, since non-being is often preferable to the unending rue that love effects. The speaker in Number XI, a man who wastes his life "in sighing," for instance, chooses to become part of "the dark," to commit suicide, in order to "sigh no more." "Night should ease a lover's sorrow," he says. But one is not sure that it will. And there are other lovers who end their lives for love: the man in Number XVI, "It nods and curtseys and recovers," who "hanged himself for love," and the Shropshire lad in Number LIII, "The True Lover," who, his throat dripping blood, returns from the dead to embrace the woman for whom he took his life. The woman says she feels no heartbeat, and the grisly lover replies,

> 'Oh loud, my girl, it once would knock,
> You should have felt it then;
> But since for you I stopped the clock
> It never goes again.'

Ironically, the woman, who would not reciprocate in life, must accept the dead lover's embrace. This macabre consummation is a punishment.

And even if love satisfies, as it does the speaker in Number XXI, "Bredon Hill," the satisfaction is brief, for in this poem the mistress deserts her lover by dying, by stealing "unbeknown . . . to the church alone." And the speaker's

resentment is obvious in his complaint "She would not wait for me."

Furthermore, in death, which often seems over-praised in Housman's poetry, love appears to be no more rewarding. Whether absolute peace is possible even in death is, as the next chapter illustrates, debatable, but, certainly, physical contact, by no means the least important aspect of the love relationship, is impossible. As one Shropshire Lad speaker says,

> Lovers lying two and two
> Ask not whom they sleep beside,
> And the bridegroom all night through
> Never turns him to the bride.[45]

The juxtaposition of bride and groom is not in any sense a union.

In _A Shropshire Lad_, platonic love, friendship, is possibly a little less hazardous, less "troubled," but it, too, is rarely completely satisfying. Few poets have given so much attention to the beauties and shortcomings of friendship as Housman does in his Shropshire cycle. The speaker in Number IX, "On moonlight heath and lonesome banks," for example, keeps a lonely death vigil outside Shrewsbury jail, where a friend spends his last hours before meeting "the hangman's noose." We do not know why the friend is to be executed; we recognize only the speaker's loyalty and love. The victim is "a better lad . . ./Than most that sleep outside," and the speaker is there to wish his friend a "sound . . . sleep."

The intense love that friendship constitutes is reiterated in Number XXIV:

Say, lad, have you things to do?
   Quick then, while your day's at prime.
Quick, and if 'tis work for two,
   Here am I, man: now's your time.

Send me now, and I shall go;
   Call me, I shall hear you call;
Use me ere they lay me low
   Where a man's no use at all;

Ere the wholesome flesh decay,
   And the willing nerve be numb,
And the lips lack breath to say,
   "No, my lad, I cannot come."

The tone is somewhat excessive, too eager, here, but the poem effectively suggests the power of friendship, the speaker's dedication to, and willingness to assist, his friend. And the same intense love is dramatized in Number XXXVII, "As through the wild green hills of Wyre," in which the speaker, a Shropshire exile beginning his journey away from his home county and his comrades, says,

And friends abroad must bear in mind
Friends at home they leave behind.
Oh, I shall be stiff and cold
When I forget you, hearts of gold;
The land where I shall mind you not
Is the land where all's forgot.

The men to whom the speaker refers are the "friends who made a man" of him.

Friendship is also treated, less sentimentally, in Number LXI, "Hughley Steeple," which deals with the separation, in English churchyards and cemeteries, of those people who die naturally from the "slayers of themselves," suicides. The speaker surveys both groups:

To north, to south, lie parted,
  With Hughley tower above,
The kind, the single-hearted,
  The lads I used to love.
And, south or north, 'tis only
  A choice of friends one knows,
And I shall ne'er be lonely
  Asleep with these or those.

Death is traditionally the great equalizer, and it is worth noting that "Hughley Steeple" suggests an anti-Christian theme. It is the church tower that separates the friends who, in death, belong together. Implicity, God is above, and cruelly detached from, the binding nature, the "single-heartedness," of earthly friendship. God's spitefulness apparently extends even to the dead.

Nesca Robb accurately points out that friendship is "insistently contrasted" with romantic love in A Shropshire Lad, for friendship, she writes,"is love that has given itself so completely that it can endure all and demand nothing, and can look the bitterest truth in the face without being overwhelmed."[46] But what is less noticeable about the friendship poems in the cycle is the "trouble" that over-shadows most of them: each refers to death or some other form of disconnection. Perhaps Housman is suggesting that friendship, like romantic love, cannot really satisfy because it, too, is impermanent. The agony that man experiences at the loss of friends is effectively captured in Number LIV, "With rue my heart is laden," discussed earlier, and Number LVIII:

When I came last to Ludlow
  Amidst the moonlight pale,
Two friends kept step beside me,
  Two honest lads and hale.

Now Dick lies long in the churchyard,
And Ned lies long in jail,
And I come home to Ludlow
Amidst the moonlight pale.

Whether this poignant piece is intended to suggest some kind of murder story--is Ned, in jail, the killer of Dick?--it effectively dramatizes, by virtue of its matter-of-factness, the anguish that results when good friends are no longer together. The repeated phrase "the moonlight pale" suggests mystery and death, and that the three friends "kept step" eloquently implies the closeness of their relationship.

A Shropshire Lad also links romantic love and friendship. Indeed, the death of a friend, and the loyalties and obligations that are an essential part of friendship, sometimes conflict with romantic desires and sexual needs. In several Shropshire poems, the friends of dead lovers replace their comrades in the arms of the mistresses the dead leave behind. Number XXV, "This time of year a twelvemonth past," and Number XXVII, "'Is my team ploughing'" are two such poems. Ironically, however, the replacement lovers, who speak in both compositions, are not so conscience-stricken as one might expect. "A lad that lives and has his will/ Is worth a dozen dead," says the speaker in Number XXV, and, in the other poem, the speaker is reluctant to confess where and with whom he now sleeps. He says to his dead friend in this colloquy, having been asked if he "has found to sleep in/ A better bed" than the dead man's,

Yes, lad, I lie easy,
 I lie as lads would choose;
I cheer a dead man's sweetheart,
 Never ask me whose.

The drives of the flesh are possibly more compelling than friendship's loyalties. But, clearly, this replacement lover does not wish to cause his dead friend pain.

Even the most satisfying friendship dramatized in A Shropshire Lad is touched with imperfection and death. Number XLII, "The Merry Guide," which is particularly reminiscent of Arnold's "The Scholar-Gypsy," treats a relationship between the speaker and a non-human, non-verbal guide, Hermes, who is always "merry," "happy," and "delightful." Traditionally, Hermes is the escorter of "the dead to their place in the underworld,"[47] but in this allegorical poem he takes on added meaning. He beguiles the living, lures them on through the seasons, but never permits them to gain "their hearts' desire."[48] Through nature, "Midst the fluttering legion/ Of all that ever died," the speaker follows Hermes, but the divinity, "With lips that brim with laughter," will "never once respond" to the speaker.

Man-woman relationships and friendship, then, are in Housman's Shropshire cycle, not particularly rewarding. Man's relationship with the natural environment is similarly unsatisfying. In A Shropshire Lad, nature, despite its beauty, is a constant reminder to man of his mortality, his evanescence. Indeed, nature often seems, like man himself, death-struck. But this is more an appearance than an actuality, for Housman

indicates that, in nature, which is cyclical, there is continuity through rebirth.

Man's love for his natural environment is illustrated in a number of Housman's Salopian poems. In Number XLI, for instance, "In my own shire, if I was sad," nature befriends and consoles the speaker, and, at the same time, it seems to share his sadness. But, in actuality, it reminds him of his own mortality. Elsewhere, nature has no memory and quickly betrays the speaker in Number LII, "Far in a western brookland," by beguiling a passing stranger while the speaker lies alone in London. Indeed, Housman's nature provides very little solace and satisfaction. Rarely is it, as Donald A. Stauffer believes, a "panorama" that provides men with a "refuge from the 'blackguard' who made the world."[49] On the contrary, Housman's nature is full of reminders that death is imminent: "rue," "cypress," "yew," "drifting" petals, falling leaves, "bereaved" autumn woods, cheery trees "hung with snow," the "chilly" windflower, "snowdrifts in the hedge," heaving" aspens, the West and "western skies," the "many-venomed earth," and so on--such connotatively rich details as tnese, legion in _A Shropshire Lad_, all of which are, in context, associated with death, imply the omnipresence of Housman's "blackguard" creator, since it is He who determined that all men should die. These details intimate that there exists no refuge except perhaps death itself.

Nature's nagging attempts to point up man's mortality are perhaps most imaginatively treated in Number VII, where a blackbird (symbolically associated with death in gnomic

literature) sings to a whistling ploughman,

> 'Lie down, lie down, young yeoman:
> What use to rise and rise?
> Rise man a thousand mornings
> Yet down at last he lies,
> And then the man is wise.'

The ploughman kills the bird with a stone, but the real damage cannot be undone, for his "soul" takes up "the blackbird's strain," and sings,

> 'Lie down, lie down, young yeoman:
> The sun moves always west;
> The road one treads to labour
> Will lead one home to rest,
> And that will be the best.'

But nature in A Shropshire Lad is not merely a living and constant reminder of man's mortality. In one of the most effective poems in the cycle, Number XVI, nature comes together with romantic love and death:

> It nods and curtseys and recovers
> When the wind blows above,
> The nettle on the graves of lovers
> That hanged themselves for love.
>
> The nettle nods, the wind blows over,
> The man, he does not move,
> The lover of the grave, the lover
> That hanged himself for love.

Bateson calls this poem "the most brilliant as well as one of the shortest" in the Shropshire Lad cycle; "there is not one superfluous word in this exquisite lyric," he says.[50] And another critics echo his admiration, among them the poet Randall Jarrell, who writes that "the nettle stands for the

hurting and inescapable conditions of life, the prosperous . . . evil of the universe," and the wind for "the gale of life."[51] In effect, the dancing nettle apes the dead lovers above whom it blows, repeating, in its own stately fashion, the "little meaningless nodding actions" that are, for man, life itself.[52] Such actions, Jarrell writes, are not voluntary.[53] Since the wind controls them, Housman intimates that men are similarly "helpless and determined."[54]

The ironies in "It nods, and curtseys, and recovers" are disturbing. The steps the nettle dances, for instance, imply a gracious and measured piece, a minuet perhaps. The plant "nods," "curtseys," and "recovers," steps back. But the dance of life in which men are engaged is neither gracious nor measured in the same stately manner. Furthermore, there is no recovery from death for man. The nettle, in contrast to the suicides above whom it dances its mocking steps, is vital, full of motion, and will be reborn, "year after year," to dance again and again.[55] Which is the better condition, the vigorous and endless but controlled dance of the nettle or the oblivion of the dead over whom it dances? The question is posed but not answered.

In contrast, nature's detachment is illustrated in Number XLVI, "Bring, in this timeless grave to throw," an elegy in which the speaker requests his fellow-mourners not to strew the grave of their dead friend with rosemary, yew, and cypress, the evergreens conventionally associated with death. Rather, he says, the mourners should seek out a single bloom, one

associated with the brevity of life, "Whatever will not flower again." This will more effectively "comfort" the dead man. But it is December, Christmas, a time at which nature yields no such flowers.

It becomes evident that death overshadows the entire Shropshire Lad cycle. But it is not always a negative condition. One of the suicides in "It nods, and curtseys, and recovers," for example, is ambiguously termed a "lover of the grave." He is a lover in a grave as well as a man who loves being dead. There are many such death-lovers in Housman's collection, and the cycle as a whole appears to suggest a clear-cut answer to the question posed in Number XVI--namely, that death is preferable to life. Since man's existence constitutes a series of nagging "troubles," to seek a long life is, implicitly, to invite unceasing and inescapable "ill." Indeed, Maude M. Hawkins, like other critics, argues that Housman's poetry offers only one "panacea for the bitterness" of life, and that panacea is man's "deliveress," death.[56]

To what extent death is a "panacea" will be taken up later, but, certainly, A Shropshire Lad dramatizes an undisguised admiration for those men who actively seek death, for those individuals who, either in order to escape from particular "troubles" or for other less specific reasons, courageously control their own destinies by ending their lives. In Housman's cycle, these death-lovers, the suicides, are true "men."

Clearly, Housman's glorification of the suicide contributes to the anti-theistic thrust of A Shropshire Lad. For the

Christian view that suicide is both sinful and cowardly is, in his cycle, strongly challenged. In Number XIX, "To an Athlete Dying Young," for example, the speaker's admiration for the young runner who has slipped "betimes away," a detail that suggests the racer may have taken his own life, is patent. The youth has, on the one hand, achieved earthly victory by winning a race for his town, but, in death, the glory will be everlasting. He

> will not swell the rout
> Of lads that wore their honours out,
> Runners whom renown outran
> And the name died before the man.

Were he to live, the runner would witness his "record cut" and hear the victory cheers die into "silence." In life, "glory does not stay," whereas in the place of the "strengthless dead" the youth's laurels will never wither. The dead, who have no need or desire to compete with their kind, will admire the athlete forever.

It is not clear that the racer in Number XIX is a suicide, but no such uncertainty is present in Number XLIV, "Shot? so quick, so clean an ending?" Here the act of suicide was a moral imperative, for the speaker, apostrophizing the self-murderer, says:

> Oh you had forethought, you could reason,
> And saw your road and where it led,
> And early wise and brave in season
> Put the pistol to your head.
>
> Oh soon, and better so than later
> After long disgrace and scorn,

> You shot dead the houshold traitor,
> The soul that should not have been born.
>
> Right you guessed the rising morrow
> And scorned to tread the mire you must:
> Dust's your wages, son of sorrow,
> But men may come to worse than dust.
>
> Souls undone, undoing others,--
> Long time since the tale began.
> You would not live to wrong your brothers:
> Oh lad, you died as fits a man.

Although the particular "trouble" that prompts the youngster in Number XLIV to commit suicide is not stated, the architect of the youth's dilemma is indirectly indicted: God. It is the youngster's soul that is the "traitor," and it was "born," created, to corrupt, to undo, others. This suicide was predestined "to tread the mire" and "wrong" his fellows, but, with "forethought" and "reason," he elected to cheat the divine plan. He took his own life in order not to contribute another chapter to God's eternal "tale" of "souls undone, undoing others." In the speaker's view, the youth's action leaves him

> Undishonoured, clear of danger,
> Clean of guilt.

Suicide, morally reprehensible in the Christian system, here provides moral redemption.

A similar theme underlies Number XLV, "If it chance your eye offend you." When "your sickness is your soul," says the speaker, "play the man, stand up and end you." In short, the individual should not be a source of "trouble" for his fellows. Men are, apparently, capable of moral contagion, and suicide

can function to control the spread of moral blight, a spread that presumably God intends.

"Hughley Steeple," Number LXI in A Shropshire Lad, by contrast, does not applaud suicide; but in it suicides are used to suggest an anti-Christian theme. In this poem, Housman deals with the Church's practice of separating the suicides' graves from those of people who die naturally. The latter lie buried to the south of the church tower. There, in the sunshine, "The headstones cluster" and "The sunny mounds lie thick." But the sun is selective; it does not shine on the graves of the suicides, which are "a soon-told number," few, and "chill," and lie in "steeple-shadowed slumber." Nature, represented by the sun, and God, represented by the church steeple, are uncharitable, but the speaker is not. All the graves contain the bodies of his friends, "The kind, the single-hearted,/ The lads I used to love," he says.

Moreover, the suicides in the Shropshire cycle and the soldiers are not unrelated, for whereas the first end their "troubles," love "troubles" and soul "troubles," with"forethought" and "reason," the second meet and challenge death in battle. Both figures are altruistically motivated. The suicides seek not to corrupt their fellows, for the most part, and the soldiers seek to benefit their fellows by dutifully sacrificing themselves. More importantly, both cheat God by taking their fates into their own hands.

The Shropshire Lad soldier poems are usually considered expressions of patriotism, but the soldiers in the cycle are

rarely approached from the perspective of patriotism as they are, for instance, by Kipling. In fact, Housman was especially critical of patriotic verse. Patriotism, he said, was for poets "a dangerous subject," and he told his brother, Laurence, that "of all the virtues, . . . the one which had inspired the least amount of good poetry was patriotism, the reason being that it so easily degenerated into vice."[57] Housman continued: "when poets began by praising their own country they commonly ended by insulting others."[58]

This is not to claim that Housman is never chauvinistic in the Shropshire cycle. In Number III, "The Recruit," a soldier is told to "make the foes of England/ Be sorry you were born." And in Number XXXIV, "The New Mistress," a rejected lover who enlists says "the enemies of England . . . shall see me and be sick." But such sentiments are rare, and the little patriotism that does color Housman's verse is what William Archer calls "dogged rather than exultant."[59] In addition, although Housman's soldiers, those who speak and those who are spoken about, are Englishmen, they fight "not so much for the glory of England as for the credit of Shropshire."[60] The wars in which they battle, the campaigns in which they engage, and the causes they defend--these are never specified, primarily because these issues are irrelevant.

Similarly, the joys of battle are ignored. Even in Number I, "1887," which Charles C. Walcutt writes is a "satire on the hypocrisy of empire,"[61] patriotism is less important than it may at first seem. We read,

From Clee to heaven the beacon burns,
    The shires have seen it plain,
From north and south the sign returns
    And beacons burn again.

Look left, look right, the hills are bright,
    The dales are light between,
Because 'tis fifty years tonight
That God has saved the Queen.

"1887," however, is not a tribute to Victoria or England. It is a paean to the selflessness of the countless ordinary soldiers who, in dying, make Victoria's jubilee possible. They are Christ-like "saviours" who "come not home tonight," without whose dedication no monarch, Victoria or any other, would be "saved." The price of monarchial security is specified in the poem, for while jubilee fires burn in the English night,

It dawns in Asia, tombstones show
    And Shropshire names are read;
And the Nile spills his overflow
    Beside the Severn dead.

"1887" is an anti-theistic challenge to the basic premise of the British national anthem. God does not save the Queen, the poem reveals. Men, soldiers, do.

This last idea is reinforced in several Housman soldier poems. The soldier, even the traditionally despised mercenary, is an exemplary who saves "the sum of things," and who defends "what God abandoned," "earth's foundations." The minimum price the fighting man pays is separation from that which he knows and loves, his home and friends. The familiar and the beloved are replaced by the worst of privations, and, almost invariably,

the soldier forfeits his life. Housman's point is that in a universe that offers all men an endless battle against all sorts of "trouble," there exist individuals who create their own confrontations with death, who face death in battle because they elect to do so. These individuals are to be admired. Like the suicides, they are their own strategists, not so much in the particular military battles in which they fight, but in the unceasing war against cosmic "ill." They do not submit to the whim of a tyrannical creator. In effect, they themselves determine the kind of "trouble" they will combat. These are perhaps numbered among the youngsters celebrated in Number XXIII, "The lads that will die in their glory and never be old," men who "will carry their looks or their truth to the grave," one of whom, in Number XXXV, "on the idle hill of summer," responds automatically to "the steady drummer," "the calling bugles," and "the screaming fife." This Shropshire youth says he will join the troop of marching soldiers because he must, and he is aware that the mission will be costly:

> East and west on fields forgotten
>   Bleach the bones of comrades slain,
> Lovely lads and dead and rotten;
>   None that go return again.

This is not the kind of chest-thumping bravado usually found in patriotic verse. Housman's soldiers are not mindless military automatons, but feeling, thinking creatures to whom courage rarely comes easily. In Number LVI, "The Day of Battle," for instance, one infantryman explains his fears--

either to himself or to another, possibly less experienced soldier who has voiced a desire to run from the battlefield:

> 'Far I hear the bugle blow
> To call me where I could not go,
> And the guns begin the song,
> "Soldier, fly or stay for long."
>
> 'Comrade, if to turn and fly
> Made a soldier never die,
> Fly I would, for who would not?
> 'Tis sure no pleasure to be shot.
>
> 'But since the man that runs away
> Lives to die another day,
> And cowards' funerals, when they come,
> Are not wept so well at home.
>
> 'Therefore, though the best is bad,
> Stand and do the best, my lad;
> Stand and fight and see your slain,
> And take the bullet in your brain.'

This is grim, but not unintelligent, counsel. The speaker argues that death is, one way or another, inevitable. To run from death--in this case, death in battle--does not solve the problem of mortality. Contrary to the claim of the old music hall song, there exist no soldiers, young or old, who "never die." And he who fights and runs away may live to fight another day (as the English schoolboy rhyme says), but he cannot escape death.

The soldier, then, in preference to doing battle against a thousand and one everyday "troubles," chooses to experience a single intense "Day of Battle." Frequently, he dies, but in electing to fight, he, like the suicide, governs his own destiny.

Obviously, death is what Maude Hawkins calls "the polyphonic background" of the Shropshire cycle, for there are

few compositions in which death is not mentioned, directly or indirectly. And Housman's apparent view that the peace of non-being is better than the pain of life is equally prominent. Many commentators discuss this nihilism, and most attribute it to the poet's alleged homosexuality. Fairchild, for example, considers the preoccupation with death and the pessimism Housman's "extravagant lashing out against a world to which he cannot adjust."[62] Housman's world view, says this writer, is "appropriate to his [sexual] predicatment."[63] Marlow's comments are comparable. It is Housman's "overwhelming attachment" for Moses Jackson that, because "it could not find its fulfilment," colors Housman's entire poetic output "with thoughts of death, hanging, suicide, and rebellion against God."[64]

Unfortunately, such explanations fail to consider the fact that Housman's artistic interest in death, if not his nihilism, manifested itself long before he met Jackson, and probably quite some time before he recognized his own sexual preferences. Housman's sister, Katharine Symons, explains that death was "an obsession" with the writer, even in boyhood.[65] The subject of a prize-winning poem Housman composed in grammar school, for instance, was the death of Socrates.[66] Another composition, written when the poet was fourteen, deals with the death of Roman glory, and yet a third poem, composed when Housman was sixteen, takes as its subject death in nature.[67] This last subject is again treated in a elegaic lyric Housman penned before attending Oxford, "Breathe, my lute, beneath my

fingers."[68] At Oxford, furthermore, Housman decorated his room with only two pictures, Dürer's "Melancholia" and "The Knight, Death, and the Devil," both of which reproductions he later hung in his London lodgings.[69]

It is possibly less argumentative to claim that the poet's interest in death, reflected not only in A Shropshire Lad, which is, in a sense, "one long meditation upon death,"[70] but in all his verse, is the outcome of many experiences, the most influential of which was his mother's death. This event, which occurred while the poet was absent from his home, had, writes Housman's brother, "a profound effect on him, for there has been between [mother and son] a deep bond of affection and understanding."[71] Mrs. Symons, Housman's sister, elaborates. Housman was so attached to his mother, she says, that all his life he kept "every scrap of writing. . . he had ever received from her or about her."[72] This "cruel loss," she explains, "seems to have roused in him an early resentment against nature's relentless ways of destruction."[73]

Regardless of its specific origins, Housman's interest in death, and the emphasis on its imminence that marks all his verse, are important. Throughout, Housman's view seems to suggest that the only sure cessation of, and escape from, the countless debilitating "troubles" that make up the life of man, are provided by death. Indeed, there is every indication in A Shropshire Lad that life itself is a kind of exile, a dispossession, engineered by a gratuitously cruel diety. A number of poems already discussed imply this theme. In "The

Immortal Part," the bones grumble about their separation from non-being, the "bed of dust," and "Be still, my soul, be still" reinforces the same idea. "Why did I awake?" the speaker asks, and "when shall I sleep again?" Elsewhere, the exile that life constitutes is less obvious but implicit. Number XII, "When I watch the living meet," suggests that life is a temporary break in the endless "sojourn" of non-being. The speaker, here, watches the "living meet" on the "street/ Where I lodge a little while."

Furthermore, if life itself is an exile, an imposed separation from the comfort of the long sleep of non-being, an image that, in one form or another, is repeated throughout A Shropshire Lad, it also imposes other, no less agonizing separations. "Troubles" of various kinds--rejection in love and criminality, to mention only two, for example--compel a number of Shropshire Lad speakers to forego their native county and to wander in an alien environment, London, where, separated from nature and the people they know and love, they experience the profoundest sense of isolation. One composition, Number XXXVI, suggests that man is an eternal wanderer, for the speaker says,

> The world is round, so travellers tell,
>   And straight though reach the track,
> Trudge on, trudge on, 'twill all be well,
>   The way will guide one back.
>
> But ere the circle homeward hies
>   Far, far must it remove.

It is characteristic of Housman's art that key terms are

repeated, and, in this poem, the repetitions are singularly effective; the term <u>trudge</u> captures precisely the emotional implications of the wanderer's complaint.

A similar wandering exile soliloquizes in Number LX, "Now hollow fires burn out to black":

> Square your shoulders, lift your pack,
> And leave your friends and go.
>
> Oh never fear, man, nought's to dread,
> Look not left nor right:
> In all the endless road you tread
> There's nothing but the night.

Is the journey here referred to the journey to death that all men experience, or the march of an infantryman going to war? Both meanings seem to apply, not inappropriately in a verse cycle that suggests life is both the voyage of an exile and an endless battle against a multitude of "troubles."

Separation and exile underlie other Housman poems. The speaker in Number LIX, "The Isle of Portland," refers to a dead friend from whom he is geographically separated:

> On yonder isle, not to rise,
> Never to stir forth free,
> Far from his folk a dead lad lies
> That once was friends with me.

In this poem, friendship, death, and exile come together, and the final stanza, in which the speaker apostrophizes his dead friend, introduces a fourth Housman interest:

> Lie you easy, dream you light,
> And sleep you fast for aye;
> And luckier may you find the night
> Than ever you found the day.

A Shropshire Lad, then, is full of such painful disconnections, separations, and exiles of various kinds, and these represent but one more "trouble" in dozens that, according to Housman's poetic view, dog man. Most of these "troubles" are, as has been suggested, local and particular: unreciprocated love, infidelity, "the thinning of old friendships," and so.[74] Ultimately, however, the local and particular form part of a "trouble" that is less specific, a trouble that is cosmic. Housman's "trouble," according to William Brashear, embraces "far more than these particular ills," for "it is sometimes . . . . made to stand for the unhappy fact of life itself as apprehended through Housman's intense and hopeless vision. In this sense it is neither good nor ill, right nor wrong, but a poignant apprehension of the nothingness (at once ultimate and imminent) of all, distinguished from traditional nihilism by a quality of life or aliveness which persists--a vibrant anguish. It is, in its broadest extension, the agony of dying consciousness apprehending intuitively and directly its own sound and fury."[75]

Brashear perceptively argues that it is this general "trouble" with which Housman deals in Number XXXI, "On Wenlock Edge the wood's in trouble":

> On Wenlock Edge the wood's in trouble;
> His forest fleece the Wrekin heaves;
> The gale, it plies the saplings double,
> And thick on Severn snow the leaves.
>
> 'Twould blow like this through holt and hanger
> When Uricon the city stood:

'Tis the old wind in the old anger,
 But then it threshed another wood.

There, like the wind through woods in riot,
 Through him the gale of life blew high;
The tree of man was never quiet:
 Then 'twas the Roman, now 'tis I.

The gale, it plies the saplings double,
 It blows so hard, 'twill soon be gone;
Today the Roman and his trouble
 Are ashes under Uricon.

In this disturbing meditation, the gale is the punitive wind of life, ancient and angry, battering and bending mankind. The antagonism is eternal and universal. Both the pre-Christian Roman and the contemporary Salopian yeoman, vulnerable "saplings," have been subjected to its undiscriminating fury, and both have apprehended the gale's meaning. This fury is, furthermore, not only elemental and inescapable but, worse, impersonal. The speaker's claim that the storm "will soon be gone" is plurisignificant: the statement implies, first, that the gale comes and goes, is inconsistent and unpredictable, and second, that the onslaught ultimately ends for each man because all men, like the Roman now buried under the hillock, die. The gale, "trouble," ends permanently only for the dead.

In "On Wenlock Edge the wood's in trouble," a relatively commonplace occurrence, the effect of a gale on country woods, is artfully managed to suggest an idea that is decidedly not commonplace. And this technique is typical of Housman and an important source of Housman's appeal, as James Brannin explains. The everyday event, says this critic, is frequently "a vehicle for revelation of [Housman's] deepest . . . feeling in all its

depth."[76] Brashear makes a similar comment. The poems that deal with "cosmic anguish," he writes, "are generally short and usually follow, with some exceptions, a similar pattern of metaphorical development from a local or confined perception to a vast, all-encompassing imaginative apprehension that startles with its sweep and starkness."[77] Housman, by way of this method, frequently "accomplishes an immediate, often disquieting leap from the local to the cosmic, bypassing, for better and for worse, the intermediate stations, the levels of meaning and complexities that constitute the enriching substance for most major poets."[78]

Interestingly, metaphorical winds abound in A Shropshire Lad, and invariably they are related to cosmic "trouble." One such wind, for instance, appears in Number XXXII, "From far, from eve and morning":

From far, from eve and morning
 And yon twelve-winded sky,
The stuff of life to knit me
 Blew hither: here am I.

Now--for a breath I tarry
 Nor yet disperse apart--
Take my hand quick and tell me,
 What have you in your heart.

Speak now, and I will answer;
 How shall I help you, say;
Ere to the wind's twelve quarters
 I take my endless way.

In this composition, life itself is described as "a breath," a relatively unimpressive movement of air that contrasts sharply with the twelve powerful winds that we are told create

man and "disperse" him. The winds are crucially related to "trouble," for they carried "the stuff of life" that "knit" the speaker. The term "knit," here, has several connotations. Obviously, it means made, created. But it also means to furrow, to wrinkle, in the same sense that one knits one's brows from worry. There may be yet a third connotation. The word could function as a pun on the English colloquialism nit, which means to plague, to annoy. Housman, in Number XXXII, seems to be indicating that "trouble" is at the root of man's being, creates him, and that "trouble" causes him to die.

Winds also feature in Number XXXVIII, "The winds out of the west land blow," and Number XL, "Into my heart an air that kills," but, here, although clearly associated with death, they represent the flow of memory. These less antagonistic breezes, however, are no less disturbing than the powerful gale that attacks the countryside in "On Wenlock Edge the wood's in trouble," for memory, in A Shropshire Lad, is the source of debilitating anguish. Memory is pain, "trouble," "ill," for it is a constant reminder of the past--a past from which individuals are forever separated.

John Sparrow writes that Housman's "finest poems" are those which express the "feelings inspired by contemplations of [man's] relation to the universe. Here," this critic says, "that resolute despair, which, broken only by outbursts of passionate resentment, is the undertone of all Housman's verse, finds its noblest utterance."[79] Whether these poems are necessarily Housman's "finest" is debatable. Unquestionably, however,

they are his most disturbing. For, together with the verse dealing with more particular "troubles," they seem to illustrate that life is in no way a blessing. Life promises so much, the cycle demonstrates, but delivers so little. Ultimately, Housman's Salop is, on the surface, "a world where God and . . . [His] laws seem hostile, and [man] himself an alien--cast out . . . to roam through time and space."[80] "Ill" is inescapable, and although the "trouble" to which the cycle finally points its accusing finger is cosmic, Housman chooses to exemplify his world view by dramatizing local and particular frustrations--frustrations that are immediately accessible to any reader. It may very well be that this localization and particularization is, as Brashear argues, "largely responsible for the narrow reading of Housman's poems."[81] To be sure, the Salopian "pose" is "at once effective and misleading. It tends to draw attention too much to the 'local.'"[82]

Local or universal, however, "trouble" is ubiquitous in A Shropshire Lad, and its "various meanings . . . extend over a vast scope."[83] Indeed, at times Housman's pejorism--his defeatism and his nihilism--his impassioned outcry against what he believes to be a "cosmic betrayal,"[84] seems so all-encompassing that many of us may not wish to apprehend it or give it its proper due. A Christian culture that deplores defeatism is bound to resist a world view that runs counter to the traditional grain. The most effective means of belittling such a vision is, of course, to designate it, as numerous commentators do, incomplete, "wanting in depth and

complexity,"[85] "a gross over-simplification."[86] Brashear explains these reactions. To many readers, he says, Housman is "not playing the game--of human survival--and is betraying first principles that even the most decadent and recalcitrant of his contemporaries and successors have never questioned. Our humanistic inclinations cry 'foul,' and there is the temptation to throw out the accusation of puerility . . . . But for what Housman is saying . . . maturity has no answer--except, perhaps, that it ought not be said. Rather than puerile, then, these poems are subversive--not politically, or socially, or even philosophically, but in a deeper sense."[87] For Housman "has not only abandoned all hope, but also all will. His surrender amounts to an affront to humanity."[88]

Notes

[1]The Trend of Modern Poetry (London, 1949), p. 5.

[2]Arnold Whitridge, "Vigny and Housman, A Study in Pessimism," American Scholar, X (Spring 1941), p. 158.

[3]William Lyon Phelps, The Advance of English Poetry in the Twentieth Century (New York, 1918), p. 65.

[4]Ibid., p. 66.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Norman Marlow, A. E. Housman, Scholar and Poet (Minneapolis, 1958), p. 112.

[7]Guy Boas, "The Poetry of A. E. Housman," English, I (1936), p. 212.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Laurence Housman, My Brother, A. E. Housman: Personal Recollections Together with Thirty Hitherto Unpublished Poems (New York, 1938), pp. 23-24.

[10]William York Tindall, Forces in Modern British Literature, 1885-1946 (New York, 1949), pp. 112-113.

[11]F. W. Bateson, "The Poetry of Emphasis," A. E. Housman, A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Christopher Ricks (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), p. 139.

[12]John Heath-Stubbs, The Darkling Plain, A Study of the Later Fortunes of Romanticism in English Poetry from George Darley to W. B. Yeats (London, 1950), p. 94.

[13]Samuel C.Chew, "The Nineteenth Century and After," A Literary History of England, ed. Albert C. Baugh (New York, 1948), p. 1546.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Boas, pp. 212-213.

[17]Laurence Housman, p. 72.

[18]Ibid.

[19]Introductory Lecture, Delivered before the Faculties of Arts and Laws and of Science in University College, London, October 3, 1892 (Cambridge, 1937), p. 16.

[20]Ibid., p. 37.

[21]Ibid., p. 38.

[22]Boas, p. 220.

[23]Babette Deutsch, Poetry in Our Time (New York, 1956), p. 13.

[24]Laurence Housman, pp. 21 and 114.

[25]Bateson, p. 141.

[26]Marlow, p. 112.

[27]Martin Cooper's comments appear in Cyril Connolly, A. E. Housman: A Controversy," A. E. Housman, A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Christopher Ricks (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), p. 44.

[28]Cleanth Brooks, "Alfred Edward Housman," A. E. Housman, A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Christopher Ricks (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), p. 70.

[29]Robert Graves, On English Poetry (New York, 1922), p. 31.

[30]Christopher Ricks, "The Nature of Housman's Poetry," A. E. Housman, A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Christopher Ricks (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), p. 106.

[31]Robert W. Stallman, "A Bibliography of Housman," PLMA, LX (June 1945), p. 486.

[32]Michael Roberts, The Modern Mind (London, 1937), pp. 240-241.

[33]Fifty Years of English Literature, 1900-1950 (London, 1951), p. 112.

[34]Charles Williams, Poetry at Present (Oxford, 1930), p. 33.

[35]William R. Brashear, "The Trouble with Housman," Victorian Poetry, VII (Summer 1969), p. 83.

[36]Nesca Robb, Four in Exile (New York, 1948), p. 13.

[37]Ibid., p. 18.

[38]Brooks, p. 68.

[39]Number IX, Last Poems.

[40]Stephen Spender, "The Essential Housman" Horizon, I (April 1940), p. 297.

[41]Ibid.

[42]John Peale Bishop, "The Poetry of A. E. Housman," Poetry, LVI (April 1940), p. 152.

[43]Boas, p. 214.

[44]Ibid., p. 215.

[45]Number XII.

[46]Robb, p. 48.

[47]Marlow, p. 54.

[48]Ibid.

[49]The Nature of Poetry (New York, 1946), p. 159.

[50]Bateson, p. 139.

[51]"Texts from Housman," A. E. Housman, A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Christopher Ricks (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), p. 57.

[52]Ibid., pp. 57-58.

[53]Ibid., p. 58.

[54]Ibid.

[55]Ibid.

[56]Maude M. Hawkins, A. E. Housman: Man Behind a Mask (Chicago, 1958), p. 167.

[57]Laurence Housman, pp. 83-84.

[58]Ibid.

[59]William Archer, Poets of the Younger Generation (London, 1902), p. 186.

[60]Ibid., p. 189.

[61]Charles Child Walcutt, "Housman and the Empire: An Analysis of '1887,'" College English, V (February 1944), p. 256.

[62]Hoxie Neale Fairchild, Religious Trends in English Poetry, V (New York, 1962), p. 59.

[63]Ibid., p. 58.

[64]Marlow, p. 97.

[65]Katharine Symons, Alfred Edward Housman: Recollections (New York, 1937), p. 8.

[66]Laurence Housman, p. 31.

[67]Ibid., pp.31-34.

[68]Ibid., p. 38.

[69]Ibid., p. 55.

[70]J. B. Priestley, *Figures in Modern Literature* (New York, 1924), p. 84.

[71]Laurence Housman, pp. 23-24.

[72]Symons, p. 8.

[73]*Ibid.*

[74]Brashear, p. 83.

[75]*Ibid.*, p. 84.

[76]James Brannin, "Alfred Housman," *The Sewanee Review Quarterly*, XXXIII (April 1925), p. 193.

[77]Brashear, p. 85.

[78]*Ibid.*

[79]*A. E. Housman: Recollections* (New York, 1937), p. 77.

[80]*Ibid.*, p. 78.

[81]Brashear, p. 82.

[82]*Ibid.*

[83]*Ibid.*

[84]Louis Untermeyer, *Lives of the Poets, The Story of One Thousand Years of English and American Poetry* (New York, 1959), p. 611.

[85]Deutsch, p. 14.

[86]Brashear, p. 87.

[87]*Ibid.*, p. 88.

[88]*Ibid.*

Chapter VI

Ironies and Dualities

No thorough and balanced analysis of Housman's poetic art should ignore the ironies and dualities--verbal, situational, formal, and philosophical--that underlie his world view in A Shropshire Lad, engaging discrepancies that in some instances function to accentuate the bleakness of his vision, and in others mitigate that bleakness. To be sure, it is in part a failure to recognize and understand the "tug of contraries"[1] in Housman's verse that prompts such critics as Bronowski to condemn the Shropshire cycle for being, if not a series of contradictions, then irritatingly inconsistent. Housman writes "in an aimless welter of standards," this commentator claims, and, because "every poem is at odds with every other,"[2] the compositions "damn themselves."[3] A comparable indictment, less hyperbolically worded, is presented by Heath-Stubbs. The "ignobly cruel irony and a sniggering cynicism" in Housman's poetry, he says, "belie" the "values from which his poetry really takes its origin." [4]

These two critics are perhaps guilty of an approach to

poetry explained by J. B. Priestley in his penetrating essay on Housman. Like so many Housman commentators, they estimate the verse "in terms of something outside [the] poetry, . . . a system of ethics or a definitely formulated philosophy."[5] Evaluated in the light of these "alien standards," says Priestley, Housman does seem "contradictory and downright perverse."[6] But poetry generally and Housman's work specifically are not, writes this critic, "philosophy in fancy dress," and to charge the creator of A Shropshire Lad with being contradictory is "to make a gigantic falsification," is to "translate that strangely beautiful logic of the whole being of Man which we call poetry into that somewhat drier logic which is simply a part of Man's intellectual apparatus. If, when engaged in the hopeless task of disentangling the myriad threads of a poem's fabric, we make references to systems of belief, schools of philosophy, and the like, we do so for the sake of mere convenience."[7] A careful and perceptive analysis of Housman's work reveals that he is in many ways not contradictory but paradoxical.

One of the most obvious ironies in the Shropshire cycle involves Housman's anti-theism, which is frequently vocalized in diction, phrases, and cadences directly from, or reminiscent of, the Authorized Version of the Bible,[8] In his enlightening treatment of the literary influences on Housman's poetry, Norman Marlow details many of these debts,[9] and explains the function of these allusions and reverberations as being "to give an air of timelessness to [the] poems."[10] This explanation

is accurate enough, as far as it goes, but it is surely the tonal authority with which Housman's anti-Christian theme is invested, as a result of his employing these Biblical echoes, that ought to be noted. For such echoes make his world view more persuasive to the Christian, especially the Anglican, reader, either on a conscious level or subliminally. Ironically, the Bible, "the Word of God," sometimes used verbatim, sometimes given a slight twist, serves, in context, to undercut "the Word" as well as to indict the originator of "the Word," God himself. The force of argument thus achieved cannot be undervalued.

A few examples, some of which have already been cited in other contexts, will illustrate the effectiveness of this aspect of Housman's technique. "1887", for instance, challenges the claim of the British national anthem by arguing that not God but British soldiers--more accurately, Shropshire soldiers--"save" the monarch. That these selflessly dedicated patriots are mocked by the sentiments expressed in the anthem is evident in Housman's use of a phrase with which Christ was taunted on the Cross. Housman's soldiers are "saviours" who do not return home because "themselves they could not save" (Mark 15:31). The same Biblical incident is recalled by Housman's "The Carpenter's Son," when the Shropshire criminal who speaks tells his friends to learn from his experience. He asks his comrades to be more clever than he, to "'make some day a decent end,'" and he adds, "'Live, lads, and I will die,'" an ironic twist on Jesus' belief that He died so that mankind might live eternally.

Housman's sacrificial lamb also commands his friends not to emulate him, employing a phrase that brings to mind a central New Testament Metaphor. "'Walk henceforth in other ways,'" he says. Thus his listeners are asked not to follow but to avoid "the Way."

Christ is alluded to elsewhere in A Shropshire Lad. The phrases "son of grief" and "son of sorrow," traditionally used to refer to Jesus, appear several times in Housman's cycle. Furthermore, the Sermon on the Mount is not only recalled by Number XLV, "If it chance your eye offend you," but, as Marlow points out, "pushed further."[11] The speaker, Terence, urges,

> if your hand or foot offend you,
> Cut it off, lad, and he whole;
> But play the man, stand up and end you,
> When your sickness is your soul.

In Housman's poem, Christ's words (Mark 9:43-45) are used to advocate what is, in the Christian system, a cardinal sin, suicide.

But probably one of the most interesting of these New Testament references is to be found in Number LXIII, "I hoed and trenched and weeded," the piece that ends the Shropshire Lad cycle, and one that is unquestionably intended to suggest Jesus' parable of the sower (Mark 4). Likening his poems to flowers that will produce seeds for planting, Terence says,

> Some seed the birds devour,
> And some the season mars,
> And here and there will flower,
> The solitary stars.

In the Bible, the seed to which Christ refers is "the Word," the gospel. Is Housman's verse, then, a new gospel, not of hope but of despair, as this allusion intimates?

In passing, it is also worth mentioning Housman's use of the Old Testament, especially Ecclesiastes and Job. Reverberations from these books do not involve irony, but they do contribute to the tonal authority underlying the Shropshire Lad world view. Marlow explains that Ecclesiastian attitudes towards life and death "find a constant echo . . . in Housman, and in reading . . . the Preacher we recall whole Housman poems to which he could provide a text."[12] Number VII, "When smoke stood up from Ludlow," for example, in which a blackbird serenades a Shropshire ploughman with a dirge, seems, as Marlow says, based on a passage from Ecclesiastes, "Yea, though he live a thousand years twice told, yet hath he seen no god; do not all men go to one place?" (6:6). The Shropshire blackbird, a harbinger of death, chants,

> 'Rise man a thousand mornings
> Yet down at last he lies
> And then the man is wise.'

Similarly, there exist likenesses between Job's frustration and the sense of divine injustice that underscores A Shropshire Lad. Marlow points out that Housman's verse dramatizes the sentiments of "the earlier and unrepentant Job," but "prevalent in both [Job and the Shropshire cycle] is a vehement bitterness against the iniquity of the universe."[13]

A less obvious duality in Housman's Shropshire collection relates to poetic form. Almost every Housman critic refers to the influence on his poetry of the ballad:

> In dramatic situation, in outlook, in language and in meter [the influence] is everywhere apparent. From his earliest years Housman found that the short, vigorous rhythms of the ballad were more congenial than others; probably it is because a man under the influence of an immediate, over-mastering emotion finds that these short lines come more naturally to his lips; they are, so to speak, the natural language of the heart.[14]

In actuality, however, the Shropshire cycle includes only three true ballads, Number VIII, "'Farewell to barn and stack and tree,'" Number XXVII, "'Is my team ploughing,'" and Number LIII, "The True Lover." Of the remaining sixty poems in the volume, moreover, only fourteen conform to the quatrain pattern common to ballad verse.[15] More importantly, no one of this total of seventeen pieces uses the traditional ballad rhyme scheme _abcb_, but all use _abab_, a pattern most closely associated with the Protestant hymn. Indeed, an additional twenty-eight poems in _A Shropshire Lad_, written in quatrains but not adhering strictly to the fourteener metric of the Protestant hymn, use this _abab_ rhyme scheme.[16] Such connections are rarely accidental, and it is likely that in some sense Housman's cycle is intended to be a hymn to God--but not a hymn of praise or gratitude.

The ironies involving Biblical allusion and poetic form, then, reinforce Housman's anti-theism. There exist other dualities in _A Shropshire Lad_ that work to meliorate the anti-Christian world view, not the least important of which is

Housman's musicality. Life is unquestionably an agony, and God is an oppressor, the Shropshire verse demonstrates, but it frequently does so to a music that is distractingly light and melodious, a music that often functions as an ironic descant to the bleak sentiments expressed and the painful experiences dramatized, a music that, according to Edmund Wilson, makes "loss and death and disgrace seem to beautiful."[17] In short, sound in A Shropshire Lad frequently appears to belie theme. As Christopher Ricks observes, Housman's poems are "remarkable for the ways in which rhythm and style temper or mitigate or criticize what in bald paraphrase the [poems] would be saying."[18] This melodiousness is present in some of Housman's most pessimistic compositions, and it permits a disarming "cheerfulness" to break through.[19] Indeed, Ricks says that this tension makes for "the profoundest of Housman" and marks most, if not all, his poetry.[20] Housman, he writes, was "fascinated" by "contrarieties and disparities of feeling," and was attracted by the "power of music radically to change what is said."[21]

A few examples are sufficient to illustrate Housman's technique. Number XIII, "When I was one and twenty," for instance, deals with the agony of young love. Lovers pay a high price, the piece says: "endless rue." But sound in the poem operates as a counterpoint to theme. Light iambic trimeter lines (lines one, three, five, and seven in each of the two eight-line stanzas contain an extra syllable), a predominance of short vowel sounds, and monosyllabic diction

(of the ninety words in the composition, seventy six are monosyllables) combine merrily to undercut the sadness of the speaker, a rejected lover.

In precisely the same manner musicality modifies meaning in Number XVI, "It nods and curtseys and recovers":

> It nods and curtseys and recovers
> When the wind blows above,
> The nettle on the graves of lovers
> That hanged themselves for love.
>
> The nettle nods, the wind blows over,
> The man he does not move,
> The lover of the grave, the lover
> That hanged himself for love.

Again, here, rhythm, a pattern of short vowel sounds, and monosyllabic diction work not to underscore theme but ironically to counter it. The poem is about man's mortality, but its melody celebrates the vitality of what which is not subject to death, the nettle, nature.

Housman's musicality, what he terms his attempt to "harmonise" the world's sadness,[22] is occasionally not effective, however. In Number XXIII, for example, which applauds the lucky Shropshire lads who will not live to suffer old age, Housman uses fourteeners, each line beginning with an iamb and followed by four anapests:

> The lads in their hundreds to Ludlow come in for the fair,
> There's men from the barn and the forge and the mill and the fold,
> The lads for the girls and the lads for the liquor are there,
> And there with the rest are the lads that will never be old.

There's chaps from the town and the field and the
till and the cart,
And many to count are the stalwart, and many the brave,
And many the handsome of face and the handsome of heart,
And few that will carry their looks or their truth
to the grave.

I wish one could know them, I wish there were tokens
to tell
The fortunate fellows that now you can never discern;
And then one could talk with them friendly and wish them
farewell
And watch them depart on the way that they will not
return.

But now you may stare as you like and there's nothing
to scan;
And brushing your elbow unguessed-at and not to be told
They carry back bright to the coiner the mintage of man,
The lads that will die in their glory and never be old.

The pace here achieved may be light and tripping, and may function as an ironic contrast to theme, for, while suggesting the glory of early death, the poem uses a metric that captures the vitality that is life. Unfortunately, the anapestic rhythm falls like a jogtrot on the ear. The piece is, for no apparently good reason, breathless as well as monotonously regular. It should also be observed that in this poem Housman favors polysyllables, a choice that possible contributes to the canter-like beat of the poem.

Another Shropshire Lad piece in which Housman uses fourteeners, Number XXXIV, "The New Mistress," suffers from a comparable weakness. In this poem, Housman wisely foregoes the anapest and employs iambs, but, like Number XXIII, the composition gallops, as the final stanza indicates:

'I will go where I am wanted, where there's room for
one or two,

> And the men are none too many for the work there
> is to do;
> Where the standing line wears thinner and the dropping
> dead lie thick;
> And the enemies of England they shall see me and be sick.'

Number XXXIV is probably the least successful of Housman's published poems, not merely because it is a jogtrot, but because the speaker, a rejected lover, is petulant ("'I will go where I am wanted,'" he tells his lady, who is, she says, "'sick'" of him), and because his patriotism rings false. Further, in this poem Housman's use of the couplet is not impressive. There is an unnatural pause at the end of each line.

Much more memorable and fitting is the melodiousness of Number XL, one of the Shropshire cycle exile poems:

> Into my heart an air that kills
> From yon far country blows:
> What are those blue remembered hills,
> What spires, what farms are those?
>
> That is the land of lost content,
> I see it shining plain,
> The happy highways where I went
> And cannot come again.

Once again, iambics, short lines (here Housman employs his favorite stanzaic form, the hymn quatrain), monosyllables, and a pattern of short vowel sounds lighten the poignancy underlying the composition--the pain of separation from the past. The irony achieved is appropriate, for two emotions are blended: the joy, the sweetness, associated with the past, and the pain, the bitterness, that marks the separation from the past and the recognition that return is impossible. The musicality,

in addition, accentuates the figures in the first line: memory is an "air," a gentle breeze and a light melody.

The musicality of Housman's Shropshire verse, then, is at times extremely effective, at others quite inappropriate. This is one aspect of Housman's art that has stimulated several interesting critical differences. Priestley, for example, argues that Housman "relies very little upon the charm of meter."[23] Edith Sitwell, on the other hand, insists that Housman is metrically incompetent. His verse, she writes, "tries to trip along in a cheerful manner which has nothing to do with the meaning" of the poetry.[24] Louis Untermeyer's response is more accurate than either of these, and more perceptive. Housman's world view, "dismal at the core," he says, "could never have found favor" had it not been "expressed in peculiarly glamorous music."[25] Housman writes with "such compelling grace," Untermeyer continues, "that, for the moment, . . . darkness "is made to "seem desirable."[26] Always, this critic says, Housman's verse is song--"song sharpened, acid flavored, yet always song," and "not the least of [the poet's] triumph is the mingling of pungent humor and poignance in lines of haunting melody."[27] Whether, as Untermeyer concludes, this melodiousness too frequently obscures meaning--"it is . . . doubtful whether readers pay much heed to the central philosophy, being carried on if not convinced by the brisk and brilliant measures," Untermeyer believes[28]--there is no doubt that, as a result of its musicality, Housman's poetry is more "invigorating . . . than depressing."[29]

The sometimes startling discrepancy between matter and manner in much of Housman is, then, particularly fascinating, and this irony is pronounced in the Shropshire Lad volume. There are other ironies. In many poems that apparently celebrate life, for instance, there are, as the previous chapter in this study explains, subtle suggestions of imminent death. The reverse is also true. Ironically, a significant number of Shropshire compositions that seem to laud death, particularly early death, simultaneously celebrate vitality, life. One such piece is the ballad "'Is my team ploughing,'" Number XXVII, the colloquy in which a dead man returns to ask his friend about the life he left behind. The dead man sleeps in a good "bed" and is at peace, safely tucked away from life's "troubles," but he manifests a burning interest in life. The condition of his horses, the sound of their jingling harness, the village soccer games, whether his friend has a mistress--these are the issues to which the dead man refers. In this composition, life is vital and death seems tedious. The monotony and non-activity of death are also stressed in Numbers XII, XXV, and XXVI, and Housman's paradoxical point cannot be disregarded. Death may very well bring peace, surcease of life's anguish, it may even constitute a victory in man's endless battle against an oppressive deity, but it lacks vigor. As one Shropshire Lad speaker puts it,

> If the heats of hate and lust,
>   In the house of flesh are strong,
> Let me mind the house of dust
>   Where my sojourn shall be long.

His closing statement is particularly suggestive:

> Lovers lying two and two
>   Ask not whom they sleep beside,
> And the bridegroom all night through
>   Never turns him to the bride.[30]

In spite of the despair that underlies the Shropshire cycle, the reader is never quite permitted to forget that

> Clay lies still, but blood's a rover;
>   Breath's a ware that will not keep.[31]

This contrast--indeed, this conflict--between being and non-being is at the heart of one of the most interesting of the Shropshire Lad poems, Number XX:

> Oh fair enough are sky and plain,
>   But I know fairer far:
> Those are as beautiful again
>   That in the water are;
>
> The pools and rivers wash so clean
>   The trees and clouds and air,
> The like on earth was never seen,
>   And oh that I were there.
>
> These are the thoughts I often think
>   As I stand gazing down
> In act upon the cressy brink
>   To strip and dive and drown;
>
> But in the golden-sanded brooks
>   And azure meres I spy
> A silly lad that longs and looks
>   And wishes he were I.

Drowning, death, provides the speaker in this composition with the promise of an idyllic environment, fairer and purer, quieter and more serene than any to be found "on earth." But the youth's reflection in the water, his non-self, so to speak,

who presumably experiences first-hand the idyllic, is envious of the speaker, who lives. Life is as appealing to him as death is to the man who speaks. Indeed, in A Shropshire Lad, most of the dead implicity regret the loss of life, and the reader is never sure which of the two states, being or non-being, is preferable. Perhaps neither is, as Number LVII intimates:

> You smile upon your friend today,
> Today his ills are over;
> You hearken to the lover's say,
> And happy is the lover.
>
> 'Tis late to hearken, late to smile,
> But better late than never:
> I shall have lived a little while
> Before I die for ever.

Housman may dramatize what William Archer calls a "bitter resentment" against life, but his verse also embodies a "rapturous realization" of it.[32] Guy Boas is right in claiming that the poet's Shropshire verse suggests a "zest for life . . . equal to that of the most passionate lover of creation," despite the poet's arraignment of "the Creator as a 'brute and blackguard.'"[33]

But no matter how attractive death may seem in Housman, no matter how glorified the active death-seekers, the soldiers and the suicides, the volume intimates that to impose death on man, as society imposes it on criminals, is cruel and unforgivable--as unacceptable perhaps as God's creation of the primal fault, man's fall, and the penalty that followed, mortality. There are several criminals, transgressors, in

A Shropshire Lad, and the compassion with which all are treated is sufficient indication of Housman's attitude towards "certain 'laws of God and man,' with their socially imposed sanctions,"[34] an attitude that is most clearly voiced in Number XII, Last Poems:

> The laws of God, the laws of man,
> He may keep that will and can;
> Not I: Let God and man decree
> Laws for themselves and not for me;
> And if my ways are not as theirs
> Let them mind their own affairs.
> Their deeds I judge and much condemn,
> Yet when did I make laws for them?
> Please yourselves, say I, and they
> Need only look the other way.
> But no, they will not; they must still
> Wrest their neighbour to their will,
> And make me dance as they desire
> With jail and gallows and hell-fire.
> And how am I to face the odds
> Of man's bedevilment and God's?
> I, a stranger and afraid
> In a world I never made.
> They will be master, right or wrong;
> Though both are foolish, both are strong.
> And since, my soul, we cannot fly
> To Saturn nor to Mercury,
> Keep we must, if keep we can,
> These foreign laws of God and man.

Here, angry defiance ends in reluctant acceptance, but there can be little doubt that, in "The laws of God, the laws of man" and other Housman poems, social justice--actually, social injustice--is related to cosmic injustice, indeed, serves to implement it. Housman's brother explains that the poet saw human nature as "imperfect material" and "made wide allowance for its failures."[35] Housman's understanding and compassion are pronounced in the Shropshire Lad suicide poems, already

discussed, and in Number XLVII, "The Carpenter's Son," and Number IX, "On moonlit heath and lonesome bank" both of which center on criminals convicted of capital crimes. Interestingly, we do not learn the nature of the crimes. The carpenter's son dies because he would not leave "ill" alone, and because he was in some fashion involved in "love," but we do not know even that much about the transgression of the prisoner discussed in Number IX. The speaker, here, keeps a night-long vigil outside the jail where his friend, a felon, will hang at dawn. We apprehend only that social justice is as punitive and undiscriminating as God's, for the sentenced man is "a better lad . . ./ Than most that sleep outside." Tomorrow, says the speaker,

> sharp the link of life will snap,
> And dead on air will stand
> Heels that held up as straight a chap
> As treads upon the land.

The finality of death by execution is vividly communicated by the line "sharp the link of life will snap" and just as vividly, although less directly, by "Eight O'Clock," one of Housman's most successful pieces:

> He stood, and heard the steeple
> Sprinkle the quarters on the morning town.
> One, two, three, four, to market-place and people
> It tossed them down.
>
> Strapped, noosed, nighing his hour,
> He stood and counted them and cursed his luck;
> And then the clock collected in the tower
> Its strength, and struck.

God, the Church, society, time--all are indicted in this piece from Housman's Last Poems. But Housman's condemnation of the death penalty together with his compassion for those who are victimized by it are most clearly related to his belief that all men are, in the eyes of God, criminals, sinners, transgressors. They suffer life and are condemned to die for a distant sin in which they took no part. Nesca Robb is correct when she claims that "the cruelties and blunders of human justice become," in Housman's poetry, a reflection of the processes of "universal law."[36]

"Eight O'Clock" also contains another irony characteristic of Housman's poetry, his expert and subtle use of the pun. The sentenced man hears the clocktower "sprinkle the quarters on the morning town." The point is that the community is literally a "morning town" but not what it ought to be under the circumstances, a mourning community. Christopher Ricks explains that "in many of [Housman's] more strangely powerful poems, the force comes from what is submerged, 'obscure and latent,' so it is not surprising that he was fond of that particular kind of pun which creates its double meaning by invoking but excluding".[37] The terms "morning" and "thyme" also operate as puns in Number XLII, "The Merry Guide," and verbal ironies of the same variety are found in Number XVI, "It nods and curtseys and recovers." Ricks argues, quite persuasively, that the term "curtsey" suggests courtesy, and that the nettle's mocking dance over the graves of the suicides is decidedly discourteous.[38]

Housman, furthermore, is fond of plurisignificant elements. The "lover of the grave," over whom the nettle performs its taunting measure, is, as was mentioned earlier, a lover *in* the grave and a lover *of* the grave, a death-lover. In Number XXXVIII, "The winds out of the west land blow," when the speaker, an exile, says that "at home I heard you [his friends] plain," the word "plain" means, in context, *clearly* and *complain*. The same plurisignificance is found in Number XIX, "To an Athlete Dying Young." The dead runner is, for instance, "smart" in that he is both *shrewd* and *quick*, and the term "cut" in the lines "Eyes the shady night has shut/ Cannot see the record cut" means *recorded* and *broken*. And when Terence refers to the "smack" of his poetic brew, he means two things: the *taste* and the *impact*. One can hardly agree with Tindall when he refers to this kind of thing as "unintentional ambiguity."[39]

Yet another Housman duality is his juxtaposing--in a sense, fusing--the majestic and the homely in single poems, as he does, for example, in Number IV, "Reveille," which begins with a complex and elevated description of daybreak:

> Wake: the silver dusk returning
> Up the beach of darkness brims,
> And the ship of sunrise burning
> Strands upon the eastern rims.
>
> Wake: the vaulted shadow shatters,
> Trampled to the floor it spanned,
> And the tent of night in tatters
> Straws the sky-pavilioned land.

In the next quatrain, however, mood, tone, and style change:

> Up, lad, up, 'tis late for lying:
> Hear the drums of morning play;
> Hark, the empty highways crying
> 'Who'll beyond the hills away?'

The same technique is employed in Number X, "March," which describes the morning in astrological terms:

> The Sun at noon to higher air,
> Unharnessing the silver Pair
> That late before his chariot swam,
> Rides on the gold wool of the Ram.
>
> So braver notes the storm-cock sings
> To start the rusted wheel of things,
> And brutes in field and brutes in pen
> Leap that the world goes round again.

Housman suddenly turns from this complex description to matters much less sublime:

> The boys are up the woods with day
> To fetch the daffodils away,
> And home at noonday from the hills
> They bring no dearth of daffodils.

In Housman, nature, the backdrop against which the Shropshire speakers play out their troubled, luckless parts, is often magnificently charged. But rather than dwarfing man's misery, it emphasizes it, for, more frequently than not, the descriptions have a thematic function. In "Reveille," to cite but one example, the dawn is a violent phenomenon, a kind of battle. Indeed, daybreak, in the title, is likened to a military bugle call. And, in Housman, life calls always,

despite the appeal of death, and life is, in effect, a military confrontation. F. W. Bateson considers these "transitions" from "baroque grandiosities . . . to the common" somewhat "cheap . . . . The abrupter the descent from magnificence," he writes, "the more the reader sits up, but the descent must justify itself aesthetically."[40] Unfortunately, this critic fails to explain why the technique is, in his judgment, "vulgar" and indecorous.[41]

These, then, are some of the ironies and dualities that Housman threads through the Shropshire cycle, and they cannot be overlooked, for a significant number of them qualify Housman's apparently hopeless view of man's condition. On the one hand, life is a terrible agony, the source of numerous "troubles" that beset man from the cradle to the grave. At the same time, however, although death, or more properly non-being, seems best in A Shropshire Lad, it is finally less than satisfactory because it lacks vitality. In effect, this is the paradox that is dramatized in the Shropshire volume.

The crowning irony in Housman's cycle, however, reveals itself clearly in the next to last poem in the collection, Number LXII, "'Terence, this is stupid stuff,'" for this piece indicates conclusively what Housman, through Terence, is actually attempting to do in the Salopian compositions. In order to accept and to endure life's "troubles," this poem explains, one must recognize, first, that such "troubles" exist, and second, that they are universal rather than particular. Then, and only then, the poem suggests, can some degree of content-

ment be achieved, the kind of contentment Terence obviously experiences in eating his "victuals" and drinking his ale. The poetry may seem, as Terence's complaining Shropshire critic argues, mere "'moping melancholy,'" and, worse, a way of rhyming "'friends to death before their time.'" But its real purpose is to prepare man for, and to build up man's resistance against, an "ill" that is in this world ubiquitous, an "ill" that is in one form or another inescapable. "The world has still/ Much good," says Terence, "but much less good than ill." Thus, the Shropshire cycle is essentially a didactic work, a means of helping man to "train for ill and not for good."

The didactic thrust of A Shropshire Lad is reinforced in the cycle's closing poem, Number LXIII, "I hoed and trenched and weeded," which implies that the experiences dramatized in, and the vision provided by, the volume will, it is hoped, prepare future generations to meet and withstand life's tribulations and frustrations. That the underlying vision of the cycle will be resisted, especially in Housman's own time, is clearly signalled. The poems, "flowers," were "brought . . . home unheeded" from the market, and some, planted as seeds, will fail to survive, for some will be eaten by the birds and others ruined by the elements. Like men, perhaps, even poetic insight perishes. But some, "the solitary stars," eventually will flower, and, after Terence is "dead and gone," other "luckless lads" will wear them.

It would be a mistake, however, to judge this indirect

plea for recognition, acceptance, and endurance a complete surprise, a totally unexpected reversal of the defeatist and nihilist vision that marks the Shropshire Lad cycle in its entirety. The plea is foreshadowed early in the volume and reiterated, sometimes humorously, sometimes seriously, in a number of compositions. Number XVII, for instance, suggests that one can endure:

Twice a week the winter thorough
 Here stood I to keep the goal:
Football then was fighting sorrow
 For the young man's soul.

Now in Maytime to the wicket
 Out I march with bat and pad:
See the son of grief at cricket
 Trying to be glad.

Try I will; no harm in trying:
 Wonder 'tis how little mirth
Keeps the bones of man from lying
 On the bed of earth.

There is a grim ironic humor to this poem. We expect man (who is here compared to Christ in the phrase "son of grief") to endure his agony by means of something less pedestrian than a game of football or cricket.

Elsewhere in A Shropshire Lad, another solution is posited:

Think no more, lad; laugh, be jolly:
 Why should men make haste to die?
Empty heads and tongues a-talking
Make the rough road easy walking,
And the feather pate of folly
 Bears the falling sky.

Oh, 'tis jesting, dancing, drinking
 Spins the heavy world around.
If young hearts were not so clever,
Oh, they would be young for ever:

Think no more; 'tis only thinking
Lays lads underground.[42]

Apparently, ignorance can be bliss, and conceivably some few of us can refrain from thinking, can achieve obliviousness through alcohol. But, here, Terence is being deliberately flippant. Man cannot be drunk forever. He himself has tried liquor, has

carried half-way home, or near,
Pints and quarts of Ludlow beer:
Then the world seemed none so bad,
And I myself a sterling lad;
And down in lovely muck I've lain,
Happy till I woke again.
Then I saw the morning sky:
Heigho, the tale was all a lie;
The world, it was the old world yet,
I was I, my things were wet,
And nothing now remained to do
But begin the game anew.

As Terence explains in "'Terence, this is stupid stuff,'" then, escape through inebriation is not possible for most men with heads and hearts.

A less playful means of enduring life's miseries is dramatized in Number XXXVII, "As through the wild green hills of Wyre": the memory of past friendship will aid the young speaker to bear his exile. He resolves to be a credit to his Salopian friends who "made a man of me."

Resignation and endurance are treated elsewhere in the cycle. In Number XLIII, "The Immortal Part," the skeleton, testily aching to return to a state of non-being, is required to do the will of its "master," the speaker, whose "flesh and soul, now both are strong,/ Shall hale the sullen [slave]

along." In a like manner, the soul in Number XLVIII is commanded to "be still," to stop complaining. Life's anguish is "but for a season," says the speaker. "Let us endure an hour and see injustice done."

But what, ultimately, will serve to help man bear his "trouble"? The answer in *A Shropshire Lad* is, as Donald Stauffer claims, plain: Housman indicates that man finds "refuge from the 'blackguard' who made the world in the panorama of nature, in the nobility of endurance, and in the perfection and permanence of art."[43] In respect to this last, it is a statue that causes the exile in Number LI, "Loitering with a vacant eye," to accept life manfully. The marble statue, probably a Greek work, seems to suggest to the exile that his, man's, despair, his sense of dispossession, will be relatively brief. "'Years, when you lay down your ill,'" says the statue, "'I shall stand and bear it still.'" In "'Terence, this is stupid stuff,'" another art form, poetry, will aid man. Terence's "'stuff'" may not be as "brisk a brew as ale," but it is intended to effect a "good"--to sustain "heart and head," to "friend" man "in the dark and cloudy day," and, most important, to help man build up a resistance to the "poison" that is an inescapable part of living. This last function is parabolically implied in the closing lines of the composition, in Terence's *exemplum*:

> There was a king reigned in the East:
> There, where kings will sit to feast,
> They get their fill before they think
> With poisoned meat and poised drink.

He gathered all that springs to birth
From the many-venomed earth;
First a little, thence to more,
He sampled all her killing store;
And easy, smiling, seasoned sound,
Sate the king when healths went round.
They put arsenic in his meat
And stared aghast to watch him eat;
They poured strychnine in his cup
And shook to see him drink it up:
They shook, they stared as white's their shirt:
Them it was their poison hurt.
--I tell the tale that I heard told.
Mithridates, he died old.

In light of the rest of the Shropshire cycle, the disturbing analogies here suggested, albeit with humor, cannot be ignored. God is the devious murderer whom man must attempt to outwit, and he can in a sense outwit the creator of "trouble," says Terence, if he tastes, through the poetry, the various "ills" designed to lay him low. Regardless of these religious implications, however, the poem makes a case for awareness and resistance, and its position in the Shropshire cycle indicates that these are the poetic aims of the entire Shropshire Lad collection.

But should man endure what, according to the Shropshire cycle, he must endure? Nesca Robb provides a perceptive answer. Housman, she writes, suggests that "the wisest man is he who, in a world that must appear to him as always unintelligible and often iniquitous, stands loyally by his friends, enjoys his passing pleasures, and braces himself to endure manfully the inevitable buffetings of fate."[44] After all, she goes on, "in the midst of the apparent futility of man's endeavors, there are . . . things worth possessing--

qualities moral, imaginative, or spiritual, that are sufficient reward for a life-time of struggle."[45] This view is essentially Terence's, and Terence is the exemplary in Housman's cycle: he observes, experiences, endures, and educates. Thus, awareness and acceptance make endurance possible. One can live without hope, without delusion, but also without fear, and one can develop for oneself a system of values, a code of action, without believing that there will be any recompense in this or the next world, other than the knowledge that one is able genuinely to respect oneself.

Notes

[1]Christopher Ricks, "The Nature of Housman's Poetry," A. E. Housman, A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Christopher Ricks (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), p. 109.

[2]J. Bronowski, The Poet's Defense (Cambridge, 1939), p. 221.

[3]Ibid., p. 227.

[4]John Heath-Stubbs, The Darkling Plain, A Study of the Later Fortunes of Romanticism in English Poetry from George Darley to W. B. Yeats (London, 1950), p. 95.

[5]J. B. Priestley, Figures in Modern Literature (New York, 1924), p. 82.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Ibid., p. 83.

[8]Norman Marlow, A. E. Housman, Scholar and Poet (Minneaplis, 1958), p. 104.

[9]Ibid., pp. 104-116.

[10]Ibid., p. 114.

[11]Ibid., p. 107.

[12]Ibid., p. 109.

[13]Ibid., p. 112.

[14]Ibid., p. 69.

[15]Numbers I, IX, XVI, XVIII, XX, XXII, XXV, XXXVI, XXXVIII, XXXIX, XL, LVII, LIX, and LX.

[16]This excludes all those poems in which Housman does not employ quatrains: Numbers V, VII, XI, XIII, XV, XXI, XXIII, XXVI, XXIX, XXXIV, XXXVII, XLI, XLVI, XLVIII, XLIX, LI, LXI, LXII and LXII.

[17]Edmund Wilson, "A. E. Housman," A. E. Housman, A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Christopher Ricks (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), p. 23.

[18]Ricks, p. 106.

[19]Ibid., p. 109.

[20]Ibid.

[21]Ibid., p. 114.

[22]Katharine Symons, Alfred Edward Housman: Recollections (New York, 1937), p. 37.

[23]Priestley, p. 98.

[24]Edith Sitwell, Trio (London, 1938), p. 108.

[25]Louis Untermeyer, ed. Modern British Poetry, A Critical Anthology (New York, 1931), p. 253.

[26]Ibid.

[27]Ibid., p. 254.

[28]Ibid., p. 253.

[29]Arnold Whitridge, "Vigny and Housman, A Study in Pessimism," American Scholar, X (Spring 1941), p. 166.

[30]Number XII.

[31]Number IV.

[32]William Archer, Poets of the Younger Generation (London, 1902), p. 185.

[33]Guy Boas, "The Poetry of A. E. Housman," English, I (1936), p. 210.

[34]Laurence Housman, My Brother, A. E. Housman: Personal Recollections Together with Thirty Hitherto Unpublished Poems (New York, 1938), p. 105.

[35]Ibid.

[36]Nesca Robb, Four in Exile (London, 1948), p. 45.

[37]Ricks, p. 118.

[38]Ibid.

[39]William York Tindall, Forces in Modern British Literature, 1885-1946 (New York, 1949), p. 113.

[40]F. W. Bateson, "The Poetry of Emphasis," A. E. Housman, A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Christopher Ricks (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), p. 137.

[41]Ibid.

[42]Number XLIX.

[43]Donald A. Stauffer, The Nature of Poetry (New York, 1946), p. 159.

[44]Robb, p. 46.

[45]Ibid.

Chapter VII

The Unity of *A Shropshire Lad*

As this study demonstrates, then, *A Shropshire Lad* is a carefully and effectively unified work, and setting, *personae*, style, and theme contribute to this unity. But is the collection, as several critics, including T. S. Eliot,[1] imply or claim, a single poem?

Whether Housman intended the work to be regarded as one poem is not known. There is, however, no doubt that he considered the integrity of the collection particularly important, for, except in a few isolated instances, he refused to permit publication of single poems or selections from *A Shropshire Lad*. But nowhere, neither in his letters nor in his reported conversations, does he provide a full explanation for this refusal. It is likely that he objected because he thought anthologists and editors too often careless. A misplaced colon, an omitted comma, a line of poetry broken at the wrong point, a misspelled word--Housman, a perfectionist, would tolerate no such errors, and was, according to one of his publishers, furious when these or others appeared in print, in authorized or pirated

versions of, or excerpts from, the Shropshire Lad volume.[2] Housman, an editor of Latin texts, was familiar with the misreadings resulting from errors that appear to be, in isolation, trivial. Obviously, the poet was determined that, if he could help it, no such oversights would mislead his readers.

Since the writer's intentions in respect to the poetic unity of the collection are not known, some degree of reasonable speculation may assist. First, A Shropshire Lad is patently not a single poem in the sense that, say, Browning's The Ring and the Book is. Nor is it, in spite of the claims of Nesca Robb[3] and Robert Graves,[4] a sequence in the same way that Rossetti's House of Life and Meredith's Modern Love are carefully structured sequences. In her otherwise extraordinarily keen discussion of A Shropshire Lad, Miss Robb argues, perhaps with more conviction than persuasive evidence, that the work is a "straightforward tale of a country boy's emotional development,"[5] a tale that records "his passage from adolescence to maturity."[6] The boy is Terence Hearsay, and A Shropshire Lad is the "cycle of man's [Terence's?] awakening from the illusions of youth, his passing through the agony of loss, failure, and disillusionment, and his emergence from that agony with such strength and wisdom as he can muster."[7] Miss Robb concludes that "one might also go further and call [A Shropshire Lad] a poem."[8]

Even if we were to assume that Terence Hearsay is the sole persona in the Shropshire volume, as Miss Robb does, only a selective examination of the poems in A Shropshire Lad would

support her interpretation. But if one is to account for all sixty-three pieces in the collection, as surely one must, one discovers that this critic's theory is altogether too convenient, too pat. There is, for instance, disillusionment in the poem that introduces the collection, "1887," and the youthful nature-lover in Number II, "Loveliest of trees, the cherry now," is well aware of the brevity of life and the inevitability of death. At twenty, he appears to have no illusions from which to awaken. He knows what most of us learn much later. Indeed, there is a noticeable absence of illusion, youthful and otherwise, in the first twenty or so pieces in _A Shropshire Lad_. It is true that some of the speakers, and most of the addressees, are young, but that is not the same thing. In fact, a significant number of these Shropshire youngsters are portrayed as being realistically aware, from bitter experience, of the painful nature of human existence. In short, they are already disillusioned, perhaps, on occasion, even cynical.

That Miss Robb's interpretation is less than accurate is also attested to by the fact that youthful speakers complain throughout _A Shropshire Lad_, not only in the poems that open the collection; if her explanation were valid, surely the "country boy" (whether Terence or some other lad) whose "passage from adolescence to maturity" is dramatized in Housman's work would age gradually. His emotional-spiritual maturation would follow some chronological pattern. This,

however, is not so, as a few illustrations will indicate. The speaker in Number XVIII, "Oh, when I was in love with you," is a cynical young man who, now that love, a "fancy," has passed, is "quite myself again." In the next composition, "To an Athlete Dying Young," the speaker is clearly an older man who has lived to see "the rout/ Of lads that wore their honours out" increase in number. Number XX, "Oh fair enough are sky and plain," which follows, features a man who describes himself as "a silly lad," something the speaker in "To an Athlete Dying Young" would not and could not do in view of his age. Miss Robb might have reached some different conclusion had she given more attention to the various voices, the _personae_, in _A Shropshire Lad_, for point of view in this collection is, as this study explains, of primary importance. _The Shropshire Lad_ poems are not, as J. B. Priestley observes, "threaded on a string . . . ; they have not that sort of unity."[9]

Still, a truth underlies Miss Robb's interpretation: her sense that "the more one studies [_A Shropshire Lad_], the more intimately do its component parts appear to be related to one another."[10] To be sure, "as one grows familiar with the whole, one comes to feel the closest organic connection between the individual poems" in the volume.[11] The antitheistic protest in _A Shropshire Lad_, the pastoralism, the dramatization of various particular "troubles" and their relation to cosmic "ill," the paradoxical nature of Housman's world view, the role of Terence Hearsay, and so forth--many of these interesting and important aspects of Housman's art,

and the inter-relatedness of all of them, go undetected and unappreciated if one fails to read the entire work. This is not to imply that single pieces cannot be appreciated out of their Shropshire Lad context. But to concentrate on the individual part while ignoring the whole--a practice in which one suspects a number of Housman commentators have engaged--is to remain ignorant of subtle connections that often contribute significantly to the meanings and the appreciation of individual excerpts.

In actuality, Housman's A Shropshire Lad is a cycle, to repeat a term used frequently in this study, a cycle not unlike Donne's Songs and Sonnets and Blake's Songs of Innocence and Experience, a cycle that dramatizes most engagingly and persuasively "the companionship of suffering"[12] in the battle of life, what we might call the burden of being. This theme, together with its counter-theme, the idea that life, vitality, in some sense justifies the battle, becomes evident only if the reader is exposed to all sixty-three poems in the cycle. Almost all the pieces can only be "rightly understood" in "their relation to each other."[13]

Moreover, the structure of the cycle, the order in which the sixty-three pieces are presented, seems deliberately haphazard, in effect kaleidescopic. Within the overall framework of the cycle, there are sub-orders, sequential selections and companion pieces. Numbers VIII and IX, for example, use criminality as their subject; Numbers XI and XII contrast, respectively, the attractiveness of death and the appeal of life;

Numbers XXXII and XXXIII together form a poignant colloquy of man and woman; Numbers XXXVI, XXXVII, XXXVIII, XXXIX, XL, and XLI dramatize the homesickness of several Shropshire exiles; and so on. Similar subjects and themes, however, appear elsewhere in the cycle, and although it would be extremely convenient to compartmentalize selections in the cycle, such a neat arrangement will not work. Only some of the time do the Shropshire Lad pieces compliment one another or, conversely, work against one another.[14] Housman could have arranged the poems differently, could have followed a less fragmented order, but perhaps the fragmentation in the structure of the cycle is meant to reflect the fragmentation that marks man's life on earth. Such a thematic implication is quite possible in the poetry of Housman.

To some degree, furthermore, Terence's poetic commentaries function to clarify, elaborate on, point, and universalize the various experiential pieces they punctuate. And, certainly, the two compositions that end the cycle, "'Terence, this is stupid stuff'" and "I hoed and trenched and weeded," pull together the various thematic strands woven through A Shropshire Lad.

In respect to the placement of these two poems, Tom Burns Haber contends that "I hoed and trenched and weeded" is in a logical position, at the end of the volume, but that "'Terence, this is stupid stuff'" appears where it does (it is the last piece but one in the cycle) "because no logical place could have been found for it: it is an oddity, and would have

defied any arrangement."[15] Haber's statement is bewildering. "'Terence, this is stupid stuff'" is clearly placed appropriately. It is a key piece in the cycle and could not logically appear anywhere in the collection except at the close. There can be little question, moreover, that Housman composed it with the specific intention of placing it at the end of A Shropshire Lad. A better case might be made for the apparent redundancy of "I hoed and trenched and weeded," which reiterates, although from a different angle of vision, and in a different manner, some of the views expressed in "'Terence, this is stupid stuff.'" Terence's reason for apparently rhyming his Salopian comrades "'to death before their time'" and driving them "'moping melancholy mad'" needs no amplification. But Housman perhaps ends the cycle with Number LXIII because it communicates a fascinating irony: Terence's verse celebrates man's mortality, but the verse, unlike its creator or the men whose agony it reveals, will not die, is immortal.

Despite the fact that the collection is a cycle and artfully unified, however, there are, in A Shropshire Lad, at least three poems that, for one or another reason, do not appear to fit. "1887," which opens the cycle, seems, despite its interest in patriotism, despite its references to Shropshire, and despite its anti-theism, out of place. In this piece, Housman may wish to signal at the outset, so to speak, an important distinction between appearance and actuality, a distinction that underscores the entire cycle, but whether he manages this effectively with this particular poem is

debatable. Similarly, Number XXVIII, "The Welsh Marches," is a puzzling poem in the Shropshire Lad context. The speaker and setting are Salopian, and the composition deals with the sins of the father being visited on his descendants. This latter concern may be intended to reinforce the cycle's condemnation of God for ordaining that all men, throughout all time, must suffer for the transgressions of Adam and Eve. But this connection has to be forced, and it is difficult to know whether "The Welsh Marches" is symbolic or allegorical. The latter mode is perhaps also employed in a third Shropshire Lad piece that appears out of place in the cycle, Number XLII, "The Merry Guide," one of Housman's earliest pieces, composed in 1890. The subject is a youth's pursuit of Hermes, traditionally the escorter of the dead to their place in the underworld, and this poem suggests what is dramatized elsewhere in the cycle, the seductiveness of non-being. Regardless of this theme, "The Merry Guide," the longest piece in A Shropshire Lad, seems curiously at odds with the remainder of the poems in the cycle.

Notwithstanding these possible shortcomings, Housman's cycle is, as this study has tried to demonstrate, of a piece. It is not a single poem, certainly, and not a strict sequence, but an artfully unified cycle, arranged kaleidoscopically, with the intention of revealing that, in this life, despite the existence of "much good," "trouble's sure." As J. B. Priestley puts it, "one spirit breathes through" the poems in A Shropshire Lad; "they flow out of one central mood."[16]

On the one hand, "life is lovely enough, but all too short, and death is the enemy of happiness."[17] On the other, "existence itself is a misery only to be endured until the welcome arrival of death the deliverer."[18] And who has not at some time subscribed to both views, either separately or simultaneously? Housman, Priestley adds, is not a Homer, a Shakespeare, or a Shelley.[19] "Compared with their wide domains, [Housman's] is nothing but a little estate."[20] But, he concludes, "it is a little estate that is exquisitely ordered."[21]

In appearance, Housman's A Shropshire Lad is a "little estate," a local estate, limited and particular. But what it has to say, and the affections and vicissitudes with which it deals, are far from local. They are primary and universal. The music that reverberates through the pages of this slim volume, the music to which generations of readers, young and old, have responded intensely, the music that simultaneously disturbs and exhilarates, is a lingering echo of the still, sad music of humanity. In reading Housman's cycle, one enters a county--but one discovers a world.

Notes

[1]T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (New York, 1932), p. 294.

[2]Grant Richards discusses the problem at length in *Housman: 1897-1936* (New York, 1942).

[3]Nesca Robb, *Four in Exile* (London, 1948).

[4]Robert Graves, *On English Poetry* (New York, 1922), p. 31.

[5]Robb, p. 52.

[6]*Ibid.*, p. 13.

[7]*Ibid.*, p. 12.

[8]*Ibid.*

[9]J. B. Priestley, *Figures in Modern Literature* (New York, 1924), p. 82.

[10]Robb, p. 12.

[11]*Ibid.*

[12]*Ibid.*, p. 40.

[13]*Ibid.*, p. 52.

[14]Tom Burns Haber, *A. E. Housman* (New York, 1967), p. 95.

[15]*Ibid.*

[16]Priestley, p. 82.

[17]*Ibid.*

[18]*Ibid.*

[19]*Ibid.*, p. 101.

[20]*Ibid.*

[21]*Ibid.*

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