

THE POETRY OF MR. A. E. HOUSMAN

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IN 1896 *A Shropshire Lad* was published, and Mr. A. E. Housman's next volume of verse under the title *Last Poems* appeared in September, 1922. During the period thus marked off there may have come out a hundred books of permanent interest, or two hundred, or fifty, or fewer. But whatever the number, these two are of it. Mr. Housman's poems are only about a hundred, for the most part very short, and none long: but all who care for modern English poetry know the whole of his work, and there is no other living English poet of whom that can be said. There is also hardly any other of whose personality, apart from his work, so little is known.

His brother, Laurence Housman, with perhaps as great a talent—diffused over numberless poems, plays, drawings and other forms of utterance—has been a familiar figure in the London world of writing people for a generation. Those who knew Laurence Housman knew also his sister, Clemence, engraver of the woodblocks for his drawings, and writer of fantastic tales—a personage who might naturally have belonged to William Morris's coterie. But the author of the *Shropshire Lad* was never seen; we knew only that he was a highly reputed scholar. A student who attended his lectures said that Browning's Grammarian might have written them; they were so laboriously concerned with details of form, so void of any attempt to bring out the living charm of ancient literature. Perhaps Mr. Housman thought that this might be trusted to make its own way to the intelligence. Perhaps in all spoken speech he was donnishly shut up within himself. I think he has spent a quarter of a century disavowing acquaintance with the person who let out to the world fifty or sixty lyrics, the more vibrant because of their restraint. The hermit crab stays in his shell because he knows himself so vulnerable. Yet every author is tempted to help in comprehension of his work, and the dozen lines of print prefixed to *Last Poems* in explanation of that title enable one, assisted by an ordinary book of reference, to reconstruct with some definiteness this singular literary career.

Almost all that Mr. Housman has written may be described as bucolics—rather exceeding in bulk Virgil's *Eclogues*, but not so

long as the *Georgics*. It is all associated with a particular countryside, away from which he has lived his working life, yet which is the background of all that his mind pictures, and the source of nearly all his imaginings. The home of his boyhood was somewhere in the western midlands of England, a region made beautiful by the Severn and its tributaries, and by the hills that were the old marches between England and Wales. He got his Greek and Latin at an old grammar school at Bromsgrove in Worcestershire, now part of Birmingham's manufacturing area. But I am very sure that farmers' sons from the counties of Shropshire and Hereford, a few miles distant from Bromsgrove, sat at the desks with Mr. Housman; for it is not by any literary convention that all his types of young manhood have hands that sweated in their day upon scythe and plough. The dominant passion in this passionate recluse is friendship between men; the youth whose memory inspires them moved among English yeomen, a type that is rare, but still survives in parts of a country where the land-holding peasant has been long extinct. Of the four years which he must have spent at Oxford you will find no trace in his verse, and I think I know why. For a man like Matthew Arnold, coming straight from Rugby, the transition from school to university was easy and natural; Oxford was the delightful fulfilment of his preparation. But the lad from a small grammar school came to a society where he was a stranger, and which in the late seventies and early eighties had no cordial welcome for the stranger, rather kept a style of living that limited him for companionship to those—like himself—ill-provided with acquaintance, and of narrow means. He would naturally look back with more happiness on the earlier simple jollities which he shared with yeomen's sons, who had "few pence in purse" to spend, and nowhere to spend them but the country market-town. "Ludlow fair" in all Mr. Housman's poems is the symbol for what Piccadilly means to the ordinary public schoolboy or undergraduate.

When Oxford was done with, every clever penniless young man was met by the problem how to cash his academic distinctions, and the civil service offered as a prize for those who could beat almost everybody at examinations a career less unattractive than school-mastering. So Mr. Housman won his place in the civil service, and went to London. Half a dozen poems in the *Shropshire Lad* tell us how he hated going to London, hated its unfriendly streets, longed for the clean air and beauty of the West Country and for the hearty friendships he had left. He must have kept up his reputation as a scholar, for after ten years he was lifted (in 1892) out of his clerkship at the Patent Office, and made professor of Latin

at University College, London. That was probably a great deliverance from drudgery. He had already written one of the poems which we know; stanzas on Queen Victoria's Jubilee of 1887 prove that at twenty-eight he had already gone far to form his manner, though neither the language nor the thought was yet so clear of rhetoric as he was to make both. The pride in England and in English soldiers, embodied for him in Shropshire hills and fields and Shropshire soldier-lad, was there, and it has never ceased to find expression in his work. But we know now that he was thirty-six before something made him decisively a poet.

"I can no longer expect," says the foreword to *Last Poems*, "to be revisited by the continuous excitement under which in the early months of 1895 I wrote the greater portion of my other book, nor indeed could I well sustain it if it came." What excitement? Scattered through the pages of the *Shropshire Lad* is a group of love poems, nearly all sombre, some of them tragic. That is the obvious answer, probably the true one. But it is plain also, from both volumes, that searing experiences marked this man's heart where it lay open to friendship between men. Two poems in the earlier book have to do with a hanging, but the impulse is not exhausted; there are two more in the second on the same grim theme. I do not think that if a friend of Mr. Housman's had suffered this death, he would have written these verses; but I believe that he knew the apprehension of this fate for a friend so closely that it left an obsession on his imagination. The actual happening may be guessed at from another poem, which in the manner of a Border ballad tells the story of a brother's murder, and from another which describes the isle of Portland and the "felon-quarried stone" of the convict prison, where

Far from his folk a dead lad lies
That once was friends with me.

Another group of poems—all in the *Shropshire Lad*—make suicide their theme—and praise the selfslayer:

Shot? So quick, so clean an ending?
Oh, that was right, lad, that was brave.

I cannot but think that these two quatrains record literal truth:

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.

With these it seems natural to link the poems of revolt:

Be still, be still, my soul; it is but for a season:
 Let us endure an hour, and see injustice done.

Or that in the later volume which begins. "The Laws of God,
 the Laws of Man"—

How am I to face the odds
 Of man's devilment 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.

Yet, in truth, what is his whole inspiration but a cry of revolt? This sentient thing, this lump of "proud and angry dust" resents its own weakness and impermanence, resents the transience of its hold on earth's delight; the more keenly it feels earth's beauty, the fiercer its resentment that in a little others must "possess, as I possessed, a season," all the dews of morning, all the splendours of noon. This mood has grown on him. Earlier in life he could praise not only the suicide's quick way out of shame, but the triumph of a young athlete's death; he could feed his fancy with the thought of Ludlow fair and its jostling crowd, in which move unrecognized "the fortunate fellows that now you can never discern," the lads that will die in their glory and never be old. But with advancing years he has relinquished this philosophy, or has changed it for a more universal sense of man's passing; let it come late or early, it is the passing he resents. One image haunts his maturer mind—the vast shadow which earth projects into space, her "towering foolscap of eternal shade." When the sun is bright, he always feels the dark coming up at him; all that is is born to be engulfed. Courage matters; he has not gone back on courage, but nothing else matters greatly, for nothing lasts; and, least of all, remembrance of the dead. Earth fills her lap with pleasures of her own; none knows it better than the author of *Last Poems*, though in the second volume he is content to suggest by a single turn of phrase the lovelinesses that his verse dwelt on lovingly when his mind in London revisited the West Country. But his growing sense of life's briefness besets

him with a jealousy of the stranger's feet, that will trespass upon forest and meadow where his can no longer enter in and take possession.

For there is undoubtedly a difference in tone between the two volumes. The accent of late youth alters to that of long-established middle age. Most of the poems were written, the foreword tells us, between 1895 and 1910. After that, Mr. Housman was translated from London to Cambridge, and for eleven years, it seems, he wrote no more verse; but in the spring of 1922 something happened, and, "about a quarter of the matter" belongs to the April of that year. These are of course the poems—there may be about a dozen—which had their origin in emotions accumulated during the European war that was suddenly let loose. A taunt or an unjust word may have given them vent. I should not be surprised if the famous "Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries" marked the beginning; it is unlike the rest, in that it is neither dramatic nor lyrical. For this once, the bucolic convention is dropped; the scholar speaks in his own person; there is even a deviation into Latinism in the last line:

What God abandoned, they defended,
And saved the sum of things, for pay.

The tense passion of his laconic irony is easily understood; from first to last, Mr. Housman has always loved and idealized a soldier. In the life which he pictured there were two possibilities. Staying at home, ploughing the land, shepherding flocks on "the idle hill," stood in his imagery for ease and heart's content. But if roving blood was strong and the road over the hills tempted, then drum and fife made good music to march to. That was the path of adventure, the path of honour. Mr. Housman, most English of poets, is in no way more English than in his conception of the "soldier's trade," which "steals the hearts of men, and maids together." It is always self-chosen, it always leads over the hills and seas, it is never the common obligation that every man in every continental State bears on him at home. And because he is Mr. Housman, these marchings all have the same end:

And down the distance they,
With dying note and swelling,
Walk the resounding way
To the still dwelling.

Everybody in his wars becomes a casualty:

Dear to friends and food for powder,
Soldiers marching, all to die.

That was his mood about it as far back as 1895. But in 1922 the whole shape of the thing had altered. Soldiering was no longer just the adventurer's choice, though he still presents it as a call that may be evaded. Sometimes he dramatizes the woman's reproach to "The Deserter" who, to join his fellows, turns his back on her:—

'Tis like the brave.
They find no bed to joy in rightly
Before they find the grave.

Or again her appeal:

O stay with company and mirth
And daylight and the air,
Too full already is the grave
Of fellows that were good and brave
And died because they were.

But there is also more than once in this later volume the suggestion of a danger that must be faced, that can be broken, even though in breaking it you perish:

Her strong enchantment failing,
Her towers of fear in wreck,
Her limbecks dried of poisons,
And the knife at her neck.

The Queen of air and darkness
Begins to shrill and cry
"O young man, O my slayer,
To-morrow you shall die."

O Queen of air and darkness
I think 'tis truth you say,
And I shall die to-morrow
But you will die to-day.

That young man belongs to the "army of mercenaries" who "took their wages and are dead:" and these poems all explain sufficiently the passion of Mr. Housman's comment on that name. But one lyric adds to our comprehension. In his boyhood's dreaming,

It was not foes to conquer,
Nor sweethearts to be kind,
But it was friends to die for
That I would seek and find.

I sought them far and found them,
The sure, the straight, the brave,
The hearts I lost my own to,
The souls I could not save.

They braced their belts about them,
They crossed in ships the sea,
They sought and found six foot of ground,
And there they died for me.

That is why, I think, this civilian—who was fifty-five when war broke on Europe—found a disused utterance return because men spoke of “mercenaries;” then, having uttered his rejoinder, let the chords vibrant in him bring back thoughts and emotions which the war period had begotten. The mood, the fit, the possession, is ended, and the poet withdraws into the professor. “It is best that what I have written should be printed while I am here to see it through the press, and control its spelling and punctuation.” There is to me a suggestion that the professor would not venture even a conjectural emendation in the poet’s work.

There may be no more of it. Yet who in this age has given more? Where is more of beauty? Where is the savour of life more felt? I doubt if any of the *vers libres* now in fashion will last in memory like these stanzas, often simple and hackneyed in their form, yet always subtle in their cadences. Poem after poem consists almost entirely of monosyllables; in poem after poem there is hardly an expression that a ploughman might not use. To write so is, of course, supreme artifice. It is to use your speech of every day deliberately “like a learned language,” as Mr. Yeats says in a recent book, excluding every word that has grown hackneyed, yet keeping no word that has not its place in common speech. It can be done only with scholarship, yet can be done only by one who has really known how ploughmen talk.

And the thought, too, is of apparent simplicity; hardly a turn of it that you could not parallel somewhere or other, yet—except for one or two echoes from Mr. Kipling in the earlier book and an echo from Scott in the later—not a line that is not absolutely and entirely Mr. Housman’s own mintage. It has been no purpose of mine to quote for illustration of his special excellence. If that were necessary, I should choose out of the *Shropshire Lad* “Bredon Hill” as the most exquisitely characteristic, and by it I should set without hesitation “Fancy’s Knell” from *Last Poems*. Both have the same magical evocation of the same hilly yet fertile country; both with very slight variation from a common stanza produce a wholly novel and delightful melody; and both—but how else could it be with this poet?—have a sad ending. And if the melancholy in the second be less tragic, gentler, and more whimsical than in the so much earlier poem, its sadness strikes deeper; for it arises not out of any single misfortune, but from the general sadness which to Mr. Housman’s feeling broods over the whole lot of man.