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IRONIES AND DUALITIES IN *A SHROPSHIRE LAD*

By GORDON B. LEA

In his discussion of "trouble" in the poetry of A. E. Housman, William R. Brashear speaks of the "unmitigated anguish" of the poet's vision.¹ But his explanation ignores an important aspect of Housman's art—namely, Housman's use of irony. For ironies and dualities, verbal, formal, thematic, and situational, seem always to underlie Housman's pejorative world view, especially in *A Shropshire Lad*.² These engaging discrepancies occasionally accentuate the bleakness of Housman's vision, but more frequently they relieve it, and, as a result, a poetry whose sentiments ought to depress us actually delights us. It is perhaps a failure to understand these extraordinary contrarities that prompts some critics to condemn the Shropshire cycle for what they consider are its inconsistencies. A careful study of *A*

¹ "The Trouble with Housman," *Victorian Poetry*, VII (Summer 1969), 89.

² All Housman quotations are from *The Collected Poems of A. E. Housman* (New York, 1965).

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Shropshire Lad reveals that Housman has created an illuminating paradox, the purpose of which is essentially didactic.

One of the most pronounced ironies involves Housman's anti-theism, which is frequently vocalized in diction, phrases, and cadences either directly from, or highly reminiscent of, the King James Bible. Norman Marlow details many of these allusions and explains that they function to make Housman's verse seem timeless.³ But the tonal authority with which the anti-Christian theme is invested, as a result of Housman's employing these Biblical echoes, is also worth noting. These allusions make his world view more persuasive to the Christian, especially the Anglican reader, either consciously or subliminally. Ironically, the Bible, the revealed "Word," is employed to undercut "the Word" as well as to indict God himself.

A few examples illustrate the success of this technique. "1887" challenges the claim of the British national anthem by arguing that not God but British soldiers protect and maintain the monarchy. That these selflessly dedicated patriots are mocked and cheated by the sentiments expressed in the anthem is evident in Housman's use of a phrase with which Christ was assailed 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 "The Carpenter's Son," in which a Shropshire felon, moments before his execution, commands his friends to learn from his experience. Bitterly, he urges them to be shrewder than he, in order to enjoy a less indecent end. And he adds, "Live, lads, and I will die," an ironic upending of Jesus' claim that He died so that mankind might live eternally. Housman's sacrificial lamb also employs a phrase that brings to mind a central New Testament metaphor: "Walk henceforth in other ways," he says, and thus his listeners are asked to avoid "the Way" recommended and represented by Christ (John 14:6).

Jesus is alluded to elsewhere. The appellations *son of grief* and *son of sorrow*, traditionally used to refer to Christ, appear several times in the cycle, and, in "If it chance your eye offend you," Christ's Sermon on the Mount supports an heretical argument. The speaker urges,

3 A. E. Housman, *Scholar and Poet* (Minneapolis, 1958), 114.

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.

Here, Christ's words (Mark 9:43-45) advocate a cardinal sin, suicide. To take one's own life is not a moral transgression but a moral imperative, just as it is in "Shot? so quick, so clean an ending?"

The most suggestive of these New Testament reverberations is found in "I hoed and trenched and weeded," which ends the Shropshire cycle. Here, Housman calls on Jesus' Parable of the Sower (Mark 4), for Terence, likening his poems to flowers that will yield seed, says

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

In the New Testament, the seed is Christ's gospel. Is Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*, then, a new gospel, one not of hope but of despair?

A less obvious duality concerns Housman's poetic form. Most critics mention the balladic quality of Housman's verse, but in actuality the cycle includes only three true ballads, "Farewell to barn and stack and tree," "Is my team ploughing," and "the True Lover." Of the remaining sixty poems in *A Shropshire Lad*, moreover, only fourteen conform to the quatrain pattern common to ballad verse (Numbers I, IX, XVI, XVIII, XX, XXII, XXV, XXXVI, XXXVIII, XXXIX, XL, LVII, LIX, and LX). And no one of this total of seventeen poems uses the conventional ballad rhyme scheme *abcb*. All use *abab*, a pattern most closely associated with the Protestant hymn. Indeed, an additional twenty-eight poems in the collection, written in quatrains but not adhering strictly to the fourteen-meter of the Protestant hymn, use this *abab* rhyme scheme. Such patterns are design rather than accident, and it is reasonable to suggest that in one sense Housman's cycle is intended to be a hymn to God, but not a hymn of praise or gratitude.

There exist other contrarities, but these meliorate rather than reinforce Housman's anti-Christian world view. Not the least fascinating of these is Housman's musicality. The poetry

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dramatizes that life is an agony and God an oppressor, but it does so to a music that is distractingly light and melodious, a music that often functions as an ironic descant to the bleak sentiments and painful experiences it accompanies. In short, sound at times appears to belie theme. This incongruity is pronounced in "When I was one and twenty," which deals with the pain of young love. In this piece, the price paid for temporary bliss is clear—"endless rue." But sound acts as a counterpoint to theme. Agile iambic trimeter lines (line one, three, five, and seven in each of the two eight-line stanzas contain an extra syllable), predominance of short vowel sounds, and monosyllabic diction (of the ninety words in the poem, seventy-six are monosyllables) combine merrily to undermine the sadness of the speaker, a rejected or abandoned lover.

Musicality modifies meaning in other *Shropshire Lad* pieces. "It nods and curtsies and recovers" is about man's mortality but the melody celebrates the vitality of the nettle, a symbol for nature, and nature is not subject to death. Sound and sense are also at odds in one of Housman's most poignant treatments of the isolation that accompanies old age, "With rue my heart is laden." The melody of this dramatic lyric is lively, vibrant, especially in the first quatrain. The discrepancy is fitting because it is the loss of this very vitality that the piece commemorates. And Housman's attempt to "harmonise" the world's sadness is equally successful in "Into my heart an air that kills," one of the exile poems. Here, melodiousness qualifies theme, for the poem is about separation from beloved places and people. The irony that results is effective, for two emotions are blended: the joy, the sweetness, associated with the past, and the pain, the bitterness, that marks that separation and the speaker's recognition that return is impossible. The musicality also accentuates the figure in the first line, for memory is an "air" in two senses: a gentle breeze and a light bitter-sweet melody.

The sometimes startling discrepancy between matter and manner in much of Housman is, then, particularly fascinating. In effect, the music bemuses, captivates, entrances. Expressions of the darkest despair are musically tempered and, as a result, seem less hopeless and, not insignificantly, more memorable. Housman's bitter-sweet lines have a stubborn way of staying

with us. And we are not so much depressed by the poet's matter as we are invigorated by his manner.

There are other ironies. In many *Shropshire Lad* pieces that apparently celebrate life, vitality, Housman weaves subtly disturbing references to imminent death. "Loveliest of trees, the cherry now," for instance, ostensibly celebrates the beauty of nature in the spring, but the exquisite loveliness of the cherry blossom, and the joy the young speaker derives from that loveliness, are evanescent. The allusion to Easter, the mention of the speaker's "threescore year and ten," and the reference to snow introduce the chill of death.

The same disturbing combination is achieved in other *Shropshire Lad* poems. "The Lent Lily," "The Merry Guide," and "Say, lad, have you things to do?" seem to celebrate life, but death is ominously present, perhaps because in Housman, a pastoral poet, nature, itself perpetual, is a constant reminder of the brevity of man's temporal stay. What is more, in Housman's verse, spring, traditionally the season of birth and regeneration, produces the most poignant indications of man's mortality. Occasionally, nature may seem to sympathize with man, may seem even to suffer from the same blight. Flowers and plants, the seasons, the years—each and all may appear, at times, to be death struck. But in truth they are not. Their vitality is eternal.

Ironically, however, death, which is literally inescapable in Housman's poetry, is not necessarily a curse. Indeed, there are indications that death can be desirable, and few modern poets dramatize so persuasively the appeal of non-being. "To an Athlete Dying Young," "The lads in their hundreds," "The Immortal Part," and "Be still, my soul, be still"—these and other poems imply that life is a cruel and punitive dispossession, a curse, and that oblivion, non-being, is preferable. In these poems, death is the only sure refuge from the "trouble" that is life.

But is the choice that simple? Housman's *A Shropshire Lad* suggests that it is not, for those poems that seem to laud death, particularly early death, simultaneously pay tribute to life. In "Is my team ploughing," a colloquy between a dead man and his living friend, the dead man sleeps in a good "bed," 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 state of his land, the local soccer games, whether his friend has a mistress—these are the activities to which the dead man refers. In this poem as in others in Housman's cycle, life is vital, active, whereas death is monotonous, passive.

Housman's paradox is intriguing and disturbing. Death brings peace, surcease of life's anguish. It may even be a victory in man's endless battle against an oppressive deity. But it is a Pyrrhic victory because it is paralysis. Housman never permits us to forget that "blood's a rover" and "clay lies still." This conflict between the different appeals of being and non-being is at the heart of Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*, but it is perhaps most lucidly dramatized in "Oh fair enough are sky and plain." Death by drowning promises the speaker an idyllic existence, fairer, purer, quieter, and more serene than any found on earth, for death is a becalmed reflection of nature the speaker sees in the water. But the youth's other self, his non-self, as it were, gazes at him from the surface of the water enviously. Real life is as appealing to him as death's promise is to the speaker. Neither "lad" is at peace.

Housman also engages in verbal irony, particularly multiple meanings, plurisignification, and puns. In "It nods and curtsies and recovers," the dead man over whom the nettle performs its taunting measure is both a lover *in* the grave and a lover *of* the grave, a death-lover. Similarly, in "To an Athlete Dying Young," the dead athlete is "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 both *recorded* and *broken*. And when Terence Hearsay refers to the "smack" of his poetic brew, he means two things: the bitter taste and the painful impact.

Yet another, less obvious Housman duality is his practice of juxtaposing—in a sense, fusing—the sublime and the homely in single poems. "Reveille" begins with a complex and majestic description of daybreak:

Wake: the silver dusk returning
Up the beach of darkness brims,
And the ship of sunrise burning
Stands 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 third quatrain, 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 "March," the first quatrain of which pictures the morning in complex 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.

Housman gently turns to matters more homely: the rooster crowing, farm animals in their pens, and boys gathering daffodils in the woods. Housman is into the familiar, and the "rusted wheel of things" begins to revolve again, as it does in March, after the long sleep of winter.

These engaging flights and descents have a thematic thrust. In Housman, nature, against which backdrop the Shropshire speakers act out their troubled, luckless parts, is often magnificently charged, not to dwarf man's misery but to emphasize it. In "Reveille," for instance, the dawn is a violent phenomenon, a military engagement. Indeed, daybreak is likened to a military bugle call in the poem's title. And in *A Shropshire Lad*, to live is to battle.

These, then are some of the engaging contrarities threaded through Housman's Shropshire cycle, and most mitigate Housman's apparently hopeless view of the human condition. The crowning irony in the collection, however, is revealed in "Terence, this is stupid stuff," which constitutes a frame. Here, Housman, through Terence Hearsay, indicates his overall intention in *A Shropshire Lad*. This poem intimates that, in order to bear life's "troubles," one must recognize, first, that such tribulations are inescapable and, second, that they are universal rather than particular. Only then can some semblance of peace

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be achieved—the kind of contentment Terence manifests eating “victuals” and drinking his Ludlow draught. The poetry may seem, as Terence’s complaining Shropshire critic insists, mere “moping melancholy,” and, worse, a means of rhyming “friends to death before their time.” But its real purpose is to train Terence’s listeners for temporal “ills” that are ubiquitous and unavoidable. “The world has still/ Much good,” says the Shropshire poet, “but much less good than ill.” Thus, the Shropshire cycle is essentially didactic. It urges man to “train for ill.” The following poem, “I hoed and trenched and weeded,” which ends the cycle, reinforces Housman’s didacticism. Here, Terence voices his hope that the Shropshire poems will prepare future generations of “lads” to face and withstand life’s “troubles.” That the underlying vision will be resisted, especially in Housman’s own time, is clearly signalled, for the poems, “flowers,” are “brought . . . home unheeded” from the market, and some, planted as seeds, will perish. Like men, perhaps, poetic insights can be destroyed. But a few poems, “solitary stars,” will remain after Terence’s death, and other “luckless lads” will wear them.

In effect, then, Housman’s *A Shropshire Lad* is an indirect plea for recognition, acceptance, and endurance. But what, ultimately, helps man bear his troubles, endure his ills? Ironically, that which never fails to remind man of his mortality, nature and art, will constitute a refuge from the agony of being and the paralysis of non-being. Nature and art, both of which are timeless, immortal, will sustain and befriend man “In the dark and cloudy day.” Nature is, after all, beautiful in its own right, and, in respect to art, it is a statue that causes the Shropshire exile in “Loitering with a vacant eye” to accept life manfully. Man’s tribulations are relatively short, the statue seems to imply, whereas it must bear its ill forever. Poetry, another art form, will also assist. Terence’s “stuff” may not be as tasty as ale, nor will it befuddle the brain, but it will sustain “heart and head,” and, perhaps more important, it will help man build up a resistance to the poison that is life. This last possibility is parabolically dramatized in Terence’s *exemplum*. Mithridates

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.

Mithridates was wise enough to develop his own immunity.

Of course, one needs to be very cautious about attributing these views to Housman. They are essentially Terence's. But Terence is indubitably an exemplar in *A Shropshire Lad*: he observes, experiences, records, and educates, and, as a result, he endures. Through him, we perceive that awareness, acceptance, and endurance are possible. His vision may shatter our hopes and illusions, but it also decreases our fears. He teaches us that one can achieve self-respect, genuine self-respect, without expecting any recompense in this or the next world. What is more, Terence teaches us that one can attempt wryly to laugh at, even to sing about, the injustice that is life, as so many of Housman's Shropshire speakers do. But we cannot forget, I think, that they laugh and sing in order not to weep.



LAURENCE HOUSMAN IN BOOKS: A CHECKLIST

By WILLIAM W. HILL

Publication of *A Shropshire Lad* in 1896 forever cast Laurence Housman in the shadow of his older brother Alfred. However, he readily conceded the superior poetic abilities of his brother and expounded them to others when given the chance.

Born at Perry Hall, Bromsgrove in 1865, Laurence Housman is best remembered for his cycles of plays concerning the lives of St. Francis of Assisi and Queen Victoria. Talented in many other areas, he first trained as an artist, developing under the influence of the "art nouveau" school of the late nineties. He illustrated many of his own works as well as those of others. Impressed by Charles Ricketts of the Vale Press, Housman became interested in book design and produced many elaborate title pages, head and tail pieces, and cover designs which were often incorporated into his early publications.

His first excursions into writing were almost exclusively con-