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THE PHILOSOPHY OF A. E. HOUSMAN'S POETRY

by

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PREFACE

Having been attracted to the poems of A. E. Housman, I desired to study them further, particularly the apparent irreligion expressed in them. It soon became obvious to me that there is a wide variation in critical opinion on the philosophy of Housman's poems.

Although at least one hundred writers have had something to say in books or journals about this subject, their studies are limited to a small part of it, or their comments reveal a bias that limits the value of their criticism. Thus a systematic and thorough study has been needed in order to determine what philosophy is expressed and how it is expressed.

My first three chapters present a basis for the study. I have shown that by their structure the poems emphasize their philosophical nature. Although--contrary to the assumption of several critics--the poems do not often contain events from Housman's experience, they do reflect his attitudes toward life, presented as the growing awareness of a young rustic from Shropshire.

In the four chapters that follow I examine the four philosophical positions which are evident in the poems: Cyrenaic hedonism, pessimism, Stoicism, and atheism. Hedonism is the basic one from which the others are derived or to which they are subordinated. The philosophy is limited almost entirely to practical ethics, with speculation or theory developed very little.

In addition to the poems, source material such as letters and personal observation has come mainly from Laurence Housman's biography of his brother, Grant Richards' reminiscence written as Housman's publisher and friend, Percy Withers' accounts of his personal association with the poet, and Housman's own biographical letter in response to questions by Maurice Pollet.

The most helpful critics who deal with the poems in a general way have been Ian Scott-Kilvert and Nesca A. Robb. Tom Burns Haber has several good articles and John W. Stevenson has two good ones on specific aspects of the poems. The best critic on individual poems is probably Cleanth Brooks. To these and others I am indebted for ideas and interpretations.

I am grateful to Walter F. Wright, Professor of English at the University of Nebraska, for advice and for prompt and careful reading of my manuscript with attendant suggestions for improvement.

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Chapter I

THE PHILOSOPHIC NATURE OF HOUSMAN'S POEMS

Ever since the publication in 1896 of A Shropshire Lad by Alfred E. Housman, numerous critics have wondered in print why those poems and his later ones have been able to gain and retain a popular audience. The philosophy of the poems, commonly assumed to be atheistic pessimism, is supposed to be unacceptable to English-speaking people generally. Many critics suggest that readers must find something else in the poetry that interests them in spite of the attitude expressed, implying that any philosophy in the poems is unimportant. A few venture the suggestion that Housman is really an optimist, as though pessimism were necessarily an evil. A few deplore the pessimism or atheism and conclude that readers do not realize that the poems are therefore bad. Since a problem is indicated here, a further examination of the philosophy in the poems is apparently needed.

One aspect of the poetry that most critics have ignored is that of process. The poems are not a statement of a philosophical position, but instead are a record of

the process of search. At best they arrive at only a tentative conclusion. Dealing with the complexity of life, the poems avoid easy, pat answers to the riddle of existence. Thus the best approach to the study of the poems is to regard them as a process. Perhaps many readers--even some who may not care for pessimism--have been attracted by the dramatic struggle in the poems.

It is evident that Housman's poems are intentionally philosophic. They are written in popular, not professional, terms because they are posed as poems by a rustic, a Shropshire lad, who is faced with problems arising from the behavior of himself and his fellows--that is, problems in ethics. He is a sensitive young man, but he is not formally educated in philosophy.¹ Since the poems, however, are concerned with the finding and expressing of a satisfactory attitude toward life, they can be regarded as essentially philosophic.

Housman recognized the influence of the ballads on his poetry.² This influence is apparent in the similarity of themes, phrases, and stanza forms. Professor Tom Burns Haber maintains that forty percent of the poems are written in ballad stanza and that almost all the others are influenced by it.³ Yet, with few exceptions, Housman's poems are not primarily narrative. The emphasis in the poems is not action but reflection.⁴

The organizational pattern in the majority of his poems emphasizes their philosophical nature. Housman seldom develops any topic at length or in fine detail; he presents rather the experience or observation in either general direct statement or in brief symbolic terms and then proceeds to the question, "How does this affect life?" For example, the popular poem "Loveliest of trees, the cherry now" (ASL II)⁵ has one stanza describing the blooming cherry tree, which symbolizes spring; the two stanzas that follow are concerned with a philosophical reaction:

Now, of my threescore years and ten,
Twenty will not come again,
And take from seventy springs a score,
It only leaves me fifty more.

And since to look at things in bloom
Fifty springs are little room,
About the woodlands I will go
To see the cherry hung with snow.

Or, for another example, he may put the experience in the whole of the poem except for a "punch line" which contains the reaction. In "When I was one-and-twenty" (ASL XIII) while the first fourteen lines record the advice of a wise man to the unheeding youth, the last two lines show the acquiescence of the youth after reflection on what has happened; at the age of twenty-two, he says, "And oh, 'tis true, 'tis true."

As indicated in the above examples, Housman commonly used a shift in the pattern of a poem which has the effect of emphasizing the philosophic comment. Whether or not

one has specifically noted the shift while he reads a poem, the shift suggests that the preliminary part has been told and that the main content of the poem is now about to be presented.

The most common pattern, used in about one-half of all Housman's poems, is that of beginning with an experience or with an observation of a scene or event and then shifting to direct comment upon it.⁶ The comment may be stated as opinion, reflection, resignation, advice, wish, or resolution. Although not all the poems that conclude with a wish or resolution can be considered as having a direct commentary, such statements as the following (from the last stanza of "Fancy's Knell, LP XLI) obviously should be included in this group:

Come, lads, and learn the dances
And praise the tune to-day.
To-morrow, more's the pity,
Away we both must hie,
To air the ditty,
And to earth I.

Similar in pattern to this group of poems are another dozen⁷ that start with a wish or advice but then shift to a direct comment stated as opinion or reflection. The shift of idea is emphasized in a majority of this whole group of poems by a corresponding shift in point of view; for example, from first person to third or from third person to second. Also in several of these poems transitional words and phrases such as "therefore," "so," "but now," "yet," and "sure enough" help to emphasize the latter part

of a poem and give the reader the feeling of reaching the significant statement of the poem.

Although Housman used a few other patterns involving a shift, he also wrote several poems that use no change of any kind. But even among the poems that do not shift idea or pattern, there are many that deal with philosophical matters; they are simply all commentary.⁸

Thus altogether in approximately three-fourths of his poems Housman put the philosophical reflection in the form of a direct statement rather than leaving it to be implied by the reader. The aim of such poems is thus clear: they deal with the problem of human existence. Two short poems will serve to illustrate Housman's tendency to comment directly. His usual comment is a generalization, as in the following poem (LP X):

Could man be drunk for ever
 With liquor, love, or fights,
 Lief should I rouse at morning
 And lief lie down of nights.

But men at whiles are sober
 And think by fits and starts,
 And if they think, they fasten
 Their hands upon their hearts.

In a few of the poems, however, the comment is not a generalization but a statement which is applied to one person only;⁹ in ASL LVII the speaker states a few observations about the effects of friendship and comes to the conclusion that "I shall have lived a little while" before death comes. Although this comment, as stated, applies to only

one person, it is like the generalization in that it is an attempt to explain or interpret human experience.

In approximately one-fourth of the poems Housman has no direct statement of philosophical reaction. But even in several of these the philosophical intention is clear. In LP XXIII he presents only a brief description of two lovers, but in their looking away he cynically implies the unfaithfulness of lovers (one of his favorite themes) and perhaps their shame. In MP XXVI Housman dramatizes the dilemma of solipsism; he did not state the problem but clearly implied it in the suggestion by the speaker that everyone else would die if he commits suicide with a knife he is holding. In an unfinished poem (MP XIII) he toyed with the problem of the identity and continuity of the self:

I lay me down and slumber
And every morn revive.
Whose is the night-long breathing
That keeps a man alive?

When I was off to dreamland
And left my limbs forgot,
Who stayed at home to mind them
And breathed when I did not?

.

--I waste my time in talking,
No heed at all takes he,
My kind and foolish comrade
That breathes all night for me.

Although he implied rather than stated them in these and many other poems, Housman was concerned with philosophical problems.

While it is thus clear from the content of the poems

and their patterns that Housman intended his poems to be philosophic, one should not pick out just any poem at random and decide that it, by itself, is a valid expression of the philosophy of his poetry. This sort of action has been the practice of many critics on Housman, while others have done almost the same thing by commenting in general terms on a philosophy expressed in the poems and then citing random lines as proof.¹⁰ The inadequacy of a "proof-text" method to determine the philosophy of the poems is obvious if one considers contradictory lines such as these from adjacent poems: "Think rather,--call to thought, if now you grieve a little" (ASL XLVIII) and "Think no more, lad; laugh, be jolly" (ASL XLIX). Or one may note contradictory poems such as ASL XXXIII and LP XIX, which express opposite reactions to the death of friends.¹¹ The poems must be studied in context.

Chapter II
THE CHARACTER OF HOUSMAN
AS A SOURCE OF THE PHILOSOPHY IN THE POEMS

As it is inadequate to assume that random poems express the philosophy of all the poems, so is it inadequate, or sometimes misleading, to assume that everything Housman wrote in the poems is based on his own experience and that the philosophy of the poems is based entirely on that experience. The contradictory examples cited above show this assumption to be manifestly wrong.¹ Yet the majority of the biographical studies of Housman to date make that assumption and are concerned with trying to find out what personal catastrophe made Housman contemplate suicide, forswear the love of woman, denounce God, or otherwise have such gloomy and unrighteous thoughts as those expressed in the poems. Although it is probably true that some of the experiences indicated in the poems were his own, yet many undoubtedly were not; for example, MP XXXVII and several other soldier poems could not have been his experience because he was never a soldier in battle. For the poems, Housman adopted a pose--that of Terence, a

Shropshire lad; and he never dropped that pose in all his poems, never speaking as a London or Cambridge don.²

Since Housman did adopt a pose in the poems, he tended to separate the poems from his life as much as possible. He frequently said that poetry was his avocation, from which he avoided earning any money,³ and that his proper business was Latin scholarship. He even professed dislike for his lecture, The Name and Nature of Poetry, and consistently refused to sign printed copies of it.⁴ He conversed little with his friends about his poetry, and to questions presuming to relate his poems to his own experience he usually refused to reply.⁵ He was also reticent about discussing anything very personal, apparently because he was shy and reserved with even close friends and his own family.⁶

Such reticence has delighted certain literary gossips who have assumed that he was hiding something that he hinted at in the poetry, especially the numerous poems about love or affection. Why he should hint at something he wanted to keep secret no one has as yet explained adequately. Maude M. Hawkins suggests that Housman's overwhelming desire for fame led him to write revealing poems which he planned to publish anonymously under the title Poems of Terence Hearsay.⁷ He had planned to use that title, but there is no evidence that he ever planned to remain anonymous; neither does Mrs. Hawkins indicate why poems that

reveal personal secrets make one more famous than poems that do not. Some biographers apparently believe that he unwittingly revealed his experience,⁸ some imply that he was playing a game with the readers,⁹ but most writers apparently assume that poetry automatically expresses the experience of the poet. But with the absence of evidence none of these speculations is necessarily true.

Speculation on a secret in Housman's life has come mainly since the publication in 1936 and 1938 of the post-humous poems, More Poems and Additional Poems, by his brother Laurence. Since these poems are mainly the ones Housman rejected for A Shropshire Lad and Last Poems, the biographers profess to see in them many hints on his personal affairs.

One guess commonly advanced as to Housman's great secret has been that of an ill-fated love affair.¹⁰ Since there is no evidence whatever that Housman ever had an affair with any woman, some recent biographers, not willing to give up romance, have suggested that he suppressed a desire to have an affair with some woman of his early acquaintance.¹¹ This suggestion involves an experience so nearly universal that the authors may well be right--but also trivial.

The other guess as to a secret, first advanced at about the same time but not considered seriously until more recently, is homosexuality, either practiced or desired.¹²

Only speculation, on the basis of some of the poems and the fact that Housman roomed with his friend Moses Jackson at Oxford and London, was offered in support of this guess until Mrs. Hawkins proffered one bit of solid evidence in her book. She cites a letter to herself from Laurence Housman on October 7, 1956, in which he mentions a "remarkable diary which reveals the most intimate relations with his friend Moses Jackson."¹³ Such a statement would be proof enough if it were not that Mrs. Hawkins filled her book with inaccuracies, distortions, and apparently willful misquotations.¹⁴ Although the suggestion that Housman was homosexual is quite plausible, until better evidence is available--perhaps the elusive diary mentioned by Laurence Housman--this guess must remain a guess. It is certainly not so significant as Mrs. Hawkins maintains: the reason he could not study at Oxford but could later, the reason he wrote and published poems, took trips to the Continent, made enemies, made friends, or almost anything else he did.

Some possibilities for secrets have been left unexamined. No biographer has as yet suggested, on evidence from the poems, that Housman must have tried to join the army but, being rejected, sublimated his desires in the soldier poems. No one has yet advanced the idea that, behind a hay rick in rural Worcestershire, he must have jangled with another lad and left a knife in his side, thus

explaining his preoccupation in the poems with murder, jails, and hangings. But perhaps in due time these and other such speculations will be offered to explain Housman's gloomy outlook on life.

The reasons for the searching out of a secret behind the love poems have been summed up by Professor Tom Burns Haber as 1) the tradition of such a search, 2) the poems themselves, and 3) the too vehement denial of his friends.¹⁵ Although Mr. Haber regards these reasons as adequate, they are not. 1) If there is no evidence, a tradition of search may be simply gossip; 2) the poems themselves, as previously explained, are not necessarily first person experience; 3) if there were other valid indications, a search in spite of denial by friends is acceptable, but a search because of such denial is plain perversity. One biographer has even accused the friends and relatives of a conspiracy to maintain the secret.¹⁶

Denials of any secret affair have been made by persons who should know Housman best: a sister, his brother Laurence, his publisher (who was also his personal friend for forty years), and a friend at Cambridge.¹⁷ While these friends denied any secret affair, they did suggest the probability that certain known events--such as the death of his mother when Housman was twelve, his father's long illness and financial troubles with resultant responsibility on A. E. Housman as the oldest son, his failure in

the "Greats" examinations at Oxford, and the death of a brother and close friends--contributed to his bitterness about life. While some biographers and critics have tended to overemphasize the influence of only one event,¹⁸ these events have been fully documented and explained by numerous writers, so that their influence in Housman's life is well known. To what extent, however, they are responsible for the poems is less clear, except for one of the posthumous poems (MP XLII, titled "A. J. J.") written after the death of a close friend. A few other poems are evidently based on historical, not personal, events.¹⁹

Housman denied a biographical basis for the poems on at least two occasions. Wilfrid Scawen Blunt recorded one instance in his diary on November 26, 1911: "I took Housman for a walk and asked him how he had come to write his early verses and whether there was any episode in his life which suggested their gruesome character, but he assured me it was not so."²⁰ The more famous instance was the rare occasion when he answered the questions of a young Frenchman about himself and his poetry. He wrote, "The Shropshire Lad is an imaginary figure, with something of my temper and view of life. Very little in the book is biographical."²¹

If conjecture on the experiences of Housman yields little to explain the background of the philosophy in the poems, a look at his character may, as Housman himself sug-

gested, yield more. He was born middle-aged and remained at that stage throughout his seventy-seven years. According to his sister he early developed habits of "punctuality, industry, fixed routine, daily walking . . ." which remained through his life.²² The only pleasures he allowed himself, aside from poetry and some studies, were the drinking of wines, viewing of cathedrals, and walks in nature--all of which he began at home as a boy and in which, characteristically, he made himself a connoisseur. Within his rather narrow range of interests he disciplined himself severely, as he indicated in his statement: "A scholar who means to build himself a monument must spend much of his life in acquiring knowledge which for its own sake is not worth having and in reading books which do not in themselves deserve to be read."²³ Thus in university circles he early developed a great reputation as a classical scholar in textual emendation, but in nothing else. In his poetry he seemed full grown in his first book, A Shropshire Lad; in Last Poems or the posthumous poems no essential change is discernible.²⁴ Although the bulk of Last Poems and the posthumous poems were written in the 1890's, without external evidence one could not distinguish a poem of 1895 from one of 1922. Even the nonsense poems of his later years seem of about the same quality as those written in his boyhood.²⁵

Housman's attitudes seemed to change little during his life. In his boyhood he developed a sadness and an

aloofness that remained.²⁶ He said that he early developed a skepticism in religion, and his sister testified to an early tendency toward stoicism;²⁷ both of these attitudes remained, and both are reflected in his poetry. He had a passion for perfection, and this passion often made life difficult; for example, his leaving questions unanswered on his "Greats" examination rather than writing partial answers or his avoiding merely polite conversation as worthless.²⁸ This same passion led him to be sarcastic to his students when they failed to reach his ideal²⁹ and vitriolic toward other classical scholars, for whom he saved up caustic comments in his notebook pending need for them.³⁰ The same perfectionist often struggled for days with a stanza of poetry³¹ and, as noted frequently by his publisher, often complained about errors in punctuation by the printers. The tone of Housman's poetry reflects this same uncompromising and often belligerent attitude.

Ian Scott-Kilvert suggests that the inspiration of Housman's poetry sprang from his youth, "when untried ideals and untutored desires at their strongest first encounter a hostile or indifferent world." His development stopped there.³² Although he seemed in his poetry to be constantly seeking an answer to life's problems, he refused to come to terms with life's demands and disillusionments. He mellowed very little with age; instead, he kept essentially the same ideas and attitudes he had developed in his youth.

Chapter III
THE DEVELOPING PHILOSOPHY
IN A SHROPSHIRE LAD AND LAST POEMS

In his lifetime Housman published two volumes of poems, A Shropshire Lad and Last Poems. Into the first of these he put his view of life, in the pose of a Shropshire youth, and seemed determined to let that book stand as his sole poetic contribution. However, perhaps because of the constant nagging of his publisher and other friends or perhaps because he thought he had something more to say, he relented and after twenty-six years published his second volume. Apparently determined to end the nagging, and to indicate the nature of the poems as well, he called it Last Poems. But he again relented and in his will gave his brother Laurence permission to collect from the notebooks and publish any complete poems that were not inferior to those already published and to destroy the remainder.¹ Laurence collected rather lavishly in More Poems, including one incomplete poem (MP XIII), and collected again in Additional Poems. He retained and pasted into new notebooks all existing manuscripts of published poems and sold them; of course, the sheets have since been unpasted,