The Lyrics of A.E. Housman

by Sarah Buckley



English Association Bookmarks
No. 27

"I, a stranger and afraid ..."
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SCOPE OF TOPIC

A. E. Housman's ***A SHROPSHIRE LAD*** was published in 1896. This Bookmark seeks to commemorate its anniversary by looking again at Housman's achievement in compiling this series of rueful epitaphs

For golden friends I had,
For many a rose-lipt maiden
And many a lightfoot lad.

It argues that Housman succeeds in making out of this morbid fascination a poetry that crystallises our ironic understandings that we are 'strangers' to the non-human element in which we find ourselves and that human perfection is all in vain. Consciously poetic, the style in which he expresses both his fear and his mystified regret represents a final refinement of the elegiac mode in Victorian verse. In addition, Housman published ***LAST POEMS*** (1922) and ***MORE POEMS*** (1936, posthumously).

BOOKS TO READ

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FURTHER READING

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NOTES

Fear no more the heat o' the sun,
Nor the furious winter's rages;
Thou thy wordly task hast done,
Home art gone and ta'en thy wages.
Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney sweepers, come to dust.
Shakespeare: **Cymbeline** (1610)

The lamentable realisation that that 'golden lads and girls all must, as chimney sweepers, come to dust' is reiterated in Poem XLIII of Housman's ***A SHROPSHIRE LAD*** (1896). In **The Immortal Part**, Terence Hearsay – Housman's rustic persona in this famous sequence of sixty-three poems – expresses an urgent yearning for his death to come and extinguish the anguish of his life:

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When shall this slough of sense be cast,
This dust of thoughts be laid at last ...?

This theme – expressed here by two examples of archaic metonymy – runs throughout the poems of ***A SHROPSHIRE LAD***. Housman is concerned with the futility of man's mortal existence: that is, with his lonely struggle to accept that he is a finite creature in an infinite universe. **Poem II** is a famous example of this concern. Given a finite number of opportunities to take in the visual loveliness of the cherry-blossom, he comes – after the banal arithmetic of the second quatrain – to a heroic resolution to make the most of them:

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

The jaunty rhythm accompanies him up and down the woodland ride; its brisk, lively lilt reinforces his determination to seize the 'fifty springs' that remain to him. Only rarely do Housman's lyrics aspire to a condition of natural fluency: even here, his syntax is inverted ('about the woodland I will go') so that a rhyme can arrive on station; elsewhere, unnecessary words are inserted so that the metrically correct number of syllables can be finger-counted. Even so, the formal simplicity of Housman's style is perfectly attuned to his uncomplicated theme: the bitter-sweet irony that man's wages are paid in the currency of dust. The common criticism of Housman's universe – that his monosyllabic rhymes, padded-out metres and monotonous diction are competent only to express an adolescent pessimism – seems unduly astringent. From lyric to lyric, the style is subtly adjusted so that the traditional theme is freshened by original cadences and so that the tone itself varies from harsh irony to simple evocations of a cosmic loneliness.

It is in those lyrics where his diction remains plain and unaffected by a search for poetic effect that Housman most directly communicates finite man's torment. There is no more concise anthem for doomed youth than **Poem XVI**:

It nods and curtseys and recovers
When the wind blows above,
The nettle on the graves of lovers
That hanged themselves for love.

Here, Housman explores the irony of mortality in an immortal world; his juxtaposition is of man (the finite creature) with nature (the infinite world). Whereas the pernicious nettle can recover, the man who felt its sting ironically cannot. The wind is literally a timeless force which has no adverse effect on the eternal/immortal universe, represented by the nettle; but it becomes in the second quatrain an agent of the suffering – of, for example, the grief involved in unrequited/suicidal love – which is experienced by the sentient mortal. The irony lies in Housman's sense of cosmic injustice; he sounds sadly indignant that man, who is after all part of the natural world, should come to dust as a result of 'the furious winter's rages' while the stinging nettle appears merely to be buffeted by these forces. Housman's view – that this deal is ironic and also unfair – suggests how alienated he feels from his immortal surroundings. The formality of the repetition in the second quatrain –

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

– confers an authority on this bleak state of affairs. Responsible for the power of this epitaph is the logical simplicity with which Housman organises his quatrains: their symmetries, their

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syntactical parallels, are reinforced by the stately rhymes. It is Housman's constant complaint that 'heartless, witless nature/Will neither care nor know' (**Last Poem XL**) what happens to him or any other man.

Housman – for whom "poetry is not the thing said, but the way of saying it" – is notorious for finding in poem after poem different ways of saying the same thing: in short, he is given to writing the same poem twice! For instance, his subtle personification of our natural surroundings in **Last Poem XXVII** heightens our awareness of the neutrality of nature to the same effect that he earlier achieved in **Poem XVI** of ***A SHROPSHIRE LAD***:

The sigh that heaves the grasses
Whence thou wilt never rise
Is of the air that passes
And knows not if it sighs.

The 'sigh' is not a human sigh for a heart-felt loss, but is ironically a breath of fresh wind which feels nothing for the human loss that the 'low mound on the lea' represents; equally, in the second quatrain, the romanticised dew-drops ('diamond tears') are not tear-drops wept by a compassionate world, but dispassionate water-droplets. In Housman, creation is eternal and it is implacably indifferent to human ephemerality; it cares not that we come to dust. As a result, Housman remains grimly aware that he is made little by the 'heartless' indifference of the universe and continues to regard his own pathetic graspings at significance from a rueful distance. In these polished quatrains, he begins to labour this point. Being understated, his anguish intensifies in pathos and powerfully conveys his lonely torment.

It is in **Poem XXXI** of ***A SHROPSHIRE LAD*** that Housman most famously explores the ironic strength of 'furious winter's rages'. Wenlock Edge becomes an emblem of the indifferent, non-human world by which man's impermanence may be measured:

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 extended metaphor, the force of temporal change which batters man is synonymous with the inexorable force of the wind (which also sunders the wood). Housman organises his conscious poeticisms – 'the gale of life' (his phrase for the non-human power of time) and 'the tree of man' – so that he can explore the 'trouble' in which mortal man inevitably finds himself; the iambic beat which drums throughout the five stanzas is functional in depicting the rush of the wind which – by the fourth stanza – has increased its tempo to an almost apocalyptic 'anger'. Here ('ashes under Uricon') are the only wages for the cosmic torment of both Roman and yeoman. Even the place-name is extinct!

The two famous quatrains that make up **Poem XL** of ***A SHROPSHIRE LAD*** encapsulate Housman's personal sense of dolour:

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,

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I see it shining plain,
The happy highways where I went
And cannot come again.

The 'air that kills' is a nostalgic air; it is a breeze imbued with the mnemonic power to transport Housman's Terence back in time to the Shropshire countryside of his childhood. '***That*** is the land of lost content' – the demonstrative pronoun is so emphatic in its answer to the un-rhetorical question that it seems to accuse the blue remembered landscape of an unmentionable betrayal. Not without a bitter poignancy do Terence and all such lads mourn the loss of their boyhood innocence/lament the passing of those days when they were 'happy' [= innocent of their own mortality] and so could feel the heat of the sun or the furious winter's rages without the harsh recompense of cosmic irony.

In **Poem LII** of ***A SHROPSHIRE LAD***, Terence expresses an equally acute nostalgia for the blue hills and sighing poplars of his home county. This ache is intensified by his familiar feeling that the pastoral beauties of his homeland (now 'a western brookland') go on being beautiful without him:

Far in a western brookland
That bred me long ago
The poplars stand and tremble
By pools I used to know.

Once again, this romantic longing is both for a lost place and a lost time that become equivalent to a lost condition: a lightfoot lad's innocence. It is therefore no surprise that the antithesis of Terence's Shropshire (with its hills, farms, spires, highways, pools and fields) is Blake's London:

no more remembered
In fields where I was known,
Here I lie down in London
And turn to rest alone.

In this lyric, Housman uses 'London' to suggest that fatal loss of innocence that comes with age: whereas the city is representative of worldly tasks, the land of lost content [= the 'western brookland'] is an emblem of his 'happy' past. The blue landscape which Terence remembers (and which becomes an emblem of his innocent self) ironically does not remember him in return. Not only is he alienated from his own country, but he must also live with the fearful knowledge that his love for it goes unrequited and that it is witlessly indifferent to his absence from its 'glimmering weirs'.

This frightening sense of alienation from a world which remains ironically indifferent to his human passion for it Housman encapsulates in a trite couplet from **Last Poem XII**:

I, a stranger and afraid,
In a world I never made.

Expressed here is Housman's ultimate grievance: that he, a sentient mortal, should have been doomed to seek a sense of identity in 'a world' for which he was 'never made'.

Sarah Buckley wrote this Bookmark whilst she was a Sixth Form pupil at Newcastle-under-Lyme School in Staffordshire and subsequently read English at Lincoln College Oxford.

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