Chapter- 5

Theme of Exile

'Everyone is born a king, and most people die in exile...'

Oscar Wilde.

The title of *A Shropshire Lad* has aroused the misconception that the work is set entirely in Shropshire. There is hardly any truth in the belief of some of Housman's early readers that he was a Shropshire poet. Housman himself corrects this fact in a letter to Maurice Pollet:

> I was born in Worcestershire, not Shropshire, where I have never spent much time...I had a sentimental feeling for Shropshire because its hills were our western horizon. I know Ludlow and Wenlock, but my topographical details— Hughley, Abdon under Clee, —are sometimes quite wrong.[1]

Keith Jebb writes:

> The first thing to say about Houusman's Shropshire is that it is not, and never was, the country on the Welsh border normally represented by that name. In fact it is as mythical as the Britain of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King,* or the pastoral setting of Sir Phillip Sidney's *Acradia.* It is not that the poet did not know

> Shropshire well, having never lived there, though he didn't; it is not even that he falsified the geography of the place to suit himself, though he did: it is more that in creating Shropshire he produced a stage, a little world on which to set in motion the characters, the emotions and the dramas that he needed to portray.[2]

An examination of the poems which preserves the integrity of their order reveals that only the first thirty-six are set in Shropshire, the remainder, principally in London.[3] That all of Housman's poems do not depend upon the reality of the Shropshire setting has been demonstrated by the recent study of Ralph Franklin, who showed that only fifteen of the sixty-three poems contain references to Shropshire, a number of these recognized by the poet as inaccurate.[4]

ASL XXXVII establishes the shift in setting from Shropshire to London. It also determines with few exceptions the theme and tone of the remaining poems of *A Shropshire Lad.* The poems now look back westward from London to Shropshire. The mood of the speaker in the poems is now one of nostalgia for something lost and never to be recovered. The theme of estrangement is established in the first four poems of the exile group, three of which were shifted to their present position in the

final ordering, the fourth ("In My Own Shire, if I Was Sad") added to the printer's copy immediately before publication.[5]

ASL XXXVII was included as a functional poem to emphasize the gap that lies between the earlier group of Shropshire poems and the exile poems which follow. Norman Page calls it "a poem of departure in which the city is seen, as in Wordsworth's 'Michael', as a place of temptation."[6] The poem describes the effect of the vanishing of the Shropshire landscape from the sight of Terence[7] as the train carries him to London:

> 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.
>
> (ll. 1—10)

But the loneliness and anxiety of the London poems are also anticipated. In one passage, Terence addresses the hand which still aches from the handshakes at his departure:

> Hand, said I, since now we part
> From fields and men we know by heart,
> From strangers' faces, strangers' lands,—
> .....
> 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.

(ll.11–13, 17–26)

In *ASL* XXXVIII, the persona nostalgically looks back to the west, to Shropshire, the land of his birth, from which he has now become estranged. "It is indeed a different kind of poet; one who claims in his other fantasy that the wind from Shropshire is an emanation of his friends' voices, warm with their breath and blood."[8]:

The winds out of the west land blow,
My friends have breathed them there;
Warm with the blood of lads I know
Comes east the sighing air.

It fanned their temples, filled their lungs,
Scattered their forelocks free;
My friends made words of it with tongues
That talk no more to me.

Their voices, dying as they fly,
Thick on the wind are sown;
The names of men blow soundless by,
My fellows' and my own.

(ll.1–12)

Metaphorically, the wind is the life force with which the pastoral youth identified himself in the home shire. This identification is suggested in line 2 ("My friends have breathed them [the winds] there"), and in line 3, which refers to the winds as "warm with the blood of lads I know."In line 4 the wind is the breath of life which "filled their lungs." Wind is one of Housman's favourite

images. Norman Page writes, "its richness of meaning includes the literal winds of heaven, human passion , the spirit of life, connection with one's origin (the wind blows from one place to another) , and destruction (as in Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind", the wind as 'destroyer' as well as 'preserver').The wind is also Housman's pervasive geographical sense: for him, exile and separation are concepts indivisible from the idea of movement in this or that direction, usually and for good reason, on an east-west axis. Within a single poem, the wind may be evoked punningly; and the image links poems at different points in the collection. XXXII ('From far, from eve and morning') , for instance, moves rapidly from the 'twelve-winded sky' to 'the stuff of life' blown by the wind, then to the 'breath' that, Beckett-like, Housman sees as man's portion, finally back to the 'wind's twelve quarters' that disperse the fleshy envelope after death. In XXXI ("On Wenlock Edge the wood's in trouble") , the wind blows not just through a human life but through history: an actual wind becomes ' the old wind in the old anger'– the wind of the distant past; then the 'gale of life', blowing through ' the tree of man', that links dead Roman and Victorian Englishman."[9]The last two stanzas of *ASL* XXXVIII make it clear that there is an inseparable bond between the wind and Shropshire existence. " The ' sighing air' is first the west wind linking home with the

place of exile, then the breath of life and the spoken words of lost friends, and finally the exile's own sighing,":[10]

Oh lads, at home I heard you plain,
But here your speech is still,
And down the sighing wind in vain
You hollo from the hill.

The wind and I, we both were there,
But neither long abode;
Now through the friendless world we fare
And sigh upon the road.
(ll. 13–20)

The three poems which follow bears the same sense of loss and nostalgia because they look back to a land of youth and simplicity, like Wordsworth's pastoral figure, that "...there hath passed away a glory from the earth."[11]Lyrics XXXIX–XLI reminds us of the "Intimations Ode," the hour of "splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower"[12]:

'Tis time, I think, by Wenlock town
The golden broom should blow;
The hawthorn sprinkled up and down
Should charge the land with snow.

Spring will not wait the loiter's time
Who keeps so long away;
So others wear the broom and climb
The hedgerows heaped with may.

Oh tarnish late on Wenlock Edge,
Gold that I never see;
Lie long high snowdrifts in the hedge
That will not shower on me.
(No. XXXIX)

There is a great difference between Housman's treatment of the loss of harmony with nature in *A Shropshire Lad.* and Wordsworth's conception of the same process in a poem like "Intimations Ode." Housman depicts the loss not in terms of time but in the motif of two lands, one a land of youth and simplicity, the other a place of exile. Moreover, Wordsworth finds compensation, even in the midst of loss, in the memories of youth.[13] *ASL* XXXIX "echoes II ('Loveliest of trees, the cherry now') but wears the exile's rue with a difference, for it is less man's morality than separation caused by circumstances that makes poignant the thought of springtime beauty; the "cherry hung with snow" is no longer seen but dreamed of."[14]

The persona of *ASL* XL dreams of the "land of lost content" and the "blue remembered hills" from a distance because now he is in London. The "land of lost content" is Shropshire and the memories of youth is "an air that kills":

> 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.

However, R.L. Kowalczyk, obviously unaware of the change in setting, finds the reference to the "far country" confusing, although he believes that the confusion is deliberate:

> The Shropshire commentator deliberately appears confused here, for Housman submerges the symbolic meaning of "far country." Thus the reader fails to discern whether Terence wishes to describe his Shropshire or the irretrievable past. Terence's confusion suggests that his memory is slowly debilitating and that he finds himself in the present observing a quickly changing world. In both cases, the speaker recognizes that time has robbed him of a sense of permanence and stability, since his fading memory destroys the unchanged past as quickly as his present world changes.[15]

But the speaker does not appear confused if the poem is seen in relation to the design of the whole work. Home shire is now indeed a "far country," and it is being described not by an inhabitant who is confused or whose "memory is slowly debilitating", but by an exile who views it only in the imagination. Moreover, the reader, who has observed the shift in setting does not fail to discern "whether Terence wishes to describe his Shropshire or the irretrievable past," for they are

now one. Any confusion which arises from a reading of the poem must be related to the reader's failure to place the poem in its proper context.

ASL XLI "In MY Own Shire, if I Was Sad," is based on the contrast between the "homely comforters" of the home shire and the "mortal sickness" of London.[16] John Stevenson has called the poem Housman's "Intimations ode,"[17] dealing as it does with the Wordsworthian theme of the therapeutic value of nature. Yet as Stevenson further observes, Housman's attitude towards nature differs radically from Wordsworth's, primarily because Housman could not accept the Romantic doctrine of nature's divinity. The persona of "In My Own Shire" does not learn intimations of immortality from nature; it serves only as a comforter, sorrowing with the youth by displaying "the beautiful and death-struck year":

> 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.
> (ll. 1—10)

"Yet this closeness to nature—albeit a sorrowing mortal nature—is absent in London. The persona has lost not only his oneness with the land but his empathy with man as well"[18]:

> Yonder, lightening other loads,
> The seasons range the country roads,
> But here in London streets I ken
> No such helpmates, only men;
> And these are not in plight to bear.
> If they would, another's care.
> They have enough as `tis: I see
> In many an eye that measures me
> The mortal sickness of a mind
> Too unhappy to be kind.
> Undone with misery, all they can
> Is to hate their fellow man;
> And till they drop they needs must still
> Look at you and wish you ill.
> (ll.19–32)

The picture of men of London, who "hate their fellow man," reflects the hostile world where "homely comforters" are substituted by men who "wish you ill."

The contrast between Shropshire and London is continued in two other poems of the exile group. *ASL* LII, "Far in a Western Brookland," echoes the mood of lyrics XXXVIII– XLI both in its use of wind imagery and its comparison of two distinct states of existence:

> 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, marveling 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.
(ll.1–12)

The wind image of the last stanza suggests the unquiet soul of the lad who has forsaken the land of his youth for a barren existence in London:

There, by the starlit fences,
The wanderer halts and hears
My soul that lingers sighing
About the glimmering weirs.
(ll. 13–16)

ASL LV offers a complication to the exile motif. It suggests that the new existence has also its compensation. It allows the lad to escape one feature which characterized life in Shropshire:

Westward on the high-hilled plains
Where for me the world began,
Still, I think, in newer veins
Frets the changeless blood of man.
Now that other lads than I
Strip to bathe on Severn shore,
They, no help, for all they try,
Tread the mill I trod before.
(ll. 1–8)

The last two lines of the above stanza implies that no longer must the London lad "tread the mill [he] trod before." The process of change viewed in the poems of the Shropshire setting is repeated in the last two stanzas of this lyric because it again describes youth as a time of uncertainty and change:

There, when hueless is the west
And the darkness hushes wide,
Where the lad lies down to rest
Stands the troubled dream beside.

There, on the thoughts that once were mine,
Day looks down the eastern steep,
And the youth at morning shine
Makes the vow he will not keep.
(ll. 9–16)

According to Leggett, if Shropshire and London are taken as symbolic of two diverse states of existence, it is necessary to recognize that Housman continues in these symbols the central paradox of loss and gain found in the individual poems of *A Shropshire Lad.* The quest for permanence in a mutable world can be achieved only through the sacrifice of the essence of existence itself. But, conversely, the loss of the simplicity and vitality of the pastoral world is partially offset by the more stable vision of maturity.[19]

"The Merry Guide," (*ASL* XLII) is an allegorical narrative in which the speaker of the poem is approached by "a youth that trod/With feathered cap on forehead/ And poised a golden rod". Here the persona recollects the departure from Shropshire as a mythic journey of death. This Merry Guide leads him across the countryside, refusing to say where they are going, refusing in fact, to say anything:

With mien to match the morning
And gay delightful guise
And friendly brows and laughter
He looked me in the eyes.

Oh whence, I asked, and whither?
He smiled and would not say,
And looked at me and beckoned
And laughed and lead the way.

And with kind looks and laughter
And not to say beside
We two went on together,
I and my happy guide.
(ll. 9–20)

According to Louise Boas, the merry guide of poem's title is the god Hermes, identified by his feathered cap (stanza 2) and his "serpent-circled wand" (stanza 15).[20]Here Hermes is performing his role of leading dead to the underworld. His birthplace was Acradia. He is the pastoral god, the god of roads, and the protector of travellers.[21] All these functions are consistent with images Housman uses in dealing with the departure from Shropshire.

The wind imagery dominates the poem. The narrator recalls the journey which began

Once in the wind of morning
I ranged the thymy wold;
The world-wide air was azure
And all the brooks ran gold.
(ll. 1–4)

The journey itself is described as the passing of the wind:

Across the glittering pastures
And empty upland still
And solitude of shepherds
High in the folded hill,

By hanging woods and hamlets
That gaze through orchards down

On many a windmill turning
And far discovered town,

With gay regards of promise
And sure unslackened stride
And smiles and nothing spoken
Led on my merry guide.
(ll.21–32)

Like Shelley's west wind, the wind through which the narrator and his guide travel is both "destroyer and preserver,"[22] carrying the blossoms of spring and the dead leaves of autumn. Thus the wind of spring symbolizes the destruction of life and the wind of autumn its preservation. It is, in fact, the paradoxical nature of the journey which complicates what is, on the surface, a simple narrative. "But the happy guide is also the conductor of the dead, whom the poem sees as giving the soul on its last journey all the affection it could not receive in life. And with that all the speechless fellow-feeling of the dead"[23]:

And like the cloudy shadows
Across the country blown
We two face on for ever,
But not we two alone.

With the great gale we journey
That breathes from gardens thinned,
Borne in the drift of blossoms
Whose petals throng the wind;

Buoyed on the heaven-heard whisper
Of dancing leaflets whirled
From all the woods that autumn
Bereaves in all the world.
(ll. 41–52)

The persona perceives the true nature of the journey in stanza 14, still he follows willingly his delightful guide:

> And midst the fluttering legion
> Of all that ever died
> I follow, and before us
> Goes the delightful guide,
> (ll. 53–56)

The irony of the poem lies in the fact that the "delightful guide" leads the speaker to the land of the dead. In fact, the title and the description of Hermes throughout the poem contribute to the ironical tone. "The guide is described in stanza 5 as "my happy guide," and in stanza 8, as a "merry guide." In addition, he is characterized in stanza 3 by a "gay delightful guise" and "friendly brows and laughter," and in stanza 5 by "kind looks and laughter," in stanza 8 and 15 by " gay regards of promise" and "lips that brim with laughter"[24] the persona's depiction of the guide has prompted Louise Boas to call the poem a highly ironic one:

> Man might expect this merry guide to lead him to life and love– to Acradia. But like trickster he is, he leads man on through the fields and flocks, through the woods and orchards, through sunlight and clouds, to the world of the dead. He makes gay promises– unspoken but implied. A happy journey? So it seems on the surface. But is not the happiness a dream? Hermes

is the dream guide. If one follows him then one is in a dream. Man travels then through the dream of life to the reality of death. It is the guide who laughs.[25]

The title of the poem is somewhat ambiguous and capable of both literal and ironic interpretation. "To an Athlete dying Young" clearly establishes the fact that, at times, death is an occasion of joy rather than of sorrow. The poem, then, may not be as "highly ironic" as Miss Boas has suggested. The poem, as John Bayley points out, "puts a sad a theme in a happy way, showing how the death guide, in whom we see all we can never have, accompanies us through life. Fulfillment in love comes only in imagination of it."[26]

The implication of "The Merry Guide" is that the departure leads to a kind of spiritual death.[27] London is, in the symbolic sense, the hades to which Terence is led by the god of the dead. This state of spiritual death relieves the lad of some pain of the more vital existence of Shropshire. "The Merry Guide" in the London sequence deals with the preserving aspect of death. "The Immortal Part" pictures man's permanence as beginning after the death of the body and the soul:

"When shall this slough of sense be cast,
This dust thought be laid at last,

This man of flesh and soul be slain
And the man of bone remain?"
(ll.5–8)

ASL XLIV views death as the preserver of man's good name:

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.
(ll. 1–4)

The poem is based on the paradox that to destroy is in one sense to preserve. This theme is more briefly stated in *ASL* XLV, where Housman alludes to a Biblical passage to support an unorthodox doctrine:

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.

The first two lines of stanza 1 recall Christ's words in Matthew 5:29 "And if thy right eye causeth thee to stumble, pluck it out and cast it from thee....". and lines 5 and 6 continue the allusion to verse 30: And if thy right hand causeth thee to stumble, cut it off and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish and not thy whole body go into hell."

We find a complicated view of the Acradia-exile pattern in XLII–XLV group of lyrics. The persona may look back eagerly on the

lost youth for which Shropshire now stands, but he finds compensation in the symbolic death-state of the London exile, for he escaped the pain of the youth's first discovery of his own transience. This new mood of thought is continued in later poems of the exile group, which deal with the lad's new found stability in the stoical attitude to life.[28]

In *ASL* LI, the lad sees a Grecian statue in a London gallery. He is "brooding on [his] heavy ill," but the statue is "still in marble stone" and steadfastly looking at him. He imagines that the statue speaks to him, for he sees that they share a common fate:

> Loitering with a vacant eye
> Along the Grecian gallery,
> And brooding on my heavy ill,
> I met a statue standing still.
> Still in marble stone stood he,
> And steadfastly he looked at me.
> "Well met," I thought that the look would say,
> We neither knew, when we were young,
> These Londoners we live among."
> .....
> "What, lad, drooping with your lot?
> I too would be where I am not.
> (ll. 1–10, 13–14)

The statue advises the lad to become a stoic– one who is indifferent to pleasure and pain. The trouble of life becomes light and bearable to the lad who achieves a degree of permanence in the face of life's transience by adopting the guise of death. He becomes "Manful like the man of stone":

Courage, lad, 'tis not for long:
Stand, quit you like stone, be strong.
So I thought his look would say;
And light on me my trouble lay,
And I stept out in flesh and bone
Manful like the man of stone.
(ll. 21–26)

Housman's advocacy of stoicism is inconsistent because it contradicts the attitude expressed in other poems.[29] Critics have never been careful enough to note the growth and development of the Shropshire lad. An examination of the position of these poems reveals that many of these poems deal with the pleasures of life at its prime and the pain of its dissolution; others show an unconcern for both its pleasures and its pains.

The first stanza of *ASL* XLVIII suggests the futility of struggling against "earth and high heaven":

Be still, my soul, be still; the arms you bear are brittle,
Earth and high heaven are fixt of old and founded strong.
Think rather, –call to thought, if now you grieve a little,
The days when we had rest, O soul, for they were long.
(ll.1–4)

Gordon Pitts points out that the poet is echoing and reversing the words of a popular nineteenth-century hymn which begins: "Be still, my soul: The lord is on thy side;/ Bear patiently the cross of grief and pain," and ends:

Be still, my soul: the hour is hastening on
When we shall be forever with the Lord,
When disappointment, grief, and fear are gone.[30]

ASL XLVI describes how a man reconciles himself to the consequences of his human state. The poet imagines, for his 'timeless grave', no timeless memorial garland, no cypress, yew, rosemary, and no leafless boughs which survive the winter and are reborn in the spring:

> Bring, in this timeless grave to throw,
> No cypress, sombre on the snow;
> Snap not from the bitter yew
> His leaves that lives December through;
> Break no rosemary, bright with rime
> And sparkling to the cruel clime;
> Nor plod the winter land to look
> For willows in the icy brook
> To cast them leafless round him: bring
> No spray that ever buds in spring.
>
> (ll.1–10)

"The juxtaposition of those plants which survive the winter and experience the rebirth of spring with the "timeless grave" of one who "never shall arise" only serves to increase the irony of man's mortal state. Reflecting a new sense of resignation, the poem states that man must be comforted by those objects of nature which are for a single season" [31]:

> But if the Christmas field has kept
> Awns the last gleaner overstept,
> Or shriveled flax, whose flower is blue
> A single season, never two;
> Or if one haulm whose year is o'er
> Shivers on the upland frore,
> —Oh , bring from hill and stream and plain
> Whatever will not flower again,
> To give him comfort: he and those
> Shall bide eternal bedfellows
> Where low upon the couch he lies
> Whence he never shall arise.
>
> (ll.11–22)

ASL L is the poem of a man who looks back to the time when he was a Knighton lad: [32]

In valleys f springs of rivers,
By Ony and Teme and Clun,
The country for easy livers,
The quietest under the sun,

We still had sorrows to lighten,
One could be always glad,
And lads knew trouble at Knighton
When I was a Knighton lad.
(ll.1–8)

He realizes the deplorable fact that even in youth "one could not be always glad," because one has "sorrows to lighten," and if, in London, "sorrow is with one still." But he finds satisfaction in the thought that if a man's burdens increase with age, so does his ability to bear them:

'Tis sure small matter for wonder
If sorrow is with one still.
.....
And if as a lad grows older
The troubles he bears are more,
He carries griefs on a shoulder
That handselled them long before.
(ll.11–16)

The imagery of the poem makes it clear that the pain of human existence is a heavy weight, the luggage which encumbers the journey. The poem then looks to place where this burden may be removed, and the destination is envisaged in the last stanza:

Where shall one halt to deliver
This luggage I'd lief set down"

Not Thames, not Teme the river,
Nor London nor Knighton the town:

'Tis a long way further han Knighton,
A quieter place than than Clun,
Where doomsday may thunder and lighten
And little `twill matter to one.
(ll.17–24)

"The concluding poems of *A Shropshire Lad* thus depict, on the whole, the mood of one who is resigned to the fact of death and has lost the frustration of youth who first becomes aware that he must die. Anguish is replaced by nostalgia for lost youth and, especially towards the end of the work, for friends the persona has outlived. "With Rue My Heart is laden," is perhaps the finest expression of this mood."[33]Lyric LVIII mourns "two honest lads" who accompanied the lad when he "came last to Ludlow," and "The Isle of Portland," *ASL* LIX, mourns the loss of a friend:

On yonder island, not to rise,
Never to stir forth free,
Far from his folk a dead lad lies
That once was friend with me.
(ll.5–8)

In LXI ("Hughley Steeple"), "The reunion with lost friends is found only in the grave, but it is also the final exile."[34]This is the last poem of the exile group, and is concerned wholly with the death of friends whom the lad has survived:

The vane on Hughley steeple
Veers bright, a far-known sign,
And there lie Hughley people,

And there lie friends of mine.
Tall in their midst the tower
Divides the shade and sun,
And the clock strikes the hour
And tells the time to none.
(ll. 1–8)

Hughley Steeple, which divides the shade and sun, the north and the south, also plays a very important role in controlling the poem's imagery. These two directions have special significance because shaded northern side contains the suicides:

To south the headstones cluster,
The sunny mounds lie thick:
The dead are more in muster
At Hughley than the quick.
North, for a soon-told number,
Chill graves the sexton delves,
And steeple-shadowed slumber
The slayers of themselves.
(ll. 9–16)

The narrator, resigned to death, makes no distinction between the groups. Death is now a matter of indifference:

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.
(ll.17–24)

On the surface, "Hughley Steeple" may appear to violate the Shropshire-exile structure. However, there is no clue in the poem to suggest that the speaker is now in Shropshire viewing the scene he is describing. Moreover, the speaker refers to the scene as *there,* not *here*: " And there lie in Hughley people,/ and there

lie friends of mine" (ll.3–4)Ultimately, it deserves mention here that in other poems of the London group, the narrator describes scenes in Shropshire as if he were actually present, though certainly he was not. Lyric LII pictures a scene in "a western brookland". The conclusion of the poem, however, makes it clear that the scene is viewed only in the imagination, for the narrator says of himself: "Here I lie down in London / And turn to rest alone."[35]

The prevailing mood of *Last Poems* is the same as that of the second half of *A Shropshire Lad,* where the persona muses on his Shropshire youth from a new viewpoint and sees both the loss and gain involved in the process of change. "The First of May" (*Last Poems* XXXIV) exhibits one characteristic pattern of the exile poem.. In its four stanzas, Housman develops two viewpoints. In the first two stanzas, the persona is reminded of something of the sense of being a part of the world at its prime:

The orchards half the way
From home to Ludlow fair
Flowered on the first of May
In Mays when I was there:
And seen from stile or turning
The plume of smoke would show
Where fires were burning
That went out long ago.

The plum broke forth in green,
The pear stood high and snowed,
My friends and I between
Would take the Ludlow road ;
Dressed to the nines and drinking

And light in heart and limb ,
And each chap thinking
The fair was held for him.
(ll. 1–16)

The imagery of the stanzas indicates that the spring as well as the fair was held for the young man. It reflects the sense of harmony with the natural world. However, this sense of harmony is not there in the following stanzas and we see the gulf between the persona and his lost youth. This distance is made real by the projection of the other young men who are now "the fools that we were then":[36]

Between the trees in flower
New friends at fairtime tread
The way where Ludlow tower
Stands planted on the dead.
Our thoughts, a long while after,
They think, our words they say;
Theirs now's the laughter,
The fair, the first of May.

Ay, yonder lads are yet
The fools that we were then;
For oh, the sons we get
Are still the sons of men.
The sumless tale of sorrow
Is all unrolled in vain:

May comes to-morrow
And Ludlow fair again.
(ll.17–32)

Here the youth is exiled from the natural world and the sense of being a part of the world at its prime has been lost. The youth now realizes that it was all an illusion; neither the spring nor the fair existed for him. The world of difference that lies between

past and present is very clearly stated here. It was nothing more than a part in an endless pageant of foolish young men acting out their own brief roles. But the persona betrays himself finally because he cannot destroy completely the beauty of the former vision. He realizes that the illusion is stronger than the knowledge that it was an illusion: "The sumless tale of sorrow / Is all unrolled in vain."[37]

A number of the finest lyrics of Last Poems begin with the persona brooding over his boyhood when he had "youth and pride." In such a situation, the point of view is ironical because the persona looks back on his former self from the vantage point which time provides. *Last poems* XXXIX provides an instance of this:

When summer's end is nighing
And skies at evening cloud,
I muse on change and fortune
And all the feats I vowed
When I was young and proud.

The weathercock at sunset
Would lose the slanted ray,
And I would climb the beacon
That looked to Wales away
And saw the last of day.

From hill and cloud and heaven
The hues of evening died;
Night welled through lane and hollow
And hushed the countryside,
But I had youth and pride.
(ll.1–15)

"The imagery of dying summer and dying day unites past and present, and structurally the poem is built on the two contrasting responses to an image that signals the death of something desirable. For the older man the image evokes the past, but ironically the vision that he conjures up is that of himself as a young man observing the same sunset and contemplating the future"[38]:

> The year might age, and cloudy
> The lessening day night close,
> But air of other summers
> Breathed from beyond the snows,
> And I had hope of those.
> (ll.21–25)

The images of change, summer's end and sunset recur in each stanza of the poem. As the poem progresses, the aspirations of the young man are replaced by the mature man's reluctant acceptance of what the scene he has gazed upon since boyhood really means. Typically, the poem does not end with an outcry against the injustice of it all, but with a simple sigh, the heart's echo of the last sounds of summer[39]:

> So here's an end of roaming
> On eves when autumn nighs:
> The ear too fondly listens
> For summer's parting sighs,
> And then the heart replies.
> (ll. 31–35)

In *Last Poems* XXXV, the search for the "lost young man," still continues. But, as Bayley puts it, "the contemplation of

what is distant or disappeared, or a country of the mind, is less important for a romantic poet like Housman than the harsh actualities they contrast with."[40]

When first my way to fair I took
Few pence in purse had I,
And long I used to stand and look
At things I could not buy.

Now times are altered: if I care
To buy a thing I can;
The pence are here and here's the fair,
But where's the lost young man?
(ll.1–8)

The poems of this type all contain, at the bottom, the paradoxical notion that it was only the illusion that made life meaningful. The mature man, looking into the past, sees that life held a hope and significance for the young man which he no longer finds. The very act of looking into the past destroys the meaning by revealing the illusion. In "When first my way to fair I took," suggests the same idea in a rather complicated way by the contrast between the young man with the few pence for whom the fair has a meaning and significance, and the mature man, who could now satisfy the desires of his youth, except that the act would now be meaningless. It was only the vanity and innocence which created the desires and the young man is gone. The real intention of the poet is, however, not to reveal the vanity

of youthful desires but to suggest the destructive effect of knowledge[41]:

—To think that two and two are four
And neither five nor three
The heart of man has long been sore
And long 'tis like to be.
(ll. 9–12)

The significance of the fair has departed with the "lost young man", and the persona's search for meaning takes him back to the past.

"Hell Gate" (*Last Poems* XXXI), is an allegorical narrative which deals with one aspect of Housman's treatment of the past. It employs symbolic devices to treat the blending of idyllic past and hellish present. "Housman had his own hell, of course, but he did not believe that the wages of sin are death, as the narrator reflects while travelling towards hell's gate with his 'dark conductor' "[42], a satanic version of the Merry Guide"

Many things I thought of then,
Battle, and the loves of men,
Cities entered, oceans crossed,
Knowledge gained and virtue lost,
Cureless folly done and said,
And the lovely way that led
To the slimepit and the mire
And the everlasting fire.
(ll. 25–32)

The narrator meets Sin and death on the drawbridge, at a moment when the sentry, one of the damned who guards the gates of hell, also reminds him of another time and place. In the

company of Death and Sin, "the sentry turned his head,/ looked, and knew me, and was Ned" (ll. 63–64). This sentry, seeing his old friend is also damned, revolts, and shoots the guide, who is of course Satan. This murder, an instinctive act of comradeship and love against all the odds, absolutely ruins the hell. In the end there are just the two of them:

> And the hollowness of hell
> Sounded as its master fell,
> And the mourning echo rolled
> Ruin through his kingdom old.
> Tyranny and terror flown
> Left a pair of friends alone,
> And beneath the nether sky
> All that stirred was he and I.
> (ll.87–94)

Then, the two friends from the past, silently begin "the backward way," and the fire about Ned extinguishes. The last lines, says Keith Jebb, "echo the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, except that in this backward glance nobody is turned to salt"[43]:

> And the ebbing luster died
> From the soldier at my side,
> As in all his spruce attire
> Foiled the everlasting fire.
> Midmost of the homeward track
> Once we listened and looked back;
> But the city, dusk and mute,
> Slept, and there was no pursuit.
> (ll. 97–104)

Clearly the poem deals with the longing for the redemption of the fallen world by the innocent world of the past. However, it is a theme which could not be treated realistically. Ned, the symbol of the pastoral world, releases the persona from the hold of

Death and Sin, the hell to which the fall from innocence has led him. So the narrator is ultimately able to recover the "lost young man," but only in a dream-vision.

Many of the poems of *A Shropshire Lad* deal with the pleasures of life at its prime and the pain of its dissolution; others show an unconcern for both its pleasures and its pains. The former mood pervades the Shropshire poems and the latter, those poems after the exile. Housman depicts in the latter poems of *A Shropshire Lad* an attitude towards life which has a direct relation to the young man's first discovery of his mortality. "The young man, cut off from a view of the physical world as permanent and benevolent, cannot accept the existence of a spiritual world which transcends the physical. The young man rebels against the injustice of it all; the mature man accepts the inevitable not as a happy solution but as the only possible one. The new attitude does not relieve the pain, but it renders it bearable. Perhaps the chief distinction of the concluding poems of *A Shropshire Lad* is the evidence of a mature mind imposing order on the flux of experience in a way that the adolescent mind could not."[42] In brief, this group of exile poems of Housman allows us to share, at least temporarily, the sense of what it means to recognize the passing of youth, the movement from one

view of life to another, besides a nostalgic feeling for the place, although imaginatively.

Notes and references:

1. Maurice Pollet, "Lettre inedited de A.H. Housman," *Etudes Anglaises,* V (1937) , 403.
2. Keith Jebb, *A.E.Housman* (Seren Books, 1992) ,p.73.
3. B.J.Leggett, Housman's *Land of Lost Content: A Critical Study of 'A Shropshire Lad'* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1970) p.93.
4. Ralph Franklin. "Housman's Shropshire," *MLQ,* XXIV (1963), 164–71.
5. Tom Burns Haber, "The Printer's Copy of *A Shropshire Lad*" in *The Manuscript Poems of A.E. Housman,* pp. 126–27.
6. Norman Page. *A.E.Housman: A Critical Biography* (London: Macmillan, 1983) p. 190.
7. Of course, in the convention of the work, Terence is the author of all the poems. Housman, it may be recalled, had originally intended to entitle the work *Poems by Ter ence Hearsay,* but was persuaded to change the title to *A Shropshire Lad* on the suggestion of his friend A.W .Pollard. See Richards p. 71.
8. John Bayley, *Housman's Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon,1992) p.116.
9. Norman Page, op. cit., p.195.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 190.

11. "Ode: Intimations of Immortality From Recollections of Early Childhood," l. 17.

12 *Ibid,* 180.

13. See John Stevenson, "Housman's Lyric Tradition," *Forum,* IV (1962) , 17–21,for a comparison of the attitudes towards nature in the poetry of Housman and Wordsworth which I have followed here.

14. Norman Page , op.cit., p.190

15. R.L. Kowalczyk, "Horatian Tradition and Pastoral Mode in Housman's *A Shropshire Lad," Victorian Poetry,* IV (1966), 232.

16. No.XLI is the last of the poems added to the printer's copy of A *Shropshire Lad.* See Haber, *Manuscript Poems,* p. 127.

17. Stevenson, op.cit., p. 20.

18. Leggett, op. cit. p.113.

19. *Ibid.*, p.115.

20. Louise Boas. "Housman's 'The Merry Guide,' " *Explicator,* III (1944–45), Item 6.

21. Miss Boas points out these functions of god in her analysis of the poem.

22. "Ode to the West Wind," l. 14.

23. John Bayley, op.cit., p. 113.

24. Leggett, op.cit., p.117.

25. Louise Boas. op.cit.Item 6.

26. John Bayley, op.cit., p.114.

27. Because one of the conventions of the pastoral is that an existence close to the soil, close to nature, is vital and intense, life apart from the pastoral setting –at court or in the city –involves a loss of vitality, a complication of the "simple life," and also a corruption.

28. Leggett, op.cit. p.120.

29. See Jacob Bronowski, "Alfred Edward Housman" in *The Poet's Defence*, p.221; and Hugh Molson, "The Philosophies of Hardy and Housman," pp.207–208. The *stoicism* expressed in Housman's poetry does not represent a philosophy in any strict sense, but an attitude or emotional state.

30. Gordon Pitts, "Housman's 'Be Still, My Soul,' " *Victorian Poetry*, III (1965) , 137–138.

31. Leggett, op.cit., p. 123.

32. Knighton is a town in southwestern Shropshire on the river Teme.

33. Leggett, op.cit., p. 125.

34. Norman Page, op.cit., p. 190.

35. Leggett, op. cit., p. 127.

36. B.J.Leggett, *The Poetic Art of A.E.Housman: Theory And Practice* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978) p.73.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

38. *Ibid.*, p.78.

39. *Ibid.*, p.79.

40. Bayley, op.cit.,p. 55.

41. Leggett, op. cit. (N 36), p.79.

42. Bayley, op.cit.,p. 155.

43. Keith Jebb, op.cit., p.90.

44. Leggett, op.cit., (N3), p.124.