

Chapter- 6

Treatment of Nature

London is a woeful place,
Shropshire is much pleasanter.
Then let us smile a little space
Upon fond nature's morbid grace.
Oh, Woe, woe, woe, etcetera...

Mr. Housman's Message by Ezra Pound.

During his childhood Housman often took his brothers and sisters for walks along the countryside with a didactic purpose, teaching them the names of flowers and more particularly of trees, which he always loved and could identify with characteristic accuracy and precision. Being a Foundation Scholar he could live at home as a day-boy, walking to school each morning across the fields. He was sixteen years old at this time. That he much preferred his home-life in the midst of nature and with his stepmother Lucy is shown by this sad little letter from his school in 1875:

Yesterday I went into the churchyard, from which one can see Fockbury quite plainly, especially the window of your room. I was there from two o'clock till three. I wonder if you went into your room between those hours. One can see quite plainly the pine tree, the sycamore and the elm at the top of the field. The house looks much nearer than you would expect, and the distance between the sycamore and the beeches in the orchard seems very great, much longer than one thinks when one is in Fockbury.¹

And this letter to Percy Withers in 1928 gives a rare hint at how observant Housman was of nature:

...there have been so many early springs in the last fifteen years people have forgotten the proper time for leaves and flowers to come out. For twenty years or so from 1887 onward I noted these things in a diary, on the strength of which I inform you that the lilac usually comes into blossom on 7 May...²

That Shropshire is a county of the mind, this is not really so in respect of topography, has already been explained in chapter 5. Housman mapped out his territory in a letter to Houston Martin:

I am Worcestershire by birth: Shropshire was our western horizon, which make me feel romantic about it. I do not know the county well, except in parts, and some of my topographical details are wrong and imaginary. The Wrekin is wooded, and Wenlock edge along the western side, but the Clees and most of the other hills are grass or heather. In the southern half of the county, to which I have confined myself, the hills are generally long ridges running from north to south, with valleys, broad or narrow, between.³

The English countryside is everywhere in Housman's poetry. Many of the poems— and not only those of *A Shropshire Lad*— are given a pastoral setting. *ASL* II ("Loveliest of Trees") may be called a nature poem in a way characteristic of Housman. The interest he shows in

nature in this poem is purely visual in character. He tries to strike a note of contrast between the beauty of spring which returns eternally in accordance with the cycle of seasons and his transient life. While reading it, one is reminded of Robert Herrick's *To Daffodils*. A major difference between the two poems lies in the fact that Housman perhaps does not deal with the idea of the transience of life as effectively as Herrick has done. Cleanth Brooks writes, "Time is the enemy of delight and yet the cherry tree is the product of time. The very description of the springtime beauty is ominous: if "hung with snow" is a way of stressing the unbelievable whiteness of the blossoms, the phrase also hints of winter and death to come."⁴ It is characteristic of Housman to conjure up images of nature in order to highlight the brevity of human life:

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.

Housman's preoccupation with nature is very different from that of the early Romantics and we must take into account this changed attitude if we are to understand his poems. He did not propound any pantheistic philosophy, nor did he write a poem like Wordsworth's "*The Education of Nature*" or Keats "*Ode to Autumn*". "If nature is lovely and offers man delight, she does not offer him solace or sustain him as Wordsworth was solaced and sustained."⁵

"A certain love of Nature, a vital interest, which man's intelligence and feeling take in the outward world, a desire to

harmonize its doings with our own, to picture them as human, to give them an intelligence and passion like our own, appears to have been implanted in the human race from the earliest times.”⁶ However, the depiction of nature by Thomas Hardy or Robert Frost reveals the somewhat altered perspective of the twentieth century. Frost’s themes in the nature poems are the usual themes of the 20th century poets – fear, grimness, terror, horror, loneliness, isolation, paradoxes, etc. His attitude to nature is scientific in so far as he thinks that nature is indifferent to man and does not take notice of him. Nature was glorified like a benign mother by Wordsworth and other Romantic poets. To them nature appears to have a *holy plan* of her own for the good of mankind and she keeps a benevolent watch over man. But Robert Frost views nature as hostile to man and other living beings. The outward appearance of nature is highly deceptive.

Let us extend the term *poetry* to include some of the finest prose fiction and look at the picturing of nature in Hemingway and Faulkner. “The natural world is reflected with beautiful delicacy and even radiance in the fishing episode in Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, or in the hunting scenes of Faulkner’s “The Bear.” This latter story concludes with what can be described as a great hymn to nature.”⁷

So our immensely increased knowledge of nature or even the so-called scientific neutralization of nature has not destroyed her charm in the eye of many of our poets. But it has altered their attitudes

towards her and at the same time it has emphasized man's sense of alienation from nature. "The poems of Robert Frost testify again and again to the elemental attraction of nature of which man is a part, but Frost never yields to the delusion that man can slip through the invisible barrier to merge himself into nature."⁸ The poems, *My November Guest* and *Reluctance* do portray the pleasure the poet experiences in communion with nature. But it is in accordance with his conviction that man should never make the mistake of crossing the "wall" and trespassing into the domain of nature. In *Tree At My Window*, the tree can experience only outer weather, storms, strong wind, etc. it does not and cannot know "Inner weather"— spiritual upheaval, the agony of the soul, the plague and the torment of the thinking and questioning mind. The poet's attitude to nature is almost contrary to that of romantic poetry. The Romantics emphasized the points of similarity between man and nature. Frost stresses the essential differences between both the worlds.

Again, the traveller in *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* pauses as he enjoys the beauty of the lovely scene. He is tempted to prolong his stay there, allowing his mind to be hypnotized by the charming woods:

The woods are lovely dark and deep.

But he is a man of the world: he has promises to keep and it is significant that he drives on.

Frost's treatment of nature can help us to understand Housman's characteristic attitude towards nature in the beautiful poem XL ("Tell me not here, it needs not saying") in *Last Poems*. Of course, the poetic strategies of the two poets differ in a number of ways and I am not going to suggest that the attitudes of the two poets are identical. But the comparison can help us understand the "modern" attitude of Housman that we may easily overlook

LP XL is a celebration of nature's beauty and a farewell to that beauty. The theme of the poem is the resignation of the poet's mistress Nature to another. The poet possessed her too completely to feel that she is less than a part of himself. "It is not the poet's fault but nature's, the deceiving enchantress, whom the poet willingly resigns to some successor"⁹:

Tell me not here, it needs not saying,
What tune the enchantress plays
In aftermaths of soft September
Or under blanching mayes,
For she and I were long acquainted
And I knew all her ways.

The poet's knowledge of the ways of nature is thorough and complete. He expresses this in the second and third stanzas:

On russet floors, by waters idle,
The pine lets fall its cone;
The cuckoo shouts all day at nothing
The leafy dells alone;
And traveller's joy beguiles in autumn
Hearts that have lost their own.

On acres of the seeded grasses
The changing burnish heaves;
Or marshaled under moons of harvest
Stand still all night the sheaves;

Or beeches strip in storms for winter
And stain the wind with leaves.

“These beautiful stanzas do more than create a series of scenes from nature. They insinuate the speaker’s claim to his possession of nature through an intimate knowledge of her ways. Each of the vignettes suggests the secret life of nature revealed to a rapt and solitary observer: the tap of the falling pine cone, audible only because the scene is hushed and breathless; the shouts of the solitary cuckoo, who seems to be calling to no other bird and not even to a human listener but with cheerful idiocy shouting “at nothing”; the flower called “traveller’s joy” in the autumn sunshine silently extending to the joyless wayfarer its grace of self, the namesake of joy.”¹⁰

The “changing burnish” on the “acres of the seeded grasses,” probably mean the faint light that one sees upon a hayfield in late summer when the wind heaves and ripples the long grass stems to catch the light. “Burnish” is not too extravagant a term, for the grass sometimes shimmers as if they were metallic. The wind that heaves the grass is the wind of late summer. Late autumn gale strips the leaves of the beech trees. “The secret life of nature is thus depicted through all weathers and throughout the round of the seasons. All of it has been observed by the speaker, all of it has been made his own

possession through knowledge and is held now in memory. But the various scenes of the changing year are but the magic spells woven by the one enchantress.”¹¹

The fourth stanza emphasizes the speaker’s claim to possession. However, “the countries I resign” depicts the relinquishment of his claims:

Possess, as I possessed a season,
The countries I resign,
Where over the elmy plains the highway
Would mount the hills and shine,
And full of shade the pillared forest
Would murmur and be mine.

“His claim to possession is based upon a shared experience, a secret knowledge, the kind of bond that unites two lovers who feel that they belong to each other. But in this instance, the beloved is nature; and nature is not one to recognize any lover’s claim to possession.”¹¹

Nature, which is stupid as well as unfeeling, used to seduce him with her beauties. But now the poet realizes that she is faithless, no longer giving herself to him but to some stranger. The poet has loved nature whole-heartedly, but now his time for loving nature has come to an end, and now it is another’s turn. The poet’s disillusionment is probably based on the grim realization that nature’s charms are really fickle. She is the idiot mistress, having no more mind than heart.

For nature, heartless, witless nature,
Will neither care nor know
What stranger's feet may find the meadow
And trespass there and go,
Nor ask amid the dews of morning
If they are mine or no.

Nature, despite all her attractiveness to man, is highly indifferent to him. This is the most important point upon which the poem is based. The very charm of nature lies in the way in which she can give herself freely to all of us who will eagerly try to claim her. And moreover, if nature is heartless and witless, she is still as freshly beautiful as the morning. Nature spreads her dewy meadow as virginally fresh for the imprint of the feet of the trespasser as for those of the old lover who would like to believe that he alone possessed her.¹²

Wordsworth, who "could receive infinite teaching, healing' splendour of thought, imaginations calm and fair, freedom from melancholy, joy ,peace and love in his own heart from the world around him. Nothing in him interfered with Nature's action on him. She spoke to him, and he listened to her song" also realized that "there was vital difference between man and Nature, and this he laid down with great and careful clearness. Nature and man were two separate beings, distinguishable always the one from the other. The poet does not make this or that mood in Nature by imagination; it is Nature who communicates, like a

person, her mood to the poet. We must grasp, when we read Wordsworth, this conception of his, if we would read him rightly, this separate life of Nature and man which enables a reciprocal action to take place between them. We do not receive from Nature what we give to her, "her life the eddying of her living soul," as Coleridge thought; we give, and then receive back from her, something wholly different. It is not the reflection of ourselves which Nature gives us; it is the friendship of another life than ours. The birds do not sing gaily or sorrowfully because the poet happens to be sad or happy; they sing their own pain or pleasure"¹³:

The birds around me hopped and played;
Their thoughts I cannot measure.¹⁴

But he is certain that they have their own feeling:

For the least motion that they made,
It seemed a thrill of pleasure.¹⁵

The flowers had each its own enjoyment in the air, not his:

It is my faith that every flower
Enjoys the air it breathes.¹⁶

Certainly the idea of the poem has been taken seriously by critics, including Empson, who praised it, but writes:

I think the poem is wonderfully beautiful. But a secret gimmick may well be needed in it to overcome our resistances, because the thought must be about the silliest or most self-centered that has been expressed

about Nature. Housman is offended with the scenery, when he pays a visit to his native place, because it does not remember the great man; this is very rude of it. But he has described it as a lover, so in a way the poem is only consistent to become jealous at the end. Perhaps the sentiment has more truth than one might think...many English painters really are in love with the scenery of England, and nothing else, so they had much better give up their theoretical tiff with Nature and get back to painting it.¹⁷

Ricks regards Empson , but maintains that “What we have is the co-existence of powerful love for Nature with powerful erotic feelings. It is in the last stanza that the bitterness makes itself heard; the poet is still in love with something he knows is heartless and witless (no substitute for the love of people). Lurking behind this attack on the faithless promiscuity of Nature is the traditional image for a promiscuous woman as “the wide world’s common place,” or “the bay where all men ride.” Bitterness, perversity, and self-reproach are all fused by lyrical grace into a poem unique in the language.”¹⁸

Housman is definitely modern in his attitude towards nature. The essential themes in the nature poetry of the 20th

century — fear, horror, loneliness, isolation, paradoxes— are all there in his poetry. Wordsworth used to assert that nature never did betray the heart that loved her. But Housman does not agree with it. According to him, nature is ever indifferent to man. Housman, like Frost, believed that the external calm and beauty of nature is highly deceptive. Nor is he, like Wordsworth, a poet who has had a vision in youth which he can spend the rest of his life interpreting. Housman's poems tell us of his daily, and one might say, common experience. His earlier poems manifest his lifelong interest in the contemplation of nature by means of careful observation. In these poems, contraries— light and darkness, good and evil—are constantly being set side by side. But, as Norman Marlow points out, "the sensitiveness to the beauty of the world which finds exquisite expression in his poetry was heightened by the thought of death."¹⁹ "His footprints become our own; we stand in his shoes; we share in his experience, which has been treasured up and given a life beyond life. That is what art can do. That is why we must always feel a deep gratitude to the poet."²⁰

References:

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2. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
3. Henry Mass (ed.), *The Letters of A.E.Housman*, (Rupert Hart-Davis, London, 1971), p. 352.
4. Cleanth Brooks, in *A.E.Housman: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Christopher Ricks (ed.), (Prentice-Hall, Inc., Eaglewood Cliffs. 1968), p.78.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Stopford A.Brooke, *Naturalism in English Poetry* (J.M.Dent & Sons, London & Toronto), p. 25.
7. Cleanth Brooks, op.cit., p.79.
8. *Ibid.*
9. John Bayley, *Housman's Poems* (Oxford:Clarendon,1992) p.170.
10. Cleanth Brooks, op.cit.,p.81.
11. *Ibid.* p.82.
12. Cleanth Brooks, op.cit., p. 83
13. Brooke, op.cit., pp. 161-62.
14. Quoted in Brooke, op.cit., p.161.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*

17. William Empson, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 2 (1962), 40–41. See also Christopher Ricks, *The Force of Poetry*, 177.
18. Ricks,(ed), op.cit.,(N4), p.122.
19. Norman Marlow, *A.E.Housman: Scholar and Poet* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958), p.2.
20. Cleanth Brooks, op.cit., p.84.