

Topic : A.E. Housman's Poetry:

A Reassessment

A cursory glance at the small output shows that Housman may not rank with major Victorian poets with respect to the emotional intensity and thematic variety of their verse. But he can justifiably be called a poet who communicates with utmost verbal directness. Since he has never been rated as a major figure, he has, perhaps, not received the amount of critical attention which, for example, Hopkins did. But the fact that outstanding critics like Edmund Wilson, Randall Jarrell, William Empson, Christopher Ricks, F.W. Bateson, and Cleanth Brooks have commented on his poetry, clearly indicates that his verse has its own kind of poetic excellence. The present study entitled *A.E. Housman's Poetry: A Reassessment* aims at studying the major themes of Housman's poetry. Since his death in 1936 Housman's character and personality have attracted more critical attention than his poetry.

Housman's poetry has often been praised by his critics for its simplicity of form and meaning. Apparently it does not seem to offer any difficulty. But there is enough truth in what J.P. Bishop has remarked about this simplicity when he says that despite an apparent clarity such that almost any poem seems ready to deliver its meaning at once, there is always something that is not clear, something not brought into the open, something that is left in doubt. Like the classical philosophers, Epicurus and Lucritus, Housman believed that the human fear of death prevents any real and productive means of existence. An examination of his poetry reveals the manner in which he employs the tenets of atomic theory

to demonstrate the vacuous nature of human life in an enduring face of death.

Housman in his poems such as "Loveliest of Trees", explicitly expresses his belief that an awareness of the brevity of life leads to a desire to experience it more intensely. His poem "Reveille" is a call for action and involvement in youth before death closes the opportunity for action. In many of Housman's poems, however, the recognition of transience and decay leads to the desire for the release of death rather than a more meaningful participation in life. It is the second element of the theme that has led many critics to dismiss Housman as a bitter pessimist who exposes the tragic side of life. However, a careful analysis of the poems in which these two aspects of the theme appear casts some doubt on this conclusion. It is clear, in fact, in examining the view of life contained in "Loveliest of Trees" that to regard Housman merely as a pessimist is to oversimplify a more complex attitude.

Some other critics, however, find that Housman answers the question of life and death in contradictory ways. *A Shropshire Lad* is based on the human dilemma of life and death, and this dilemma can be resolved only in paradoxical terms. To be fully understood it must be seen in relation to the concern with permanence and change, and innocence and experience, which lies at the heart of the work. In his 'Apology' to *Late Lyrics and Earlier Hardy* defends himself against the charge of pessimism. Housman had similar problem and made his own attempts to distance himself from the charge of pessimism. For instance, in his letter to Houston Martin Housman writes that pessimism is 'silly' and himself is a peyorist as opposed to a meliorist.

It is possible that both these writers would have embraced pessimism, but they did not want to be thought of as people who could only see the dark side of things. They both wanted to make it clear that they had arrived at their positions after due consideration of the evidence; as Housman pointed out in the letter to Houston Martin that he arrived at his peiorism owing to his observation of the world, not to personal circumstances.

The discussion of the theme of soldiering evinces that Housman was greatly fascinated by soldiering and the accidents of military life. The most important source for Housman's compassion for the desperate young soldier was his youngest brother, Herbert. Herbert's battalion took part in the Boar War of 1901, and he was killed in action. The fact of his death inspired writing or re-writing of some of Housman's greatest poetry. In a letter to his sister Kate, he wrote that the essential business of poetry was to harmonize the sadness of the universe. Yet publicly, Housman appeared wholly unmoved by the Great War and cynical about its motives.

Duty, friendship, and bravery are the three public or conventional values that Housman expects to find in a soldier. The sacrifices made by soldiers in defending their motherland always won his admiration. Military friendship and community is another important characteristic of Housman's poetry. Many of the lyrics lament friendship broken by death, which is the inevitable fate of Housman's soldier. Courage and stoic endurance are the two constant themes of Housman's poetry. In some of the poems, Housman shows the pain and sorrow certainly involved in the act of dying.

The first poem of *A Shropshire Lad*, "1887", and "Epitaph for an Army of Mercenaries" have the same subject matter and caused some controversy in their attitude towards war, religion and patriotism.

The tragedy of unrequited love, a symbol perhaps of his own passionate friendship for Moses Jackson, haunts Housman. In many of his love poems, he treats the theme of a heartless mistress who relents too late. Earlier group of Shropshire poems also depict the varied faces of love: the misery of being unloved at the time of loving, the folly of loving that produces only misery, the lover's suicide, the exchange of innocence for experience, faithlessness, etc. Housman's love lyrics emphasize the awareness that love, like life, is fleeting and transient. The earliest love poem, *ASL V* is lighthearted in tone in spite of its theme of love's misfortunes. *ASL VI* treats love as an illness. The nature of love is so transitory that if lover's desires are fulfilled, his love is over, and it is the maiden who must "lie down forlorn". *ASL XIII* serves as the introduction to a whole group of poems which depict the true transience of love. The five poems that follow deal in more detail with the various stages of the misery of the lad who fails to heed the wise man's advice and give his heart away. In *ASL XIV* the lover's despair is so strong that probably it can never be removed. A comparatively tragic view of love is depicted in later Shropshire poems. The theme of *ASL XXI* ("Bredon Hill") is the impossibility of permanent love in a world where death is inevitable. The final series of love poems in the Shropshire group (Nos. XXV, XXVI, XXVII) deals with the true pathos of love, for all three poems reveal love's inconstancy by suggesting an endless cycle of lovers forgotten in death and

betrayed by the surviving lovers. ASL XXVII displays pictures the inconstancy of love with the unrealistic situation of a dead lover speaking from the grave. The poem reveals Housman's use of love as a symbol of change. It deals with two kinds of love — the love of a friend and the love of a sweetheart. But neither of the two is fixed and unchanging.

Some of the poems of Housman seem to have been occasioned either by his separation from his closest friend, Moses Jackson, or by some other emotional experience which Housman wanted to hide from his readers. They are naturally characterized by a strong element of ambiguity. This emotional element of Housman's poetry reminds us of what Tennyson said in *In Memoriam* v. 5—6: 'for the unquiet heart and brain, / A use in measured language lies'. In the same context (v. 1—4) Tennyson, measuring his language, confessed:

I sometimes hold it half a sin
To put in words the grief I feel;
For words, like Nature, half reveal
And half conceal the Soul within.

It was his poetry that offered Housman the medium to 'half reveal / and half conceal the Soul within'. Housman wrote from an urgent personal need to find expression for the inexpressible. They are not for the most part 'biographical' in any straightforward sense. But they have a personal element that cannot be ignored. Housman's unrequited love for Moses Jackson lay at the heart of his emotional life and about which it was impossible to silent remain silent. In fact, Housman's poems have an instinct both for revelation and for concealment.

The next important theme of Housman's poetry is exile. Lyric XXXVII ("As Through the Wild Green Hills of Wyre") establishes the shift in setting from Shropshire to London. The theme of estrangement is established in the first four poems of the exile group, for these four poems, more than any other in *A Shropshire Lad* establishes the contrast between the pastoral existence of Shropshire and the exile in London. The poems now look back westward from London to Shropshire, something living in the memory but beyond recovery.

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 through the Shropshire poems and the latter, through 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. ASL XXXVII describes the effect of the vanishing of the Shropshire landscape from the sight of Terence as the train carries him to London. Both the loneliness and anxiety of the London poems are also anticipated. In ASL XXXVIII, the persona nostalgically looks back to the west, to Shropshire, from which he has now become estranged. In London, the alien finds himself in a "friendless world." The journey from Shropshire establishes the final break with the world of youth and innocence. The persona has also lost harmony with nature. The three poems which follow bear the same sense of loss and nostalgia because they look back to a land of youth and simplicity. In ASL XL, the memories of youth come from "yon far country" of "blue remembered hills." The memories of

things past is “an air that kills” and the “land of lost content” is Shropshire. 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. 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.” In ASL LII “Far in a Western Brookland,” the wind which the wanderer hears in the “windless night-time” is the soul of the lad who has forsaken the land of his youth for a barren existence of London. The prevailing mood of *Last Poems* is similar to that of the second half of *A Shropshire Lad*, where the persona broods over his Shropshire youth from a new viewpoint and experiences both the loss and gain involved in the process of change. This exile group of poems contains the paradoxical notion that it was only the illusion that made life meaningful. The mature man, in 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 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, though imaginatively.

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.