

Chapter- 1

*Introduction:
Biographical and Literary
Background*

Alfred Edward Housman (1859–1936), was born on 26 March 1859 in the Valley House, Fockbury in Worcestershire. His father, Edward Housman, was a solicitor in Bromsgrove. Alfred's mother, Sarah, the daughter of the Reverend John Williams, Rector of nearby Woodchester, was a more gifted person. Alfred was the eldest in a large family. He was followed by Robert in 1860, Clemence in 1861, Katherine in 1862, Basil in 1864, Laurence in 1865 and Herbert in 1868. "There is every sign that Alfred's childhood was happy; and with such an attractive home, a loving intelligent mother and cheerful energetic father ready to share his many enthusiasms with his children, there was a good reason for happiness. The bells of Bromsgrove Church, Laurence recalled in his old age, were a constant background to family life; and the home was strongly Christian, with family prayers before breakfast and church twice on Sundays."¹ But the Housman children also enjoyed considerable freedom. Edward Housman was a man of many interests and he inspired the children to be always doing something. Laurence writes:

There were probably many; but none, I daresay, more interested in itself, when it stood compact and pugnaciously united – seven against the rest of the

world. How we loved; how we hated; how we fought, divided, and were reconciled again! How we trained, and educated ourselves; and developed a taste in literature and in the writing of it, in which, until years later, our elders had no part, and with which school hours had little to do.²

Alfred was sent away to spend his twelfth birthday with old family friends, the Wises of Woodchester where, on that birthday, he received a letter from his father telling him of his mother's death. The event had a profound effect on Housman. He later said that he became a deist at twelve and an atheist at twenty-one. The Wises of Woodchester had a German Governess, Sophie Becker, who became a very close friend of Alfred, and she is one of two or three close emotional attachments which Alfred made in his whole life. Laurence wrote in 1950:

I think the woman he loved most in the world was his mother...after that probably came Sophie Becker, who 'mothered' him in his great loss; I think his *mother-love* was very passionate...³

Housman entered Bromsgrove School with a Foundation Scholarship on 12th September 1870. The replacement of the Headmaster, Dr Blore gave Alfred his first real mentor, Herbert

Millington, the man who had the greatest influence on Housman's early classical training, and who remained a lifelong friend.

His two school-prize winning poems, *The Death of Socrates* and *Paul on Mars Hill* are long narrative poems. *The Death of Socrates* was his first published poem, which appeared in the school magazine and the local paper. There has been a difference of opinion over his poem *Sir Walter Raleigh*. One of the prizes he won at school was *Sabrinae Corolla*, a book of translations of English poetry into Latin and Greek. This book, Housman said, "implanted in me a genuine liking for Greek and Latin"⁴

Housman was awarded a scholarship to St John's College, Oxford, in 1877. His earliest Oxford friend was his fellow classics scholar Arthur Pollard. He later became acquainted with Moses Jackson who, he told Laurence years afterwards, "had more influence on my life than anyone else".⁵ "These three friends shared digs together in their more senior Oxford years, and at sometime during this period A.E.H. began to understand that he had fallen in love with Moses Jackson."⁶

Housman's favourite poet was Matthew Arnold and he recommended *Empedocles on Etna* as containing "all the law and all the prophets."⁷ Hardy's pessimistic view of life was probably

the cause of Housman's admiration for him. He also read and enjoyed W.H. Mallock's "Is Life Worth Living?" (1879), "the title of which may be said crudely to summarize his later poetry."⁸ He made a number of contributions of humorous prose and verse to an undergraduate periodical *Ye Rounde Table*, under the pen-name of "Tristram" He published two poems — 'Parta Quies' and 'New Year's Eve' in another Oxford magazine, *Waifs and Strays*. The former is one of the best poems he ever wrote.

During their fourth year Pollard, Jackson and Housman took a set of rooms in St. Giles, opposite St. John's College. "But Arthur Pollard, who knew better than anyone else what was going on, put it down to lack of work on the syllabus and over confidence. For night after night, while Arthur was busy revising, Alfred and Moses were chatting. Moses had already completed his three-year course in Physics, with First Class Honours, and had nothing to lose. Only Alfred was building up trouble. Captivated by the charm of Moses he was wasting his time."⁹

There are other factors to do with Housman's course of work at Oxford. He made a close study of the manuscripts of the Roman poet Propertius. It took a lot of time and certainly an original work, but entirely outside the syllabus. Subjects which were relevant, like the ancient history and philosophy part of the

Greats syllabus, were of no interest to him. There have been instances of able students at Oxford who became diverted on to researches more to their own liking than the set works. When the final exams came, he was completely unprepared and failed. It was the second great disaster of his life. Years later he himself wrote, "They (the examiners) had no option but to plough me."¹⁰

He returned to Bromsgrove in disgrace, without a degree and no visible source of income. Laurence writes, "if sympathy was what he feared to receive on his return from Oxford, he took the best means to deprive himself of it."¹¹ However, during this period he worked hard and took the Oxford pass degree in a year, and then took the Civil Service Examination and was offered an appointment as a Higher Division Clerk, first in Dublin, which he refused, and then in the Patent Office in London. Moses Jackson was in the same office, working as Examiner of Electrical Specifications. Jackson and his younger brother Adalbert invited Housman to share their rooms in Bayswater. At this time he kept away from his family, feeling their disappointment, for their hopes had centered on him, and his academic failure came at a time when his father's ill-health caused him to leave his practice.

In 1892 Housman was appointed as a Professor of Latin at University College, London. Housman delivered the traditional Introductory Lecture. He gave it the title, "Reasons for Acquiring Knowledge." A part of the lecture has been quoted in chapter 2. Its theme is the defence of learning for its own sake.

Now Housman had achieved what he truly wanted— the life of a senior university academic. He was the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Law from 1895–6 to 1896–7, and from 1899 he was a member of the College Council. He read papers on Matthew Arnold, the Spasmodic School, Erasmus, Darwin, Robert Burns, Tennyson and Swinburne; all rather surprising since he regarded himself as a textual not a literary critic.

For Housman, research and publication were more important than teaching. The first volume of his edition of the *Astronomica of Manilius* appeared in 1903, and an edition of Juvenal in 1905. Housman became interested at an early age in astronomy, and once placed members of his family on the lawn to represent the motions of the planets— the sun, the earth and the moon.

J.E.B. Myor, the Professor of Latin at Cambridge University died in 1910. Housman was nominated for his Chair and to a Fellowship at Trinity College. Within a few months of his election, the Chair of Latin was renamed the Kennedy Professorship, in honour of Benjamin Kennedy whose *Sabrinæ*

Corollae had greatly influenced Housman in his schooldays. The Cambridge Inaugural Lecture which he delivered in May 1911 was suppressed because he could not verify a statement it contained about the text of Shelley's *Lament* of 1821. It was first published in 1969 under the title, "The confines of Criticism". In this he delineates the limits of textual criticism as a science, not a branch of literature. It is not an exact science either, since its results, unlike true scientific data, cannot be experimentally proved.

Housman's personal life while he was at the college remains rather shadowy. Nobody seems to have got really close to him, certainly among the academic staff and students. His teaching at University College seems to have been more than adequate, but he was not an inspiring tutor. His former students picture him as a reticent and fairly dry character, somewhat aloof, setting his students high standards. There are stories of him sending female students away in tears. He was also prone to forgetting his students' names. Platt and W.P.Ker, the Scotts English Professor, were his main friends among the academic staff. One of his farewell comments before the College, at the Professors' Dining Club, was on a bibulous theme:

Cambridge has seen many strange sights. It has seen
Wordsworth drunk; it has seen Porson sober. Now I am a

greater scholar than Wordsworth, and a greater poet than Porson, so I fall betwixt and between.¹²

In 1933, he was persuaded against his better judgement to accept an invitation to deliver the Leslie Stephen Lecture at Cambridge. He told Percy Withers that while writing the lecture "his days had been unabated torment. He had awakened every morning to the dread of a task to which he could bring no heart, and a struggle that had never given him a moment's satisfaction, or could so give".¹³ Housman called his lecture *The Name and Nature of Poetry*. He stated that poetry was not the thing said, but a way of saying it. Poetry was not the same as verse, and simile and metaphor were inessential to it. As to the creation of a poem, he said that this was "in its first stage...less an active than a passive and involuntary process...". "It had the effect of a counter-blast to the new generation of Cambridge literary critics, represented by I.A.Richards and F.R.Leavis, even though it never mentioned them, nor even alluded to their existence"¹⁴ The story goes that afterwards, as everybody filed out of the hall, Richards was heard to mutter, "This has set us back ten years."¹⁵

During the last three years of his life he continued to work, despite increasing ill-health. "It is likely that Housman, if he had been so inclined, would have received honorary doctorates at

half a dozen leading universities, would have been appointed to the Order of Merit, could have been knighted and might even have become Poet Laureate. But he was not so inclined. He steadfastly refused every offer of high academic honour.”¹⁶ Several letters of this time give a precise insight into Housman’s religious stand. To Maurice Pollet in 1933 he wrote:

I was brought up in the Church of England and in the high Church party, which is much the best religion I have ever come across. But Lempriere’s Classical Dictionary, which fell into my hands when I was eight, attached my affections to paganism. I became a deist at thirteen and an atheist at twenty-one.¹⁷

He explained his attitude to life to Houston Martin in 1936:

In philosophy I am a Cyrenaic or egoistic hedonist, and regard the pleasures of the moment as the only possible motive of action. As for pessimism, I think it almost as silly, though not as wicked, as optimism. George Eliot said she was a meliorist: I am a pejorist, and also yours sincerely,

A.E.Housman¹⁸

April 24 saw his last lecture and his last meeting of the Family dining club, although he was too ill to eat. Next day he

went back to the Evelyn Nursing Home where on 30 April 1936 he died. At his funeral in Trinity College Chapel, his own hymn, "For My Funeral" (MP 47) was sung. It suggests a divine presence to those who want to find it there, but a mere return of dust to dust, to those who look for no other point in life.

A.E. Housman's ashes lie beneath a stone tablet under the north wall of Ludlow Church, the same Ludlow Tower of his poems. A larger stone, set in the wall, quotes some of his own lines:

Good-night; ensured release,
Imperishable peace,
Have these for yours.

They come from "Parta Quies" (MP XLVIII).

Poetical Works:

Two collections of Housman's verse were published in his lifetime: *A Shropshire Lad* (1896) and *Last Poems* (1922). His popularity as a poet undoubtedly rests on *A Shropshire Lad*. His original plan was to link the poems by suggesting an imaginary narrator, who was to be called Terence Hearsay. Only two of the poems mention Terence as a speaker. It was Arthur Pollard—loyal and wise friend from Oxford days—who told him that the proposed title, "Poems of Terence Hearsay", was a bad idea. He rather suggested "*A Shropshire Lad*", a suggestion that might have contributed to the book's success. Arthur also advised Housman to try his own publisher, Kegan Paul; since his first approach to Macmillan had proved fruitless.

A year later, in March 1896, Housman published *A Shropshire Lad*, at his own expense, but under Kegan Paul's imprint. Within two years it was sold out, and for the second edition Housman was approached by a young publisher called Grant Richards, who was trying to make a name for himself by taking up the latest poets— including Thomas Hardy. Richards remained Housman's publisher, in one way or another, via bankruptcy, for the rest of his life. He scolded him often for his

mistakes in printing, for his inconsistencies over copyright, and for his attempts to introduce editions that would be greater moneyspinners. For Housman was resolute in insisting that he did not want to make money out of his poems, and that he only wanted them to be available in cheap editions for young people.

His popularity has gradually increased since his death in 1936 if we apply the yardstick of the number of his poems which have been published in various anthologies. By 1918 an academic survey of contemporary literature declared, "the genius of Mr. A.E. Housman places him with the first of living English poets [that is, Hardy]".¹⁹ Norman Page points out, only five of his poems were included in Yeats's *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, and soon afterwards (1939) the new edition of the *Oxford Book of English Verse* only three. The number increased to seventeen in the 1973 edition of the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*.²⁰ This serves as an evidence of the growing appreciation of Housman's poetry, especially in the United States where the last of the above-mentioned anthologies is read by a large number of young students of poetry.

After the publication of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which coincided with that of Housman's *Last Poems* in 1922, the

popularity of Housman's verse suffered a diminution. This is in no real sense a postwar collection and was regarded as belonging to a vanished age. Still, for the generation of second and third decades of twentieth century Housman exercised a unique influence. George Orwell attests the fact:

At the beginning of the period I am speaking of, the years during and immediately after the war, the writer who had the deepest hold upon the thinking young was almost certainly Housman. Among people who were adolescent in the years 1910–25, Housman had an influence which was enormous and is now not at all easy to understand. In 1920, when I was about seventeen, I probably knew the whole of the *Shropshire Lad* by heart. I wonder how much impression the *Shropshire Lad* makes at this moment [1940] on a boy of the same age and more or less the same cast of mind?²¹

Last Poems appeared on October 19, 1922 in an edition of four thousand—a number decided by Grant Richards after discouraging noises from booksellers. However, it was such an instant success that by the end of the year a total of twenty-one thousand had been printed. Despite this instant popularity, it was generally recognized that this was more of the same stuff as

his first volume, despite the quarter of a century that has passed. In fact, some of the poems had been written, or at least started, before 1896, and a few had originally been intended for the earlier book, including *LP* III, "Her strong enchantments failing," and *LP* XI, "Yonder see the morning blink." The opening poem of *Last Poems* was entitled "The West", and took up the theme of the tender but painful world towards the setting sun, at the point where *A Shropshire Lad* had left it. Housman took every care over the arrangement of its contents, still we cannot call it a tightly ordered sequence. "The themes of *A Shropshire Lad* recur, and the world of redcoats, beer, the hangman's noose, woman's fickleness, is evoked, or recalled, in the first few pages."²² The title of the volume indicates that Housman intended to publish no more poems during his lifetime. He had finally answered the years of pestering from people like Grant Richards, eager for a follow-up to *A Shropshire Lad*. Lyrics V–VI, according to Housman, were written at the time of Boar War. XVII ('Astronomy'), also written at the beginning of the century, was prompted by the same war and recalls the opening poem of the earlier collection. XIII ('The Deserter') was, again according to Housman, begun in 1905 and finished in that same productive month of April 1922.

But *Last Poems* also contains one of the finest of all Housman's longer poems. This poem, XL ('Tell me not here, it needs not saying'), has its roots that lie deep in Housman's heart.

More Poems, adds a further forty-eight poems to the list of Housman's collected poems. "The systematic fictionalizing process that we have seen at work in *A Shropshire Lad* – the creation of a dramatic world as a device for truth-telling not otherwise to be contemplated – has no counterpart, or at best a counterpart only vestigial."²³ Many of the poems express a mood of despair in excess of any revealed cause. And yet there are poems in this volume as close to Housman's emotional life as anything he ever wrote. (XXXIV is a possible comment on the events of May 1881).

Moses Jackson's presence is often a potent one: among other examples, XXIII, XXX, and XXXI are fragments from an autobiographical account of Housman's feelings towards him. The attitude expressed in the last line of XXX is echoed in Housman's final letter to Moses. Although they are of considerable biographical interest, it needs to be remembered that these are poems and not letters or diary entries.

Actually *More Poems* and *Additional Poems*, salvaged from the notebooks and published after his death by his brother

Laurence, represent verse Housman elected not to publish himself.

Literary Influences:

One of the loveliest poems in *A Shropshire Lad* indicates influence of Stevenson. Following is the opening stanza of poem No. IV in *Underwoods* :

It is the season now to go
About the country high and low,
Among the lilacs hand in hand,
And two by two in fairyland.

And in its third verse we find the phrase 'A year ago at Eastertide'. Again the urgency is to be up and doing, to see the lovely lands on earth. Housman must have remembered Stevenson when he wrote:

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
Is hung with bloom along the bough,
And stands about the woodland ride
Wearing white for Eastertide.

And again when he wrote in the last verse:

About the woodlands I will go
To see the cherry hung with snow.

Again the phrase from *In the States* which describes his feeling on leaving Britain:

With half a heart I wander here,
As from an age gone by....
Underwoods XXIX,1-2

which reminds us of Housman's parting from Moses Jackson:

I shook his hand and tore my heart in sunder
And went with half my life about my ways.

No.XXXV of *Last Poems* is modelled on an anonymous Greek epigram of which an English version appears in *Sabrinae Corollae*. The original, No. IX 138 in the Palatine Anthology runs as follows:

“I was young and poor, but now in old age I am rich – alas! alone of all men wretched in both, who could have enjoyed when I had not the means, and now have the means when I cannot enjoy.”

The version in *Sabrinae Corollae* goes like this:

I was poor, but I was twenty,
Now at three score I have plenty;
What a miserable lot !

Now that I have hoarded treasure,
I can no more taste of pleasure:
When I could, I had it not.

Sabrinae Corollae, p.148.

Housman wrote his poem on the same theme:

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 is the lost young man?

One of the strongest literary influences on Housman seems to have been that of Matthew Arnold. Arnold's Empedocles reflects about the feelings and emotions that possess the human heart:

Born into life—'tis we,
And not the world, are new.

Our cry for this, our plea,
Others have urged it too;
Our wants have all been felt, our errors made
before.

Housman's Shropshire lad has similar reflections:

Aye, 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 tomorrow
And Ludlow fair again.
(LP XXXIV)

"Arnold's influence on Housman probably extends to the careful and exact descriptions of flowers, trees and landscape in which both poets excel."²⁴ A line from *Sohrab and Rustum*, for example,

Marshall'd battalions bright in burnish'd steel.
(*S and R.*, l.139)

has probably given two words to a description in one of the finest of *Last Poems*:

On acres of the seeded grasses
The changing burnish heaves:
Or marshaled under moons of harvest
Stand still at night the sheaves;
(LP XL)

Both poets use 'flute' as a transitive verb. In LP XLI Housman writes:

And flute the sun to sleep

This is like *Thyrsis*, 90:

And flute his friend, like Orpheus, from the dead.

Three of Arnold's *Lines Written by a Death-bed*:

Because on its hot brow there blows
A wind of promise and repose
From the far grave, to which it goes.

reminds us of the 'far grave' of the lover in *A Shropshire Lad*:

In the land to which I travel,
The far dwelling, let me say—
Once, if here the couch is gravel,
In a kinder bed I lay

(*ASL XI*)

Housman's outlook on life was influenced by his early reading in Herodotus. His agnostic contemporaries like Morley and Spencer also play a very important role in shaping his philosophy of life. "Homer's feelings about life and death have earned for Housman the name of pessimist." and "Homer view of life is profoundly sad. He believes in no future happiness to redress any injustice in this world,"²⁵ He makes Zeus say

'There is none more wretched than man of all creatures which
breathe and crawl on the earth.'

(*Il. XVII*, 446-7)

Housman exhorts himself:

What evil luck soever
For me remains in store,
'Tis sure much finer fellows
Have feared much before.

(*LP II*)

Another Greek poet, Asclepiades, comes nearest to the poems of *A Shropshire Lad* which speak of unrequited love. A lover of one-and-twenty in Asclepiades's poetry laments:

'I am not yet two and twenty, and I am weary of life. Oh loves,
why this suffering? Why consume me?'

(*Anthologia Palatina*..XII, 46)

Here is Housman's:

The heart out of the bosom
Was never given in vain;
'Tis paid with sighs a plenty
And sold for endless rue.'
And I am two and twenty,
And oh, 'tis true, 'tis true.
(ASL XIII.)

"Its chief sources of which I am conscious", wrote Housman to Maurice Pollet, "are Shakespeare's songs, the Scottish border ballads, and Heine."²⁶ Percy Withers tells us that Housman "had carefully—I inferred from his statement, almost meticulously— investigated all three sources, though equally he had been careful to avoid imitation: they had been no more, he believed, than fortunate influences."²⁷

It becomes clear that Housman was not in fact careful to avoid imitation, and in many cases the imitation is so direct that he seems to be making explicit allusion to the earlier passage. One of the finest songs, *Fear no more the heat o' the sun* is repeatedly echoed by Housman. The opening lines:

Fear no more the heat o' the sun,
Nor the furious winter's rages;
(*Cymbeline* IV,II, 258–9)

are deliberately alluded to in *The Immortal Part*:

'Rest you so from trouble sore,
Fear the heat o' the son no more,
Nor the snowing winter wild,
Now you labour not with child.'
(ASL XLIII)

and in the very next poem we find a reminiscence of the ending of the first verse of the song:

Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages:
Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.
(*Cymbeline*, IV, II, 261–63)

Housman compresses the first two lines and adds a dark thought:

Dust's your wages, son of sorrow,
But men may come to worse than dust.
(*ASL XLIV*)

The phrase 'golden lads' attracted him and he used it twice: first in the lament for lost friends in *A Shropshire Lad*:

With rue my heart is laden
For golden friends I had,
(*ASL LIV.*)

and again in *Last Poems*:

Think , I the round world over,
What golden lads are low
With hurts not mine to mourn for
And shames I shall not know.
(*LP II*)

A phrase from Balthazar's song in *Much Ado About Nothing*, II, ii, 64:

Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more.

The phrase is recalled by Housman:

Lads that waste the light in sighing
In the dark should sigh no more;
(*ASL XI*)

Sometimes Housman's poem echoes an arresting phrase from Shakespeare. For example, the line:

Dear to friends and food for powder,
(ASL XXXV)
is a reminiscence of Falstaff's:

Food for powder, food for powder.
(*King Henry IV*, Part I, IV, ii, 72)

It has been pointed out by Tom Burns Haber in an article on the influence of ballads in Housman's poetry ²⁸ that out of his 178 published poems all but 47 are in the quatrain pattern common to ballad poetry.

ASL LIII, *The True Lover*, tells a story in the ballad manner. It opens with a lover coming to the door at night:

Light was the air beneath the sky
But dark under the shade.

In *Clerk Saunders* the lovers are lying together:

It was about the midnight hour,
When they asleep were laid,
(*The Oxford Book of Ballads*, 27, V)

In *Willy's Lady* the jealous mother threatens her son with the death of his wife and with his own faithlessness:

'But she shall die and turn to clay,
And ye shall wed another may.
(*O.B.B.* 6, XVII)

So Housman's Terence hears the aspen and its message:

Two lovers looking to be wed;
And time shall put them both to bed,
But she shall lie with earth above,
And he beside another love.'
(ASL XXVI)

Bredon Hill opens with two lovers on Bredon Hill:

In summertime on Bredon

The bells they sound so clear;
Round both the shires they ring them
In steeples far and near,
A happy noise to hear.

Here of a Sunday morning
My love and I would lie,
And see the coloured counties,

A hear the larks so high
About us in the sky.

(ASL XXI)

In the opening lines of the first and second verses he has adopted lines from the third stanza of *A Love Sonnet* by George Wither:

In summertime to Medley
My love and I would go.

The tragedy of unrequited love haunts Housman, and in several of his poems he treats the theme of a heartless mistress who relents too late. Here we have a lover who is dying of his love:

When the lad for longing sighs,
Mute and dull of cheer and pale,
If at death's own door he lies,
Maiden, you can heal his ail.
(ASL VI)

This is what happens to the lover in *Barbara Allen*:

All in the merry month of May,
When green buds they were swellin',
Young Jemmy Grove on his death-bed lay,
For love of Barbara Allen.
(O.B.B.158)

The cadence of the words 'return again' of which Housman is very fond of at the end of a verse:

Lovely lads and dead and rotten;
None that go return again.

(ASL XXXV)

is also beloved of ballad writers, as for example in *Broomfield Hill*:

‘That a maid shanna gae to the bonny broom
And a maiden return again.

(O.B.B. 24, II)

and in *Young Waters*:

‘But I neir rade thro’ Stirling town
Neir to return again.

(O.B.B. 82, XII)

Many poems of *A Shropshire Lad* seem to show the influence of Kipling’s *Barrack-Room Ballads*, particularly *The New Mistress*. The reference to death as ‘bitter beer’ in *Danny Deeveer*:

‘E’s drinkin’ bitter beer alone,’ the Colour-Sergeant
said.

is like the line in *LP XXV*, which is in the same colloquial vein:

‘Tis true there’s better boose than brine, but he that drowns
must drink it;

Housman in those poems “which cry out against the ‘iniquity on high’ and inveigh bitterly against the destiny of man to ask and without an answer till his mouth is filled with earth”²⁹ is closest to Heine. Like him Heine has been charged with self-pity and adolescence. The themes of death and unrequited love are common to both. They use a simple, almost plain syntax and vocabulary. When he wrote first two stanzas of ‘Sinner’s Rue’ (*LP*

XXX) Housman was probably producing a version of Heine's 'Am Kreuzweg wird begraben':

He's buried at the crossroad,
He who his own hand slew;
A blue flower springs from earth there,
The flower of sinner's rue.

I stand at the crossroads sighing;
The still night chills me through.
In the moonlight gently trembles
The flower of sinner's rue.

(trans. Hal Draper, *The Complete Poems of Heinrich Heine*, OUP, 1982, p.73)

And here is Housman's version:

I walked alone and thinking,
And faint the nightwind blew
And stirred on mounds at crossways
The flower of sinner's rue.

Where the roads part they bury
Him that his own hand slays,
And so the weed of sorrow
Spring at the four cross ways.

There are many other echoes of lines and passages from Heine in Housman's poetry.

Housman was greatly influenced by the Authorized Version and of Coverdale's translation of the Psalms. He remembered Coverdale from childhood and the cadences of the Prayer-Book version of the Psalms touched his heart deeply, as he shows in *The Name and Nature of Poetry*. Sometimes he reproduces whole lines. As in:

When I shall lie below them,

A dead man out of mind.

(ASL LXIII.)

Which recall Psalm XXXI, 14: 'I am clean forgotten, as a dead man out of mind.' More often it is a phrase or part of a line.

ASL LXII:

And while the sun and moon endure
Luck's a chance, but trouble's sure.

Ps. LXXII, 5, Cov.:

...As long as the sun and moon endureth.

The view of Ecclesiastes on life and death find an echo in Housman's heart. Several passages in Housman show a close parallel to the wisdom of the Son of Sirach .We can compare, for example, ASL XXIV:

Say, lad, have you things to do?
Quick then, while your day's at prime.
Quick, and if 'tis work for two,
Here am I, man: now's your time.

with Ecclus. XIV, 13:

Do good unto thy friend before thou die, and according to thy ability stretch out thy hand and give to him.

There are many verbal similarities of Job in Housman:

ASL XXXII:

Job XIII, 22: Speak now, and I will answer:

ASL LIII: Then call thou, and I will answer.

He hears: no more remembered
In fields where I was known.

Job XXIV, 20:

He shall be no more remembered;

Housman was a strong admirer of Milton. In *Sabrinae Corollae* we find extracts from *Paradise Lost* which are echoed in his poetry. The reference to the sun as the 'eye of day' is favourite with Milton. Housman would have seen the following examples in *Sabrinae Corollae*:

The liquid notes that close the eye of day,

(*Sonnet To The Nightingale*, 5)

Where day never shuts his eye,
Up in the broad fields of the sky.

(*Comus*, 978-9)

The phrase, or the echoes of it appears in Housman:

The year draws in the day
And soon will evening shut:

(Introductory poem to *LP*)

When the eye of day is shut,
And the stars deny their beams.

(*LP XXXIII*)

The cadence of *Paradise Lost* VIII, 239:

But us he sends upon high behests.

is echoed in *LP IX*:

To-morrow it will hie on far behests.

This description in *L'Allegro* has probably given Housman a picture of country life in the lines:

And the milkmaid singeth blithe,

And the mower whets his sithe.

(*L'Allegro*, 65-6)

Which reappears in *God's Acre*, No. XI of *Additional Poems*:

Blithe the maids go milking, blithe
Men in hayfields stone the scythe;

No Victorian can escape the influence of Tennyson, and Housman is no exception who, copies extracts from *In Memoriam*, *The Passing of Arthur*, *The Princess*, *A Dirge* and various other shorter poems. The influence of *A Dirge* was probably upon him when he wrote *Alta Quies*, and its contrast between the fever of life and the stillness of death is a common theme throughout Housman's poetry.

Now is done thy long day's work;
Fold thy palms across thy breast,
Fold thine arms, turn to thy rest.
Let them rave.
Shadows of the silver birk
Sweep the green that folds thy grave.
Let them rave.

This is echoed in:

When earth's foundation flee'
Nor sky nor land nor sea
At all is found.
Content you; let them burn,
It is not your concern:
Sleep on, sleep sound.

(*MP XLVIII*)

One of the characteristics which Tennyson shares with Housman is a scientific precision of vocabulary; Tennyson's interest in science and Housman's in astronomy lead them both to write of

men and events against a cosmic background and to employ the movements of the earth and the planets to convey emotion at man's dauntless and hapless courage.³⁰

Move eastward, happy earth, and leave
Yon orange sunset waning slow;
From fringes of the faded eve,
O, happy planet, eastward go.

(*Move Eastward*, 1859)

Housman also makes us feel the motions of the earth and planets in this way. The following passage comes very near even to the language of these four lines:

Too fast to yonder strand forlorn
We journey, to the sunken bourn,
To flush the fading tinges eyed
By other lads at eventide.

(*LP I*)

Other Victorians also influenced Housman. About Christina Rossetti he "thought highly and said that posterity would probably place her above Swinburne".³¹ She writes in "Shall I forget?"

Shall I forget on this side of the grave?
I promise nothing: you must wait and see,
Patient and brave.

And in *MP XII* Housman writes:

I promise nothing: friends will part;
All things may end, for all began.

There is one unmistakable echo of Andrew Lang in Housman's poetry. In Valentine *In Form of Ballads*, he writes:

Where sands of Egypt, swart and red,
'Neath suns Egyptian glow,
In places of the princely dead,
By the Nile's overflow.

Probably Housman had these lines in his mind when he wrote:

And the Nile spills his overflow
Beside the Severn's dead.

Housman draws quite freely and impartially upon all periods of English poetry. Here, for example, a line in the *Knight's Tale* of Chaucer:

The slayer of himself yet saw I there.

has given a phrase to the poem *Hughley Steeple*:

And steeple-shadowed slumber
The slayers of themselves.

The mannerism in the lines in Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress*:

The grave's a fine and private,
But none, I think, do there embrace,

is dropped and the negative used characteristically at the end of a poem:

Lovers lying two and two
Ask not whom they sleep beside,
And the bridegroom all night through
Never turns him to the bride.
(ASL XII)

Housman probably read and liked Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village*. He says:

I still had hopes, my long vexations pass'd,
Here to return—and die at home at last.
(*The Deserted Village*, 95-6)

We find its echo in *MP III*:

They cease from long vexation.

These reminiscences indicate the wide range of Housman's reading and show him to be steeped in the poetry of his contemporaries besides the Greek and Latin poetry. After studying the biographical and literary background of A.E.Housman in the foregoing pages I now proceed to take up the major themes of his poetry in the next chapters.

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